

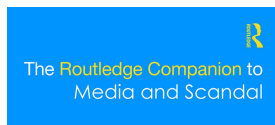
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3

MEDIA COVERAGE OF POLITICAL SCANDALS

Effects of personalization and potential for democratic reforms

Marion R. Just and Ann N. Crigler

While journalists view the chief goal of their profession as informing the audience, they labor under the necessity of attracting their attention. As Walter Lippmann remarked, journalists face “the economic necessity of interesting the reader quickly, and the economic risk involved in not interesting him at all” (Lippmann 1965 [1922], 217). Attention-grabbing news helps to maximize audience size and hence the revenues of media outlets in the highly competitive marketplace (McManus 1994; see also Gans 1979; Just 2007; Thompson 2000, 80–81). Researchers have pointed to various news biases or frames that attract audience attention, particularly soft news topics (Baum 2003), and dramatize the story or focus on persons rather than abstract ideas (Bennett 2012). The prominence of news coverage of political scandals can be explained by their inherent drama, personalization, and likelihood of attracting audience attention. These are criteria that fit well with widely shared news values in market-driven American media.

Defining scandal

For the purposes of this chapter, we conceptualize scandals as a product of the social construction of meaning. Scandals are defined as actions or events that transgress values, norms, or moral expectations, which are often hidden, and when revealed elicit strong negative reactions (such as anger, shock, disgust, outrage) in the public. Political scandals involve individuals in government policies or institutions and usually revolve around the transgression of values and norms regarding sex, money, or power (Thompson 2000). Scandals are dynamic as competing actors attempt to control narratives and seek to hide or reveal the transgressions. In addition, there may be what Thompson calls “second-order” scandals—ones in which an actor attempts to conceal the original transgression through “deception, obstruction, false denials and straightforward lies giving rise to an intensifying cycle of claim and counter-claim that dwarfs the initial offence and fuels a scandal which escalates with every twist” (Thompson 2000, 17).

In liberal democracies, journalists and opposing partisans play a central role in bringing scandals to public attention. Scandals are more likely to come to light in a highly polarized, partisan era when strong opponents seek to tear down one another. News coverage has historically been indexed to elite conflicts which generate attention-grabbing headlines and fit well with the us-them framing that dominates partisan media (Bennett 2016; Iyengar 1991). They are also more

likely to occur when journalists and political officials dislike/disrespect/don't trust each other. In this case, journalists may take a more proactive, investigative journalism tack to reveal the weaknesses of the official. Scandals may also be more likely to surface if there are splits within an administration and if some people want to reveal the transgressions of their opponents to gain power or protect what they see as a threat to democracy (or at least their own view of democratic values).

Not all transgressions rise to the level of scandal. With the widespread use of social media, for example, political actors can bypass the press and reach supporters with their own narratives and facts. In addition, highly partisan media may choose to defend the same party members accused of transgressions or to ignore the stories and focus on other topics. Finally, scandalous incidents may receive less attention in cases where the media or the opposition might be seen as culpable (Entman 2012). For example, if journalists failed to investigate and perform the watchdog functions of the press, transgressions may not be covered or viewed as scandalous. Likewise, scandals may not gain traction when the opposition party is made complicit by going along with the policy, as was the case for invading Iraq.

Scandals fit the demands of journalism's organizational processes, norms, and values (Iyengar and McGrady 2007). News requires novelty—a deviation from what is expected. The definition of scandal is “some deviation from the norm,” so that scandals automatically fit the criterion of surprising news. In addition, scandals are negative stories for the key figures involved, which also fits the journalistic inclination to negative news (Iyengar and McGrady 2007, 61). Finally, blame for scandals is often attributed to an individual or group of individuals rather than institutions (Bennett 2012), which makes the story easy to understand. The presence of heroes or villains makes it easy for the audience to relate to the story. If the scandal involves celebrities or prominent people, the more likely it is that scandal stories will draw the attention of the audience (Gans 1979).

Journalists' standards for news are widely shared and lead to a broad consensus on what topics or aspects of topics should be followed (Gans 1979; Just et al. 1992; Sabato 1991). Political scandals are easily identified as newsworthy and also play into polarized politics by giving partisans a means to attack their opponents. News media with different partisan leanings cover scandals in line with the slant of their editors (Puglisi and Snyder 2011) and readers (Thurman and Schifferes 2012).

While much American research on newsworthiness points to agreement on what is news (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Gans 1979; Sabato 1991), other scholars find differences across media. Recent comparative research finds that the criteria of newsworthiness vary across nations based on differences in national interest, national journalistic culture, and editorial policy (Archetti 2010). Cristina Archetti's analysis of the war in Afghanistan and post-9/11 news coverage in the USA, France, Italy, and Pakistan reveals differences in news content cross-nationally.

In addition to cross-national differences, differences in the newsworthiness of scandals have also been shown in research on partisan media within the USA (Entman 2012, 32–33). Partisan media are motivated to diffuse information that favors their fellow partisans and denigrates opponents. These partisan and/or new investigative journalists contribute to what Lanny Davis has termed the “gotcha politics” of the scandal machine in which media, “sanctimonious values of hyper-ethicists,” and the “intervention of what turned out to be an extra-constitutional monster called the ‘independent counsel’” escalates attention to political scandals (Davis 2006, 84) and diverts it away from more substantive debates. Print and broadcast news may also differ in the visual images, personalization, and sensationalism of their coverage with television news tending to contain more of these than newspapers (Graber 2010; Neuman et al. 1992; Rosenstiel et al. 2007).

Media critics are wary of scandal stories precisely because they are so appealing to the audience. In the market for news, easily accessible stories may crowd out more substantive news (Nyhan 2015; Zaller 1998, 2001). Agner Fog, a cultural selection theorist, maintains that “the unavoidable political consequence is that the democratic process will allocate a more than optimal amount of resources to purposes that range high on the media agenda for reasons of attention catching, and a less than optimal amount of resources to purposes with little media appeal” (2005). Brendan Nyhan, however, observes the reverse, that is “pressure from competing news stories has a substantial negative effect on the likelihood and intensity of scandal coverage” (2). Observers are also concerned that a constant stream of sensational stories makes the audience jaded and uninterested in news altogether (Patterson 2000). Still others worry that a plethora of scandal stories and the ways in which politics are covered make citizens cynical and “weaken public regard” for political institutions (Bowler and Karp 2004, 26; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Sabato 1991; Schudson 2011; Thompson 2000). In light of the impact of muck-raking journalism and historical icons of watchdog reporting, such as Watergate, some scholars see scandal news as an instigator of political reform (Thompson 2000).

The divergence of scholarly views about media coverage of scandals can be partly explained by the types of scandals studied. Monographs about sexual scandal generally deplore the appeal to prurient interests and the race to the bottom of “junkyard” journalism (Sabato 1991). Those who study scandals about the abuse of power tend to see the role of journalists in a positive light. So, for example, books about sexual scandals (see for example, Dagnes 2011; Stanyer 2013) tend to deplore the tabloidization of news, while books and articles about Watergate (Bernstein and Woodward 1974; Hume 1997; Lang and Lang 1980) are inclined to praise enterprising journalists.

Those who worry about the media’s increased focus on sex scandals, however, should perhaps give American voters more credit. Voters tend to judge sex scandals as less important than financial scandals (Doherty et al. 2014). Faced with a barrage of scandal coverage, voters create a scandal hierarchy, wherein the rare scandals which involve multiple parties or politicians have a much larger negative effect than their increasingly pervasive single-party and single-politician counterparts (Kumlin and Esaiasson 2011, 42).

There are many typologies of scandal. However, two of the dominant types, personal and political, have different markets. Personal scandals about sexual misbehavior forge an immediate connection with the audience. Sex scandals are especially appealing to reporters when the miscreants’ behavior flies in the face of their professed values, such as adherence to conservative sexual mores or to homophobia. Political hypocrisy is a perennial target of journalists. In addition, other actors, particularly opposition parties, will seize on personal scandals for political gain from the damage to the reputations of those involved (Thompson 2000). A private moral failing will be framed as a reflection on incompetence, political immorality, untrustworthiness, or “broken promises” (Sabato 2000). The case of the impeachment of Bill Clinton reflects these reframing dimensions, as Republicans likened his sexual dalliances and other transgressions to Nixon and the Watergate affair (Just and Crigler 2000; Marion 2010).

Non-sexual political scandals do not have as much audience appeal as hanky-panky in high places, but they play an important role in democratic systems. Financial malfeasance has a longer life in the public memory and is more widely condemned than sexual failings, since they directly break the public trust. Having the government pay for personal expenditures has brought down many elected public officials (Senator Carol Mosely Brown and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) chief Scott Pruitt). In covering these political scandals, journalists try to attract the audience by *dramatizing* the scandalous events and evoking curiosity. Dramatic narratives often humanize the story by centering on particular individuals (Entman 2012; Thompson 2000).

By attributing blame to one or a few individuals, media coverage of political scandals may divert attention from institutional problems. Iyengar in his path-breaking research on the influences of television news framing on audiences' causal explanations for issues showed that when the news framed stories around individual victims, viewers were less likely to attribute blame to institutional factors, and vice versa (Iyengar 1991).

Framing scandal coverage around the culpability of one or a few people may also trivialize the events. Blaming scandals on "a few bad apples" tends to direct attention away from institutions. Investigations by the Ethics Committee, Department of Justice, or FBI significantly increase the likelihood of scandalous activity receiving coverage, perhaps because such inquiries, and pursuant trials, lend themselves so easily to personalization (Romano 2014). Once guilty parties are revealed and punished, the immediate problem recedes and inevitably loses news value. The larger institutional problems go unresolved. For example, the media's focus on "a few bad apples" likely stopped the Abu Ghraib scandal from gaining steam (Bennett et al. 2007; Entman 2012).

As is the case for personal scandals, other actors may benefit from personalized news framing of political scandals. Opposing parties may use the scandal to run against the party of the blameworthy few, without having to come up with answers for significant institutional problems. Since reform challenges the internal balance of power, institutions involved in political scandals benefit when the scope of conflict or debate is narrowed and blame is placed on a few miscreants rather than on the organization itself (Bennett et al. 2007; Schattschneider 1975; Tait 2012). It is therefore in the interest of institutions to collaborate in generating a personalized news narrative of political scandals.

Case studies of policy scandals

Our own investigation into the media coverage of four contemporaneous scandals demonstrates the factors outlined above: the prevalence of the negative tone of scandal coverage, the extent of personalization, sensationalism, and the discussion of the ramifications of the scandals. The scandals we looked at were: the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib during the Iraq War; the attack on consulate personnel in Benghazi, Tunisia; the leaking of security information by Edward Snowden; and sexual assault in the military.

Data and methods. Each topic was coded from the time news broke about an event or issue through some kind of resolution, or if the scandal is ongoing through the end of April 2014. We purposely chose issue-based political scandals because we expected they would be a hard case for personalization. Table 3.1 shows the specific media sources, dates, number of stories, and inter-coder reliability results for each scandal. The selection of media sources was not uniform across the scandals but reflects a variety of news sources: foreign and domestic; print and broadcast; more or less recognized for partisan leanings. Approximately 40–50 stories per source were coded, although this varied depending on the availability of stories.

The coding was conducted by students at Wellesley College in Massachusetts and the University of Southern California (USC) using a common set of variables and coding instructions. The analyses focused on the: primary accused; tone towards the accused; motivation of the accused; values or norms that were violated; and scope of blame for the scandal (a single individual, two or more individuals, or an organization or institution). In addition, we analyzed each story for: sensationalism of the coverage; Bennett's information biases (Bennett 2012); and possible ramifications of the scandal. (Consult the authors for the complete content codes used in the analysis.) To assure quality control, a final inter-coder reliability test was conducted by one student for all of the scandals. The student recoded five stories for each scandal and then

Table 3.1 Analysis of Four Contemporaneous Political Scandal Cases

Scandal (% agreement)	Media source	Dates	No. of stories
Abu Ghraib (98.0%)	CBS News	9 June 2004 to 8 December 2006	47
	<i>New York Times</i>	3 May 2004 to 9 December 2006	48
	Middle Eastern News Compilation*	13 May 2004 to 17 February 2006	54
Benghazi (92.1%)	Associated Press	12 September 2012 to 13 April 2014	55
	BBC News	12 September 2012 to 15 January 2014	42
	CBS News	12 September 2012 to 27 January 2014	49
	FOX News	12 September 2012 to 23 February 2014	47
NSA/Snowden (93.2%)	BBC News	10 June 2013 to 18 April 14	50
	CNN News	14 June 2013 to 18 April 2014	48
	FOX News	11 June 2013 to 15 April 2014	50
Sexual assault in the military (90.2%)	<i>New York Times</i>	7 March 2003 to 21 March 2014	50
	<i>Washington Post</i>	21 February 2003 to 19 November 2013	40

* Middle Eastern News Compilation consisted of *Jerusalem Post*, *Daily Star* (Beirut), Iran News, UPI Arabic News, and Israel National News.

calculated the percentage agreement among coders for each of the variables on the code sheet. All inter-coder results exceeded 90% agreement.

Negative tone of coverage. All of the sampled news media covered the four scandals negatively. We found a negative tone toward the person or institution primarily accused in news stories about political scandals. This comes as no surprise since the definition of a scandal is the contravention of social norms or values. The percentage of stories judged negative and the mean score of negativity varied, however, across scandals. The proportion of stories that were negative towards the person or institution blamed ranged from 59.8% for Benghazi to virtually all of the stories about sexual assault in the military (96.7%). The mean negative tone for each scandal (on a scale of 1 negative; 2 neutral/balanced; and 3 positive) never exceeded 1.42 in our sample of media stories, with coverage of sexual assault in the military uniformly negative. See Figure 3.1.

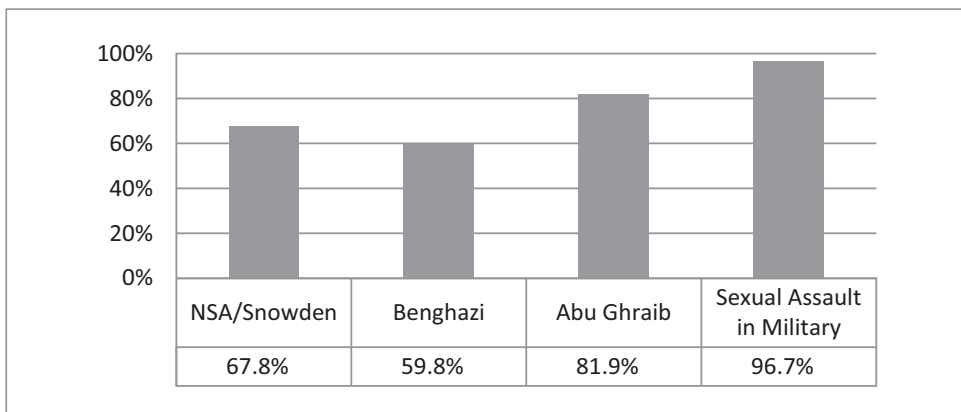


Figure 3.1 Percentage of Stories Negative to Primary Accused, by Scandal

Sensationalism. The media coverage of all the scandals was not only negative, it also tended to be sensational, but not uniformly across scandals. For example, the sensationalism coverage of sexual assault in the military averaged 4.13 on a scale of 5, the highest we recorded in our analyses. Abu Ghraib was somewhat less sensational with a mean of 3.5, and coverage of Benghazi and NSA/Snowden tended to be in the middle of the scale (2.75 and 2.86, respectively). See Figure 3.2.

The correlation between egregiousness of the violation of norms and the sensationalism of coverage is also demonstrated by our results. Abu Ghraib involved Americans torturing Iraqi prisoners, and sexual assault in the military involved incidences of the rape of soldiers serving in the American military, but the two other scandals, Benghazi and NSA/Snowden, scored more in the middle of the 5 point sensationalism scandal. A minority of stories in any of the scandals was covered without any sensationalism.

Personal and institutional coverage. Our content analyses of these purportedly institutional scandals did not bear out attribution of blame to individuals rather than institutions. Unlike sexual scandals or financial scandals where the blame is quite reasonably placed on the individuals involved, in the issue-based political scandals we examined, news coverage tended to put the blame on institutions and to a lesser extent on named individuals. The attribution of blame for the scandal did not differ significantly across media within each scandal. Coverage of the sexual assault in the military scandal was overwhelmingly (94%) attributed to the institution of the military rather than individuals. Fifty-eight percent of Benghazi stories primarily attributed blame to institutions. With Abu Ghraib and NSA/Snowden, media coverage was fairly evenly split between institutions and individuals. In the case of Abu Ghraib, the focus was on specific low level individuals directly involved in the abuse, but the institutional failures were never addressed. In the Benghazi case, Fox News in particular sought to pin the blame on Secretary of State Clinton and not on the institutional failures in communication. See Figure 3.3. Our findings reinforce the news consensus view with a few exceptions.

Violating personal and institutional norms or values. When journalists covered these scandals they tended to describe how both personal and institutional norms were violated rather than viewing a trade-off between the personal and the institutional. For example, all

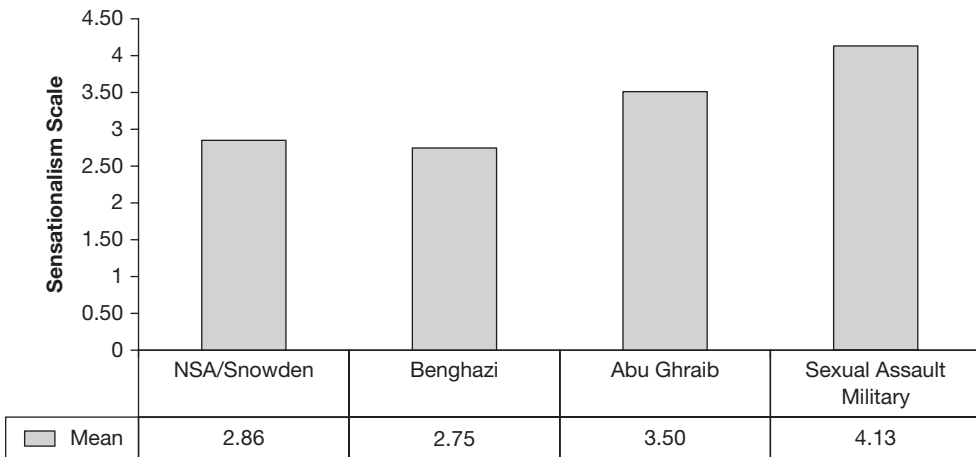


Figure 3.2 Sensationalism Score (1–5), by Scandal

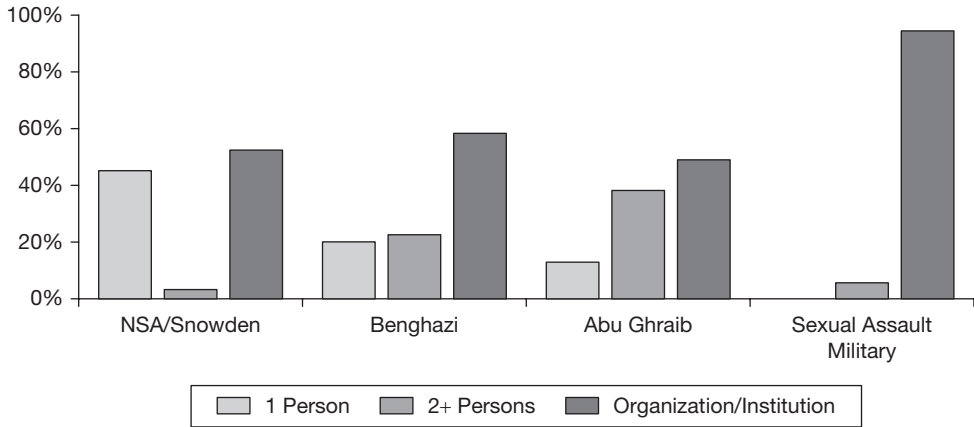


Figure 3.3 Attribution of Blame (Personalization), by Scandal

of the stories on sexual assaults in the military told of how personal and institutional norms were violated. The stories of individual perpetrators and victims were mixed with the larger institutional problems of the military. This same pattern occurred throughout the years that we analyzed. However, over time both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* significantly shifted whom they blamed the most, but in different directions. The *New York Times* coverage increasingly focused on individual members of the military, while the *Washington Post* coverage increasingly treated the institution of the military as the primary accused. The divergence between the *Times* and the *Post* suggests that as researchers we cannot take for granted that news outlets that share platforms and missions will cover stories in exactly the same way. There is always room for editorial judgment.

It is notable that the media included ramifications of institutional scandals, particularly efforts at reform. In the case of sexual assault in the military there was a public outcry to put an end to these abuses, especially in light of the relatively recent integration of women in the U.S. military. Specific calls for reform from legislators, such as Kirsten Gillibrand, heightened attention toward the institutional ramifications of military sexual abuse.

Bennett’s personalization bias. Our findings for Bennett’s personalization bias are consistent with our other measures of personalization and institutionalization (see Table 3.1 and Figure 3.4). Personalization was most typical in the coverage of sexual assault in the military (mean of 1.81 on a scale of 1 to 2 where 81% of the stories exhibited personalization bias) compared to Abu Ghraib (mean of 1.51, 51.4%), NSA/Snowden (1.44, 44%), and Benghazi (1.42, 41.7%). Personalization is definitely present in coverage of political scandals. There were stories detailing accusations against individuals ranging from President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to individual members of the military and Edward Snowden. Even though personalization is used to tell the story of political scandals, however, other evidence suggests that it does not overwhelmingly direct attention away from institutions.

Why and how is the coverage of some scandals limited? Donald Trump inoculated himself from scandal by decrying “fake news” which included any news stories that were critical of him. He used that slogan to undermine the credibility of all media that did not praise or support him. He frequently tells his supporters not to believe the press. For example, on a campaign-like speech in the Midwest in July 2018, he remarked, “Don’t believe

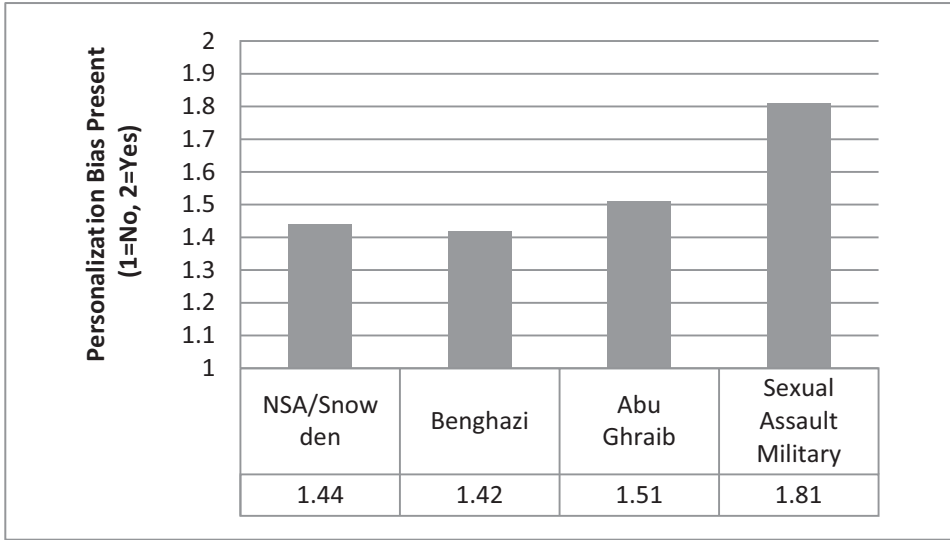


Figure 3.4 Personalization Bias Across Scandals

the crap you see from these people, the fake news,” gesturing at the journalists watching his speech to veterans (*Real Clear Politics*, July 25, 2018). Trump’s rejection of news began as soon as his inauguration, when he argued that his crowd was larger than at any preceding inauguration. Several news outlets showed the differences in aerial pictures, making it clear that Obama’s 2008 inaugural attracted many more people. Despite the evidence, Trump continued to tout his numbers, inviting his supporters to believe his claims and “not their lying eyes.”

Trump has praised conservative media outlets, such as FOX News, that either did not cover his scandals or argued that the allegations were suspect. The existence of a cable news mouthpiece for the president is a relatively new phenomenon in American politics, although not unknown in other democratic or quasi-democratic systems. Partisan cable news outlets provide Trump supporters with an opportunity to “confirm” their opinions; typically they do not attend to any other news outlet (Vinnick 2014).

During the campaign and Trump Administration, whenever the news reflected badly on the president, Fox led with a story about his opponent in the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton. Fox covered Clinton more than any other network in 2017–18 (Chang 2018). The case of Trump demonstrates that highly partisan news outlets not only fail to cover some scandals, but can distract the loyal audience with coverage of another story to shore up their political agenda. This is not the first time that Fox has attempted to distract the audience in this way.

Before the invasion of Iraq by President George W. Bush, Fox touted the likelihood of finding weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), which the Bush Administration claimed were developed by the Iraqi government. Fox covered the issues of WMDs more than any other network. After the invasion, with no weapons found, Fox provided almost no coverage of the topic. One-third of Fox viewers did not know that no WMDs were found in Iraq. In other words, ignoring an ongoing story can seriously mislead the public (Kull et al. 2003).

The Trump campaign in 2016 and the administration that followed provide an example of another scandal phenomenon, that is scandal matching and scandal fatigue. American journalists

who make an effort to be “objective” or neutral often fall into the trap of claiming “both sides” are equally guilty of transgressing norms. During election campaigns, journalists are expected to match accusations against one candidate with accusations against another. At least one journalist has decried false equivalency. Mark Halperin wrote in a memo to his colleagues at ABC: “We have a responsibility to hold both sides accountable to the public interest, but that doesn’t mean we reflexively and artificially hold both sides ‘equally’ accountable when the facts don’t warrant that” (Grann 2004) . For example, lying may be egregious and constant by one candidate, and occasional and less significant by the other candidate. While scandal coverage generally adjusts to the level of egregiousness, during a campaign a major scandal on the one side may be matched with a minor infraction on the other side. Trump made numerous factual errors, faced a scandal of sexual misconduct, and another scandal of Russian interference; yet Clinton’s controversies got more attention than Trump’s (19 % versus 15 %). Trump’s coverage wallowed in a cascade of separate controversies. Clinton-badgering by the press had a laser-like focus on her emails and, as a result, she was alleged to be scandal-prone. Clinton’s controversies received four times the amount of press attention than Trump’s treatment of women; and her controversies got 16 times the amount of news coverage than was given to her most heavily covered policy position (Patterson 2016). The audience may perceive that the scandals have equal weight if and when journalists report them in tandem, implying equivalence, and fail to cover other important topics.

Candidate, and then President, Trump lied on a daily basis. One media outlet (the *Washington Post’s* Fact Checker) kept a running tally of Trump lies and reported an average of more than 4.9 per day in the first quarter of his Administration, which rose to an average of 9.1 in May 2018 (Kessler et al. 2018). That is an incredible number. Some of these “lies” are mistaken historical facts or facts that can easily be disproved; but they are repeated with no apologies. Trump claimed that immigrants engaged in more crime than Americans, even though this is patently untrue. Yet he repeatedly called Mexican immigrants “rapists and murderers.” During the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton claimed she was under fire when she left her plane during the Balkan war. Although hostile fire was possible, it did not occur. During the campaign, the press repeated that single erroneous memory to balance Trump’s daily lies.

If a candidate or president lies constantly or commits scandalous acts, it is difficult for the press to perform its regular signaling function. Journalists are supposed to select the stories with the most impact on a given day, but that process is extremely difficult when numerous scandals are ongoing. During Trump’s first year and a half in office, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt was accused of numerous instances of misuse of government funds. In covering the president, the fact that Trump takes so much time off to play golf at courses that he owns might be a scandal in any other Administration, but the press cannot be bothered with that given the more egregious instances of self-dealing represented by his ownership of a hotel down the street from the White House. His hotels are a magnet for foreign and domestic groups and individuals who want to curry favor with the president by renting rooms or convention space in his hotels. Trump made no attempt to divest himself of his properties or put his interests in a blind trust, with the result of a daily scandal that is rarely mentioned by the press.

Even Trump’s self-dealing may be regarded as less of a scandal than some of his policy actions, that is the pursuit of policies that contravene accepted norms or harm the majority of people. Trump’s staff’s involvement with Russian operatives during the election campaign might be seen as less important than the policy changes that result from his appointment of several cabinet secretaries who have conflicts of interest in the industries they regulate (e.g., oil and gas or drug manufacturing). One could argue that the threats to public health from deregulation of clean air and clean water are themselves a greater immediate and widespread hazard than Russian interference in the election campaign. It is, in fact, difficult to catalog all of the scandals that journalists

could be writing about under the Trump Administration. Where do the rejection of climate change and the refusal of the USA to sign climate accords lie on the scale of egregiousness?

The separation of families at the southern U.S. border (some of whom are applying for asylum) is a clear human rights abuse and was roundly condemned on both sides of the partisan divide as an affront to family values, norms of justice, and rules of amnesty. It received a great deal of attention, but as the story is ongoing, other events crowd it out. Which should be at the center of press coverage? Only the most adept and agile newsrooms can hope to cover the breadth of the scandals of the Trump Administration.

Trump deplores any criticism as “vicious, partisan attacks” coming from unfair, biased media going after him—ignoring his own attacks on others. By crying “fake news,” Trump took on the media framing of stories. His undermining of the press has diminished the American public’s faith not only in the press, but also in other institutions, such as the FBI. To maintain their majorities in Congress, Republican leaders have not stood up to Trump regarding investigations into Russian interference in U.S. elections, the FBI, and the press. The few exceptions among the President’s own party were those marginalized by illness (McCain) or not running for reelection (Jeff Flake and Bob Corker). As long as the news media are employing the personalized, “What bad thing did Trump do today?” framing, they play right into his blame frame.

Democratic governance depends upon the self-correcting mechanisms of open information. Would the Watergate scandal have resulted in Nixon’s resignation if he had had Fox News? Or was the key element in his fall the fact that his party did not control the legislature, making it possible for Congress to go forward with impeachment? Today, with polarized parties and partisan media, and the rise of social media, defining “What’s news?” has different answers, even when the topic is a major political scandal.

The partisan nature of news outlets is contested and in some outlets is constructed by journalists themselves to rouse support from loyal segments of the audience. Attacks of partisan bias have been leveled against the “liberal” media by critics on the right and against conservative media by critics on the left and center. When a partisan outlet, such as Fox, makes statements about who is responsible for political scandal and the rest of the media does not follow its lead, it feels vindicated in its claim that the media have a liberal bias. A partisan press increases the heat on scandal coverage, but may not enlighten the audience, which tends to self-segregate according to their previously held beliefs.

If investigation, discussion of institutional problems, and evaluation of policy reforms were dependent only on journalists, our own study suggests that we might see these efforts succeed. Policies, however, are constructed by many actors: political and business elites, public opinion, and media organizations all play roles in the process under constraints of time, space, and other competing events. The journalists cannot carry the burden of reform by themselves.

Coverage of political scandals (like Watergate or the separation of families at the border) may lead to reforms and new laws and rules that enhance democratic accountability. Likewise, scandals can lead to investigation in Congress and elsewhere. Factors beyond media coverage—especially the polarization and gridlock of the political process—may preclude actual reforms. Even though the media are doing a creditable job covering institutional responsibilities in political scandals, the political process may not produce significant reform.

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