THE ROUTINIZATION OF MEDIA SCANDALS

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Introduction

This chapter highlights the role of rituals, interrelatedness and temporality in the workings of a media scandal and discusses those aspects in relation to routinization.

As the work of journalists depends highly on common norms and values within the professional field of news journalism, routine is obviously a central aspect (e.g. Tuchman 1973; Cook 1998). For instance, the question of what is considered newsworthy – what is considered to be legitimate and appropriate news content – has been extensively studied by scholars in journalism and media studies. Cook (1998, 61) argues that “when reporters make choices on who and what to cover and how to cover it, these choices are governed . . . by a ‘logic of appropriateness’ based on their professional craft-related roles as journalists”.

While routines play a salient role in news work, and as such also in the journalistic crafting of media scandals, our ambition is to extend the understanding of routines by also suggesting that who and what are in the focus of single media scandals can take on a routinized character. Whereas media scandals often are studied as single events, we build our argument on a growing scholarly interest in the interrelated nature of scandals since they often come in waves (Adut 2005; Kantola and Vesa 2013). Single scandals need to be placed in broader contexts and to be understood in relation to other scandals. Understanding scandals as a social phenomenon with historical roots challenges ideas on what ingredients are needed in the making of a news media scandal. A transgression of norms that are repetitively covered by media may over time make the narrative of the media story rather predictable with a predefined set of questions, a storyline and suitable actors to play lead roles – as villains, victims and heroes.

Even though both the logic of media and the character of a scandal suggest some kind of novelty and norm breaking aspects, our analysis suggests that the media trajectory of a scandal over time can be rather repetitive with predefined roles and scripts for the actors involved to play. We base our argumentation on extant studies on media scandals as something characterized by rituals, temporality and interrelatedness, and we use a case study of the Swedish textile company H&M as an illustration. The case study is based on a content analysis of news media coverage about “responsibility” and H&M, and covers a period of 18 years, from 1995 to 2012. During the period, H&M was recurrently accused of misconduct and irresponsible behaviour. The chapter is concluded with a discussion on how the routine perspective of scandals in the media inform the present literature in the field and how it can be used and researched in future studies.
Rituals, temporality and interrelatedness

Scandals are suggested to be closely related to and play a salient role in “the professional ideology of journalism” (Allern and Pollack 2012, 9) as they legitimize news organizations and journalists’ roles as the “fourth estate”. Kantola (2012, 73) even calls scandals “a strategic ritual of journalism” in the sense that they provide formative experiences for younger generations of journalists. However, scandals are not mirrored events in the media, but created through the professional handicraft of journalism. In this way, journalists are not only performing roles as news reporters, but “they also interpret and – to varying degrees – direct the progress of the scandal” (Allern and Pollack 2012, 9).

The professional routines for journalistic work, often summarized in the umbrella term “media logic” (Altheide and Snow 1979), set boundaries for what events or social phenomena will be picked up in the first place and how it later develops in terms of a scandal in media narratives. This means that we to a large extent can predict the key ingredients and rhetoric of a media scandal. Jacobsson and Löfmarck (2008, 207) argue that we need to understand scandals as rituals, because they have a “predictable pattern of behaviour with a symbolic and expressive dimension”. We can therefore expect scandals to contain certain types of behaviour such as “angry letters” and “heated websites debates”. According to Jacobsson and Löfmarck this also implies that the scandal will follow certain moments: at first emotional energy which then fades away and thereafter a more reflexive phase follows. In this way, mediated scandals are suggested to follow similar cycles as they start with some kind of transgression of societal norms that come into the limelight of the media, and thereafter follow a “market-driven media logic in living a life of its own” (Herkman 2017, 4).

The scandal-as-ritual perspective suggests, according to Jacobsson and Löfmarck, a type of drama containing a set of key actors, an audience and a corresponding script. In these social dramas narratives are generated and familiarities are constructed. The person or organization being criticized “becomes part of a story about The Good and The Bad, the Perpetrator and the Victim” (Allern and Pollack 2012, 187). The professional routines are powerful in deciding the frames of the story in a media scandal, and according to Allern and Pollack (2012, 187) the frames tend therefore to limit the scope and understanding of social phenomena: “reality is observed from one and the same perspective”.

We take the existing literature on the roles of routines in news work and media scandals as the point of departure for our analysis, and suggest that the routine perspective can be further elaborated and extended by adding two more aspects: temporality and interrelatedness. 

First, while the existence of routines implies a temporal aspect in understanding news work, only recently has the role of history been emphasized in analyses of media scandals and how they perform. As with all social phenomena, scandals are also to a certain extent historical products. In line with Pettigrew (1990, 270), “history is not just an event in the past but is alive in the present and may shape the future”. One recent example is a study of political scandals in Finland, in which Kantola and Vesa (2013) show how their temporal approach allows for not only understanding whether the phenomena of media scandals are becoming more common or not over time, but also how their focus and character may change. Their longitudinal media study shows that what was considered appropriate behaviour during the 1970s – such as drinking alcohol during political negotiations and decision-making in the sauna or even having personal drinking problems – was criticized during the 1980s and 1990s and unacceptable in the 2000s (Kantola and Vesa 2013). While historical analyses of media scandals tell us about how topics and ideas about appropriate and legitimate behaviour change over time, we can also expect the routine aspect of media scandals to show repetition over time. For example, and as illustrated in the case
of H&M, organizations given a villainous role in the media may repetitively play that role and be used as an illustration of the “bad example”.

Second, the understanding of media scandals as rituals and as historically rooted highlights also the interrelatedness of media scandals. The narrative frames set by the media logic bring also ideas concerning what kinds of actors are suitable to include. As research shows that journalists tend to reuse source and expert voices who meet the communicative requirements of the media logic, we can also expect topics, organizations and individuals that are being criticized in scandals to be “reused”. Vasterman and Ruigrok (2013) show for example in their study on media coverage of the swine flu how a few experts were recurrently used as commentators. In particular, two experts were given opportunities to make statements over and over again – and both of them were more alarmist in their statements in comparison with other expert voices. The media logic may therefore enhance certain types of messages and images of social phenomena and at the same time other perspectives may entirely fall outside of the radar. In addition, Kantola and Vesa (2013) state – drawing on a large pile of scholarly work on media scandals – that certain types of scandals tend to come in waves. Single media scandals therefore tend to influence other scandals, directly or indirectly.

In sum, we argue that an understanding of media scandals from the perspectives of rituals as well as temporality and interrelatedness stress the routine aspects of why and how social phenomena are turned into scandal narratives in the media. We use the empirical case of the Swedish textile company H&M to illustrate the nature of media scandals from a routine perspective. The case illustrates how once an organization has been in focus for a critic, the critic may pop up in subsequent occasions as the organization is used as a negative example.

To play the leading role in an ongoing media scandal

This section builds on an analysis of media texts of the large Swedish stock exchange company H&M in relation to issues concerning corporate responsibility over a period of 18 years, from 1995 to 2012. Initially, the coding of media texts in the largest newspapers in Sweden included four Swedish stock exchange companies, all in retail business to consumers (Grafström et al. 2015). The results demonstrate that three of these four companies were continually discussed in relation to one type of responsibility issue over the years. In other words, the results indicate that these three companies were given certain scripts and roles in the media narrative of corporate responsibilities over the years. In this chapter, we develop the case of H&M further in order to illustrate our argument about routinized, temporal and interrelated media scandals.

H&M was selected due to its long history of being publicly debated as to whether or not it was an (ir)responsible organization. With the use of a set of keywords we searched for print articles that explicitly addressed issues about corporate responsibilities – and mentioned in relation to H&M. The articles are complemented with other media sources from TV and radio broadcast programmes when relevant. Our analysis demonstrates that the company has been involved in what we understand as an ongoing media scandal; a scandal that stretches over several years. The character and focus of the scandal appear to be recurrent and strengthened over time. The main focus of the media critique of H&M relates to working conditions in the textile factories in which the company’s products are manufactured.

1997–1998: starting point of the ongoing scandal

The starting point for the media attention on H&M and its working conditions was a documentary by the Swedish public television at the end of 1997. The documentary revealed bad working conditions and even child labour in the factories that manufactured H&M products:
Hennes & Mauritz celebrates its 50th birthday this year. The company is today one of the largest clothing chains in Europe and one example of a company that successfully takes advantages of the global economy. The business idea behind the profitable development on the stock market, latest fashion to the lowest price, has offered the customer cheap clothes and the owners billions in profit.

(SVT 1997, our translation)

In the publicity that followed, H&M was held responsible for the child labour that had been found in the suppliers’ factories. The media attention was intensified by the fact that the CEO at the time, Stefan Persson, at first did not comment on the disclosures. In one of the first articles published after the TV documentary – with the headline “Stefan Persson refuses to make a statement” (Aftonbladet, 29 December 1997) – it was stated that the CEO had tried to stop the documentary and that he was not interested in being interviewed about the challenges that H&M were facing in their operations abroad. One day later, the CEO, the purchase manager and the communication manager made comments stressing that H&M took the critique seriously and by no means accepted child labour, as for example in this quote:

I think that this is as disgusting as everybody else, [the CEO of H&M] says about the TV disclosures about child labour among the suppliers . . . It is absolutely not true that I’m hiding, he says upset and as a reaction to the information that he has earlier refused to comment on the film. We would under no circumstance allow child labour and we follow the UN declaration about human rights. This is an important issue for us.

(Persson 1997, our translation)

The programme also led to a fierce debate among journalists, politicians and consumers about the morality of the market. Opinions were expressed about how profit-seeking companies were allowed to act. The Minister of Labour at the time, Margareta Winberg, criticized the company in a newspaper article with the headline “Winberg: I will never go shopping there again”. The announcement from the Minister gave impetus to consumers as well as other actors to express their opinions and stakes in the debate. For example, The Swedish Trade Union Confederation considered selling its share of stocks in H&M (Svenska Dagbladet, 31 December 1997) and the Minister of Agriculture declared in an interview that “I will think once or twice before I walk into that shop again” (Expressen, 31 December 1997). The Minister of Consumption at the time, Leif Blomberg, also reacted to the TV documentary and announced that he himself did not believe in boycotts. Instead he urged key actors within the textile industry to get together to combat jointly child labour (Göteborgs-Posten, 31 December 1997). At the end of January 1998, a meeting between H&M and the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Consumption was arranged. The media reported that the Minister of Labour – now when she had more information about the efforts made by H&M to deal with the situation – regretted that she had urged a boycott against H&M (Aftonbladet, 28 January 1998; Dagens Industri, 28 January 1998).

All through 1998, H&M continued to play a paramount role in the media narrative about multinationals in a global world; a narrative that raised questions and spurred a debate about the morality of companies – and what is reasonable to expect in terms of social responsibility – in an increasingly globalized market economy. The media scandal during this first phase was created out of and strengthened by a conflict between different ideas and norms about the moral order of the market economy. The key media story was about the big company H&M manufacturing their products in low-wage economies and thereby transgressing norms about how far a company should go in its striving for profits. The media story thus triggered, and was given impetus
by, questions both on business conduct in a global economy and on corporate responsibility along its value chain. The story had a very clear casting in which H&M was given the role of the villain, people who worked in the factories were victims, and the investigative journalists perceived as the heroes.

1999–2011: the media scandal is kept alive

In the following years, H&M was targeted in the media on several occasions regarding working conditions in textile factories. The majority of the articles contained some kind of criticism towards H&M, but there are also some, even though they are few, examples in which H&M was praised. The media scandal from late 1997 was kept alive over the years as working conditions continued to be in focus – and often with the reference to what was revealed about child labour in 1997. In addition, H&M also figured in publicity about problems in the textile industry even though the company was not directly involved itself. H&M was mentioned as an example of companies in the industry that ought to take a greater responsibility.

We take the year 2006 to illustrate the media coverage of H&M over this period: it was an average year when it comes to publicity about responsibility issues and included several different media stories about H&M and its working conditions in different countries and within different areas. For example, the Swedish radio broadcast programme *Kaliber* revealed deficient working conditions in the jewellery industry in China (23 April 2006). Several companies – among them H&M – were accused of poor working conditions in their suppliers’ factories. The day after the radio broadcast H&M’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) manager was interviewed on the morning show on Swedish radio, where she explained that H&M already had taken action to improve conditions. While some of the critics of the jewellery industry did not relate to H&M but to other Swedish companies, H&M was still asked questions on prime time Swedish radio about the situation.

Recurrently in the media coverage, references are made to earlier accusations of H&M violations of human rights in the late 1990s. The media audience is not only reminded about earlier negative publicity but is also presented with a continuity – a pattern of behaviour that signals what is reasonable to expect from H&M. References made to negative publicity from the 1990s is not only made in critical articles but also in those concerning H&M’s efforts to improve working conditions at the suppliers’ factories. One example:

H&M has a large part of its production in Bangladesh. It was one of the companies that during the early 1990s was pursued by the media, when the labour conditions in the textile factories of the third world suddenly became world news. Since then, it has invested heavily to change its image and the standard among its suppliers.

(Svenska Dagbladet, 26 April 2006, our translation)

The majority of the analysed articles from the year 2006 cover protests by workers in factories in Bangladesh. Even though H&M was not using any of the suppliers facing criticism from workers, the company was recurrently brought up in the media coverage. H&M is basically used as an example of a company that used textile factories in Bangladesh for manufacturing its products. H&M also appears in articles about competitors. For example, when another textile company is accused of lack of control of their suppliers, H&M becomes part of the story as an example of both bad and good practices.

The media scandal about labour conditions is not isolated to the very peaks of media attention but rather lingers and gives impetus to the media framing of labour conditions in general
within the textile industry during the years from 1999 to 2011. It is evident that H&M is used as an example when the newspapers are reporting on issues with poor working conditions where other companies are involved, but H&M is not part of this story. As the media narrative lingers and even continues to develop, H&M – from a responsibility perspective – increasingly begins to stand for poor working conditions. In this sense, H&M’s media scandal is in this phase turned into what Jacobsson and Löfmarck (2008) argue is a drama in which the roles as well as the script are predefined and, moreover, where a certain familiarity is created – coverage on poor working conditions easily brings H&M into the story.

2012: the media scandal is reinforced

In 2012, the scandal was again reinforced as TV4 and its programme *Kalla Fakta (Cold Facts)* broadcast two documentaries. In both of them H&M is accused of not paying fair salaries to workers in the factories. The programmes resulted in intense media attention and a public debate between H&M and *Kalla Fakta*.

A month before the first TV programme was broadcast, H&M received positive publicity for its ambition to influence politicians in Bangladesh to raise minimum wages as well as collaborating with UNICEF to start schools for children in that country (e.g. *Expressen*, 5 September 2012; *Dagens industri*, 6 September 2012). In October 2012, *Kalla Fakta* broadcast the first of the two documentaries and accused H&M of not paying the workers fair wages. The TV programme started with a number of rhetorical questions that raised the moral dilemmas of how wealth and welfare ought to be distributed.

Who in Sweden has never worn H&M clothes? Who has never heard about this company’s fantastic success or the owner family’s enormous fortune? *Kalla Fakta* tonight is about those who sew clothes and those who gain the profits. On the one side, tens of thousands of poor sewers in Asia earning a few crowns an hour, and on the other side one of the world’s richest owner families. We really take a social responsibility, as much as one can ask for, says H&M.

*(Kalla Fakta, 24 October 2012, our translation)*

H&M responded to the programme in an article in which the CEO, Karl-Johan Persson, refuted the criticism:

“We do not recognize ourselves in the accusations. We struggle for higher salaries and better conditions for the factory workers in Cambodia,” he tells *Expressen*.

*(Expressen, 24 October 2012, our translation)*

In the TV documentary, information from 2011 about workers that were fainting in the textile industry was repeated and reused. Hence, the link to previous episodes of the critique towards H&M was strengthened; and in that sense the ongoing scandal was reinforced. Directly after the programme, H&M sent an email to *Kalla Fakta* with responses to the criticism. The email was published by *Kalla Fakta* and they, in turn, responded to H&M’s criticism of the programme. The email correspondence initiated and spurred a public and hot-tempered debate, and it continued with new letters in December the same year. Part of the communication regarded the role that H&M plays in the global society and how the company can defend the fact that it makes profits on cheap labour in developing countries.
Critics call it “economic freeriding” and make parallels with the colonialism of the nineteenth century – that H&M in principle gains but does not give anything back to the poor countries as you don’t pay company tax in for example Bangladesh and Cambodia. What do you say?

(Question posed by Kalla Fakta, see TV4 2016)

There are probably extreme opinions and critics with a number of ideas, but the majority of all organizations – probably more than 90 per cent – argue that trade is paramount to eliminate poverty and there is clear evidence that proves that this has happened and happens. In our opinion, it is Kalla Fakta’s task, in a serious journalistic manner, to balance different extreme opinions and to provide a nuanced picture of reality. We have clearly explained how our company structures work in several of our answers – but it is probably always possible to find those that are critical.

(Answer provided by H&M, see TV4 2016)

In December 2012, the second part of the Kalla Fakta documentary was broadcast with a focus on the income of the owner family of H&M, in which was discussed their earnings in relation to the workers in the production countries. Even before the programme was broadcast H&M reported Kalla Fakta to the Broadcasting Commission at the Authority for Print Media, Radio and TV (Aftonbladet, 10 December 2012). In its online newsroom H&M explained that Kalla Fakta did not give a nuanced or correct image of the company or their effort to create better working conditions and that Kalla Fakta thereby had not followed the rules of press ethics. H&M also published all the information about the ongoing media story online.

To sum up, the analysed news flow of H&M shows that the company was recurrently presented in relation to and tied to the moral issue of the working conditions in the textile industry. Media scandals concerning H&M during the late 1990s appear to have set the stage for subsequent scandals by both zooming in on working conditions and at the same time excluding other possible areas and issues for scrutiny and criticism. In addition, it has given H&M a role as a representative of the “villains” within the textile industry in a broader sense. A media scandal concerning H&M today thus needs to be understood in relation to previous ones. We have shown that when for example poor working conditions in the textile industry are the focus of a media story, H&M is often mentioned or even interviewed, regardless of whether the actual transgression in the specific story has anything to do with the company. In this way, media scandals over time appear to develop some kind of continuity and predictability – more or less the same story builds up the base of an ongoing media narrative of H&M. New media stories and public outbursts about the organization are created based on previous news stories – making links between new and old information and resulting in a blurring of time. Hence, one could argue that over time less and less information is actually needed to create an outburst – or a media scandal – as it simply adds to previous stories.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have argued that media scandals take on a routinized character in particular via three aspects: media scandals have the character of being (1) rituals; (2) temporal; and (3) interrelated. While the first aspect – the scandal-as-ritual (e.g. Jacobsson and Löfmarck 2008) – has been paid extensive scholarly attention, the two other aspects have been less
researched. In this chapter we set out to provide a first attempt to highlight the role of history and the interrelated nature of scandals, aspects that we argue are much in need of future study within the field.

The illustrations presented from the media coverage of H&M are only one story among many others and should be both further developed and challenged. Media scandals concerning working conditions have a very strong moral message and involve a clear set of cast members of villains (H&M), victims (the workers) and heroes (most often the journalists). Even though there would be many companies that could have played the role of the villain, H&M is recurrently used as the example – even when it is not involved at the time. And even though H&M since the late 1990s has launched a number of initiatives in the area, the scandal story would not gain from including and discussing them.

A routinized perspective of media scandals suggests that a scandal never really closes: instead it is open to more information, interpretation and action. As long as something new can be added to the story, they remain important for journalists to keep investigating and reporting about. The interrelatedness further emphasizes that, even though there might be an end to a current scandal, it can rather easily be revived with slightly new ingredients.

We suggest that the character of routinized media scandals is self-reinforcing as it brings with it rather predefined roles and scripts for the actors involved to play and to follow. For example, journalists that cover the area of sustainability and the textile industry would likely turn to H&M when new issues or possible scandal situations appear – maybe they have already previously reported on H&M and are familiar with the history of the company or, if not, H&M will easily pop up as the key example when for example searching online and discussing with colleagues. Our results for the other companies included in the analysis (Grafström et al. 2015) indicate a similar picture of a rather narrow and one-dimensional focus on one issue, and one organization, at the time – and once an organization is tied to one particular responsibility issue, there seems to be a tendency for it to be related with the same issue over time. For example, the Swedish telecom company TeliaSonera was during the years 1995 to 2011 very much tied to issues concerning corruption. In 2012, the publicity on corruption concerning the company exploded as it was criticized for its business in Uzbekistan. We can also rather easily think of other equivalent organizations in other industries – with other key problems in focus – such as for example the big oil companies BP and Shell and questions about the environment and greenhouse gases. This in turn reminds us that the “leading roles” in ongoing media stories are few and only a very limited number of organizations would be suitable for those roles, regardless of whether it is to play the villain or the hero.

While our analysis very much has focused on journalistic norms as the foundation for and explanations of the routinized character of media scandals, we would also like to stress the need for going beyond the editorial offices and discuss the dynamics of scandal in a broader sense. The self-reinforcing character just discussed may be partly explained by activities outside of the media – not least by the companies themselves. For example, the way H&M responded to the scandals may have contributed to turning itself into a recurrent point of reference in the ongoing media narrative. H&M has an extensive, like most large publicly traded companies, narrative about its role in society and the responsibility that it takes (e.g. sustainability reports, information on the website and the launch of a sustainable collection). In this way, the focus of certain responsibility issues is something that develops over time in the interplay between media, companies and other stakeholders. In addition, we know from previous studies that media content does not only shape opinions, values and perceptions of audiences, but also of the organization or individual in the focus of the media (Kjaergaard et al. 2011). The recurrent focus on H&M in the media has for example likely shaped internal ideas, perceptions and practices of not least
how to minimize the likelihood of possible new public criticism. Such an internal focus may in itself also have an influence on the overall scandal narrative in the media.

We would also like to underline that we are not arguing for less scrutiny of H&M – or any other company – but our argument concerns the need to problematize how scandals unwrap over time, and how news of yesterday plays important roles in shaping the news of today. If the routine perspective is taken seriously, it therefore suggests a kind of inertia in ongoing media stories which makes it less likely that the topic and castings of an already set story will change. This in turn raises questions for future scholarly investigation concerning to what extent such inertia exists, how it is created over time, and its impact on the dynamics and nature of scandals in the media.

Note

1 We would like to thank Emelie Adamsson for assistance with coding work in parts of the data collection.

References


SVT (1997) *Two World Companies*, documentary, 29 December.

