

Piotr PAWEŁCZYK

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

The impact of scandal on public opinion

Political scandal is a rare subject of academic analysis, maybe because it lies on the fringes of human and systemic weakness. It is difficult to say whether this phenomenon should be studied by psychologists, sociologists, political scientists or even experts on social communication. This issue is downplayed, which is unjustified because – although it is true that scandals frequently stem from highly trivial sources (the most frequent ones include sex, money, the pursuit of power or abuse of authority) – the consequences of disclosing certain facts can be harmful for entire political systems. Scandals sweep presidents, prime ministers and ministers off the stage, destroy political careers, break ruling coalitions and bring about consequential crises of social confidence in authorities. Events involving public persons, in particular politicians, which are stigmatised as being scandalous, are a blow to the social capital of the authorities. Their significance is frequently underestimated as regards democratic procedures. For public opinion, individuals implicated in scandals are the living proof of the inconsistency of their apparent attachment to the ethical principles, which they declare especially during election campaigns, and their actual breaching.

The term scandal “refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (Thompson, 2010, p. 28). Therefore, scandal does not emerge without transgression, but the size of this transgression needs to fall within certain brackets. If it is minor, it does not have to result in a scandal, but when it is enormous, it goes beyond a mere scandal. Neither a speeding ticket nor a murder committed by a politician do not constitute a scandal, as they do not fall within the standards that can be breached to be qualified as scandalous, rather than as a misdemeanour in the former case and a crime in the latter. Consequently, if a scandal means breaching standards, it is defined in terms of culture, time and space, the same way these standards are. The same activities do not have to breach standards for everybody, everywhere at any time. Some kinds of scandal

can only emerge in certain conditions, therefore we can even speak about the culture of scandal (Kepplinger, 2008, p. 15).

John B. Thompson is right to note that the initial breaching of a standard is frequently less significant than infringing on secondary standards, while seeking to conceal that initial breach (Thompson, 2010, p. 32). This can be exemplified by the Watergate scandal, where the fate of President Richard Nixon was to a greater extent influenced by the attempts to cover up his connections with the individuals who broke into the Democrats' offices than the break-in itself. The publication of tapes recorded in the Oval Office was of paramount importance, as they revealed to American public opinion certain personality traits of Nixon which did not fit with the image of a President. The reaction of German ex-President Woelf to the disclosure of what benefits he enjoyed in violation of ethical principles falls into the same category. It appears that his negative assessment was considerably more influenced by his attempts to prevent the publication of incriminating articles and the abuse of power for this purpose. Finally, we have the Polish example of the 'tapegate' of 2014, when the content of the tapes was at least for some time overshadowed by the campaign the prosecution and the Internal Security Agency (ABW) launched to retrieve from the journalists of *Wprost* the full audio recordings of the politicians' incriminating conversations.

Experts on public image recommend that politicians involved in a scandal admit their mistake and ask for forgiveness up to the point of resignation from office. Paradoxically, this gives them the chance of salvaging some honour and potentially even returning to politics after a period in the wilderness, by contrast, lying or obfuscation can utterly destroy their reputation. The renowned American social psychologist, Robert Cialdini, claims that voters never love their politicians more than when the latter admit their mistakes, so it is worth admitting even those sins they did not actually commit. However, politicians frequently adopt a different strategy, named the *maximax strategy* by decision theory, whereby in trying to save everything they lose everything. Attacked from every side, the heroes of scandals often begin to act aggressively towards the media. They rarely benefit from this, and usually set a mechanism of negative feedback in motion, tarnishing their image in the eyes of public opinion even more. The power of the media to create this image is incomparable with that of those involved in an affair, something the culprits often seem to forget.

Public opinion has its own crucial part to play in this performance; to some extent it is as important as the person violating the standard. The vio-

lation is not a scandal in itself. A public scandal breaks out only when the audience is activated. Scandals have a backstage and a director, who decides whether to release information to the public and when to do it. News of the infringement of a standard released at the appropriate moment can provide a powerful political weapon. The reactions of people who are not actually involved in the scandal not only serve the purpose of describing the events, but are an integral part of the scandal. No reaction means no scandal, which, by nature, makes scandals the object of interest of public opinion studies, as public opinion is only concerned with controversial issues. Controversiality is a defining element of public opinion, and it concentrates around the issues that arouse different public sentiments. Non-controversial matters do not become the concern of public opinion as, among other things, they do not attract attention of the audience and do not stir emotions. Whether this happens or not, to a great extent, depends on the mass media, which shape the image of an event, presenting its controversiality, for instance, by referring to different opinions on a given matter, thereby framing it in the category of conflict. Sometimes an event is such a clear example of a breach of standards that presenting two opposing opinions is difficult, but then coverage is dominated by the drastic features of the message. The media can make a minor, or only locally significant, transgression a primary subject for public opinion. The weight of scandal does not depend on the weight of the standard, but on how useful the scandal is for the media in terms of positioning and framing. Hans Mathias Kepplinger observed that scandals are always accompanied by a wave of media coverage which gives the impression that a given anomaly is a significant problem, stigmatising the perpetrators in an almost unanimous manner. Media coverage always generates social outrage, whose intensity reflects the intensity of the coverage, making the perpetrators feel that they are victims of a campaign waged against them, even if they do not deny the accusations (Kepplinger, 2008, p. 7). The power of the media lies in their ability to employ different ways to present the transgressions revealed. The size of the scandal is determined not necessarily by the range of wrongness, but by how intensively it is scandalised in the media coverage. Scandalisation is performed by means of different instruments: language (stylistic instruments, evaluative vocabulary), photographs, filmed material, selected comments and so on. As early as 1963, Bernard Cohen wrote that “the press is much more than a provider of information and entertainment. The press may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers

what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). In his analysis of framing, Robert Entman observes that to frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993). He distinguishes the five most popular means used by the media to frame the events they cover, clearly indicating that one of the main purposes of framing is to arouse controversy within the frame of a given interpretation. An event framed as a conflict generates the obvious controversiality of the issue, which follows from the nature of conflict as such. Being a personal drama, the event is personalised, thus acquiring additional emotion. Presentation of the event in terms of a scandal easily stimulates compassion for the victims or anger with those involved.¹ When the event is framed as a certain consequence, produced in different planes of social life, it inspires a desire to hold those responsible for the negative events accountable. The assessment of these events can differ, of course. When an event is presented as a moral issue, it can easily call for the sin to be stigmatised, for the perpetrators to be punished, thereby demonstrating one’s own purity. The media can also present the event as someone’s fault, enabling the perpetrators to be sought.²

It is worth noting that scandal does not usually commence with the transgression of a standard but rather with the act of its disclosure and the accusations that transform the original transgression into the knowledge that public opinion acquires. Scandal can be deemed to be a delayed reaction to the transgression of the standard. This temporal shift is determined by the media. It objectively depends on when the information is obtained and subjectively – on when the time to disclose it is deemed to be particularly advantageous (mainly for political reasons). The period prior to the disclosure can allow gossip and rumours to circulate. In political circles, transgressing moral standards (related to sex, alcohol and so on) is frequently common knowledge among the elite and does not have to generate

¹ From this point of view the conduct of those male politicians’ betrayed wives, who did not allow the media to frame a scandal through the perspective of their personal drama, e.g. Hillary Clinton and Wanda Łyżwińska, should be appreciated.

² William Gamson identifies a number of other frames, including that of risk and threat, violence, victims, the strong and the weak, control and consensus, competition, horse race, strategic, game, personality, issue, episode and cold war (Gamson, Modigliani, 1989, p. 1–37, after: Palczewski, 2011).

scandal, thus confirming the cultural relativity of transgression. The elite are, by nature, convinced that they have greater rights than the masses, and of their being allowed to transgress the standards that bind 'ordinary people'. When the fact of such a transgression becomes public, however, and the scandal emerges (the knowledge spreads outside the group) members of the elite have to react as if they did not know about the transgression and they were clearly appalled the same way the broad public opinion is.

Political scandals appear to be of particular importance for society and for the forming of public opinion. Thompson refers to the views of Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein who indicate that the main distinguishing feature of political scandal is seeking to increase one's power at the cost of the principles of proper conduct (Thompson, 2010, p. 119). The two scholars believe that political and financial scandals involving politicians are not political if they are not related to a certain abuse of power perpetrated at the cost of the principles of proper conduct and procedures. Only liberal democracy is characterised by preventing such practices, therefore political scandals can only break out in this political system. The disclosure of a scandal in totalitarian systems is impossible due to how the media operate there; and it requires exceptional courage from journalists in authoritarian systems. Scandals obviously emerge also in these systems but their frequency (the frequency with which transgressions of standards are disclosed in the context of the abuse of power) is significantly lower. Markovits and Silverstein's attitude appears somewhat paradoxical, but it is so only if we look at other sources of information than the media, which is, of course, possible, as we know from history, but unlikely.

In the opinion of John B. Thompson, the significance of political scandals in a liberal democracy follows from the fact that they reduce the symbolic capital which is a condition for political power to be exercised. This can also undermine the foundations of political power as such, because it destroys (or threatens to destroy) the key assets which politicians to a certain extent rely on. These assets involve their reputation and good name as well as the respect other politicians and the public media pay to them (Thompson, 2010, p. 132). This observation borders on idealisation, but being sceptical in this area may be a product of individual experience of living in a concrete state. The confidence in politicians is very low in Poland, and practice shows that scandals are not very harmful to them. Thompson believes, however, that weakened symbolic capital reduces one's potential to exert influence on his environment. It would be a consid-

erable mistake, then, to treat scandal as a superficial phenomenon or a distraction from the actual subject of politics.

Despite Markovits' and Silverstein's reservations, three types of political scandals are usually indicated: those related to sexual matters, finance and exercise of power. These are ideal categories, of course, as how to classify a scandal related to a politician's addiction to alcohol or drugs, or involvement in domestic violence. Possibly sexuality should be replaced with morals as a criterion of scandal. The division of scandals according to their sources, however, is not of particular importance for this paper, although it is true that erotic scandals involving politicians sell best, as they combine two exciting fields of life: sex and power. It might be more efficient to divide scandals using the criterion of the standard-violating desire to satisfy the need for power – hyper-dominance, hyper-gratification and hyper-acceptance (the latter would also encompass the sexual area). In the opinion of Alfred Adler, the need for power, fame or wealth felt at a hyper level (not to be confused with the quite natural expectations every individual has in these terms) must produce frustration with the inability to achieve complete and perpetual satisfaction in these areas (Adler, 1946). Such frustration can easily transform into activities that violate the standards which are typically a common product of individuals complying with standards.

It can be easily observed that in the field of politics one can identify scandals resulting in the destruction of the political image on the one hand, and on the other, scandals that are to a certain extent simulated in order to make the perpetrator's image more attractive, or at least attract the attention of public opinion through the media. Politicians have long realised the advantageous influence of scandalisation on the interest of the mass media. Therefore, scandals can be divided in respect of the intentional or unintentional outcome they produce. Not every scandal can serve the purpose of image building, of course. Scandals involving corruption are not likely to serve this purpose. Sexual or, more broadly speaking, moral scandals, however, can be an efficient tool to make image more attractive, depending on the culture (not only political culture). The political image of Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, has long benefited from his numerous scandals, until the moral standards of Italy were breached. Silvio Berlusconi's scandalising image creation was obviously aided by the national traits attributed to Italians, as well as by the fact of his being a media mogul. It is, after all, worth keeping permanent control over the framing of the scandalous event. This is not an indispensable condition, however, as

exemplified by Russia, where Vladimir Zhirinovskiy often uses moral scandals to build his image, and Poland, where Janusz Palikot makes a successful use of this mechanism, albeit being criticised by the media. Paradoxically, in the case of scandals intended to create image, the media are treated instrumentally, although sometimes the inspirers lose control over them, as in the case of Polish ex-Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz.

It is difficult to speak about the academically founded theory of scandal, although an attempt by John B. Thompson should be respectfully referred to here; he tried to develop a social theory of scandal that would link scandal with the undermining of reputation which is, in his opinion, the main source of symbolic power. He reconstructs other theoretical approaches outlining four in particular (Thompson, 2010, p. 294–308).

Firstly, scandal can be approached as an ephemeral event exerting negligible influence on the operation of the social system (the theory of the lack of consequences). Scandals are an element of modern pop-culture, with all its superficiality and short-term life. Scandals in general, and political scandals in particular, provide entertainment without consequence; they are the product of a media culture which has transformed the sensational disclosure of public persons' private lives into a self-sustaining form of journalism. This claim is confirmed by the transience of scandals. Old ones are replaced by new ones, which seems to indicate that they are not significant if they disappear so easily. Scandals are not always clearly accounted for, which makes them seem trivial events blown out of proportion by the media. Before one scandal is explained, it gets replaced by another one, whose actual course, reasons and outcomes we may also have no time to learn.

Secondly, there is the functionalist concept of scandal which claims that scandals serve to confirm the standards and conventions that are breached by the activities in question. Thompson derives this view from Emil Durkheim's concept of religion, indicating that, in the modern media world, scandal can be deemed as a secularised form of sin, which is indispensable for society to face their own vices and experience them in the process of disclosure, condemnation and punishment. Confidence in the social order is thereby confirmed by means of a public demonstration of this order's ability and determination to combat sin. We need sinners' breaching standards to be revealed to feel better about ourselves, as those who do not commit transgressions, or whose transgressions remain undiscovered, since public opinion is not interested in our lives. Consequently,

public persons, in particular politicians, deserve especially harsh judgment. It is nice to feel that one is better than the transgressors, it is good to find oneself on the 'light side of the force'.

Thirdly, there is a concept that criticises the media, emphasising the harmful influence scandal has on public discourse. The source of this concept can be sought in the premises of the theory of mass society. The media, which are frequently interested in quite trivial conduct of public persons, marginalise debates and issues of vastly greater significance. This diminishes the level of debate and gives secondary importance to rational arguments. Jürgen Habermas may be recalled here, and his opinion about the high quality of the autochthonous public realm of direct participation and glaring deterioration of the rationality of discourse in the public media realm (Habermas, 2008). Scandals, especially moral scandals, reported in a personalised and highly moralistic manner, provide ready content not only for a tabloidised press, but also for other media fighting for their market share. By this token, they no longer act as the guardians of social values and become commentators, or even co-participants of the historical collapse of the public realm. This approach to scandal is in line with the overly optimistic outlook on the role of the press in the 18th century, for example, as well as on the rationality of debate at that time. This by no means changes the fact that the quantitatively limited public realm had to be of a higher level than that of modern debate, that has adapted to the reality of mass democracy. Every new medium plunges deeper down. This is evidenced by the analysis of public debate after the spread of printed press, radio, television and – now – the internet.

Fourthly, in contrast to the foregoing concept, scandal can be approached as an element that enriches public debate, approximating it to the scope of the interests of ordinary people, who are interested in politics only, or maybe mainly, as far as soft, preferably sensational, news is concerned. The tabloids are focused on the events from the fringes of public and private lives, forcing politicians to face up to issues they would rather not talk about, or forget about altogether. It can also be said that, instead of idealistic images of politicians, the media present realistic images of people coping with everyday problems. Interestingly, while founded on utterly different premises, the third and fourth concepts arrive at a description of the same phenomenon – infotainment. Incidentally, scandalisation is becoming an effective way to create media audience, which is sold to advertisers, which is especially significant for the mass media operating on a free market.

Refraining from an assessment of the outcome, one can consider the reasons for this peculiar career of political scandal, indicating several essential changes that have taken place over the last half a century in how the social system has been functioning.

Firstly, scandal is the product of the increasing visibility of political leaders, which is a result of the opportunities the media have acquired to interfere in their lives and the distinctly reduced limitations on the publication of information. To a much greater extent than was the case several decades ago, the field of politics has become the field of the media, where the relations between politicians and ordinary citizens are shaped by media forms of communication. The growing visibility of politicians increases the likeliness of a scandal to be disclosed. All citizens may be equal before the law, but not all transgressors of standards are equal in the face of scandal. On account of their position, function or responsibility they have assumed, some people are at greater risk of becoming the heroes of scandals in case of any transgressions committed. Theoretically, the mass media, which share the responsibility for the content and form of public debate could avoid shocking the audiences with scandalous news, or at least not focus on it so much. Yet the competitive circumstances of a media market which is becoming increasingly tabloidised takes precedence over journalistic reliability.

Secondly, the opportunities for surveillance and supervision have increased. Secret recording of conversations, shooting pictures from a distance, interception of data, and the retrieval of encoded content transmitted electronically has created new ways to invade the privacy of people who are especially interesting to public opinion, such as members of the political, business, and artistic elite. Scandals are increasingly often produced by journalistic provocation, which is caused by the relative ease of creating audiovisual documentation. The technical potential foretold by films and books from the second half of the 20th century has already become a fact. What appeared technically or ethically impossible is the reality of the modern media world. The 'tapeagate' scandal in Poland demonstrated that everybody can be taped, which is a scandal in itself, and that the content and language of the private discussions of public people will always arouse controversy.

Thirdly, the media market is characterised by fierce competition which forces changes in journalistic standards. The advancements in technology do not have to mean that they will be used for surveillance, unless they are accompanied by changes in journalistic ethics. Investigative journalism

has developed dynamically since the 1960s and 70s, but it was rooted in a belief in the controlling function performed by the media. At present, the controlling purpose is becoming secondary to the desire to supply sensational, shocking, or scandalous material, and this is why the most tabloidised media always spearhead the publication of such news or gossip. Scandals disclosed by the more highbrow media (although not free from tabloidisation themselves) usually lead to more serious consequences, involving the transgression of secondary standards. It is worth observing that the media remained highly discreet regarding the numerous love affairs of President John F. Kennedy, unlike what happened thirty years later in the case of President Bill Clinton, who demonstrated considerable restraint and modesty in his ignorance about oral sex.

Fourthly, political life requires that its leaders are vested with public trust, otherwise any election of a politician would be an act of hypocrisy. On the other hand, we attach increasingly greater importance to politicians' private lives, assuming that the principles they observe in their private lives are going to translate into how they exercise their public functions. While this approach may be intuitively justified, it constitutes an element of the mechanism of optimistic memory, as we must realise that in the old days very little was known about politicians' private lives, therefore it could not have influenced the assessment of their political standards. Scandal has become democratic, in the wake of lowered criteria for elevating people to the elite whose members are of interest to public opinion. Increasingly often it is the ability to cause scandal that promotes people to the highly transient world of fame, which explains the emergence of celebrities.

To conclude, it can be said that scandal has become such a powerful element of public discourse, both in terms of politics and the media, that it is high time academic criteria were applied to it along with the research methods that are at our disposal at present. It is also time for us to domesticate scandal, the same way sin was domesticated by Christianity. It seems unlikely that the moral standards of our politicians will rise higher than the possibilities of disclosure and publication of their transgressions. And the interest of public opinion in the 'sins' of popular people will only continue to grow.

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Wpływ skandalu na opinię publiczną

Streszczenie

Skandal polityczny rzadko pojawia się jako przedmiot analizy naukowej, być może dlatego, że znajduje się na pograniczu obszaru ludzkich ułomności i słabości systemu. Nie wiadomo, czy powinni badać to zjawisko psycholodzy, socjolodzy, politolodzy, czy specjaliści z zakresu komunikowania społecznego. Wpływ skandalu na opinię publiczną jest jednak niezaprzeczalny tak samo jego konsekwencje dla funkcjonowania systemu politycznego. Skandale zmiatają ze sceny prezydentów, premierów, ministrów, niszczą kariery polityków, a także owocują brzemieniami w skutki kryzysami społecznego zaufania do władzy. Wydarzenie z udziałem osób publicznych, przede wszystkim polityków, napiętnowane jako skandal stanowi cios w kapitał społeczny władzy. Jego znaczenie jest często niedoceniane wobec rozstrzygnięć proceduralnych demokracji. Osoby uwikłane w skandal stanowią dla opinii publicznej żywy dowód niezgodności deklarowanego – zwłaszcza w trakcie kampanii wyborczych – przywiązania do zasad etycznych i faktycznego ich łamania. Artykuł zawiera rozważania na temat samej istoty skandalu, określając go jako akt naruszenia normy, ujawnienie tego naruszenia oraz reakcję opinii publicznej. Scharakteryzowano w nim także podstawowe koncepcje dotyczące przyczyn rosnącej ilości skandali oraz ich konsekwencji dla społeczeństwa.

