Political reputation and power have become increasingly dependent on mediated visibility. They can be used to gain and withhold political power, but this undoubtedly represents a double-edged sword. Political scandals are perhaps the most significant example of how visibility can damage reputation and symbolic power, and a ceaseless stream of disclosures of norm transgressions and public outrage related to politicians’ actions seems to exist. The mediated political scandal is not only about disclosure, but also dramatization, storytelling, and attraction. It fits perfectly into a news and media culture in which the offering of what is sensational, shocking, and abnormal constitutes a fundamental strategy to attract and fascinate presumptive audiences.

We developed the concept of talk scandal to understand the role that talk, in its various forms, plays in the origin and development of political scandals (Ekström & Johansson 2008). Talk is central in mediated politics, whether in politicians’ performances in different interactional settings (such as interviews and debates), in argumentation, and in the enactment of styles and public persona. In news discourse, the utterances of different actors are displayed and contextualized in the frequent use of quotes and soundbites. In this chapter we summarize and discuss our main arguments related to talk scandals, refer to some recent studies in which the concept has been applied, and critically discuss the implications of some fundamental transformations in mediated politics.

The centrality of talk in the dramatization of political scandals

Transgressive utterances can be a scandal in themselves (see below), but mediated talk is also used by news media organizations in different ways during a scandal. In the construction of political scandals, the media contributes to the establishment of moral codes and the border line between what is deemed acceptable and not. Naturally, the media cannot construct a moral standard from nothing; it must be anchored in common values. However, in their reporting, the media use various techniques to establish the standard assumed to be transgressed. One way to objectify moral standards is by allowing people to speak. Scandals typically contain quoted voices from (above all) the public, as well as from other politicians who in various ways state that the behavior of the person in question is morally reprehensible. Media scandals are in part built using these statements. With well-chosen discursive techniques, public discontent is staged as a central element in establishing a media scandal (cf. Thompson 2000).
The role of the media in a political scandal is not only to disclose transgressive acts; it is also to display and stage the act and its various reactions, and to keep the story alive day after day. Media talk plays an important role here. Quotes and soundbites are used to reconstruct and display norm transgression, even if the original scandalous action is not recorded. Statements and reactions from the accused politician also constitute an important element in the dramatization of a political scandal. Interviews are performed, and the politician’s statements are quoted, which can be more or less successful in terms of crisis management. Central to the political scandal’s narrative is the confession. The confession can be in the form of an apology, but also as justifications and explanations of how the person in question experienced what happened. Contrasts between heated critical attacks and emotional stories with the potential to draw sympathy are often part of the dramatization.

Even after the transgression has been displayed in the media, much can be done to criticize and ridicule further the politician’s behavior. A particular way to achieve this is to dig in the archives and find other statements from the politician that show the bizarreness and inconsistency of his or her behavior. In connection with political scandals, the media is also filled with comments from all possible directions, including superiors, colleagues, those who stand in opposition to the person in question, family, and friends. These comments permit discussion not only of the scandal’s moral content but also its concrete effects. One of the most common questions discussed in the media is whether or not the politician should be allowed to retain his or her post, or instead be forced to resign. Comments from various actors help to keep a scandal alive, twisting the knife yet again.

**Talk as a scandal in itself**

Mediated talk is not only a central part of the staging and dramatization of various political scandals. Transgressive talk can also develop into a scandal in itself. This is the case when politicians make scandalous and unacceptable utterances that generate significant public outrage with severe consequences for the reputation of the politician. Talk scandals represent a new step in the mediatization of scandals. They are not only communicated and dramatized in the media, but also in most cases originate in the media. There are not even necessarily original actions outside the media, and the disclosure of back-stage actions is therefore no longer a prerequisite for political scandals to occur. Two basic types of talk scandals can be identified. In the first order-talk scandal, the talk itself constitutes the scandal, and the scandal’s origin and core consist of speech events performed in the media. Second-order talk scandals relate to what Thompson (2000) calls second-order transgressions during scandals. This is the case when in interviews, politicians, for example, make statements related to the original scandal, which creates a new norm transgression. It could be intentional lies, an attempt to hide the truth, or trivialization or statements that reveal the ignorance of the person in question. The media’s attention is typically transferred from the original event to speech acts that arise as part of the course of events.

We will now focus on what we define as first-order talk scandals, the ways in which they relate to traditional categorizations of political scandals, and the different types we have observed. As with other scandals, at the core of a talk scandal is an action that constitutes a transgression of norms, rules, or moral codes. This is not to suggest that all controversial statements by politicians, and small mistakes and gaffes in public discourse, are considered talk scandals. As is true of other scandals, public criticism and a serious threat of reputation are required. The basic difference between various types of scandal is related to which type of actions are in question and which norms are transgressed. To clarify this point, in Table 18.1 we have integrated talk scandals into a revised version of a figure developed by Thompson (2000). Talk scandals originate
in speech acts—that is, utterances and talk—and discursive norms and codes that are transgressed. The central question pertains to what people in a certain position are allowed to say and how they should behave in public talk and discourse. Just as politicians can transgress norms related to private morality, the financial sphere, and as powerholders, they can also transgress norms concerning how one should behave in the public sphere. Another important difference between talk scandals and other types of scandal is that the risk of legal consequences in the former case is virtually nonexistent. Talk scandals thus highlight how a politician’s reputation and career can be seriously threatened without the risk of any legal consequences.

We identify five different types of talk scandals (Ekström & Johansson 2008). The first is the disclosure of observed back-stage utterances. This type is closest to the traditional definition of a scandal. It is constituted by a collapse between the front and back regions, which many scholars understand as the core of a scandal. A poorly chosen utterance is made in the back region, and information regarding what was said leaks to the front region, where the media reveal the utterances. The second is the accidental collapse of back and front-stage utterances. This type originates in norm-transgressing utterances that are committed without the knowledge that the action is being documented (such as with a cellphone or similar recording device). The person in question makes a statement, believing him or herself to be back-stage; the statement is not intended to be public, but it is made public because a recording device happens to be present. When the utterance is displayed in the media, it can be contextualized as a statement of principle, independent of its back-stage context. Here, accidental collapse refers to the fact that the recording/filming (which means that the utterance is saved and can be played live) has not been planned by the documenting actor. The third is produced/purposive collapse of back-stage and front-stage utterances. This type originates in norm-transgressing utterances that are committed without the knowledge that the action is being documented (such as with a cellphone or similar recording device). The person in question makes a statement, believing him or herself to be back-stage; the statement is not intended to be public, but it is made public because a recording device happens to be present. When the utterance is displayed in the media, it can be contextualized as a statement of principle, independent of its back-stage context. Here, accidental collapse refers to the fact that the recording/filming (which means that the utterance is saved and can be played live) has not been planned by the documenting actor. The third is produced/purposive collapse of back-stage and front-stage utterances. This type is the result of the journalist’s effort to find or even produce a talk scandal. It is legitimized by the same type of logic as undercover investigative journalism. Using a hidden camera or microphone, the journalists try to find proof of concealed truths, of opinions that politicians would not dare express in public but that are uttered when they believe they are not heard or seen in the media.

The first three types of talk scandals thus deal with different forms of breakdown between front-stage and back-stage actions. The next two types are distinguished from these in that the events have already occurred in the media limelight from the beginning. Transgression of norms in the public sphere is a particular type of first-order talk scandal that occurs when politicians (or others) transgress norms and codes regarding how one should behave in public. Politicians appear in various interactional settings in the media. Debates, interviews, press conferences, and talk shows include norms that can potentially be broken. In a debate, passionate argument and hostile speech acts can be completely within the bounds of what is acceptable and expected. There are limits, however, and a transgression of these creates a breeding ground for a talk scandal. The last type is unsuccessful utterances in journalistic interviews. The interview gives journalism access to a repertoire of strategies for pressing people in positions of power, holding them accountable and placing them in problematic communicative situations (Clayman & Heritage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of action</th>
<th>Talk scandal</th>
<th>Sexual scandal</th>
<th>Financial scandal</th>
<th>Power scandal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes transgressed</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Sexual acts</td>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Political acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of legal infringement</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>Moderate to high</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ekström & Johansson (2008: 64)
2002; Ekström & Fitzgerald 2014). It is against this backdrop that we consider unsuccessful utterances produced in journalistic interviews a specific type of talk scandal. Politicians who are interviewed on an almost daily basis run a considerable risk of making a statement at some point that is not only less than successful—a blunder—but that can also form the breeding ground for a talk scandal. The extent of this risk is related partly to journalists’ ability to ask pressing and difficult questions, but also to the relationships that develop between journalists and politicians (see Ekström & Tolson 2017).

The concept of talk scandals was founded in relation to Thompson’s seminal work *The Political Scandal* (2000) and the way he describes the characteristics and dynamics of such scandals. Over the years a number of researchers have used the concept to describe and analyze political scandals. Examples of talk scandals have been analyzed in different national contexts (Allern & Pollack 2012). Talk scandals have been related to research on topics such as apologetic speech (Kampf 2009; 2011), the life cycles of soundbites (Lee 2012), resistance to (and restoration of) media routines (Gollmitzer 2015), the ways in which candidates are scandalized during election campaigns (Trottier 2017), as well as scandals connected to contemporary right-wing populism (Herkman 2017; Patrona 2019).

**Talk scandals and the transformations of mediated politics**

In recent years, we have seen many examples of scandalous utterances of political leaders circulated in the media. Among the most well-known are Donald Trump’s lewd and sexist talk about women, recorded back-stage and published during the presidential election campaign of 2016. The talk was defended by Trump as “locker room talk.” The latest example (as we write) is the so-called Windrush generation scandal in the United Kingdom, where the Home Secretary Amber Rudd resigned due to allegations of lying when being questioned by the Home Affairs Select Committee. Talk has not become less central in mediated political scandal; quite the contrary. However, the structural conditions and dynamics of talk scandals seem to be undergoing change.

In the original analysis (Ekström and Johansson 2008), we explained the dynamics of talk scandals in relation to three fundamental conditions: the transgression of norms, the mediation of political performances, and the power and methods of journalism. Although we acknowledged the diversity of norms in political cultures—what might be considered a scandalous transgression in one context might be less remarkable in another—we assumed relative stability in the norms of conduct in public political discourse. In recent years, political populism has, however, contributed to a destabilization of political culture and discourse in several Western democracies, with implications for the performance of political styles and the politics of trust (Ekström & Morton 2017; Moffitt 2016; Muller 2016). Regarding the mediation of politics, our theory of talk scandals was developed prior to the recent growth of social media; Facebook and Twitter had only recently been launched. The theory relies on the communicative structures of traditional legacy mass media. Social media has radically changed the dynamics of public discourse and the way in which politics is communicated. The magnitude of the production, circulation, and recontextualization of utterances has increased, and the boundaries of back stage and front stage have been reformulated, in some contexts almost collapsed. Finally, we (similar to other scholars analyzing political scandals) assumed and demonstrated the decisive power of journalism in the disclosure, production, framing, and dramatization of political scandals. A precondition is that professional journalism is in control of the (mass) media, claiming to represent the public, being a mediator between politicians and citizens, and a storyteller upon which politicians in their public performances are heavily dependent. The power of journalism has definitely not been
eroded. However, at the same time as the trust in journalism is challenged in many contexts, digital media provide the infrastructure for a more efficient bypassing of journalism in political communication. In the following section we discuss these transformations and their implications for our understanding of political talk scandals.

The negotiation and destabilization of norms and moral values

The violation of norms and moral values forms the core of political scandals. As Verbalyte (2018: 68) notes, theorizing scandals as discursive phenomena, constructed and negotiated in mediated performances and dramatization, means that we do not “presuppose any norm consensus or unanimous norm system of the society at the beginning or the end of the scandal.” There are examples of clear-cut transgressions revealed in the media, in which immediate political resignation represents the only reasonable solution. More often, however, the violation of norms and moral values are negotiated in the media: in journalists’ framing of news stories, political performances, and reactions from the people. Such examples are most relevant for analyzing if we are interested in the preconditions and dynamics of mediated political scandals. Thus, we should also investigate those potential scandals that do not generate strong, homogeneous, emotional reactions in the media, nor becoming politically damaging (cf. Entman 2012). This applies not least to talk scandals. The differences between gaffes that disappear without political consequences and more serious violations of discursive norms are anything but unambiguous. Moreover, as will be illustrated, “bad manner” in the form of controversial and provocative utterances can also be strategically produced by politicians in order not only to attract public attention (Haller, Michael & Kraus 2018), but also to claim political trust in performing non-establishment identities, as a form of populist appeal to the people (Ekström & Morton 2017; Moffitt 2016).

The norms and moral standards that must exist for a political scandal to emerge or for a transgression to be a transgression are shaped by processes at different levels and times. First, there exist standards related to the history of national political cultures and democratic systems. Second, as illustrated in contemporary populist challenges to the political establishment in several countries, norms and standards in particular political contexts can also be contested and destabilized. Finally, the media and news reporters have a critical role in what Ettema and Glasser (1998: 71), in their study of investigative reporting, describe as “moral work,” “the crafting of public morality,” and the representing and objectifying of evaluative standards (cf. Lee 2012).

Let us present a concrete example to illustrate the dynamics of scandalous political talk in the context of populist challenging of the political establishment and the related destabilization of the norms of conduct. In the UK, the European Parliament election of 2014, the general election of 2015, and the ‘Brexit’ referendum of 2016 represented great successes for Nigel Farage and The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). In the mediated election campaigns, Farage claimed an exclusive representation of “the people” as a combination of performed ordinariness (visiting traditional British pubs, chatting with people in colloquial language) and anti-establishment and anti-immigration rhetoric. He harshly and frequently criticized what he described as “the political class” or “the political elite,” and most importantly his articulated frankness marked a stark contrast to his rivals’ more polished and sophisticated political language. As is the case with other populist politicians, Farage has also enacted forms of “bad manner” as a flexible resource in the construction of a public persona which claims social capital and political trust as an outsider of the political establishment (Ekström & Morton 2017; Moffitt 2016; Serazio 2016). For example, in a speech at the European Union Parliament in Strasbourg...
(April 5, 2017) during the Brexit negotiations, Farage referred to the demands on the UK and addressed the Parliament in a series of negative attributions: “You have shown yourself... to be vindictive, to be nasty. All I can say thank goodness we are leaving. You are behaving like the mafia.” This resulted in a reprimand from the Chairman of the Parliament, explicitly stating that the language used by Farage was unacceptable in the Parliament. Farage responded provocatively by rephrasing his words: “I do understand sir... I do understand your sensitivity. I change it to gangsters” (see Ekström, Patrona & Thornborrow 2018). We are not suggesting that Farage’s performance altered the general norms of conduct in the EU Parliament. Rather, it represented a strategic challenge to the norms of conduct in the performance of a populist style, which contributed to a destabilization of the political culture.

In some cases Farage’s utterances in the media resulted in news reporting with particular ingredients of a typical talk scandal. In an interview on LBC radio (May 16, 2014), Farage remarked that most people would be concerned if a group of Romanians moved in next door. This utterance received significant media attention. It was described as racist, and was strongly criticized by the leaders of other political parties. Farage was forced to defend himself and to explain his point in a series of interviews with different media. In the end, he claimed to regret what he had said, or at least how he had phrased his opinion. Contrary to the “bad manner” illustrated above, in this case Farage clearly did not respond to criticism by upholding the controversial way of talking and acting in public. In this context, his position in relation to broader moral values was more carefully balanced.

To what extent did his remark about Romanians affect his political reputation and public support? One thing is for sure, it did not hamper his great success in the elections. So was this just a minor slip of the tongue that was not particularly important in terms of moral values? No, this is not the conclusion we draw. Quite the contrary. Farage’s utterance was potentially scandalous as a transgression of moral values. This is clearly indicated in extensive media reporting, the articulation of criticism, and the “moral work” of the news journalists in the framing of interviews and news stories, as well as in the strategies of Farage and his party to handle the potential scandal (e.g., the party published an advertisement in the newspapers to explain his words). In news headlines his utterance was described as racist and he was additionally held to account in rather aggressive interviews (Ekström & Tolson 2017). This is an example from an interview in a news report by the BBC (May 19, 2014). The questions in the example were preceded by a sequence discussing what Farage had actually said in the radio interview.

**Journalist:** Would it be acceptable to say if Jamaicans moved next door people should be concerned?

**Politician:** No

**J:** Nigerians?

**P:** No.

**J:** Irish?

**P:** No there is – no there is –

**J:** Signs in the window that say no blacks or Irish here?

**P:** Can we – can we just have an honest appraisal to what has happened to post-communist Romania all right?

In the context of the news report, the repetitive questions pushed Farage into admitting (via framing the answers towards the negative) that he accepts groups other than Romanians and...
Talk scandals

thus ultimately could be accused of racism. The fourth question includes clear references to racist policies. In response to this question, Farage changes his way of answering. He includes the journalist with “we,” shifts the agenda by proposing an honest appraisal and more substantive way of talking about the real problems related to Romania and immigration, in comparison to the face-threatening questioning performed by the journalist. The example thus illustrates how the moral implications of Farage’s utterance were negotiated in the media.

Voices from the public have a central role in mediated scandals, not least as representations of the moral standards in relation to which potentially scandalous actions are evaluated. In the news reporting of Farage’s utterance, including by the BBC and other media, the opinions and attitudes of the public were quite frequently presented. However, they were in no way unambiguously condemnatory. While some vox populi described Farage as racist, the voices of UKIP supporters were actually more common. UKIP supporters were framed as unconcerned about the accusations, arguing instead that he is not racist at all, but rather a politician who knows what the English people want. In several reports Farage was presented as being in cheerful and friendly conversations with people on the street (Ekström & Tolson 2017). In the context of the political opinions in the UK at the time, as well as the moral work of the news media (as only briefly illustrated here), Farage’s potentially scandalous talk did not develop into a talk scandal that seriously threatened his reputation. In other contexts, racist utterances by politicians representing right-wing populist parties, whether originally articulated through social media, on the street (recorded by mobile phone), or provoked by journalists using a hidden camera, have resulted in talk scandals which forced the politicians to resign (Allern et al. 2012; Ekström & Johansson 2008; Herkman 2017).

Political scandals are potentially destabilizing phenomena in the political system, with concrete effects in the form of resignations, fluctuations in opinions and party support, and long-term effects on citizens’ trust in politicians and the political system. However, the destabilization of the political culture and changing norms and values are also contextual factors with implications for the dynamics of (in this case) potential talk scandals.

The mediation of political performances

In explaining political scandals, Thompson (2000) has emphasized the technologies and cultures of communication that shape the forms of mediated visibility. In recent years, many scholars have highlighted how political communication has changed due to the advancement of social media (Broersma & Graham 2015; Bruns et al. 2015; Enli 2017; Klinger & Svensson 2015). As for the dynamics of political scandals in general and talk scandals in particular, at least three aspects should be considered.

First, even if the 24/7 news cycle has enabled scandals to spread more quickly and to a wider audience, this has increased even more rapidly in a world of social media (Burkenhardt 2018; Chen & Mandell 2016). Unsuccessful utterances are posted, tweeted, and re-tweeted at unprecedented speed. This has rendered crisis management for scandalized politicians more difficult in that the range and effect of the scandal is more difficult to foresee and must be dealt with instantly. On the other hand, social media has become a resource for scandalized politicians and his or her supporters in questioning the scandal frame and using crisis management strategies more effectively (Boin et al. 2017).

Another aspect is the accessibility of potential scandals. Social media has blurred or perhaps even collapsed the distinction between back and front regions. There are numerous examples of scandals whereby politicians are disclosed as having posted inappropriate comments or using an alias on social media. One example is from the Swedish election campaign of 2014, in which
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the tabloid *Expressen* revealed xenophobic utterances by politicians of the Sweden Democrats. The politicians had used fake identities on social media network sites to make comments about immigrants such as “Muslims = the cancer of Mother Earth.” The disclosure of these comments on social media was allocated extensive media coverage, and a number of candidates had to resign from the candidatures and even leave the party (cf. Herkman 2017). The blurred distinctions might also explain why politicians are making comments in their own name, perceiving them as private without understanding the risk of them turning public. For example, the private and public distinction collapsed in the media reporting of the former South Carolina governor Mark Sandford’s complaints about his ex-wife on Facebook (Chen et al. 2016).

Finally, frequent scandalous utterances are produced and circulated in social media settings where there is no disclosure of back-stage utterances. Politicians’ use of open social networks such as Twitter and Instagram creates potential talk scandals on its own. President Trump’s use of Twitter both as a candidate and president is of course the most well-known example. Many of his tweets have caused public outrage, such as his accusations of Mexicans being “Druggies, drug dealers, rapists and killers,” calling the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un “Little Rocket Man,” or his criticism and nicknaming of television hosts Mika Brzezinski (“Low I.Q. Crazy”) and Joe Scarborough (“Psycho”). Analysis of how such utterances and repertoires of strategic performances in social media affect political reputation and credibility (and political culture more generally) is beyond the scope of this chapter.

The power and methods of journalism

The power of journalism in disclosing, framing, and dramatizing political scandals is essential in scandal research (Allern & Pollack 2012; Burkenhardt 2018; Ekström & Johansson 2008; Entman 2012; Tumber & Waisbord 2004). In particular, the rise of critical investigative reporting as a part of a journalistic culture is emphasized as an important factor in explaining the significant role that political scandals play in contemporary society (Thompson 2000; Tumber & Waisbord 2004).

It has been suggested that the rise of social media has diminished the power of journalism in general, including in relation to political scandals (Broersma & Graham 2015; Burkenhardt 2018; Johansson & Odén 2017). Social media has made it possible for scandals to erupt without journalism being involved. Posts and tweets can be disclosed and staged as scandalous without coverage in legacy media. Both first-order and second-order (talk) scandals have been revealed on social media (Chen & Mandell 2016). Journalism no longer enjoys the unique privilege of disclosing and staging scandals, and therefore directing contestation. Even the public’s response no longer remains within the control of journalism and the traditional mass media.

However, this shift does not mean that journalism is without power in scandals. In most cases, the legacy media seems to be needed to confirm the status of the transgression and to evaluate the reactions made on social media. The function of journalism in political scandals is in some cases to transfer them into an arena for the evaluation and determination of the magnitude of their accusations of norm transgressions that have already been displayed via social media. In a fragmented media system, the magnitude of a political scandal is dependent on the extent to which different news media report on the action and share the moral work in framing the action as a norm transgression. Wrongdoings and unsuccessful utterances that are not mentioned via more than one news show, newspaper, or magazine are no longer likely to develop into a full-blown scandal. The action must be represented as scandalous in the entire news system to create a substantial problem for the politician.
Another aspect of the changing media system is that accusations can be contested and questioned in so-called alternative news media and social media. In such contexts, scandalized politicians are offered a friendly and supportive platform, and they can also give voice to other perspectives or even launch counterattacks on legacy media reporting during the scandal.

To sum up, journalism has to some extent lost its authority in reporting scandals, but it remains an important player in disclosing, staging, and dramatizing them. Nevertheless, more actors and arenas such as social media now exist where scandals can occur and develop. The public discourse of contemporary politics is still to a large extent dominated by the authority of journalism (Carlson 2017), and scandals on social media seem to be quite significantly dependent upon legacy media for their recognition and verification as being of societal importance.

Concluding remarks

The concept of talk scandal was invented to account for the centrality of talk in the performance of politics and in the diverse practices of journalism and media discourse. Since then the relevance of the concept is evident in the frequent occurrence of scandals pertaining to transgressive talk in various national contexts, as well as in the number of studies in which the concept has been applied. However, as we have discussed in this chapter, a reexamination is needed with respect to the fundamental conditions shaping the dynamics and characteristics of talk scandals in contemporary mediated politics. Significant transformations have been discussed with respect to the norms of the political culture, media technologies and forms of communication, and the role of journalism. How talk scandals are shaped by and most importantly contribute to the shaping of such structural features remains in need of theorization and empirical investigation, preferably via systematic comparative studies. We propose two overall topics to be kept in mind in future research: first, the negotiation of norms of conduct and moral values in the performance and contextualization of scandalous utterances in various political and cultural contexts and media settings; second, how mechanisms of mediated politics seem to shape the simultaneous increase, magnitude, devaluation, and fatigue of scandalous talk in contemporary society.

References


