In his book-length treatment of mediated political scandal, Thompson (2000) attributes the contemporary prevalence of scandals to three major factors. First, the growth and consolidation of mass circulation press in the early twentieth century meant that newspapers needed to compete with each other to grab the attention of the readers. Second, the rise of investigative journalism had encouraged journalists to look beyond official sources, in order to uncover the information that government or other parties try to conceal for fear of reputation damage. The third reason Thompson identified is the diffusion of new media and communication technologies – the heightened visibility of politicians increases the risk of previously private activities being exposed in the public domain (pp. 57–59).

This provides a good starting point for us to explore the explanatory power of mediatization, which is a concept as well as an analytical perspective, in relation to media scandal. Building upon the pioneering work of Altheide and Snow (1979), scholars of political communication first used mediatization to capture the ways in which media logic seeped into the operation of politics and the calculation of political actors. Some even cautioned that media and their logic have colonized politics (Meyer & Hinchman 2002; Strömbäck 2008). In this day and age when digital communications have become increasingly pervasive and networked, it is all the more pertinent to understand the functioning of what Altheide (2013) calls ‘the ecology of communication’, which is a template for inspecting the interaction between ‘communication, social interaction and institutional orders’ (p. 223). This interaction goes far beyond that between journalism and political scandals; nor should we restrict our inquiry to the context of Anglo-American liberal democracy.

In this chapter, I argue that on the one hand the institutional logic of media organizations and the network logic of communication platforms are crucial to the unfolding of any political scandals. On the other hand, media logic itself is always embedded in a specific political context, thus the mediatization of scandals is a dialectic process that involves the ideological positioning of media outlets. I will first review the current state of the field, with regard to the implications of mediatization in general and that of mediatized scandals in particular. The competition toward commercial gain, political influence and professional prestige drives media outlets to expose and sustain political scandals. This has given rise to scholarly debate on the impact such ongoing process could have on public life in Western liberal democratic societies. On the other hand, as an integral part of contemporary social and political life, mass media...
outlets have frequently come under scrutiny themselves, as the transgressor in rather than the disseminator of scandals. For example, the News International phone hacking scandal that erupted in the UK in 2011, which also had wider international ramifications. I then examine how new technologies and the power of digital networks aid the circulation of scandalous stories, and how the recent case of Cambridge Analytica poses new challenges for conceptualizing the network logic. In the last analytical section of the chapter, I further attend to the dialectic relationship between media scandal and politics by problematizing the ideological standpoint of media organizations themselves. As Entman (2012) argues, the ‘study and critique of media and scandal should focus on understanding the system of political communication rather than on news organizations as separate entities charting the course of scandals by themselves’ (p. 6). Recent political events taking place in both quintessential liberal democracies such as the UK and the US, as well as other parts of the world, suggest that the trajectory of scandals is often contingent upon ideological affinity between media and different factions of political elites.

The institutional logic of mediatization

As an attempt to highlight the role of media in modern society, the notion of mediatization has been invoked since the 1980s, when for example Altheide and Snow (1979, 1988) called for an ‘analysis of social institutions-transformed-through-media’ (Altheide & Snow 1979, 7), although they use the term ‘media logic’ to refer to the formatting power exerted over how social experience is selected, categorized and presented in mass media. Thompson (1995) observes that the emergence of large media organizations specializing in the production and distribution of symbolic goods has reconfigured the relationship between institutions and between institutions and individuals, which he characterizes as the ‘mediatization of modern culture’. Asp (1986) speaks more specifically about the mediatization of politics, by which he means ‘a political system to a high degree is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass media in their coverage of politics’ (p. 359). Here already there is emergent concern over the negative consequences of mediatization on the functioning of politics. Similarly, in their mapping of ‘the third age’ of political communication, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) warned against the ‘rush to embrace infotainment and the sway of politics-smearing journalism’ as part of the consequences of the abundance and ubiquity of mediated communication (p. 225).

But it was not until the mid-2000s that more conscious efforts were made to institutionalize mediatization as a core concept underpinning research about the multifaceted influences that media have on contemporary cultures and societies (e.g., Couldry & Hepp 2013; Hepp & Couldry 2010; Krotz 2009; Schulz 2004). Jansson (2013) defines mediatization as ‘how other social processes in a broad variety of domain and at different levels become inseparable from and dependent on technological processes and resources of mediation’. He further specifies three sociospatial regimes of dependence: (1) material indispensability and adaptation, (2) premediation of experience, and (3) normalization of social practice, all of which correspond with the perceived, the conceived and the lived spaces (p. 279). In their editorial for the special issue of Communication Theory, Couldry and Hepp identified two theoretical traditions in mediatization research, namely the social constructionist approach that examines ‘communicative construction’ and the institutionalist approach that emphasizes ‘media logic’. But they also pointed out that these two strands had been converging in recent years, with a broader research agenda emerging that goes beyond lamenting the colonization of social life by ‘media logic’.

One of the research areas that would benefit greatly from treating mediatization as more of a ‘sensitizing’ rather than a ‘definitive’ concept is the study of media scandals (Jensen 2013). Quoting from American sociologist Herbet Blumer (1954) who made these distinctions in the
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1950s, Jensen explains that ‘a definitive concept refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects, by the aid of a clear definition in terms of attributes or fixed benchmarks’, while ‘a sensitizing concept gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances’ (p. 7). Scholars coming from the journalism tradition tend to take a definitive approach toward mediatization. Not only do they examine how the technological and the institutional logic of mass media shape the report and the circulation of scandals, they also assess, rather critically, the consequences such pervasive mediated communication could have on politics and public life.

There are several key aspects of the arrangements of modern mass media that enable, and often encourage, the exposé of scandals. To start with, scandals make sensational news stories that could attract attention and boost profit. On a competitive media market saturated with a huge variety of symbolic goods, any media organization that can acquire a scoop of a major scandal is poised to reap the financial gain. This line of discussion derives from the sustained critique of infotainment as a result of marketization and commercialization (e.g., Entman 1989; Hackett & Zhao 1997; Jamieson 1993; McChesney 2015; Patterson 1993; Postman 1985; Tumber 1993). It presupposes the normative goal of media functioning as public sphere in liberal democracy and highlights the negative impact of the proliferation of media scandals. Critics argue that in presenting scandals as media spectacles, journalism is adopting the ‘show-biz’ calculation based on battles of images and conflicts of characters. This debases politics by diminishing the deliberation of important policy issues, undermining the trust toward politicians and treating citizens as passive consumers of infotainment content (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Thompson 2000).

One of the most disturbing illustrations of the detrimental effect of commercial calculation is the 2011 News of the World phone hacking scandal that took place in the UK, but had much wider international ramifications. Driven by the desire to ‘pull in readers for commercial rather than journalistic reasons’ (Fenton 2012, 4), tabloid newspapers themselves became the culprit in a major media scandal. The investigation over the British newspaper industry’s illegal practices of acquiring confidential personal information through hacking into mobile phones and computers started in the early 2000s. After the conviction in 2006 of the News of the World royal reporter Clive Goodman and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire for hacking into the voicemail of Prince William’s aide, it was widely perceived that the matter had come to an end. But new allegations kept emerging, until The Guardian revealed in 2011 that the News of the World had not only hacked into the voicemail of celebrities, politicians and members of the Royal Family, but also that of a murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and victims of the 7 July London Underground bombing. This was a key turning point that triggered a strong wave of public outrage, which in turn led to the closing down of the newspaper and the government initiated Leveson Inquiry into the ‘culture, practices, and ethics of the press’ (Leveson, quoted in Tumber 2012, 13). If mediatization entails the pervasiveness of market-based commercial logic, one has many reasons to be concerned with not only journalism’s indulgence in sensationalism and emotionalism, but also the moral transgression committed by journalists themselves in their effort to acquire a competitive edge.

The professionalization of journalism, especially the development of investigative journalism, is another factor that has contributed to the rise of media scandals across Western democracies in recent decades (Tumber & Waisbord 2004). For example, Chalaby (2004) uses the case of France to illustrate how the disclosure of political scandals only became common after the late development of investigative journalism in the country in the 1980s. Here again the conception of the journalistic role is very much embedded in the liberal democratic framework that presumes the press’s independence from the government and political parties. Investigative journalists are expected to play the adversarial role of the Fourth Estate to check on politicians’ abuses.
of power. The exposure of scandal is therefore considered the highest journalistic achievement (Liebes & Blum-Kulka 2004). In contrast to the focus on commercial logic though, the emphasis on the pursuit of professional prestige, either by individual journalists or by media organizations, naturally leads to a much more positive assessment of the implications of media scandals. From the 2013 US National Security Agency and its international partner’s surveillance scandal, which emanated from the documents leaked by Edward Snowden, to the 2018 Windrush scandal in the UK, which concerns people who arrived from Caribbean countries before 1973 and were wrongly detained, denied legal rights or threatened with deportation by the UK Home Office, investigative journalism does seem to be doing the job of holding power accountable. In seeking conflicts and being fundamentally sceptical toward politicians, mainstream newspapers such as the New York Times and The Guardian seem to fit the profile of what Schudson calls ‘the unlovable press’ (Schudson 2013) that is deemed crucial to democracy.

Nonetheless, Entman (2012) argues that as non-strategic actors seeking prestige and profit only, media institutions themselves are not able to sustain major political scandals, which more often than not would involve the strategic act of party operatives, activists, politicians and interest groups in either stoking or derailing the scandal. He attributes the ‘the unfortunate excess of media scandals’ to the interaction between external strategic actors and ‘the typically non-strategic news organizations and citizenry’ (p. 7). One of the most recognized examples of such interaction is the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal that nearly resulted in the US President being removed from office. Thompson (2000) points out that although the scandal dominated the US news for more than a year, in the eyes of ordinary Americans, ‘the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal was an event that had been blown out of proportion by a combination of partisan interests and media hype’ (p. 157). Public opinion research also seems to confirm that the sustained support of Clinton can be explained by the common perception that conservative elites were using the Lewinsky affair as political ammunition (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan 2002).

The network logic of mediatization

In addition to the commercial logic and the professional logic, a third aspect of mediatization closely related to the construction and dissemination of scandals is the logic of digital networks. In the aftermath of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal, political communication scholars in the USA reflected on the inadequacy of the social responsibility model in making sense of journalism in a networked digital environment (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000, 2004). The accelerated news cycle requires that journalists across all kinds of platforms continuously report while gathering information, which leads to more mistakes and leaves little time for correction, let alone reflection. Further, on the Internet, ‘with its multiple points of access and more continuous news cycle has increased the opportunities for less mainstream individuals and groups to influence public discourse’ (Williams & Delli Carpini 2000, 79). The emergence of multiple axes of power in the new media environment means the conventional role of mainstream journalism in gatekeeping and agenda setting has collapsed.

The sombre tone lamenting the decline of the public sphere in Western liberal democracies often changes into a celebratory one when it comes to assessing the implications of network logic in non-Western contexts. For example in the early 2000s, there was widespread expectation that the Internet would help democratize authoritarian countries like China (see Meng 2010 for more discussion). Only empirically grounded works that carefully unpack ‘the multiple axes of power’ on digital networks would be able to add nuance to debate. Unlike the common belief among some scholars, the outbreak of scandal is not restricted to liberal democracies (Markovits & Silverstein 1988). Chadha (2012) traces the important role of
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Twitter in the so-called Radiagate scandal in India. In November 2010, an English language news weekly *Open* published transcripts of, as well as audio links to, conversations between a leading Indian lobbyist, Niira Radia, and leading Indian journalists. In the conversations, some of India’s best known journalists can be heard offering the lobbyists’ clients scripted interviews and favourable columns, as well as advice on how to place stories in media outlets (p. 171). The week after the tape came to light, there was practically no coverage in Indian mainstream media about it, while there was immediate and strong reaction on Twitter. After trending on Twitter India for six days as the most popular topic, Indian mainstream media finally picked up the story. But Chadha notes the episodic rather than thematic coverage of the scandal in mainstream media that failed to address the deeper structural problem with Indian journalism. She argues that the potentially disruptive digital technologies cannot alter the deep-seated social practice, which remains contingent on the complex interplay of varied ‘structural’ factors and influences (p. 176).

Similarly, Toepfl (2011) addresses how ‘Internet scandals’ impact on politics in the semi-authoritarian Russia by comparing two cases of police corruption scandals that erupted in the social media sphere in 2009/2010. He argues that with the help of powerful state-controlled television, Russia’s ruling elites are capable of managing outbursts of public outrage through redirecting the anger towards lower-level officials and foreign, supposedly hostile, powers. In China as well, the unfolding of one of the highest profile political scandals in recent history involved intensive interactions between mainstream and social media (Meng 2016). After the initial announcement made by the state news agency Xinhua on the dismissal of Bo Xilai from the post of Chongqing Party Secretary, major news outlets were largely silent during the 18 months leading up to Bo’s trial. It was social media, especially Weibo, that acted not only as the main source of information for citizens, but more importantly as the discursive battleground of ideological conflicts (Meng 2016).

In the age of social media and data-driven political marketing though, the network logic of mediatization goes even beyond enabling the production and circulation of scandals. In March 2018, following the whistle-blowing of a former Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie, several major news outlets, including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, reported that the British political consulting firm had acquired a large quantity of Facebook users’ data and used it for designing political marketing campaigns. The revelation that the firm had worked both for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign and for the Leave.EU campaign for the UK’s referendum on EU membership caused serious concerns across the Atlantic. The Federal Trade Commission in the USA and the UK’s data watchdog immediately launched investigations (Greenfield 2018). Lawmakers in both countries also summoned Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg for questioning. Around ten days after the initial exposé, Zuckerberg took out full-page advertisements in a number of British and American newspapers to apologize for a ‘breach of trust’.

Contrary to the earlier expectations that the Internet would bring about a ‘global village’, the Cambridge Analytica scandal reveals the dangers of data-driven political marketing breaking up society. Christopher Wylie offered strikingly candid criticism of the business practices of his former employer during his interview with *The Guardian*. He commented that after harvesting a huge quantity of Facebook data to figure out the user profile of different demographic groups, Cambridge Analytica was essentially ‘building the cultural weapon to win a psychological warfare’. The company would tailor the political messages and deliver them to the most susceptible groups. Therefore instead of building a shared experience by simultaneously addressing members of the public, data analytics allow firms to ‘whisper down everyone’s ear with different messages’ (Greenfield 2018). If scandal can be defined as ‘a socially constructed event that takes place when...
a public figure’s actions are widely interpreted as contravening established moral, political or procedural norms’ (Nyhan, quoted in Entman 2012, 6), a shared understanding of the ‘norms’ and what counts as transgression establishes the baseline of public deliberation. Cambridge Analytica is only one of the most high profile cases so far that represents the ascending trend of targeted political communication based on data analytics. If hyper-customized advertising messages lead to social discrimination and the disempowerment of consumers (Turow 2012), hyper-customized political messages are even more dangerous in breaking up the shared understanding that is crucial to the functioning of democracy. Already we are witnessing Donald Trump’s improbable ability to shake off the burden of numerous accusations and wrongdoings. From various allegations of sexual harassment during the presidential campaign to his steady stream of irresponsible Twitter messages, all of which are transgressions that would cause major trouble for politicians at a time of shared norms, yet none of which seem to bear any political consequence on his presidency. When a society becomes sufficiently polarized, there could be diametrically opposing views of what counts as a scandal.

The political logic of mediatization

While specifying the institutional and the technological logic of mediatized scandals provides a good analytical starting point, it does not quite capture the issues at stake in the often-intense struggles over symbolic resources. For the latter we need more of what Blumer calls a ‘sensitizing’ approach that on the one hand highlights the role of media, but on the other hand firmly embeds media in specific political and social contexts. In his effort to advance the ‘social theory of scandal’, Thompson (2000) considers scandal to be ‘struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake’ (p. 262). Here the focus on reputation and trust is premised upon the assumption that class-based ‘ideological politics’ has gradually given way to a ‘politics of trust’ based on specific policy packages offered by political parties. It is in this context that the individual character of political leaders, rather than their class affiliation, becomes susceptible to disclosure by the media of transgression and wrongdoing. Like many other analytical frameworks that are derived from and used to explain media phenomena in a highly stable society, what Thompson failed to acknowledge, based on his study of media scandal in the UK and the USA, is that scandals in some societies could involve intense ideological struggles and that media organizations can become deeply implicated in these struggles.

A case in point is the aforementioned Bo Xilai scandal in China that started in March 2012, when Bo was removed from the position of Chongqing Party Secretary, and ended in August 2013, when Bo was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to life imprisonment. This is arguably the most significant political scandal in China. As the son of a prominent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader, Bo Yibo, Bo Xilai was in the inner circle of China’s top political elite. Prior to his assignment to Chongqing, Bo had been the Mayor of Dalian, Provincial Governor of Liaoning and Minister of Commerce, with a successful political record. There was wide speculation before his dismissal in March 2012 that he would become a member of the Politburo Standing Committee following the 18th Party Congress, which was scheduled to take place later that year. Some have even compared the magnitude of this ‘political earthquake’ with the downfall of Mao’s designated heir Lin Biao in 1971 or the crackdown on the 1989 student movement (Zhao 2012). Elsewhere I have developed a comprehensive analysis of the scandal (Meng 2016). Leading left-wing scholars both inside and outside China have also offered insightful critiques of the case (Lin 2012; Wang 2012; Zhao 2012). There is no space in this chapter to contextualize adequately the Bo Xilai scandal in relation to China’s socialist history as well as contemporary politics. I can only briefly explain
why his political agenda and his leadership style not only brought to the fore the intense ideological struggle between Party factions but also polarized public opinion, with mediatised manifestations of both these phenomena.

With regard to the political infighting at the highest level of CCP elites, Bo’s rhetoric and his policy ignited contestation over class politics and China’s revolutionary past. Bo’s social policies emphasized distributive justice (minsheng, which literally translates as ‘livelihood’), which included low-income housing projects, a reformed hukou registration system that eased the migration of rural residents into the cities, and a land exchange mechanism to maximize the usage of farmland (Cui 2012). Not only did Bo emphasize social equality and wealth redistribution, he also tried to revitalize ‘red culture’ by promoting socialist cultural symbols and public service media. Strangely enough, for the first time since the CCP embarked on its course of ‘socialist marketization’, which has been criticized by many on the Left as having a strong neoliberal component (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006; Wang 2009), it was the Chongqing Party Secretary rather than the central government who articulated a more coherent political agenda in which policy and rhetoric were better aligned under socialist rubrics. Needless to say, this posed a severe threat to the central leadership, which had been trying very hard to maintain the monopoly over the appropriation and reinterpretation of revolutionary history in the post-Mao era. Bo Xilai trespassed on a second forbidden zone, which is the Party’s ongoing effort to push aside socialist discourse with non-ideological promises of things like a ‘harmonious society’ and a ‘Chinese dream’ as a strategy to circumvent the contradictions between the Party’s socialist promise and many current capitalist policies.

Secondly, media outlets, both domestic and international, which played an important role in framing and narrating the Bo Xilai saga, were far from taking a neutral stand during the whole event. The media coverage of the case was by no means a concerted effort derived from some kind of consensus indicating a sharing of common goals. Before the official announcement of Bo’s expulsion in March 2012, it was the mainstream domestic media that did most reporting on him and his policies in Chongqing. Between early 2012 and his trial in the summer of 2013, the international news media and the Internet played a more prominent role, as domestic news outlets had little choice but to toe the official line after the case became a major political scandal. In August 2013, the unprecedented ‘live webcast’ of Bo’s trial once again turned the Internet into the centre of attention and communication. Despite the ostensible differences in reporting style and details, there were surprisingly consistent threads running across different platforms and these warrant further probing.

To a large extent, the different accounts of what Bo Xilai’s Chongqing Model was and the varied assessments of its success (or failure) are themselves closely linked to commentators’ ideological viewpoints. Leftist intellectuals discussed whether the economic and social policies being carried out in Chongqing were attempts to revitalize socialism in China, while mainstream news media predominately paid attention to the crackdown on organized crime, commonly dubbed ‘striking down black’ (dahui), and the ‘singing red’ (changhong) campaign, which promoted revolutionary and nationalist culture. These colourful catchphrases were utilized frequently by both the party organs and the commercial media to characterize the political agenda in Chongqing. By always singling out the ‘singing red’ initiative from other policy initiatives in Chongqing, the mainstream media hollowed out its political significance. Further, when the media coverage did make political references, these were not to the development model that Chongqing had been experimenting with, but to the Cultural Revolution. Rather than linking the ‘singing red’ campaign with the current agenda of reclaiming the revolutionary legacy through prioritizing livelihood (minsheng) and common prosperity (gongfu), headline photos of big groups waving red flags depicted an image of ‘red terror’. The international media were eager for a scoop on the
political drama. For one thing, nuanced discussion of the historical context of Chinese politics does not make good headlines and could very well confuse non-Chinese readers. Scandalous details of corruption, betrayal, murder and spying sell much better and are easily digestible. More importantly, given the Western liberal media’s entrenched attitude toward Chinese socialism, the egalitarian policies and socialist discourse that Bo had been promoting in Chongqing were not something they shared an ideological affinity with.

In this chapter, I have tried to explicate how mediatization as both a concept and an analytical perspective could shed light on some of the key political and social dynamics of media scandals. I started with a definitive approach that specified the commercial and the professional logic of mediatization. I looked at both the positive and the negative implications of such logics on the production and dissemination of scandals. Things became less ‘definitive’ though as I moved from the institutional to the network dimension of mediatization, as the power relationships that condition networked digital communication are very much in flux. I used the recent Cambridge Analytica/Facebook scandal to illustrate the political danger of networked-based, data-driven, political marketing. I further interrogated the limits of mediatization, which is a concept derived from studying political communication in stable Western liberal democracies, in making sense of political scandals that epitomize intense ideological conflicts, using an example from China. I argue that a sensitizing approach to mediatization that avoids a media-centric view and which is attentive to the specific socio-political context is a more productive way forward.

References


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