

Introduction

Political Scandals and Media Across Democracies, Volume II

HOWARD TUMBER

City University, London

SILVIO R. WAISBORD

Academy for Educational Development

The news media have gained increasing importance both as an arena for battling out political confrontations and as a means of promoting government accountability. As Waisbord (1994) argued,

Scandals are unthinkable without the intervention of the mass media; the latter not merely covers but, more importantly, often originates political investigations . . . press organisations are essential for publicising political sins that have remained concealed. Thus scandals need to be treated, above all, as news events, as stories unmasking formerly secret political peccadilloes. The press is not the only institution responsible for media exposes, yet a scandal-hunting press is indispensable for turning abuses of political power into public events. . . . The combination of institutional political dynamics and a few news media espousing a muck-raking ethos is essential for understanding the recent series of scandals in Argentina. . . . Scandals are not inherent but sporadic phenomena, breaking the surface in specific historical and political environments. Some violations of trust never cross the threshold into public awareness, others remain potential affairs stifled by diverse interests or missed or ignored by the media and others become fully-fledged political exposés. (p. 21)

Media changes have also contributed to making scandals into common events in contemporary politics. Media organizations have historically been interested in scandalous news. Some trends in journalism in the past decades however have intensified this predisposition.

The vigor of investigative journalism in the 1960s and 1970s in Western democracies is closely related to the rise of scandal politics. By exposing corruption in government or other institutions, the news media may alter the direction of public policy and can cause people to be removed from office (Altschull, 1994). In this way, the press acts in its role as the Fourth Estate checking on government and rectifying abuses of power. Indeed, the presence of a press that

maintains some autonomy from government is required for scandals. The resignation of Nixon is often cited as culmination or high point of investigative journalism. At that time, investigative reporting, especially in the post-Watergate years, also made strides in the press in other countries. In Britain, the growth of investigative journalism sparked several scandals in the 1960s and 1970s. In Australia, muckraking contributed to the establishment of several royal commissions that investigated linkages between officials and organized crime and drugs in the 1970s and 1980s (Schultz, 1998).

Since then, investigative journalism seems to have experienced a decline. Reports about its death may seem premature as investigative journalism still finds room in some publications, but it is no longer the rage of newsrooms. Although muckrakers who defend their trade dismiss charges that investigative journalism is lying on its deathbed, the perception is that its heyday, the time when it was the rallying cry that inspired journalism students and scared public officials involved in shady dealings, has passed. Today's journalists are less inclined to think that the investigation of official misdeeds is one of the key functions of the press (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). The U.S. press, applauded for its investigative zeal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has lately been criticized for caving in to powerful interests and abandoning hard-hitting reporting. Studies have charged news organizations for ignoring or downplaying government and corporate malfeasance during the Reagan and Bush administrations, particularly the Savings & Loan and the Iran-Contra scandals (Herstgaard, 1988).

News organizations are less interested in exposing corruption on the count that investigative reporting is expensive, does not increase sales, causes legal and financial headaches, and enrages powerful officials. In all likelihood, it can have troubling effects for press executives interested in maintaining profit margins and a healthy bottom line. Several changes have discouraged news organizations from engaging in investigative reporting that laid the ground for scandals in the past. Structural changes in the ownership of media companies, editorial caution in response to financial pressures, disinterest in allocating human and monetary resources, and court decisions that made exposing political corruption a costly and troublesome venture have inhibited investigative reporting (Doig, 1997; Schultz, 1998).

The ebbing of investigative journalism however has not driven the press in the United States and the United Kingdom away from scandalous stories. Quite the contrary. Watergate has changed forever the relation between the press and politicians; namely, it affirmed a sense of adversarial reporting.

Aside from the affirmation of an adversarial relation, tabloidization has also tilted journalism toward chasing scandalous news. Tabloidization, a favorite punch-bag of many critics, fuels scandal news by pushing news organizations to chase titillating stories of corruption, full of drama but devoid of substance. To its critics, tabloidization signals the erosion of journalistic standards: Rumor replaces rigor, sensationalism replaces substance, voyeurism replaces veracity

(Bok, 1998). Tabloidization has sharpened interest among news organization in scandalous stories and molded news coverage of scandals. In the United Kingdom, the popular press has exposed indiscretions of public officials amid intense competition among newspapers and renewed "bonk journalism." In the United States, observers have pointed out that the scandals that surrounded the nomination of Justice Clarence Thomas and engulfed President Bill Clinton reflected a different journalism, one that prizes scandals with titillating, sexual details (Gitlin, 1996). The subject of contemporary exposés sets apart Watergate from recent scandals. Stories about sexual misconduct have elbowed out denunciations of high crimes and misdemeanors. Not without a tinge of nostalgia, Watergate journalism is portrayed as the expression of a press that chased official corruption, was rigorous about facts, and exercised good judgment in choosing what stories to pursue. Zippergate and other recent scandals in contrast show the prevalence of tabloid and entertainment values, the disregard for basic reporting principles, and the triumph of commerce over good journalism.

While the passing of investigative journalism is mourned in the United States and in other developed democracies, analysts have indicated the strength of hard-hitting reporting and the emergence of a more assertive press in other parts of the world. Simultaneously with the move from authoritarianism to democracy, a journalism that prizes the sniffing out of corruption has emerged in Latin America (Waisbord, 2000). Throughout the region, different news organizations have exposed a number of cases of corruption and crimes involving government officials embroiled in influence peddling, bribery, and human rights violations. Similar examples have also been observed in other parts of the world. Despite obvious limitations in the context of state-controlled media, investigative news have cautiously emerged in Chinese television (Chu, 1999). The news media have also brought out cases of corruption in other Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia where the press has long been under tight controls. Press revelations on corruption, sexual behavior, and human rights abuses triggered numerous scandals and the resignation of public officials (Eng, 1998; Lamb, 1999; Yee, 1998). In some cases such as Japan's, the foreign press has played an important role in exposing graft.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Scandals however have other important effects, namely, political and moral sanctions. Scandals put in motion the politics of shaming, actions that publicly damage individual reputations and serve as social reminders that regardless of their legal resolution, certain acts still constitute moral transgressions.

Lull and Hinerman (1997) tried to understand media scandals by comparing them to the concept of moral panic. While suggesting that scandal differs in some ways from moral panic in that "scandals must be traceable to real persons

who are held responsible for their actions," they argued that the media scandal and the moral panic may not be mutually exclusive. The behavior of individuals who create scandals can even stimulate a moral panic when their actions are interpreted as symptomatic of a larger social problem. "The discourses of the moral panic and the scandal require that a societal moral baseline is challenged. Their very discussion in the media assures that conventional morality is once again asserted as normal" (p. 5). They quoted McRobbie and Thornton (1995), who suggested that moral panic can act as a form of ideological cohesion that draws on a complex language of nostalgia and can act on behalf of the dominant social order by orchestrating consent. Examples are given from the United States where media scandal in one instance at least is part of an ultraconservative overall trend in popular culture where people may be castigated for not conforming to family values or the tabloid press blames Hollywood stars for not being faithful in marriage and TV talk show audiences scream disapproval at guests who do not conform to normal lifestyles. They argued that the contrast between conventional social behavior and the forms of deviance that make social action scandalous is part of an ideological system that defines media practice and popular culture generally (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). Lull and Hinerman set out the following 10 criteria for determining what is a scandal: (a) that social norms reflecting the dominant morality must be transgressed, (b) that these transgressions should be performed by specific persons, (c) that the actions reflect an exercise of their desires or interests, (d) that individual persons should be identified as perpetrators of the act, (e) that it must be intentional or reckless, (f) that they must be held responsible for their actions, (g) that the actions and events must have differential consequences for those involved, (h) that the revelations have to be widely circulated by communications media, (i) that they have to be turned into a narrative, and (j) that they need to inspire widespread interest and discussion. They also set out a typology of scandals, giving three different scandal types: institutional, star (meaning a celebrity), and psychodrama (Lull & Hinerman, 1997).

Lull and Hinerman (1997) did not locate media scandals solely in the realm of the cultural. One motive is financial gain by the media; as competition has increased, the media scandal is a way to stimulate public outrage and corporate profits. In Britain, competition is intense among the daily and Sunday national press. In the past 10 years, circulation of both has fallen by 2 million. But they also argued that media scandal is a popular forum for public awareness and debate of moral questions that have strong implications for public policy and is a major contribution to the mediated public sphere in modern society. They acknowledged that the often-derided activity is in fact a modern-day exercise of Fourth Estate responsibilities wherein the press keeps close tabs on those in power. They were therefore not dismissing media scandal as pure sensationalism.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES

Technological innovations have contributed to turning scandal politics into common features of contemporary democracies. One of these changes has been the multiplication of new media, namely, round-the-clock cable networks and Internet news services. These media provide outlets that have a relentless appetite for scandal news. Unlike old media, news operations in new media do not have once-a-day deadlines but provide an uninterrupted stream of news. Wall-to-wall coverage of scandalous information offers a convenient and cheap solution to fill a never-ending news cycle. Judging by rating numbers, such strategy has also proven to be financially successful. In the United States, start-up cable news such as MSNBC, CNBC, and Fox News Channel that devoted uninterrupted attention to the Lewinsky scandal duplicated ratings that helped them solidify their growth. The scandal reportedly generated huge revenues for the 24-hour cable news channels.

The urgency to produce gavel-to-gavel news has pushed cable news outlets, critics observe, to disregard basic journalistic practices by providing information that has not been carefully checked or that would not have passed the filters of traditional newsrooms. Journalism's pressure to be first and to scoop competitors has damaging effects when transported to cable newsrooms that have a bigger news hole to fill out. The so-called decline in journalistic standards and the concomitant weakening of traditional journalism is prominent in the case of Internet news. In the 1990s, the Internet emerged not only as a far-flung media technology but also as a forum for scandal. The Net is flooded with scandalous information. Web sites such as the Drudge Report, which had a crucial role in the unfolding of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, have become forums for rumor and sensation. Unlike traditional news media such as *Newsweek*, which killed an early story based on rumors about the liaison, the Drudge Report had a free range to publish the story that unleashed the scandal. *Newsweek* however posted the piece online, and reporter Michael Isikoff, who had penned the suppressed article, appeared on several television news shows. During the Lewinsky scandal, the Salon Web site published allegations that Representative Henry Hyde, who headed the House Judiciary Committee investigating the charges against President Bill Clinton, carried on a 5-year extramarital affair three decades earlier.

Unconstrained by technological obstacles, economic resources, or traditional journalistic principles, electronic news services have published information that would have had a harder time getting approval in old newsrooms. As a consequence, the floodgates of scandal news have been opened, making it possible to disseminate gossip, innuendo, and other scandalous fare. Some observers have even warned about "the end of journalism" accelerated by technologies and news outlets that undermine the control that journalism traditionally had over what is (and what is not) news (Schorr, 1999).

If some U.S. commentators find this new media environment worrisome, elsewhere, the coming of new media technologies is hailed as an alternative to state-controlled media that frequently stay away from chasing official corruption. Whereas many U.S. journalists commonly frown on the challenges that the new media pose to the established press, Internet enthusiasts celebrate new technologies for weakening the grip that official news organizations had maintained in nondemocratic systems. In countries such as China and Iran, these services provide news about government wrongdoing that otherwise would be unavailable despite the limited reach of cable and Internet news.

A different set of technological innovations has also facilitated scandal politics. Gadgets such as lipstick-size video cameras, sound scanners, and miniature tape recorders have become part of the technological arsenal of scandal politics. By allowing the catching of corruption in the act without the knowledge of involved parties, these technologies offer material evidence that sets the stage for scandals. Reporters, public investigators, or anyone interested in smearing the reputation of political rivals can go undercover and gather facts of wrongdoing.¹ Scandals that were triggered by rumors suggest that confirmed, solid evidence of corruption is not always mandatory for scandals to surface. But in the context of cultures where seeing (and hearing) is believing, recorded images and sounds of illicit acts offer what seem indisputable proof of wrongdoing. They provide the means for turning speculations about secret, illicit behavior into confirmed, public evidence. According to national laws and judicial decisions, they can be admitted as evidence in legal proceedings and in some cases, as Watergate patently demonstrated, are the smoking gun that proves the involvement of officials in wrongdoing and cover-up.

By validating claims and providing the illusion of immediacy to acts of wrongdoing, video and sound tapes are important ammunition for actors involved in scandal politics. When unable to find evidence of crimes, government, private investigators, or political enemies rely on electronic gadgets to entrap officials in "candid political camera." FBI investigators for example who were chasing corruption in Congress filmed the so-called Abscam video that showed agents posing as Arab businessmen offering bribes to representatives to help them evade immigration restrictions. Russian justice minister Valetin Kovalyov resigned after a news program aired a videotape showing him with naked women in a sauna believed to be linked to the Mafia. In Argentina, the broadcast of a video showing Judge Norberto Oyarbide having sexual relations with another man generated a scandal that ended with his resignation and trial.

If bugging is not unusual in politics, as Richard Nixon justified, eavesdropping is one of the chosen strategies to collect evidence to spark scandals. Politicians and different organized interests use taped conversations for waging scandal politics. A taped telephone conversation (that had been intercepted with a scanner) between then House Speaker Newt Gingrich and other leading House Republicans discussing strategy about Gingrich's ethics violations was offered by Democrats as proof of wrongdoing. Shortly after having lost the presidential

elections in Colombia in 1994, Conservative Andrés Pastrana made public at a press conference taped conversations between members of the Cali cartel that suggested that drug monies had entered the campaign of the Liberal party. In Russia, recordings of secret talks that involved finance minister Anatoly Chubais was used by Yeltsin's opposition as evidence that government officials were involved in illegal transactions during the 1996 election campaign. In Israel, secret taped conversations that hinted at misuse of public funds by former interior minister Aryeh Deri were at the center of a scandal that rocked the Netanyahu administration in 1997.

The widespread use of undercover cameras and sound devices in investigative news broadcasts attests to the belief among reporters that video and audio recordings are unquestionable facts that support exposés. Taped conversations between Linda Tripp and Monica Lewinsky in which the latter talked about her liaison with President Bill Clinton were received as confirmation of buzzing rumors about the affair. The presidency of Brazil's Fernando Henrique Cardoso was rocked by two scandals that originated in taped conversations that revealed illicit actions. In 1997, the daily *Folha de Sao Paulo* published transcripts of a dialogue in which two congressmen discussed receiving payoffs from a senior cabinet official in exchange for voting in favor of an amendment that allows presidents to run for reelection. Another scandal erupted in May 1999 after the publication of secretly taped telephone conversations that hinted at favoritism in the privatization of the country's telecommunications monopoly. Although speculations about illegal actions already existed, the conversations suggested that President Cardoso (who until then was untouched by early revelations) knew about the use of public institutions and public financing to manipulate the auction.

Tamar Liebes and Shoshana Blum-Kulka in the first article in this issue argue that the exposure of scandal, often seen as constituting the highest journalistic achievement, is not necessarily controlled by the journalist. Looking at scandal as the outcome of the varying relationships between reporters and sources, they offer a typology of three subgenres: *Whistle blowing* is a story in which the source betrays his or her institutional loyalty (often for a higher cause), *entrapment* is a story in which the reporter betrays an often naïve source (sometimes for the sake of a good story), and *mainstreaming* and *spotlighting* are the highlighting of routine violations of social norms by the reporter's picking up a routine story from a channel addressing a cultural enclave or by choosing to investigate routine, endemic antinormative practices. A new type of scandal emerges in the capacity of interviewees on live political talk shows to surprise their hosts by violating the norms of studio interviews or of accepted social behavior.

Rodney Tiffen illustrates how the most contentious issues in news coverage of scandals concern issues of proportion and prevalence. In New South Wales, the issue of police corruption has been on political and media agendas for more than three decades. The media reporting has included some landmark pieces of investigative reporting and dramatic revelations in trials and royal commissions

but also sensationalism and rhetorical extravagance. Despite the prolonged attention and prolific coverage, serious questions remain about how well the extent and natures of corruption were reported and whether the media have conveyed the degree of reform in police practices.

Jean Chalaby uses the case of France to show how the disclosure of scandals was fostered by developments in the judiciary field as magistrates and lawyers progressively learned to use the media to advance their cases. Investigative reporting is a recent development in France, with the revelation of scandals becoming a legitimate practice for French journalists only since the 1980s. To date, investigative reporting knows few practitioners and faces considerable legal obstacles. Chalaby provides an account of its emergence and analyzes the reasons for its late and fragile development. The French journalistic tradition has long been influenced by literature and politics and therefore has not placed as much emphasis on the collection and exposition of facts as Anglo-American journalism. Until the 1980s, there was very little competition in the French media field, acting as another disincentive for French newspapers to seek out information. Until the beginning of the Fifth Republic, venality was widespread among French journalists, further hindering the revelation of scandals. Influential social theories in France prevented the personalization of politics, placing an emphasis on the systemic and collective causes of problems.

Regardless of whether the dynamics of scandal news have beneficial or detrimental consequences for journalism and democracy in different countries, it is hard to dispute the argument that a new media scenario offers more opportunities for scandal news. Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini in their contribution in this issue forcefully make this point. They argue that the new media environment, by providing virtually unlimited sources of political information, undermines the idea that there are discrete gates through which political information passes: If there are no gates, there can be no gatekeepers. For them, the difficulty of elites (political and media both) and academics in understanding the Lewinsky scandal stems from their failure to recognize the increasingly limited ability of journalists to act as gatekeepers. The disjuncture between elite attempts to both control and understand the scandal on one hand and the conclusions that the public drew about this political spectacle on the other hand speaks to some fundamental changes that have occurred in the role of the press in American society in the late 20th century.

In the final piece in this issue, Michael Schudson suggests that modern political scandals in the United States and to some extent worldwide are cast in the mold of Watergate. Watergate established the idealized role of the press in modern scandal, created governmental machinery for investigating scandal, and offered up a language in which to describe and analyze scandal. Scandal has become an integral part of the way modern democracies do politics, but determining just what theory might comprehend the significance of scandal is an unsettled matter.

NOTE

1. The *News of the World*, a British Sunday tabloid owned by News International, featured a number of drug scandal stories through trapping a number of well-known celebrities. One case involved the former England rugby captain, Lawrence Dallaglio. Because the story involved reporters posing as agents for potential sponsors, special recording equipment was used. The tape recorder used was a Nagra because of its small size and high-quality recordings.

REFERENCES

- Altschull, J. H. (1994). *Agents of power: The media and public policy*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Bok, S. (1998, April 13). The decline and fall of journalistic standards. *Boston Globe*, p. A17.
- Chu, H. (1999, February 21). China's investigative journalists cut a broad, if cautious, swath. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A3.
- Doig, A. (1977). The decline of investigatory journalism. In M. Bromley & T. O'Malley (Eds.), *Journalism reader* (pp. 189-213). London: Routledge.
- Eng, P. (1998, November 29). Free press flexing its muscles. *Los Angeles Times*, p. M2.
- Gitlin, T. (1996). *The twilight of common dreams: Why America is wracked by culture wars*. New York: Owl Books.
- Herstgaard, M. (1988). *On bended knee: The press and the Reagan presidency*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Lamb, D. (1999, April 3). Asian crisis puts new spin on Thai press; reporters and editors are delving into issues they have long ignored, even questioning government policy. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A2.
- Lull, J., & Hinerman, S. (1997). The search for scandal. In J. Lull & S. Hinerman (Eds.), *Media scandals: Morality and desire in the popular culture marketplace* (pp. 1-33). New York: Columbia University Press.
- McRobbie, A., & Thornton, S. L. (1995). Rethinking "moral panic" for multi mediated social worlds. *British Journal of Sociology*, 46, 559-574.
- Schorr, D. (1999, June 11). The end of journalism. A deadline-a-minute technology produces qualitatively different news. *Christian Science Monitor*.
- Schultz, J. (1998). *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, accountability, and the media*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Waisbord, S. (1994). Knocking on newsroom doors: The press and political scandals in Argentina. *Political Communication*, 11, 19-34.
- Waisbord, S. (2000). *Watchdog journalism in South America: News, democracy and accountability*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Weaver, D., & Wilhoit, C. (1996). *The American journalist in the 1990s: U.S. news people at the end of an era*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Yee, C. M. (1998, November 4). Tabloid's sales soar in Malaysia tumult: Tiny paper with antigovernment image is big seller. *The Wall Street Journal*, p. A19.

HOWARD TUMBER is a professor of sociology and dean of the School of Social and Human Sciences, City University, London. He is the editor of *Media Power, Policies and Professionals* (Routledge Kegan Paul, 2000) and *News: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 1999), joint author of *Reporting Crime—The Media Politics of Criminal Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and *Journalists at War* (Sage, 1988), and author of *Television and the Riots* (British Film Institute, 1982). He is a founder and coeditor of the Sage journal *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism*.

SILVIO R. WAISBORD is Senior Program Officer at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC. He was an associate professor in the Department of Journalism and Mass Media at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Great Parade: Election Campaigns and Mass Media in Argentina (Sudamericana, 1995)* and *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News Accountability and Democracy (Columbia University Press, 2000)*. He is also the author of numerous articles about media, politics, and globalization.