In the autumn of 2017, American actor Alyssa Milano urged women to share their own experiences of sexual abuse by writing “MeToo” on social media to show the ubiquity of the problem after rampant allegations of sexual assault and harassment were made against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Codrea-Rado 2017). The idea of “me too” had started a decade earlier when Tarana Burke launched a non-profit and a movement to help victims of harassment (Garcia 2017). But it was with the potent power of social media that #MeToo – with the hashtag used to connect topics online – gained the kind of widespread traction the digital age provides. Women began sharing their stories. Men were shocked at how many of their friends had experienced abuse. The news media paid attention to abuse in a way it perhaps had never done before. The hashtag fomented online intimate publics (Berlant 2011), or virtual spaces of being political together, among women and male allies in one of the most cogent examples of hashtag activism, which is activism that grows out of online engagement (Chen, Pain and Zhang 2018; Williams 2015). The #MeToo movement also exemplified a fundamental shift in how the media and society more broadly understands and defines scandals that involve sexual misconduct. Social media blurred the lines between public and private so much that they created a public discourse where literally no private sphere exists (Juntunen and Valiverronen 2010; Mandell and Chen 2016a). As a result, the previously private missteps of politicians, celebrities and even the average person can become public at lightning speed, unknown in any prior age.

This chapter critically reviews the scholarly literature on how social media have changed the way the news media cover scandal – particularly sexual scandals – and how the news audience consumes these stories. This chapter captures today’s particular cultural moment where technology creates a ‘new digital space for malfeasance and indiscretion’ with the power to send these tales of misdeeds ricocheting around the globe in record time (Mandell and Chen 2016a, 210). I begin by defining scandal and situating it within the lens of the theory of the public sphere (Habermas 1991). Then I provide a brief history of sexual scandals and how they have been covered historically, as well as why that has changed in the digital age. I conclude with suggestions for what these changes mean for the future of how the press covers scandalous news and how the public consumes it.
What makes a scandal?

Scandal originally referred to the conduct of those in religious orders who did something to shame their faith, but it has morphed into a more general transgression that violates values or norms of a particular society (Thompson 2000). Scandal requires some type of concealment of the bad behaviour that ultimately becomes public, tainting reputations and exposing the person to disapproval (Thompson 2000). Scandals usually involve people with societal power, such as politicians, sports heroes or celebrities, who often attempt a ‘come back’ or return to grace after the scandal (Apostolidis 2011). As a result, examining scandal provides a riveting lesson in how power operates, changes and flows through society. It is important to note that corruption and scandal are interrelated but distinct. Scandal must be publicized, while corruption may remain unexposed (Waisbord 1994). Sex scandals, in particular, are assumed to be ‘tales of private transgressions’, but they are actually ‘institutional pathologies’ (Gamson 2001, 185). Scandals, sociologist Joshua Gamson (2001) notes, reveal decay in institutions, such as politics, entertainment or religion, and not merely private mistakes. Scandal scholar Hinda Mandell (2012) goes one step further, arguing that scandal itself is a social institution: scandals ‘become both a hegemonic tool to reinforce social norms and the means by which the general public can hold (temporary) power – in the form of negative public opinion’ (206). Therefore, media coverage of scandal gives the public the power to hold the scandal against the person who perpetrated it.

When the scandal involves a politician, it must violate due process, defined as the ‘legally binding rules and procedures that govern the exercise of political power’ (Thompson 2000, 91). In other words, political scandals shred the bond between constituent and politician, raising questions about whether the person should be trusted in official duties because of a private failing (Mandell 2017). Thus, scandal becomes a ‘device for social control’ of non-normative behaviour (Juntunen and Valiverronen 2010, 819). Political scandals are tied to accountability and ‘bring out the duality that underlies political life: the gap between what is said and what things are, between idealized politics and down-and-dirty politics, between the norms that are publicly legitimated and upheld and actual behaviour’ (Tumber and Waisbord 2004b, 1036–1037). Scandal, in a sense, becomes the lens through which the public judges the celebrity, entertainer or politician individually but also how it reasserts what is normative in society.

What the news media considers a scandal has varied markedly over the decades and by country. In the United States of America, for example, coverage of political sexual scandals was predominant in the late 1700s and through the early 1900s (Summers 2000). Personal morality was considered an essential element of public service, and the partisan press revealed sexual flaws as political weapons. Journalists ferreted out titillating breaches of personal virtue and linked them to public legitimacy, but by the early twentieth century these types of stories had all but disappeared from public life in the USA (Summers 2000). The switch came as the press became less partisan and more focused on objective reporting that eschewed the privacy invasion that coverage of sexual scandals required. US President John F. Kennedy’s legendary womanizing got barely a nod from the press of the 1960s. Similarly, an analysis of 2,600 news stories about the US Congress from 1990 to 1998 showed coverage of political scandals was rare (Morris and Clawson 2005).

Soon afterward, the tide turned again. US President Bill Clinton’s impropriety with an intern, which surfaced in 1998, garnered a rash of media coverage, as the line between serious news and entertainment began to meld (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004). Journalists shifted to a more investigative approach (Sanders and Canel 2006; Tumber and Waisbord 2004b). Similarly, scandal coverage became more frequent in the United Kingdom, starting in the 1990s during the administrations of John Major and later Tony Blair (Tumber 2004). Part of the shift
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was due to the proliferation of always-on cable news and the Internet, which was in its infancy at the time (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004). The media tried to justify its coverage by insisting that political sexual scandals were of grave national concern because they violated the public trust. At the same time, the ‘personalization of politics’, where politicians hired strategists to manage and inflate their images (Tumber 2004), played into a narrative that made private pecadillos a matter of public interest. If politicians were trying to sell themselves based on their brand, anything that tainted it, even a personal scandal, becomes a liability to that brand.

Historically, media coverage was a vital aspect of scandal. Without the coverage, the scandal remains unexposed or at least not widely known. Press coverage turned a scandal into a news event (Tumber and Waisbord 2004b). The media also exerted a role in deciding which scandals to cover and which to ignore. For example, a study of six members of the US House of Representatives embroiled in a financial scandal linked to a Washington, DC, lobbyist during the 2006 elections found that local media outlets focused coverage on those representatives with competitive election bids, not those in non-competitive races (Fogarty 2013). The sense was that scandal was less newsworthy, somehow, if the politician did not have to retain his seat, because a scandal becomes important only if it relates to electoral politics.

Arrival of social media

The ubiquity of social media and text messaging changed all that. It shifted the ‘calculus of the conversation regarding news’ (Mandell and Chen 2016a, 210) and created more ways for those in the public eye to fail and more ways for the public to find out about the failing. The ability to send illicit messages and pictures almost instantly—sexting—proved the undoing for public figures as disparate as Finland’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Ikka Kanerva (Isotalus and Almonkari 2014; Juntunen and Valiverronen 2010) and New York Congressman Anthony Weiner (Gamson 2016). The technology provided a convenient new tool for what thousands of public figures had done before: exposing their most base instincts. For example, Kanerva was compelled to resign when it was revealed he had sent many, many suggestive text messages to a female erotic dancer, drawing massive media coverage in Finland and triggering discussions about distrust of government (Isotalus and Almonkari 2014). Journalists justified the stories in the Finnish case because the tawdry details could affect his image and how he conducted his professional duties (Juntunen and Valiverronen 2010). Weiner resigned his seat in 2011 after his sexting scandal, but he acknowledged two years later, while a candidate for New York City mayor, that he had shared a new set of pictures of his genitals online (Mandell and Chen 2016b). Eventually, Weiner’s sexting predilection involved teenage girls, and he ended up being sentenced to 21 months in prison in 2017 (Weiser 2017). American professional golfer Tiger Woods’s scandal began as many had in previous decades with a tabloid news story claiming he had multiple affairs (Apostolidis 2011), but the scandal was heightened when some of the women released text messages allegedly between them and Woods that detailed scandalous sex talk (Gamson 2016).

The new technology adapted easily into the ‘existing sex scandal narratives’ (Gamson 2016, 78), but this same technology also enabled the public, hungry for tantalizing news, to find out about these dalliances more quickly than ever before. Social media allowed the news audience into what sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas called a ‘repoliticized social sphere’ (1991, 142) where the lines between public and private were blurred (Chen, Pain and Fadnis 2016). Communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2010) asserts that the digital space has collapsed the boundaries between public and private, so a public sphere can no longer really even exist. Rather, everything is public, unless something is concealed.
As Habermas (1991, 152) wrote years before this shift occurred: ‘The intimate sphere once the very centre of the private sphere, moved to the periphery to the extent that the private sphere itself became deprivatized’.

Thus, this public digital space enables politicians, celebrities and other public figures to commit sex scandals, such as affairs, within the glare of the public limelight. It also allows them to bare their souls (or over-share) publicly on social media, much as the general public does. For example, Mark Sanford, a former American governor, groused about his ex-wife on Facebook after their marriage failed due to his infidelity. This elicited both supporting comments and diatribes from his constituents, one of whom notably told him: ‘Just quit talking about it’ (Chen et al. 2016, 137). Social media made scandals hyper-public, meaning the audience could learn about them through news reports and watch or listen to every salacious detail unfold right before their eyes. Even those who are not public figures were no longer safe from the coverage of scandal. For example, in New Zealand in 2015, about 50 patrons at a local tavern recorded a couple having sex in an adjacent building, and the videos and photos they shared quickly went viral on Facebook and YouTube (Kuehn 2016). The resulting story topped the news for days, suggesting a new era of ‘mediated voyeurism’ (Calvert 2000, 23) – the consumption of private moments for public disclosure – that leaves few out of its gaze.

Thus, the earlier linear process where the news media exposed a scandal, and then the public consumed it, has been upended. Some scandals originated with disclosures by the public through social media, and then the press covered that exposure, widening the audience for the scandal. In other cases, the public and the media revealed the scandal almost simultaneously, and the press coverage and the social media virality of the story fed off each other in a symbiotic relationship. Frequently, of course, the press still revealed the scandal, but the public then transformed it into a bigger news event by sharing and retweeting the tale. Then the media covered that public response to the story, reigniting interest in it again.

Therefore, the press still plays a role in scandal (Toepfl 2011), which can reverberate outside the lens of a traditional media gatekeeping function (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004) as the general public shares it online. For example, the world learned that real estate mogul Donald Trump, who later became the US president, had bragged about grabbing women by their genitals and trying to conquer sexually married women when The Washington Post and later other outlets released an audiotape and video clip of him saying these things (Benoit 2017; Harp 2018). But it was social media that gave the story a life of its own. The same scenario was played out with another of Trump’s scandals: claims that he paid off porn star Stormy Daniels to remain quiet about their affair soon after his wife, Melania, gave birth to their son (Reinhard and Kuznia 2018). The story broke through traditional media, but social media produced an onslaught of public conversation and pictorial memes – ‘socially constructed public discourses’ (Shifman 2014, 8) – that made the tale resonate with the larger public and stay salient as other news competed for attention. Media attention to scandal stories has been notably short-lived in the past (Tumber and Waisbord 2004a), but social media galvanizes the public, leading the press to cover the outrage, reinvigorating attention to the scandal and prolonging the newsworthiness of the story.

The #MeToo movement offers another compelling example of this change in the way the press covers scandal in the age of social media. It was early October 2017 when The New York Times published a story detailing decades of allegations of sexual harassment and abuse against Weinstein, whose power in Hollywood was legendary (BBC 2018). Accusations included that Weinstein promised to advance female employees’ careers in return for sexual favours. Weinstein at first apologized for any pain he caused but disputed the allegations and threatened to sue the Times. Weinstein, who was involved in popular films such as The King’s Speech and
Pulp Fiction, was fired from his movie and television studio and removed from the board of his company as allegations of abuse continued to surface (Barnes 2017). The Weinstein case sparked a national conversation in the United States about sexual assault and led to accusations against more than 100 others, including journalist and television host Charlie Rose and comedian-turned-politician Al Franken (Cooney 2018). The scandals ended careers and brought a slew of firings, suspensions and resignations. CBS News and the Public Broadcasting Service fired Rose, accused of groping women and walking around naked in their presence (Koblin and Grynbaum 2017). Franken, facing allegations of groping and improper advances from at least six women, resigned his US Senate seat (Stolberg, Alcindor and Fandos 2017).

In almost all the cases, the allegations were years or even decades old, but the women had been afraid to come forward, fearing they would not be believed or that making an accusation would hurt their careers. Social media and the #MeToo movement emboldened them. They were no longer lone women making accusations against men in power. They were part of a chorus of voices that understood and supported their pain. Berlant’s (2011) concept of ‘intimate publics’ is helpful here for understanding the power of social media to foster this cohesion among strangers around a common issue. Social media allows a topic, like sexual assault, to gain currency with the public. Hashtags are a particularly potent tool for people to find others who are talking about the issue online, providing a means for them to gather together with one voice (Chen et al. 2018; Williams 2015). Though these people may not know each other offline, and perhaps never will, their shared sense of being political together (Berlant 2011) unites them. Papacharissi’s (2015) idea of ‘affective publics’ is akin to intimate publics, as it also explains how people mobilize online through a shared belief or interest. In the case of #MeToo, the online outcry against sexual harassment and assault shifted the news conversation from focusing only on the scandals themselves and instead to reporting on the larger societal issues of misogyny, disempowerment of women and overuse of power by men. The public could become more involved in the story, as they shared their own experiences of sexual misconduct, rape or other forms of abuse by using the hashtag.

In summary, the coverage of scandal has metamorphosed in today’s digital age. Previously, coverage had shifted from a focus on private failings as a sign of public unworthiness to personal impropriety as a sign of public distrust. The social media age has amplified that shift and made it easier, and quicker, for the media and the public to share news of scandal. Today’s media is no longer the gatekeeper of scandal news. As political communication scholars Bruce A. Williams and Michael X. Delli Carpini (2004) warned more than a decade ago, the distinction between news and entertainment news is no longer just porous, it has blended. The line between public and private has shifted so much that it is possible to argue quite persuasively that a private sphere really no longer exists. The media still has a role to play in scandal and is still often the original source for scandalous news. But the public also can turn a private misdeed into a public event, elicit media coverage that heightens the scandal.

The social media age has given those in positions of power, and even the general public, more tools to commit misdeeds. People can commit sexual scandals, for example, without meeting face to face with their victims through sexting or social media. Gamson (2016, 78) argues that ‘sex scandals have entered an era in which surveillance is increasingly pervasive, virtual sex has become technologically accessible, and the revelation of a “private” life has become a commonplace form of entertainment’. I agree. In some ways, it is surprising that anything is scandalous today because almost nothing cannot be discovered. Yet, scandal news continues to follow the predictable narratives of days gone by: first comes concealment, then revelation, violation of norms, public disapproval and, ultimately, an attempt to restore one’s name (Thompson 2000). But the process of this narrative is not always as linear as it was in the past. With the public and
the media both able to publicize, scandal coverage turns into more of a loop, where public interest or disclosure feeds news attention and news attention fuels public interest. Many scandals still have a relatively short shelf life in the public consciousness, as they did in the past (Tumber and Waisbord 2004a), but others can remain on the news agenda longer, sparked by public outcry through hashtags on social media. Today, as in the past, not every misdeed becomes a scandal, but those that do take on lives of their own.

What this means for the future

This shift in how scandals are covered and how the public consumes them does not only change the news stories about scintillating topics. It alters the very definition of news and affects how those in the public eye, from politicians to celebrities, are viewed in society. Consider US Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who left a woman to die after he fled the scene of a car crash in 1969 (Cos 2016). Kennedy faced public outrage at his actions, and he gave a televised speech to explain and defend his actions. Yet he was able to continue his public life, serving as a senator for nearly 50 years until his death in 2009. As Cos (2016, 49) argues, it is ‘impossible to imagine [Kennedy’s case] would unfold in a similar manner in today’s social media-driven world’.

While human beings have always been ‘hardwired to survey their environment and to prefer news about deviant or otherwise threatening events’ (Shoemaker 1996), social media today allow public outcry over dozens of allegations of sexual assault to facilitate real action against the perpetrators and reaffirm that scandals violate social norms. Even though many allegations were years or decades old, politicians, journalists and other public figures could not hide from the accusations in the shining glare of public opinion.

Yet, even though social media has enabled the public to reveal scandals and indicate strongly their disapproval in ways never before imagined, there is also evidence that scandals must be increasingly deviant to gain public and media attention. Contrast John Edwards, the 2008 US presidential hopeful whose campaign ended after the revelation of his affair while his wife was battling cancer (Mandell 2017), with Weiner, whose political career remained viable after two high-profile sexting scandals. Weiner was only really undone in 2016 when his sexting involved minors (Gamson 2016). One could compare details of their foibles and suggest an affair while one’s wife is ill is worse than sexting, until it involved minors. One could also argue that the bar for what makes a scandal has been raised at the same time that the digital age allows the public to find out more and more about those in the public eye. In today’s world almost everything is public, so even the most private indiscretion may surface, so the public gets a barrage of scandal news that zips across the Internet on a daily basis. In this world, perhaps, only the most deviant of scandals stand out, as ‘technology – and its misuse – may desensitize us, making us less alarmed when confronted with damaging facts about another person’ (Mandell and Chen 2016a, 211).

Society may be entering a phase of hyper-deviance for scandals, meaning a scandal will not arouse public enmity unless it violates social norms in a particularly atrocious way. For example, Roy Moore refused to leave his campaign for a US Senate seat despite multiple allegations of sexual abuse and child molestation (Burns and Martin 2017), suggesting that he felt he still had a chance despite these rampant scandals. The fact that he ended up losing, despite the support of President Trump, may indicate the public viewed his scandal as more deviant than he did. But it is likely than in an earlier era Moore would have had no choice but to drop out of the race when the accusations surfaced. The repeated scandals that plague Trump also illustrate this phase of hyper-deviance. There was the release of his lascivious words on videotape shortly before the November 2016 election (Benoit 2017; Harp 2018). Also, there was the ongoing scandal over his alleged affair with a porn star (Reinhard and Kunzia 2018) plus accusations of
sexual misconduct by nearly 20 women (Saslow 2018) and, perhaps the mother of all scandals, multiple investigations into whether he conspired with Russia to win the presidency (Blake 2018). While Trump’s approval rating, currently at 41 percent, has lagged compared to other recent US presidents, these scandals have not damaged his presidency on a par with how other politicians’ relatively minor scandals both in the United States and other countries have. This may just be the particular cultural moment that has enveloped the United States during the administration of Trump, who rose to power on a populist message. Or it may be part of an even larger shift in scandal news where the public becomes over-saturated with scandal and ceases to pay as much attention as they may have in past years. Or it may be that in today’s digital era a scandal must be accompanied by intense public outcry online, as in the #MeToo movement, or it loses its punch.

Regardless of which scenario is the true, however, it is clear that social media have changed forever how the news media and the public understand and define scandal. Gone are the days when a politician, celebrity, athlete, journalist or other public figure could escape scrutiny when their actions violate how society thinks they should behave. Social media allow the public to be a gatekeeper of scandal because the average person can reveal scandalous actions, and the press will cover that disclosure. Or even if the news media reveals the scandal, the public will dictate which scandals really matter to them by how they respond to them online.

**Note**

1 US President Donald Trump’s approval rating was assessed at 1:27 p.m. on 12 January 2019 at *FiveThirtyEight*, an online data journalism site that analyzes data from multiple polls; see https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/.

**References**


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