

Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack (Eds.), **Scandalous! The Mediated Construction of Political Scandals in Four Nordic Countries**, Gothenburg, SE: Nordicom, 2012, 211 pp., \$38.00 (paperback).

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Nowadays, mediated scandals seem to be everywhere. Following the headlines of national, as well as international news outlets, one scandal replaces the next. Among them are political and financial scandals, scandals in science and sports, and tax and sex scandals. Even the Vatican has had its share of scandals (*The Economist*, 2013).

In politics, it has been argued that scandals win or lose political elections and may destroy a political actor's reputation. Some scandals become internationally renowned and find their way into history books, like Watergate or the Monica Lewinsky scandal.



So why have mediated scandals become so important? This is one of the questions that **Scandalous! The Mediated Construction of Political Scandals in Four Nordic Countries**, edited by Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack, tries to answer. The collection comprises nine individual contributions—including case studies and more general examinations—by different researchers who focus on political scandals in four Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. An introductory chapter and a conclusion bookend this well-written and insightful book. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors try to shed some light on the relevance and frequency of political scandals, analyzing how journalists and politicians use scandalization as a strategic tool, how male and female politicians are scandalized, and how scandals impact party popularity and individual political actors.

One key characteristic of a political scandal is the transgression of generally accepted social norms and values, and as the authors emphasize in reference to Thompson (2000), mediation is a necessary precondition for a scandal to emerge. The authors thus underline the importance of the mass media in depicting particular scandal cases. As Allern and Pollack point out in Chapter 1, journalists may choose a specific journalistic angle to report about norm violations. They also may select particular items of information while neglecting others, thus specifically framing a scandal case. Journalists, therefore—as formulated in the title of the book—actively “construct political scandals.”

In different chapters of the book, the understanding of scandal as a mediated and dynamic process is highlighted and, as pointed out by Jenssen and Fladmoe, the active role of journalists or other communicators is characterized by the term “scandalization” (p. 53).

Thus, the central theme or thesis of the *Scandalous!* anthology is that the mass media have transformed scandal itself into mediated scandals. In line with the changes between public and private life described by Richard Sennett (1977), mediated scandals render politicians highly visible to the public. Their political achievements, private lives, and personal qualities—for example, their trustworthiness as persons in general—become highly visible to the public. Thompson (2000) describes this development as a twofold process. On the one hand, the mediatization and personalization of politics provides politicians with the opportunity to disclose personal qualities, thus positively influencing their public image. However, this self-disclosure and the presentation as ordinary citizens with high moral standards, values and beliefs also increases the risk of being scandalized when a factual or presumed discrepancy between perceived professional and personal qualities and professional and private actions is detected.

Scandals may serve vital and important functions in modern democratic societies by making wrongdoing of any kind transparent to the public; however, “democratic values are not necessarily enhanced when elected leaders, after a few weeks of media criticism, are pressed to resign before those who have elected them have a say in the matter or a chance to influence the outcome” (p. 10).

In Chapter 1, Allern and Pollack give a short introduction to the book’s key themes and concepts, and they discuss some theoretical implications, thus setting the scene for the collection. Furthermore, they formulate seven hypotheses that are to be tested by the contributions of the anthology’s different authors. Chapter 2 focuses on interesting and relevant questions: Have the number of scandals increased over the last three decades? If so, what transgressions of norm have politicians been scandalized for, and have scandalizations become more personalized? The findings are new and intriguing in what turns out to be one of the strongest contributions of the book. Allern and others analyzed 154 scandalized politicians in the four Nordic countries mentioned over the period between 1980 and 2009, demonstrating that scandals have become a more regular feature in media coverage in the first two decades of the investigation period. What makes their findings so interesting is the drastic increase in scandals that they detect for the period between 2000 and 2009 when the number of scandals, compared to those occurring in the first two decades, nearly triples. Furthermore, they show that news coverage was heavily personalized and that politicians were systematically more often scandalized for transgressions of norms connected with their personal and private lives while collective responsibility and structural aspects remained mostly unconsidered. “It may somewhat seem paradoxical that while Nordic societies have become more tolerant and liberal on many issues, political leaders have been targeted with stricter moral requirements” (p. 41f).

In Chapter 3, Jenssen and Fladmoe portray the process of a prototypically mediated scandalization, discussing the different factors involved and analyzing how individuals (e.g., political actors) may strategically make use of both the media and scandalizations as strategic weapons “to remove the opponent” (p. 67).

In another strong contribution to the book, Anu Kantola shows how younger journalists used a scandal (election campaign financing) in Finland to differentiate themselves from older journalists and to thus enhance their professional self-identity. While senior journalists regarded the scandal to be exaggerated and overblown, younger journalists—as watchdogs and warriors for democracy—attached much more importance to the scandal and kept it “actively” alive.

Chapters 3 and 4 underscore how different parties and actors (politicians, journalists, etc.) may use scandalizations as strategic tools; however, the effects of scandalizations may be numerous on different levels as Mitbo (Chapter 9) and Bierke (Chapter 10) emphasize. Mitbo analyzes the impact of six different scandals on voters in Norway by comparing party popularity before and after each of the scandals. The findings indicate that there are no significant changes in party popularity after the scandals. The discussion that follows the well-conducted analysis offers different explanations for the nonsignificant results. However, one important aspect may be missing: Party popularity may not be affected, because—as repeatedly pointed out in the anthology—scandals are heavily personalized and may thus result in an individual being scandalized rather than the respective party. All scandals analyzed in this chapter were based on individuals' norm transgressions. Therefore, voters may have perceived the individual to be responsible for the scandal on display and not have assigned blame to the respective party. This would be in line with the argument brought up by Paul Bjierke, who shows how personalized media scandalizations may victimize the depicted actors, causing severe psychological damage, and may even—in the worst case—result in the suicide of the scandalized individual (e.g., the former Norwegian politician Tore Tonne).

In the final chapter of the book, the research hypotheses are tested, and the authors discuss the idea of journalism as a fourth branch of government. They conclude that media scandals serve important functions in free and democratic societies (there are usually no mediated scandals in dictatorships). However, "big scandals about small conflicts or offences may conceal greater political issues, including the kind of disclosure that now and then grows into a true political scandal" (p. 189). One may add that these types of scandals may harm an individual's reputation and well-being in significant ways.

*Scandalous!* is a well-written book and may be regarded as recommended reading for anyone concerned with political scandals, the role of the media, and its effects on modern democratic societies. While the anthology does not offer a specific theory of political scandal, it does raise important questions and provides interesting empirical data on an increasingly important topic—the scandalization of politics and individual political actors.

### References

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