Corruption largely feeds scandals. Numbers in this regard do not exist, but there is no doubt that many, if not most, mediated scandals involve corruption, at least those scandals that have relevance for debate in the public arena. However, there is a bias regarding how these scandals are discussed by the social scientific community. Indeed, almost all the existing literature on the matter focuses on Western, liberal democracies (Thompson 2000; Canel & Sanders 2006; Allern & Pollack 2012; Entman, 2012). In particular, scandals that involve public figures have frequently been the subject of these studies. Specific cases have been analyzed and more theoretically oriented interpretations suggested, always taking into account the social and political realities of those countries that have long adopted the structures and procedures of what is usually defined as liberal democracy, even if relevant differences exist among these countries. In liberal democracies news media are supposed to play a major role in controlling and uncovering unlawful behavior that contrasts with shared expectations in these countries (Tumber & Waisbord 2004).

But these countries represent, as Curran and Park have written, a “tiny handful”: “it has become routine for universalistic observations about the media to be advanced in English language books on the basis of evidence derived from a tiny handful of countries” (2000, 3). What scholars observe and discuss in these countries rarely applies to other parts of the world where scandals represent completely different matters. This is particularly the case for corruption scandals, which are the focus of this chapter.

Just as “journalism does not grow up in a vacuum” (Mancini 2018, 4), scandals too are largely dependent on the social and political conditions within which they develop. The surrounding context defines what a scandal is, why and how an illegal or unfair behavior is transformed into a theme of public debate, how and why it is brought to light, and how it develops. Some years ago a collection of essays that appeared in *American Behavioral Scientist* (Tumber & Waisbord 2004) demonstrated that scandals mostly depend on a plurality of legal and ethical parameters that are deeply inserted within the local culture and on the forms and traditions of the political struggle in place in each country. This is especially true for corruption scandals because they are usually directly connected with the political system and with the public decision-making process. As Canel and Sanders have written, scandals represent a “useful entry point in to the exploration of political culture” (2006, 5). Robert Entman, with his influential “Scandal and Silence,” argues the same point, noting that the eruption and the development of scandals rarely depend on the importance and severity of either illegal or unfair behavior. Rather, “whether
scandals erupt, spread and persist depends far more on the skill of the partisan competitors and on the norms and the incentives governing news production than on the degree and nature of the official’s offense” (Entman 2012, 7). This is also the thesis of John Thompson who writes, “while scandal has become an endemic feature of contemporary political culture, the conditions under which scandals occur and the ways in which they unfold do, of course, vary considerably from one context to another” (Thompson 2000, 116).

Moreover, the definition of what a scandal is and why it erupts largely depend on the structure and mode of operation of the media system and on its relationship with the political system. Scandals may constitute a means to study the media system and the political system at the same time because they are closely intertwined, and what takes place within one produces consequences on the other and very often originates within the other. In the following pages, several factors will be discussed that contribute to the definition of scandal. In particular, I will focus on the reasons why a scandal erupts and why it is brought to light by the news media.

Different types of scandals exist. These types are not only related to the matter on which they focus (sex scandals, financial scandals, power scandals) and the seriousness of the violation committed. A possible typology of scandals (here I refer in particular to corruption scandals) may be proposed that is derived essentially from the specific reasons and the goals that motivate reporters to cover an instance of social behavior with public relevance that breaks the expectations diffused in a given society. I will outline three types of media scandals and the reasons as to why they erupt and will discuss how they relate to different media and political systems. I propose distinguishing between market-driven corruption scandals, “custodians of conscience” corruption scandals, and politically oriented corruption scandals.

There is no doubt that each of these types does not exist in isolation; they are always mixed together. In a way, departing from the proposed typology, a “pure” type of scandal does not exist; rather, it is possible to talk of “prevalence.” Some corruption scandals respond mainly to a competitive logic that combines with professional pressures included within the watchdog ideals of professional journalism. In contrast, other scandals are mostly motivated by political reasons while also paying attention to market competition. The “custodians of conscience” media scandals usually also respond to a market-driven logic.

Often, what establishes the “prevalence” of one type over the others are contextual factors that address the development of a specific professionalism in journalism and that set the framework of relations with other social systems, especially with politics.

**Market-driven corruption scandals**

Uncovering a public figure who is accused of “abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International 2009), as in the widely accepted definition of corruption, represents a good occasion for media market competition.

Market-driven corruption scandals are frequently observed by scholars. Almost all books and articles that have been written on scandals focus on examples taken from countries where the news media are driven by a market logic and where, as Thompson writes, “scandal sells” (2000, 32). Scandals are excellent opportunities to attract readers’ attention, and the assumption that “scandal sells” represents a sort of “constitutive law” for professional journalism. Reporters tend to act as “scandal hunters” and are aware that major stories about illegal, unfair, and often unexpected behaviors can help to sell more copies of a newspaper. This is the assumption that primarily moves news gathering in the “tiny handful of countries” to which Curran and Park refer. Indeed, in most of the liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America and in a few other countries (Australia and New Zealand, for example), the news media are inserted
within a competitive market where the exclusive news story, the “scoop,” is considered a good occasion to score a winning goal in the market competition. Very often, the scoop is embodied in the discovery of a scandalous behavior. The call by Entman for more “calibration” in the coverage of scandals (Entman 2012) is largely due to the fact that the news media, in the expectation that “scandal sells,” exacerbate the tone of the story, the language they use, and, frequently, the gravity of the violation committed with regard to expected standards of ethical and socially responsible behavior. Exotic and strange details are exaggerated, and the focus of the story is often placed on the single figure who committed the infraction, his habits, and his private life. To increase the appeal of the story, corruption is personalized and taken out of the surrounding context and directly referred to the single figure involved (Tumber and Waisbord 2004).

Market-driven scandals feature media systems that are organized along competitive logic with sufficient autonomy from external influences, particularly of a political nature. The state plays a very minor role both as regulator and funder. In most cases, media outlets are the property of either single individuals or corporations that derive their profits essentially from the media products themselves and therefore are particularly interested in the largest circulation of their news stories. Entrepreneurship is a driving logic in economics, society at large, and in the media too.

Because of this and because of the small place of politics in news coverage, in many cases, market-driven scandals do not imply the infringement of the rules that “govern the exercise of political power” (Thompson 2000, 91), rather, they focus on sex and adultery as these matters are supposed to attract the attention of news media consumers. Therefore, very often these scandals imply the invasion of the spheres of privacy and intimacy. Obviously, they are very common in the tabloid press, but the elite press as well may devote attention to these scandals if they involve public figures in the field of politics or business. Many cases may be labeled under this typology in countries around the world. There are many cases in the United States: Donna Rice and Gary Hart, Gennifer Flowers and Bill Clinton, the infidelities of George W. Bush. In their book, Maria Jose Canel and Karen Sanders discuss three cases of British sexual misdemeanors: David Mellor, Tim Yeo, and Piers Merchant (Canel and Sanders 2006). Many other examples are listed in the already mentioned two volumes of American Behavioral Scientist that appeared in 2004.

At the same time, as has already been stressed, market-driven media systems feature a high level of journalistic professionalism and autonomy from other social systems and are aimed at making profit, very often independently from political alliances. Within this context, there exists space for the assumed ethical principles of the profession to direct reporters’ choices. Traditionally, the watchdog function is one of the major assumptions of the profession in the so-called liberal models of journalism, which mix together business logic, separation from other social powers, and professionalism (Hallin & Mancini 2004). The investigation and the discovery of unfair behaviors when they are performed by public figures represent an important part of the watchdog function and one of the legitimizing elements of the profession. As Herbert Altschull writes in his textbook on journalism in the USA, the liberal ideal of journalism states that “the media must be used as agencies of social control” (Altschull 1995, XIX).

Indeed, market-driven corruption scandals and custodians of conscience corruption scandals are often interrelated. In part, this overlapping confirms what was already noted by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm in their seminal work “Four Theories of the Press” (1956): in specific situations and at specific times, it may happen, such as in the case of market-driven corruption scandals, that commercial pressures prevail over other aims of the profession. In this case the discovery of scandals is essentially perceived and used as a means to increase the circulation of the news rather than in response to the ethical principles of the profession.
Corruption scandals and the media system

If and when market-driven logic prevails, scandals are exacerbated and dramatized. Very often, as already said, the focus of the coverage shifts from underlining the social and ethical consequences of the unfair behavior to more appealing details of the personal figures involved, stressing those possibly exotic and even obsessive aspects of the event that convinced Robert Entman to call for more “calibration.”

Former Prime Minister of Italy and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi and his assumed affair with the underage Ruby is a scandal that largely follows the market logic while simultaneously responding to the ideals of watchdog journalism, being driven at the same time by political reasons. This was a corruption scandal in which Berlusconi forced the police to free the underage girl who was arrested after a theft, but, also because of its appeal, the entire story evolved around their sex affair.

“Custodians of conscience” media scandals

I adopt the definition “custodians of conscience” media scandals from the title of one of the most well-known and important texts on investigative journalism, “Custodians of Conscience: Investigative Journalism and Public Virtue” (Ettema & Glasser 1998). In the authors’ words, journalism has “the possibility to enhance virtue in the conduct of public affairs” (ibid., 7). This phrase summarizes decades of discussions and statements that followed the appearance of the “social responsibility theory of journalism” (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm 1956). Beyond contributing to selling copies of the newspaper, journalism is charged with responsibilities to the community within which it acts. Investigating all cases that break “virtue in the conduct of public affairs” is a major goal of journalism. Scandals, especially corruption scandals, represent infringements of public virtue, and journalists have the responsibility to bring these cases to light. Many of the previously discussed scandals have been revealed not only to “sell copy” but also because they offer journalism the opportunity to perform some of the most important ideals of the profession. In particular, with regard to corruption scandals, the news media are expected to play a double function: a tangible one, for example investigating, reporting, and controlling specific cases of corruption; and an intangible one, for example reinforcing a shared sense of common interest and good (Stapenhurst 2000). Both functions enhance public virtue. The former is more immediate and may produce direct consequences like the punishment of the guilty, whereas the latter may produce positive effects over a longer period.

Specific aspects of society at large and more specific arrangements of the media system allow and foster this type of scandal. The surrounding political culture of the country is undoubtedly an important element. Journalism is facilitated in investigating possible unfair behaviors when acting within societies that feature a high level of rational legal authority, such as is possible to observe in the democratic-corporatist model of journalism. Indeed, the infringement of rules may appear more dramatic and persecuted when it occurs within a framework of rules that have universal validity and fair application. In other words, “custodians of conscience” scandals occur within societies that feature universalism rather than particularism and where moral standards are not susceptible to clientelistic interpretations. These are more “cohesive” societies with a low level of political polarization where the solution of social problems is often left in the hands of what Bourdieu (1990) would call neutral “expert systems,” such as journalism or other specialized institutions such as medical doctors and health organizations (Cornia et al. 2015). This is particularly the case for Northern European countries.

Within such a context, journalists are encouraged to embody and defend an idea of general interest that is widely shared within the community and that contrasts with particular interests. Professional journalism itself develops within a framework of consensual, ethical rules that
identifies and distinguishes it from others and from other social organizations. “Custodians of conscience” media scandals are possible if professional journalism is clearly separated from other external powers, not just from the government, and if business and political interests have a limited power to address the choices of reporters.

As mentioned above, in many cases “custodians of conscience” corruption scandals combine with “market-driven scandals.” This is another case of what I define as the “prevalence” of one type of scandal over another. It is possible to assume that in certain social contexts the ideals of a watchdog profession are more relevant than the needs of market competition with regard to the choices of the reporters. It is not easy to identify which of the two prevails. It is possible to assume that “custodians of conscience” media scandals prevail where the level of rational legal authority is higher and where civil society more easily embodies attitudes aimed at the general interest. This occurs in more cohesive societies with lower levels of political polarization and division and where professionalism prevails over the exigencies of the market or, at least, is not a passive victim of the market. Indeed, in these contexts, journalism is characterized by a high sense of the profession and its duties in the face of the entire society, not just of its own readers. In any case, free market competition is needed to ensure sufficient margins of autonomy to reporters.

The story that the British newspaper The Daily Telegraph broke in 2009 on the expenses of Members of Parliament (MPs) and that erupted in a large scandal that forced the Speaker of the House of Commons and some MPs to resign and others not to run again (few were arrested) is a good example of this mixture of “custodians of conscience” ideals and pressures from the market. There is no doubt that the story about the unlawful use of the money allotted to MPs was brought to light in the spirit of competition with other British papers. At the same time, it also responded to a logic of control over the behavior of public officials (Winnet & Rayner 2009). Throughout the story, journalists acted as spokespeople of British citizens with continuous reference to public opinion and its possible reactions while they simultaneously pursued the aims of market competition (Mancini 2016).

The US Pentagon Papers and the Watergate cases embody the logic of “custodians of conscience” at its best, even if there is no doubt that they also responded to market competition pressures. In his book A Good Life, Ben Bradley, the editor of The Washington Post which brought to light both scandals, clearly recognizes this double valence. Telling the story of the Pentagon Papers scandal and how the Post obtained the secret papers from Daniel Ellsberg and discussing the doubts and problems that the publication of the papers could raise, he writes, “Getting beaten on a story is bad enough, but waiting to get beaten on a story is unbearable” (Bradley 1995, 310). At the same time, with regard to the Watergate story, he proudly recognizes the important function of public service that The Washington Post performed and its award of the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

**Politically oriented corruption scandals**

Politically oriented corruption scandals represent a very different matter. First, they are rare, but they do exist, within the liberal and the democratic corporatist models of journalism, but they are more common within the polarized pluralist model of journalism and other models that may present similar features. In other words they mostly occur outside the previously discussed “tiny handful of countries.” Politically oriented corruption scandals respond to a main logic: they are instrumentally covered by the press essentially to attack possible competitors in the field of politics or in the field of business.

The best example of this type of scandal is embodied by the Russian word kompromat, which Alena Ledeneva, author of the book How Russia Really Works, defines this way: “the word
Kompromat has no direct equivalent in English. Its literal translation—compromising material—refers to discrete information that can be collected, stored, traded or used strategically across all domains: political, electoral, legal, professional, judicial, media or business” (Ledeneva 2006, 58; see also Oates in Chapter 13). “Blackmail” is another word that is used in Central Eastern European countries to refer to scandalous news that is expressly diffused to destroy the reputation of adversaries.

In most cases, the development of politically oriented corruption scandals is directly dependent on the owners of the news media outlets who have specific interests to be defended in politics or business. Through the news media, they foster their own interests or the interests of close allies: for them, corruption scandals represent a good occasion to intervene in the decision making process and to attack possible or actual competitors.

Politically oriented scandals do not respond to the ideals of the so-called liberal model of journalism, and they do not play a relevant role in fair and detached watchdog journalism. The statement “free press is bad news for corruption,” which summarizes very well the role that a free press may play in the face of corruption scandals (Brunetti & Weder 2003), does not work in this case. On the contrary, the press provides a poor service to the entire society, increasing its confusion and uncertainty and conveying the idea that corruption is almost inevitable because it is so frequent and diffused with regard to leading public figures. The very origin of these scandals is almost always dubious. In many cases, they derive from investigations conducted by reporters following leaks from dubious and undisclosed sources (very often this happens in the other two types of corruption scandals as well). Often these sources are agents of the secret service, which obviously produces even more confusion. The instrumental use of these scandals lies in the way the scandal is narrated, in the language that is used, and in the aspects and the frames that address the entire story and that aim to achieve the often secret objectives of news stories.

Politically oriented corruption scandals have little to do with the ethics of a detached professionalism. Nevertheless, they may also respond to objectives of market competition. Indeed, if the reason for news stories on unfair and illegal behaviors is usually to be found within the structure of the political and business struggle, these stories may help to “sell copy.” Market competition may play a role even if the major reason is found elsewhere. Indeed, as Colin Sparks has written with reference to the situation in post-Communist countries, the news media represent a sort of “political capital” to be used for a plurality of goals, not just to make money (Sparks 2000).

These scandals fit perfectly with Thompson’s idea of a politics of trust. With the weakening of ideological ties between citizens and party organizations and with the increasing personalization of political life that he observes in the Western world, “people become more concerned with the characters of individuals” (Thompson 2000, 112) and with their reputations. Scandals become a sort of “credibility test,” and in many cases, they are used to undermine and destroy the reputations of political competitors (Tumber & Waisbord 2004).

These conditions are much more developed in countries outside the Western world. Indeed, the contextual conditions that produce politically oriented corruption scandals are very different from the ones we have discussed in the previous types of scandals. First, very often, these scandals are produced within media systems that are not fully independent and feature a high level of partisanship in connection with both political organizations and/or large corporations and industries. In many cases news media do not produce sufficient profits and therefore become the property of single figures or corporations with interests outside the world of the media. They invest money in these enterprises to be used as instruments to affect the decision-making process and to ensure a voice in the public arena. A good example comes from Eastern European countries. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many publishing industries in Western Europe...
invested in these countries. However, after several years, they found that the investment was not as profitable as expected, and pressures from governments and political and business actors were so prevalent that they found it preferable to retreat and sell their local enterprises to the vested interests that had spurred their retreat. Vaclav Stetka concludes an interesting paper on this retreat by referring to the words of foreign investor Bodo Hombach, CEO of the German WAZ Media Group, who made such a retreat, confirming the previous discussion: “oligarchs in the Balkans are buying newspapers and magazines ever more often to exert political influence and not to win money” (Stetka & Ornebring 2013, 441). Mediated scandals represent a good instrument to exert such influence.

Politically oriented media scandals can be observed in countries where investigative journalism is weak or is instrumentally addressed (Stetka & Ornebring 2013). These countries feature a low level of rational legal authority where particularism prevails over universalism. Through their news outlets, for example, politicians and businessmen aim to defend and foster their particular interests. Journalists too do not share a unique professional identity characterized by a recognized framework of ethical and professional rules. They are either an active part of the political and business struggle or victims of the pressures deriving from press owners and other actors.

A perfect example of politically oriented media scandals is the one that involved Silvio Berlusconi, his newspaper (in fact, the property of Silvio Berlusconi’s brother) Il Giornale, and his initial ally and later competitor Gianfranco Fini. When the scandal erupted, Gianfranco Fini was Chairman of the Italian House of Deputies and, until a few months earlier, a close ally of Silvio Berlusconi. Their alliance progressively came to an end. At that point, the Berlusconi-owned newspaper Il Giornale, after receiving an undisclosed leak, began to attack Gianfranco Fini, who was also the head of the party Alleanza Nazionale, with the accusation of having sold for a very low price to the brother of his girlfriend a beautiful villa in Monte Carlo that was the property of the party. This case involves all the ingredients of a politically oriented scandal: an undisclosed leak; a political figure, Silvio Berlusconi, who was also the owner of a newspaper (and, as is well known, a large media corporation); and the instrumental use of a scandal to attack the reputation of a political actor who was becoming a possible competitor of the owner of the newspaper (Gerli, Mazzoni & Mincigrucci 2018).

Political instrumentalization may also drive scandals that are inserted within the competitive logic or even the “custodians of conscience” logic. The recent case in the USA that involved Hillary Clinton and her use of a private email address was widely covered by the news media, but there is no doubt that it had a politically oriented slant and was used by her competitor Donald Trump during the 2016 election campaign.

The competitive logic of the French mass media system has leaned toward particularistic aims on several occasions, particularly in the case of Minister Pasqua, a Gaulliste Minister, who was attacked by the center left Le Monde for a corruption scandal, whereas the rightest Le Figaro presented scandals involving the leftist Guerini (Mancini et al. 2016).

In other words, situations that are characterized by market logic, strong professional autonomy, and the ethics of journalists are not immune to the risk of instrumentalization. Scandals, mostly corruption scandals, are a tricky matter; their origins are often unclear and undisclosed. Their development is often subject to undue dramatization and exaggeration that, as Entman (2012) states, require accurate calibration.

A unique and universal interpretation of how and why scandals erupt and develop is not possible because they are strictly dependent on the surrounding context, mostly the political context, and on the structure and mode of operation of the media system. The aims that motivate reporters to cover scandals may be different and often contrasting; and it is not rare for them to
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combine. They can respond to a commercial logic, they may be inserted within the dominant professional ideals of the so-called liberal model of journalism, and, in many cases, they become instruments of the political and business struggle.

Specific features of the media system address the different types of corruption scandals that I have outlined: market driven corruption scandals may be observed in media systems deeply influenced by commercial logic and a high level of autonomy from other social powers and the state in particular. Reporters are characterized by a professionalism that nevertheless is often influenced by an extreme commercialization which undermines the application of correct journalistic standards.

“Custodians of conscience” corruption scandals rely on shared principles of watchdog journalism that is mostly applied to control power holders. It is possible to observe such a coverage of corruption in the democratic corporatist model of professional journalism: reporters are detached from other social powers acting within cohesive societies where rational legal authority prevails over particular interests. State press subsidies ensure the possibility for minority news outlets to perform without restrictions on their function of control. Investigative journalism is deeply rooted within these media systems.

Politically oriented corruption scandals are linked to the prevalence of particularism over general interest, to a low level of professionalism in journalism, and to a context characterized by high political polarization and therefore rooted links between news media and different interests in society. A logic of media instrumentalization is diffused which favors coverage of corruption scandals deeply affected by particular interests.

Note

1 An unknown whistle-blower provided the disk with all the data regarding MPs’ expenses.

References


