A violation of certain societal norms and moral codes can result in political scandal. However, a prerequisite is that the violation ought to be mediated and framed as a scandal through the editorial choice of journalistic angles, source selection, headlines and images. Certain aspects, facts and accusations are highlighted and prioritized, affecting our interpretation of how the story is morally evaluated and the ways in which the causes are understood. Creating a political scandal requires media reports that elicit public critique and reactions. Otherwise, such events would remain in the realm of potential scandals (Entman 2016: 80).

In Durkheim-inspired functional scandal theory, norm violations exposed through mediated scandals serve as an opportunity to validate or modify social norms. Politicians are public figures, but also “moral representatives in multiple ways” (Jacobsson & Löfmark 2008: 212). Journalists who expose norm transgressions help to restore and renew the moral order of society (Alexander 1988). They also maintain the norms of public life and the values of political conduct (Ettema and Glasser 1998), compensating the lack of control by other societal institutions. Political scandals can be understood as “litmus tests of societal morality”, signalling long-term changes in society’s moral order (Kantola and Vesa 2013: 304), and functional interpretations generally underline the positive effects of scandal journalism (Brenton 2012).

However, as a general perspective, functional theory tends to overlook the fact that alleged norm violations are often contested and that scandal journalism may also have negative societal side effects or outcomes (Kepplinger 2017, 2018). Limited misdemeanours may lead to disproportionate reactions, and even small-scale scandals may have grave personal consequences. Some scandals reveal that even norm transgressions that are quite trivial can trigger dramatic media hunts in which the dominant media adopt the same perspectives, journalistic angle and dramaturgic concept (Kantola and Vesa 2013; Pollack 2015). The media sometimes blows up small deviant actions, while ignoring much greater ones (Entman 2016; Sass and Crosbie 2013). Scandalization can, in the long run, breed certain types of political actors, making it more important to be politically “clean” than to have comprehensive experience (Jenssen and Fladmoe 2012: 69). Scandal journalism can also lead to scandal fatigue as well as “damage support for politicians in general and satisfaction with how representative democracy functions in practice” (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2011: 263).

In contrast to functional theories, discursive-communicative theories “do not presuppose any norm consensus or unanimous norm system of the society at the beginning or the end of
a scandal” (Verbalyte 2018: 68). Political scandals are not merely revealed, but are constructed, shown and staged through interactions between journalists, politicians and other actors (Ekström and Johansson 2008: 72).

In this chapter, we will, on the basis of recent Nordic research, present data about the incidence, types and consequences of scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden as well as discuss the political and societal effects of scandal journalism. As a start, we will spotlight the way in which mediated political scandals are launched, dramatized and interpreted.

**Scandals, news competition and media dramaturgy**

The media system in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden has been characterized as typical of the North European democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), characterized by a mass circulated, party-affiliated press, broadcasting as a public service, and the co-existence of press freedoms, journalistic professionalism and the tradition of state intervention in the media sector. Some important elements of this model still exist (such as state-owned public service broadcasting and indirect and direct media support), but two basic changes comprise the fall of the party press and a commercialization of the media market (Allern and Blach Ørsten 2011; Syvertsen et al. 2014). These changes also gradually weakened the old type of political loyalties between political reporters, media pundits and political parties (Allern 2017; Kantola 2012). While party papers would traditionally defend their own party and its leaders – and consensus-oriented public service broadcasters sought to remain neutral or silent – the media climate today is characterized by more numerous media organizations and fierce competition for public attention.

For Nordic news media, information on norm violations that can be reported, staged and dramatized as a political scandal is a competitive resource and a strategic, market-related investment in terms of reputation and audience interest. Scandal news is a click-bait for online sites, increases the audience share of television channels, sells papers and attracts attention on social media platforms. Traditionally, popular, “tabloid” newspapers and their web editions have been the ringleaders of scandal processes, favouring political news with a potential for personal angles and dramatization.

Characterizing something as a scandal has become commonplace in political rhetoric, and news organizations often try to promote their exclusives as revelations of something scandalous. This has gradually led to a slippery and inflated use of the term “scandal” in public debates. Under the media’s “scandal umbrella”, we find “large-scale corruption revelations, security scandals, sexual harassment, politicians’ minor fiscal evasions, private sex peccadilloes, and examples of ‘scandalous talk’ in television broadcasts” (Pollack et al. 2018).

At the same time, scandals also represent symbolic capital, boosting news organizations’ journalistic reputation as guardians of public life, strengthening their democratic legitimacy. Investigations of powerful institutions and public figures play an important part in the professional ideology of journalism. Even small revelations can be used as confirmation of the news media’s will and ability to scrutinize those who are at the top of society. This gives media organizations the possibility to link their market orientation with a higher journalistic intent, making power holders accountable and revealing what some of them would like to remain hidden.

In the news cycle of multimedia houses, news reported by one medium immediately becomes disseminated on several platforms: stories can be copied and followed up by other media organizations, tweeted and re-tweeted by readers, leading to a circular dance through the media system. Journalists are the reporters of scandal, but also the interpreters, and even – to varying degrees – the directors, who have the power to keep a scandal story alive, day after day,
sometimes week after week, mobilizing reactions from indignant audiences. When it comes to political scandals, the “pundits of the press” often play an important role as the driving forces during scandals, ultimately privileged in designating villains and victims, acting as both prosecutor and judge. These established and authoritative commentators are the interpreters, picking the winners and losers in the struggle for political survival (Nord, Enli and Stúr 2012).

Mediated scandals require contact and cooperation between journalists and sources, and both parts have the ability to take the first initiative. Sometimes, scandal stories originate from whistle-blowers reporting transgressions of norms, regulations or laws. Other times, they originate through leaks from politicians who want to discredit an opponent or internal rival. Scandalization “has long been an instrument in political power struggles” (Jenssen and Fladmoe 2012: 68). These authors sum it up in an analysis of Nordic scandals, using a Machiavellian-inspired perspective. The personalization and individualization of politics has weakened the loyalty inside political parties. When a politician is scandalized, the sources of the media leaks are often members of the same party who see an opportunity to weaken or eliminate a competitor. However, in these cases of instrumental scandalization (Mancini 2018), sometimes based on anonymous sources, the actors are also dependent on editorial priorities and news frames.

In practice, professional standards in Nordic scandal journalism vary considerably. In some cases, upon receiving tips or getting wind of rumours, news organizations invest time and money in independent and thorough fact-checking investigations that may lead to revelations of corruption or other serious misdeeds. In other cases, they receive “pre-packed” information, person-oriented scandals served on silver platters, from actors who would like to remain anonymous. The revelations may be based on documented facts, though not necessarily so. Scandals also occur when media organizations are willing to frame accusations or assertions in cases in which facts are disputed and assertions are difficult to verify (Allern and Pollack 2016).

The journalistic construction of scandals generally follows a fixed dramaturgic treatment and scandal acceleration (Allern and Pollack 2012: 18–19; Jensen and Fladmoe 2012: 60–66). The first act establishes a media framework for the story, linked to a familiar cultural narrative: the villain or aggressor versus the victim. The scandal trickles down the media hierarchy, commentators elaborate and speculate, and reporters search for additional transgressions. Political opponents and rivals see an opportunity for revenge.

The second act makes room for new responses, attempted denials and counter-strategies, sometimes also expressions of sympathy for the person(s) involved. However, for the leading media organizations that originally launched the scandal, there will be a tendency to prioritize items that fit with the dominant scandal frame. If opinion polls show that a majority condemn the norm violations, the politician’s future will be uncertain.

In the third and final act comes the solution, either in the form of a dismissal/resignation or a more limited “time-out”, or alternatively, a sinner who is forgiven after explanations and self-criticism.

The increasing incidence of mediated Nordic scandals

Two Nordic studies (Allern et al. 2012; Pollack et al. 2018) have mapped and analysed the incidence of national mediated political scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden over several decades.¹ The mappings were based on the following operational definition:

*The case must have been characterized as scandalous and given broad media coverage in at least two leading national media organizations for five days or more.*²
Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack

This definition excludes most local scandals as well as short-lived media attempts of scandalization lasting a few days. Each scandal is registered once – the year it started.

Table 12.1 shows the incidence of mediated national political scandals in four Nordic countries in different time periods. In the decade 1980–1989, political scandals were a relatively marginal phenomenon; the yearly average was one (Norway) or less than one (Finland, Denmark and Sweden). The scandal incidence level remained low over the next decade but increased significantly in all four countries in the first decade after the millennium (2000–2009), more than tripling in Sweden.

The incidence of scandals continued to increase in the period 2010–2016. The total number of scandals in the last seven-year period was higher than in the entire decade of 2000–2009. In 2017, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, Sweden and Norway experienced several new political scandals related to sexual harassment. Mediated political scandals have become “the new normal”, a standard feature of political life in Nordic countries (Pollack et al. 2018).

Concerning scandal types, the two Nordic studies differentiate between the following six categories.

*Offence in economic affairs* is the largest scandal category – representing more than one-third of the scandals in the Nordic region in the period 1980–2016. Economic scandal is, however, a highly mixed category, both in terms of money and political importance. At one end of the spectrum are political scandals of rather trivial transgressions, at least concerning money and judicial consequences. At the other end, we find large-scale corruption cases, some in the municipal sector, others involving Scandinavian state-owned companies’ investments and expansion in notoriously corrupt regions around the world.

Another scandal category is *unacceptable personal behaviour*, including subtypes such as sex scandals, accusations of rape and sexual harassment and misuse of alcohol or drugs. These personalized scandals, often related to norm violations in the politician’s private life, were few and untypical in the 1980s, but began to gain more prominence in the 1990s. In the years after the millennium, this scandal type became the second largest category, though not in Denmark. The most typical Nordic “sex scandals” today are accusations of rape or sexual harassment, buying sexual services from prostitutes (illegal in Norway and Sweden) or intercourse with minors, actions prohibited by law. In contrast to the UK and the USA, sexual infidelity alone is not enough to lead to mediated scandalization (Pollack et al. 2018).

A third category that has gained some interest is *talk scandal*, defined as an unacceptable utterance that creates headlines and commentary and arouses public anger (Ekström and Johansson 2008). Talk scandals may occur when a politician makes reckless public comments, but may also come about after planned provocations, including through postings on Twitter and other social media platforms. While talk scandals are regular in Finland and Sweden, they have so far been uncommon in Denmark and Norway. During the last decade, racist utterances from politicians

### Table 12.1 Incidence of National Political Scandals in Four Nordic Countries 1980–2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>All countries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980–1989</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–1999</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–2009</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–2016</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>58</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>57</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>256</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Allern et al. (2012); Pollack et al. (2018)*
representing the nationalist, right-wing populist parties in Finland and Sweden have contributed to these statistics (Herkman 2017; Pollack et al. 2018).

The fourth category, abuse of political power, is generally linked to acts that politicians perform in their public role, often at the expense of due process and procedural rules. The fifth scandal type is characterized as a violation of other laws and regulations and mostly includes cases in which politicians seem to be bending the rules and regulations that ordinary voters have to follow. The sixth and final category comprises other types and mixed scandals not covered by the above categories.

The effects and consequences of scandals

On the personal level, the consequences of political scandals can be dramatic and negative, not just for the affected politicians, but also for their families (Hammarlin 2015). For example, two Scandinavian political scandal cases have ended in suicide. In 2001, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation revealed that the Danish trade union leader Willy Strube was a perpetrator of embezzlement. After a couple of weeks of intense media coverage, he hanged himself in his home. In 2002, a Norwegian business leader and politician, Tore Tønne, committed suicide after a three-week media hunt concerning allegations of the misuse of public funds and questionable loans (Bjerke 2012: 168).

The Swiss psychiatrist Mario Gmür has named and described a medical diagnosis, “media victim syndrome”, to describe distinctive psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety, depression and avoidance observed in patients who have been exposed in media scandals (Gmür 2002: 184). A Norwegian study, based on in-depth interviews with 14 scandalized politicians, revealed that their psychological reactions included strong negative emotions, powerlessness and symptoms of stress such as anxiety, sleep disturbances and loss of energy. They expressed deep feelings of injustice and powerlessness relating to the intensity of the coverage, the journalistic practices and the use of anonymous statements. Most significant were the extent of the exposure, attacks on personal and moral attributes, harmful effects on significant others and betrayal by political colleagues. They felt that it was difficult to publicize their own version of the story or to correct dubious facts. Long-term effects included loss of trust in others and avoidance of public exposure. For some, these experiences had become overwhelming and potentially traumatic, leaving long-lasting psychological wounds (Karlsen and Duckert 2018).

Mediated scandals can topple political careers. Since many of the most spectacular scandal cases end in dismissal or resignation, it is a widespread perception that this is the most typical consequence. However, in the 2010–2016 Nordic setting, only one-third of recent scandals have ended in dismissal or resignation. One in five scandals have led to other types of formal reactions (e.g. taking time out, or accepting a suspension for a shorter period), while around half of these scandals had no other consequences besides public critique and debate (Pollack et al. 2018). The rate of resignations was somewhat higher (47 per cent) in the decades 1980–2009 (Allern et al. 2012: 45). One explanation might be an increase in the number of scandals that many regard as trivial, thereby resulting in more limited public condemnation. Moreover, social media platforms have provided politicians with new ways of mobilizing supporters, thereby they are able more effectively to defend themselves.

In addition to personal consequences, scandals can influence political processes and have long-term effects on institutions and the political culture, affecting citizens’ trust toward political candidates and political institutions (Von Sikorsky 2018). However, they do not necessarily result in decreased sympathy for the political parties or organizations involved. A study of the voter effects of political scandals in Norway suggested that, on an aggregative level, even major scandals have relatively small and temporary effects on parties. Negative effects are trivial and
temporary (Midtbø 2012). One explanation seems to be voter loyalty. In a study of voters’ attitudes to recent political scandals in Norway, Jenssen (2014) found that sympathizers largely “acquitted” their own party, while scandals relating to parties that they opposed politically and ideologically were viewed more negatively.

**Gender and political scandals**

The female share of scandalized politicians in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden increased from six per cent in the 1980s to 37 per cent in 2000–2009 (Allern et al. 2012). This was close to the average representation of women in Nordic political institutions. In the last period (2010–2016), the proportion dropped slightly; 31 per cent of the scandalized politicians were women. One contributing factor to the somewhat lower share of women has been the rise of right-wing populist parties in Finland and Sweden, where all the scandalized politicians were men.

Scandals related to sexual harassment or prostitution are, unsurprisingly, completely male dominated. Talk scandal also has a near-male monopoly. However, there are exceptions. In Sweden in 2015–2016, the media, led by popular tabloids, used “unacceptable utterances” as a basis for repeated attacks against Åsa Romson (the Green Party), the then Minister for the Environment in Stefan Löfven’s centre-left government.3

Concerning dismissals and resignations following scandals, the main pattern seems to be relatively similar for men and women. However, in scandals involving government members, the pattern was different for the period 1980–2016. While one-third of scandalized male ministers resigned, or were dismissed, nearly half of their female counterparts have had to vacate their positions.

A much-debated Swedish example were the political consequences of a government scandal in 2006, the topics being unpaid TV licences and the use of “black” (untaxed) labour services. Of the four scandalized politicians, only the two women were made to resign (Jacobsson and Löfmark 2008; Pollack 2015). In 2016, after several party-linked scandals, both spokespersons for the Swedish Green Party experienced critical media campaigns, but while the female spokesperson, Åsa Romson, had to resign both from the party and the government, Gustav Fridolin, the male spokesperson – and Minister of Education in Löfven’s government – succeeded in retaining both his positions.

There may also be gender differences relating to the editorial priorities and social construction of scandals. In a doctoral thesis, which examined mediated Swedish scandals, Tobias Bromander discussed whether female scandal subjects are treated differently from men in media reports. His conclusion was that scandals involving women tended to be reported over longer periods and with a higher number of articles than those involving male politicians. News about scandalized female politicians also seemed to awaken stronger, negative feelings and discontent than reporting on male-perpetrated scandals (Bromander 2012: 206).

Elin Strand Hornnes (2012, 2013) highlights another gender-related question: How do female politicians involved in mediated political scandals defend themselves rhetorically? Her analysis is based on the rhetorical strategies of scandalized politicians in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. One of her conclusions is that female politicians who have learned to act like men in order to gain power and influence in the game of politics are still expected to be more relation-oriented, more disposed to feeling guilty and apologetic when faced with scandal. This creates a clear contrast between expectations regarding women’s apologia and the defence strategies female politicians actually use. Another conclusion is that several of these scandals show a pattern of extended female responsibility: scandalized women are not only being held accountable for their own actions they are also responsible for what their husbands, partners or close family might do (Hornnes 2012: 136).
Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction to *The Politics of Scandal*, Markovits and Silverstein (1988: 6) proclaimed that “political scandals can only take place in democracies”. Neckel (2005: 103) takes this reasoning further: “Where there is no scandal, there is strict control of opinions, repression and boredom”. According to functional scandal theory, therefore, scandal is basically a “positive feature of liberal democratic politics”, reinforcing collective values and “ultimately strengthening the system, consistent with Durkheim’s ideas on social cohesion” (Brenton 2012: 816).

As Thompson (2000: 93–94) argues, a definition that limits scandal to only one dynamic – the pursuit of power at the expense of process – is overly restrictive. Further, while liberal democracy can be characterized as scandal prone, political scandals do occur in many other regimes, including different authoritarian regimes.

In relation to this theoretical discussion, it is interesting to note that in Nordic countries, which are all long-standing liberal democracies, a high incidence of national mediated political scandals is a relatively recent phenomenon. The prevalence of political scandals can, in other words, change substantially over time within the same political system. Several factors may have influenced the increased importance of scandals in Nordic countries after the millennium.

One such factor, which was mentioned earlier, is that changes in the media system have altered the channels of political communication, weakened the old system of political loyalties and strengthened commercial news values.

Another factor relates to changes in political culture. Voter volatility has increased, and voters are generally more erratic and less faithful to parties and party ideologies. As a consequence of the personification of party politics, individual politicians’ norm violations have gained prominence as a basis for political scandalization (Jenssen 2014).

Economic change may also play a role. The liberalization and deregulation of the public sector in all Nordic countries has created opportunities for more private competition, but it has also increased the importance of lobbyism. Over the last few decades, several municipal corruption cases have gradually sullied the old impression of Nordic countries inhabiting a corruption-free zone. Large, state-owned Nordic companies have expanded in many parts of the world, but the other side of the coin is that there have been partnerships with corrupt power holders and various types of bribery.

A final noteworthy factor involves changes in the political and cultural climate, often influenced by social movements. One example is the changed and more restrictive attitude towards the use and abuse of alcohol among Nordic politicians and political journalists, a practice that, until the 1980s, seldom led to mediated critique or public reactions. The enhancement of equality between men and women, and a strong feminist movement, have also led to greater awareness of sexual harassment as a societal problem.

Is an increased incidence of mediated political scandals good for democracy? A general “yes” or “no” is, in our view, misleading. In some cases, the increased incidence represents important and critical media surveillance of political processes that hold leaders to account. In other mediated scandals, the intensity of the coverage is related to minor moral or legal transgressions that deserve public critique, however, in such cases, person-oriented media hunts replace democratic institutionalized types of correction. In some cases, elected leaders are pressed to resign before those who elected them have had a say in the matter, stepping down because the media drama-turgy threatens the stability of the whole organization. In the long run, this lack of distinction between the important and the trivial may undermine the scrutiny of power holders and thus the democratic importance of scandal reporting.
Notes

1 The development in Iceland is not part of these Nordic studies. However, since 2008, Iceland has experienced several financial and political scandals relating to the international expansion of its banks.

2 For a detailed methodological presentation of the Nordic scandal register and coding, see Pollack et al. 2018.

3 One of her sins was her reference to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as “an accident”, a slip of the tongue she quickly regretted. Another embarrassing error was her placement of Auschwitz in Southern Germany in a radio interview. Media pundits treated the examples as a symbol of the Green Party’s incapacities as a responsible government party.

4 Bromander’s interpretation of political scandal is wider than the definition used in Allern et al. (2012) and Pollack et al. (2018) and includes critical news reports about politicians over a shorter period of time (three days) than that used in the Nordic study.

References


