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# INTRODUCTION: SCANDALS IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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*Special Issue Editors*

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To say that there are no scandals seems to be a paradoxical statement for the introduction to a special issue about scandals in a global context, especially with research providing evidence of a significant rise of scandals over the past decades (e.g., von Sikorski, 2018). A quick search through a global database like Google News currently indicates a financial scandal involving a cryptocurrency platform in Turkey, a drug scandal in college football in Japan, a fraud scandal in Geert Wilders' 2023 campaign in the Netherlands, a lobbying scandal in the wake of the United Nations Climate Conference 2023, and a corruption scandal in Portugal's ruling Socialist party. A few more examples of political scandals from the past five years also come to mind: the scandals leading to the downfall of former British prime minister Boris Johnson, the sheer disregard for political hallmarks, namely lack of peaceful transfer of power by populists, such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro, or a new bundle of offshore-leaks, including tax-evasion schemes of not only the rich and powerful but also numerous key political figures, show that political mischief is one of the main issues in media coverage on a global scale.

So, what is the point of opening with a paradoxical statement? It is to start with a reflection on the nature of scandals because our impact-driven research of such phenomena often treats grievances or abuses of power as if they *were* scandals. However, scandals do not occur as manifest events like a violent protest, a fraud election, or a criminal trial. Such events happen and they may have a negative impact which we observe as wrong-doings, legal transgressions, or violations of a social group's moral codes. Some of these events stir public outrage and condemnation, others do not. In some cases, severe transgressions take place openly and over a long period of time and are even well documented, yet they do not *become* scandals. But why does mischief become a scandal in one country and not in another? Why does something cause public outrage at one point, but just a few years later no one seems to be bothered?

Generally, despite the digital transformations of the modes of public communication, scandals occur only when journalism and the media report on a transgression as a scandal (Kepplinger, 2020, p. 29). In this sense scandals are realized via mechanisms of symbolic interaction, or what Brenton (2019, p. 28) calls a "social pathology", in the form of mediated rituals that may be essential to the functioning of (democratic) societies (Hondrich, 2002; Neckel, 2005; cf. Kepplinger, 2020). As scandals are a communicative construct produced through mediated actions, it seems impossible to establish a framework that offers a causal explanation between the original transgressions and the development of a scandal. A scandal only emerges through social action – it is not there 'by itself' – so we should differentiate and inquire how something becomes a scandal instead of claiming that something *is* a scandal.

An obvious additional point is to be made because in recent years, the phenomenon of scandal has become more elusive and the dynamics between political actors, the media, and the public are more uncertain. In this regard, the "deep mediatization" of our lives (Hepp, 2018) has most certainly consequences for the dynamics of scandalization. From a scientific perspective it is important to determine how this already affects social actors and public communication, how societies are dealing with scandals and cultural

affairs in digital media ecosystems, and to what end this results in collective acts of signifying and evaluating cultural norms and values with discursive means (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019, pp. 13-14).

A starting point may be to look for communicative invariants that constitute scandals. Often, these invariants, or schemata, are traced back to ancient Greece (Burkhardt, 2006; Brenton, 2019) and Judeo-Christian religious contexts (Thompson, 2000). Carey (1988, p. 42) points out that “[r]ituals of shame, degradation and excommunication are official and sanctioned ceremonies in all societies from the simple to the complex.” From the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, scandals are integral as a cultural practice and always have permeated living culture and its manifold forms of social behavior. In addition, scandals can be traced everywhere in recorded culture and its collections of material artifacts. The reason may be that scandals constitute an effective form of storytelling. Such stories have central conflicts, introduce heroes and villains, victims, and white knights, they follow a carefully scripted dramaturgy with rising and falling actions, and are thus relatable as well as emotionally engaging for the audience (Bird, 1997; Burkhardt, 2006; Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2018). Following this conceptualization, we could examine internal rhetorical features and storytelling techniques of scandal, e.g., the voice and perspective of the storyteller, plotting and the use of stylistic devices like metaphor and allegory, the make-up of the story-world, e.g., through references to previous scandal cases, profiling of the protagonists as round or flat characters, the medium of storytelling and, lastly, the relationship between the storyteller, protagonists, and the audience. This could be helpful to understand why some violations or transgressions are reported as scandals, i.e., because they make a good story, and others do not because they lack specific components, e.g., an obvious villain, a distinguishable victim, or an identifiable hero. In some cases, scandal cases are too complex to be told as stories by lacking a central conflict or a clear dramaturgy. This hinders the possibility of becoming part of durable media coverage – sine qua non for initiating dynamics of scandalization.<sup>1</sup>

From the perspective of the social scientist, however, this may not suffice because such an approach lacks the means to assess and categorize the external conditions of culture that produce dynamic patterns of scandalization in different forms of media. One reason for this deficit is that research on political scandals has not been systematic. It often focuses on case studies within different cultural contexts (e.g., Tumber, 2004; Allern & Pollack, 2019; Esser & Hartung, 2004), or provides more general definitional work on the nature of scandals and theoretical assumptions on the structure and dramaturgy of scandal communication (Thompson, 2000; Burkhardt, 2015). Although international research on political scandals has provided a basis for more comparative research on scandals in recent years (see Haller, Michael & Kraus, 2018; Tumber & Waisbord, 2019; Haller & Michael, 2020; Haller, Michael & Seeber, 2021), concrete theoretical frameworks for comparative analyses of scandals are underdeveloped.

<sup>1</sup> If we look at the reports on the Panama Papers in 2016, we see that the widespread and sensational media coverage in the beginning was followed by rather less journalistic interest. Our thesis is that the Panama Papers, as a global scandal structure, contained too many details and legal specifications which created a sort of complexity that hindered scandalization. Other cases that come to mind are the misconduct of global corporations like Bayer or Nestlé that are regularly subject to lawsuits in many countries yet not necessarily scandalized in the media, e.g., because these cases lack a clear, climactic dramaturgy.

We can make use of heuristic frameworks which allow us to acknowledge related factors that increase a likelihood of transgressions becoming a scandal (or, more precisely, being scandalized in the media) in a specific context. Therefore, a first step is to develop a hierarchy-of-influences model (e.g., Donges, 2011; Reese & Shoemaker, 2014; Esser, 2016) to analyze global scandals through a functional-structuralist perspective, inspired by Durkheimian sociology (Brenton, 2019) and system theory (Luhmann, 1996). Such a framework can be applied to compare political scandals in different countries and illustrate how scandals mirror or even catalyze the changing of political norms and civic conduct in societies. The concept for such a framework can be based on the three different structural dimensions, examining a macro-, meso- and micro- level (Donges, 2011).

On the macro level, social subsystems that may have an influence on scandalization processes in politics are identified. The most relevant are the legal system, the media system, the political system, the religious system, and the cultural system. Each of these subsystems has a strong impact on the possibility for political scandals to occur. Obviously, the focal points remain the political system and the media system, drawing on Nyhan's (2015) conclusion that scandals are essentially a co-production of both systems. Looking at political scandals, the design of the political system as the foundation of politics is crucial for scandalization processes. In liberal democratic societies, politicians can be held responsible for irregular actions like tax evasion or bribery. In contrast to this, there are non-democratic regimes in authoritarian or totalitarian societies. In these systems, scandalization does not serve as a corrective mechanism because political elites are not restricted by legal frameworks. Scandalization in non-democratic regimes has the function to exclude enemies of the ruling elites and is therefore better described as preparations of show trials. Here, the legal system has a strong impact on scandal communication. Unlike the rule of law in liberal democracies, journalists in authoritarian regimes are not capable of investigating and reporting on political misconduct in a free and open manner.

However, other subsystems determine what kind of misconduct is scandalized, as transgressions of religious norms are more likely to lead to scandalization in societies with "puritan traditions" than in more secularized nations (2002, pp. 12-13). This includes violations of religious beliefs, for example extra-marital affairs as a transgression of Christian family values, that can lead to fractures in the plotlines of political careers in countries like the United States (Entman, 2012, pp. 74-93). Regarding the subsystem of culture, an ideological variable on the macro level of the social system, particularly in Western liberal democracies, is individuality. This has fostered a cult of authenticity in politics. Populist political agents use such personal narratives for their benefit because they often claim to be more authentic than career politicians and build a reputation for saying it 'as it is', which appeals to sizable parts of the electorate and has a potential to create strong identification with a political candidate (Enli, 2018, pp. 124-126). This image brand can also function as a firewall to mitigate the effects of political scandals since they seem to have less effect on the political reputation of populists (Sikorski & Kubin, 2021, pp. 50-51).

Furthermore, our changing media ecosystems have, as Chadwick (2017, pp. 207-210) has elaborated, disrupted political norms and the logic of political communication. A number of political scandals in the recent past would not have developed without the overall transformations of media and journalism in the digital age. On the one hand, technological infrastructure and digital tools give reporters new means for investigating political scandals that deal with substantial misconduct, such as corruption and other phenomena of power abuse. On the other hand, we can observe how social media offer new means for venting emotional attacks, sparking outrage, or voicing public discontent. Politicians are regularly subject to such firestorms. The rise of social media, particularly social network sites, led to a higher number of audience-induced scandals and to a faster distribution of accusations (Burkhardt, 2018).

While legacy media, i.e., TV, radio, and newspapers, are still the leading channels of political communication (Newman et al., 2020), participatory digital publics can create a 'spill-over' effect so that the consequences of misconduct, such as sexual harassment, may incite a more substantiated discourse in the political system and in journalistic mass media (Coombs & Holladay, 2021). Web 2.0 services, like blogs or Social Network Sites (SNS), empower users to share confidential information on wrongdoing or to express their distrust and outrage over actions which they perceive as scandalous. In this regard, scandals of less severity, like the concept of "talk scandals" (Ekström & Johansson, 2008), are becoming more prominent in public discourse about politics as well. In some instances, such provocative acts are strategic forms of "self-scandalization" (Haller, 2013) to increase attention for controversial political messages which gain prominence in discourse through media coverage and engagement in social media (Kleiman, 2019). Populist politicians, notably right-wing populists, appear to be especially skilled in using scandalous behavior and deliberate provocations to instrumentalize media coverage and trigger public attention (Maurer et al., 2022).

Taking a step back from most recent transformations, reflections on our understanding of 'new media' may also broaden the scope of scientific analysis. As Bösch (2011) suggests, the advent of new types of media has always created "opportunity structures" for scandals, e.g., the diffusion of print technologies since the 15th century and the rise of the popular press in the 19th century. In general, transformations of the media environment provide groups with new means for effective mediation of social events, which involve the breaching of certain moral or legal codes and help to determine how to elicit a public response.

While the macro-phenomena impact scandalization, organizational resources, routines, and roles should be accounted for as well, because such factors influence not only journalistic practices of reporting on misconduct but also how corporations and institutions react to being scandalized. Media organizations are dominated by hierarchies and political positions that allow varying degrees of editorial freedom to expose legal transgressions or social wrongs. Media organizations are biased towards specific candidates in political races, tend to draw a spotlight to their preferred candidates' political

biographies, or unfavorably scrutinize the opponents. Specific media organizations may deliberately campaign to destroy the reputation of politicians and scandalize their life stories, particularly in highly polarized public climates. Nowadays, the political reporting of Fox News illustrates the strategy used by partisan media which is close to what Kepplinger coined as “instrumental actualization” (2011). This is a journalistic practice in which events or topics from past news stories are recycled again and again by media outlets to launch attacks on and incite conflict among specific political actors. The prolonged and mostly unsubstantiated outrage surrounding Hillary Clinton’s use of private email accounts provides a recent example (Searle & Banda, 2019). An additional point to argue in this respect is that media systems with a dominant private sector (like the US or Italy) tend to favor scandalous news (Karidi, Meyen & Mahl, 2018).

Since such constellations co-determine the (re)actions of prominent figures, journalists, and audiences, the journalistic cultures of media organizations (or corporations) as well as party or corporate cultures are crucial factors in the dynamic of scandalization (Bergt, 2018; Nyhuis & Shikano, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2020). The effects of journalistic culture were noticeable during the revelation of the Panama Papers in 2016 when investigative journalism, as a professional mode deeply rooted in the participating media houses, became a driving force in scandal coverage (Haller, Michael & Kraus, 2018, p. 7). In the case of the Panama Papers, quality media covered a variety of financial and tax violations, which created a significant loss of reputation for companies in business and banking in countries like Iceland (Panamapapers.org).

On the micro-level the analysis can assess individual, psycho-social processes that may help us understand how certain actors handle scandals better than others but – more importantly – how recipients react to scandal coverage that may or may not yield an emotional effect. In this regard, the micro level refers to the three groups of actors in the coverage of political scandals, namely scandalized persons/organizations, scandalizers and scandal recipients (Burkhardt, 2018). Analyses can differentiate between fixed and more variable factors on the individual level. Concerning scandalizers, professional ethos, exogenous constraints and personality are variable and may also depend on the country of employment and culture of journalists. Looking at scandalized persons, human needs, such as security or social integration, are relatively fixed. Personality, personal involvement in a scandal or political beliefs are more variable. Scandal recipients do have relatively stable conditions/needs such as the wish to be entertained, to control the environment or to be informed about political grievances, but also exhibit varying factors, e.g., different processes of motivated reasoning (Sikorski, 2020) or abilities to articulate emotions and manage anger in reaction to scandals (Verbalyte, 2020). Depending on the culture in which a political scandal occurs, variable individual factors like personality, media usage patterns, cognitive abilities or personal involvement have relevance for the analysis.

In this introduction, the goal was to briefly elaborate some ideas that relate to different levels of scandal analysis to understand political scandals in a global context. Hence, the interconnectedness of social subsystems, resources and routines of organization,

and abilities as well as individual characteristics of agents involved in processes of scandalization were discussed and treated as variables in estimating and assessing the emergence of scandals in a particular cultural setting.

The papers published in this special issue are examples of different perspectives and methods to analyze and make sense of political scandals in a global context. Thus, the contributions cover a wide range of scandal cases, different cultures and national characteristics, with different focuses on the presented framework for comparative research of scandal communication.

Steffen Burkhardt elaborates the characteristics of global scandal processes in connection to historical developments of technologies and media systems. He identifies three steps of media change for global scandals: 1) written forms of moral code which were necessary for international reports and discourses on political scandals; 2) the evolution of a world-wide media system which led to an integration of political scandals in a global public, and 3) the development of digital forms of communication which resulted in a constant discourse on political scandals all around the globe. Burkhardt highlights specific features of digital communication which influence the process of political scandalization, such as the influence of algorithms on the proliferation of political news and 'alternative' media as partisan players in political communication. He argues that analyses on global political scandals offer the opportunity to discover the quality of public spheres in a global context.

Jan Dvorak focuses on the participation of social media audiences and therefore shows the result of a content analysis of tweets in two German political scandals. Out of a corpus of more than 55.000 messages on Twitter, he investigated 500 of the most influential tweets which were posted during the scandal cases of two younger German politicians, Philipp Amthor and Sarah-Lee Heinrich. Dvořák points out that there is a research gap regarding patterns of participation of social media audiences in scandalization processes. In his paper, he proposes a taxonomy of offensive and defensive types of audience participation during scandals. His results show that mainly dominant forms of participation were used in the two analyzed cases and that a high level of confrontation and conflict was observable in both cases. The taxonomy provides a framework for further comparative research, also in international contexts.

Maximilian Eder offers a case study of the so-called 'Ibiza-Affair' in the light of the new dynamic of scandalization that has made scandals a hyper-public phenomenon. Eder analyzes the process of scandalization and (political) journalistic discourse on Twitter in Germany and Austria. His research is based on a critical discourse analysis of 885 tweets from 149 influential political journalists. The findings suggest that scandalization on Twitter follows a hype cycle with a trigger event which functions as the starting point of the scandalization process and sharply declines over a relatively short period of time. In this process, a complex issue is reduced to an archetypical theme. The study adds to our understanding of the role of Twitter as an integral part of journalistic work when it

comes to delivering breaking news and reporting on political events of public relevance by focusing on the phenomenon of shifting the scandalization process to social media, which could be related to a deep mediatization.

Karine Prémont and Alexandre Millette expand on the research of political scandals by analyzing the media coverage of women involved in these scandals. However, rather than analyzing the coverage of women involved in sex scandals with American presidential candidates or elected officials, the authors study the media coverage of accidental celebrities, that is, women who find themselves caught up in a presidential scandal even though they are not responsible for or directly involved in it. The case studies range from 1972 (Watergate) to the Ukraine 'quid pro quo'-scandal (2020). The data are sampled from coverage of U.S. public affairs and cultural magazines. The authors' findings indicate that women who are indirectly involved in presidential scandals are covered in a negative and stereotypical way and that this type of coverage does not diminish over time.

Domagoj Bebić, Daniela Dolinar and Antea Boko investigate the amplifying role of memes in political scandals in the context of the 2022 local election in Split, Croatia. The authors focus on memes as a hybrid genre of online communication because memes represent a kind of commentary on the news that uses irony and cynicism and aims to increase the reaction of the target audience. Their paper argues that political scandals in the media are shorter-lived, and when they are in the form of memes, they are shared more on social media, thus becoming a kind of common knowledge. To analyze their assumptions, a qualitative case study was conducted on three Croatian news portals – *Večernji.hr*, *Index.hr*, and *Slobodnadalmacija.hr* – as well as the memes about the scandal published on the *Megatroll Split* Facebook page in June 2022.

In this respect, the studies published in this special issue showcase that scandals are not trivial. Scandals are like a magnifying lens that offers us insights into the dynamics of public communication and societal change. As such, the 'social pathology' we call scandal uncovers disruptions in social institutions and can be treated as a seismograph for larger cultural trends in society, e.g., with respect to degrees of polarization or the increase of populist sentiments. Furthermore, the analysis of scandals touches transformations in journalism. Scandals tell us something about the nature of 'news' and highlight the flow and diffusion of information. Additionally, scandals make visible changes in politics and strategic communication. Through scandals we learn something about political agents and their routines and means of (re-)establishing accountability. Thus, scandals offer us focal points to observe larger narratives and evolving media practices used by producers and consumers alike. Scandals are thus "rich moments for applying and refining the analytical toolkit of concepts, arguments, and theories" in media and political science (Tumber & Waisbord, 2019, p. 1).



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