

# Scandal! An 18th century drama of micro-blogging and super injunctions

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Mirror of our age?

Is there nothing that can stop the spread of scandal in the digital age? Whether false or true, gossip has always been a fact of human social life in all its destructive and revelatory forms. The supposed hey-day of Habermas' public sphere was in the coffee shops of Georgian London. But if we believe the great dramatist of that age, they were talking about sex more than politics, trade and culture.

Sheridan's 18th century farce the School for Scandal has been loudly updated by [Deborah Warner for the Barbican](#) in a rather over-blown but entertaining mix of 21st century fashion-show and crinoline-ruffling Georgian satire. The message of the play is that those people who attempt to take advantage of spreading false information will end up exposed as immoral

frauds.

But the other message is that you should put away your parchment super injunction. These elegant drawing rooms are filled with unstoppable flows of innuendo.

Sir Benjamin Backbite and his twittering, toxic network of gossips are exposed as specious, vicious peddlars of wild and nasty tales based on little or no evidence. But no harm really comes to them when they are confronted with the truth. Instead, they simply move on to their next targets. Remind you of [anything](#)?

The professional tabloid pamphleteer Snake takes money to pen and publish the propaganda of Lady Sneerwell. Again, remind you of anyone? In the play, with its happy ending, he ends up being paid more by a wealthy do-gooder for telling the truth than lies. I suppose that's a kind of Georgian [ProPublica](#).

Judge for yourself what lessons we can learn from the history school of drama. But certainly, one of the paradoxes of the nature of scandal is that it is based on morality. As Sheridan's portrait of a modern celebrity journalist, Mrs Candour says:

| *"the world is so censorious, no character escapes."*

School For Scandal shows brutally how people want gossip mainly to entertain. But the tittle-tattle is dressed up in a judgemental vocabulary that seeks to reduce the powerful to our level and confirm our own sexual and social values. It is very intolerant. And yet, revelations of dubious moral consistency can also puncture pomposity, unmask hypocrisy and expose the selfish motives of those with power.

Even the 'good' characters in School for Scandal accept tacitly that rumour-mongering is a fact of life. The paradox of the play is that the honourable people have to use subterfuge and spin to bring about a happy outcome. In the end, it is virtue not vice that gets the last laugh.

[There is a good review of this production at [The Arts Desk](#)]

