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The Rituals of Popular Media: Gossip and Scandal

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1. The popularity of colourful and exciting pieces of writing published in tabloids are generally attributed to the fact that they utilise the unscrupulous business calculations made by publishers based on the smallest common cultural denominator coupled with satisfying the consumers' psychological need to escape from life's tensions. Countering such explanations, Carey noted that "social life is more than power and trade (and it is more than therapy as well). As Williams has argued, it also includes the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments, and intellectual notions - a ritual order" (Carey 1989:34). Stevens came to a similar conclusion during his research on the scandalous media news in the 1920s: "Probably the oldest and most frequent criticism of newspapers has been that they play up sensational news, particularly of murder and sex, in order to sell more copies. Regardless of publisher motives, the public's consideration of these accounts widens the circle of the community participating, at least vicariously, in the redefinition of their own values." (Stevens 1985:53) Hence, both authors emphasise that tabloids cannot be understood solely based on economic and political motivation, or their readers' need for entertainment, information or therapeutic help, since the consumption of tabloids also has a thus far generally neglected communal aspect, which provides a far more complex and convincing explanation for the success of this media genre. To quote Stevens, 'In this view the mass media perform a valuable function in publicizing the moral dilemmas, and wide attention by the public can be interpreted as a sign of healthy public involvement' (Stevens 1985:54). Nothing could better demonstrate how much this role contributes to the essence of tabloids than the fact that ever since the 16th century press reports have contained sensational stories based on the classical triad of crime, sex and money, which are actually moral tales. Therefore, in my view, the goal of neo-Durkheimian cultural sociology is not to unveil the economic and political interest that undeniably underpins tabloids and scandals but to provide answers to how moral tales sell so well, or in other words, why people take such an interest in these stories and not in others.

Spoken Gossip and Media Tabloids

2. As far as I know it was a folklorist, Donald Bird, who first proposed the thesis that the media performs the same social role in modern times that folklore did in the traditional era: by way of spreading rumour, hearsay and gossip it informs, entertains and regulates the public, or simply put, it mediates a value system, while building and maintaining a community. "The folklorist must grapple with whether in the hot line and lovelorn columns the media have assimilated certain functions and rhetorical structures folklore once enjoyed. He must consider the media for folklorist functions of entertainment, integration, transmission of heritage,

maintenance of status quo, and social control." (Bird 1976:299). This genealogical clarification is all the more noteworthy since in the past the media and folklore were presented as opposites: while folklore and folk culture were associated with purity and authenticity, the media and popular culture were seen as murky and tainting the 'pure spring' of folklore. (This opposition was expressed with the following play of words: fakelore-folklore.) However, Bird proposed the following: "An interesting project could be designed to determine the tabloid's role in generating rumour. Previous content analyses show that such genres have the romance, scandal magazine, as well as comic strips, uphold traditional roles, values, and customs - a finding worthy of investigation by the scholar of tradition." (Bird 1976:304).

3. One of the most interesting developments of the past decade was that not only were tabloids made the subject of the cultural study but this new line of interest virtually grew into an area in its own right (Bird 1992; 1997; Martin-Barbero 1993; Glynn 1990; Langer 1992; 1998). Re-evaluating the connection between folklore and the media was especially important because it drew attention to the fact that the stories in the media – just like earlier forms of communication – cannot be accurately interpreted in isolation but rather when based on their role in a broader socio-cultural context. In other words, tabloids cannot be understood without studying their predecessor, i.e. spoken gossip, while media scandals cannot be fully understood without rumours spread about scandals. As Elizabeth Bird wrote, 'I have argued elsewhere (Bird 1992) that media and oral storytelling are comparable, though not identical, communication process, during which narratives are constructed from familiar themes that repeat themselves over time.' Then he went on to state that "In certain media genres, the kinship with folk traditions is absolutely clear. The most sensational of the supermarket tabloids, for example, draw deliberately on folklore, and the beliefs are concerns they know their readers already have. According to a tabloid reporter, » When looking for ideas for stories, it's good to look at fears, and it's good to look at real desires. That's why a lot of people win lotteries in the stories, and why people get buried alive all the time.«" (Bird 1997:104–105)

4. Fine regarded it as important to establish the connection between the media and folklore because in his view clarifying this focuses attention on a thus far neglected segment of knowledge, namely on popular culture mediated by the media. (Fine 1995) As he writes, a third kind of knowledge exists besides the formal knowledge mediated by schools and the tacit social knowledge learnt by the members of society through direct interaction: popular culture. According to this, tabloids pass down to their audiences the knowledge represented by this everyday, popular culture – modern, everyday beliefs and a profane mythology that generalises them – through the gossip, rumours and scandals spread by the media. Tabloids often address seemingly insignificant issues but it is more typical that they break news to their readers and listeners about hearsay that is important and appeals to their target audiences for some reason. That is why Fine states that tabloids and the gossip spread by the media can be regarded as ethno-concepts, i.e. concepts and problems that a given community fabricates about itself and for itself. The question is: why?

5. According to the well-known explanation by Gluckman based on Radcliff-Brown and functionalist anthropology, the most important role of gossip and scandals is

control, or creating cohesion within the given community (Gluckman 1963). Using the tools of stigmatisation and exclusion, the rumours create fear of and respect for rules and thus build a strong group identity. This is why Gluckman says that the most important thing for a person who wants to belong to a community is knowing the gossip and scandals of the given group, which socially distinguish it from other groups while faithfully reflecting the structure within the group. He maintains that an important role of gossip is that it allows the members of the group to not express their hostile feelings and thoughts openly, face to face, but indirectly, through gossip, behind the other person's back; open confrontation and animosity would lead to the disintegration of the group. In this context, as Gluckman humorously notes, it must be remembered that according to Aristotle, anthropologists – literally: 'those speaking of man' – are mongers of scandals and this is neither intentional nor wilful. What he means by this is that anthropologists themselves tell stories to people about themselves and others to facilitate a better understanding and cohesion within a community, i.e. in their own way and using their own tools, they do exactly what gossips do.

6. Gluckman asks: how do gossips regulate by the help of "culturally controlled games with important social functions"? (Gluckman 1963: 312). He states that scandals – acts of violating norms - help those engaged in gossip to continuously maintain their need for norms and repeatedly reformulate the ideals advocated by the group they are part of. At the same time, some of these ideals are practically impossible to live up to, so if anyone wanted to live up to them, they could only do so by violating the everyday rules of their group, which is tantamount to any other form of sanctioned violation of norms. The group, therefore, relativises the conditions and circumstances linked to norms in order to exercise permanent and direct control over what it regards as a legitimate way of violating rules in particular cases and by particular members. The group members must acquire a certain 'resourcefulness', i.e. although they are bound to violate some rules of smaller or bigger magnitude while achieving their goals, they have to do this with a naturalness and even confidence that is generally expected of them in life. Moreover, they must do so despite the fact that their actions will inevitably make them vulnerable to gossip. (It is easy to see that Gluckman's description strikingly resembles the kind of advice typically given by PR experts to those in the public eye and thus exposed to all forms of gossip. They are advised to show their weaknesses confidently and naturally.)

7. We can read in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary that the word gossip derives from the Old English 'God Sibb', which means godparent. It denotes the person with whom a child has a spiritual relationship, and who acts as the child's representative and supporter. This original, religious meaning was lost over time, the dictionary says, and it increasingly referred to the closeness and kinship between those sharing in gossip as well as to the confidentiality of the information concerned (Mish 1990; Thompson 1997). Indeed, Merry emphasised the aspect of gossip whereby it implicitly keeps away those who are not members of a given community and openly includes those who are, describing gossip as private information that symbolises closeness, intimacy and identity with others within a group. According to this, gossip is a peculiar form of acceptance since the gossiping person is socially as close – or closer – to the person gossiped to than to the one gossiped about. The stronger the moral judgement conveyed by the gossip, the greater the role assigned to trust and intimacy is, i. e. it presupposes greater

closeness. 'Gossip thus becomes a useful idiom for demonstrating relative intimacy and distance and can become a device for manipulating relationships, for forging new intimate ones and discarding old, less attractive ones' (Merry 1984:277). Hence, Merry can clearly see the similarity between the gossip in organic societies and the stories mediated by the media in modern societies, as well as the modus operandi of gossip in complex societies. As she writes, "the recent popularity of mass media gossip columns is an attempt to build on this social idiom of intimacy by implying that the general public is sufficiently close to the media personnel and public figures to be privy to information about the private lives of national leaders" (Merry 1984:277). Listeners and readers believe they have an extremely intimate relationship not only with political leaders and celebrities but also with other actors of the media, allowing them to feel they are part of the lives of people they have no relationship with in real, day-to-day life but with whom they develop a kind of familiarity through the media. A peculiar relationship forms in this way, which Thompson calls "non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance" (Thompson 2000:26). This peculiar relationship is interestingly exemplified by an old anecdotal story that draws attention to the special intimacy-creating power of the media. In 1942, in the golden age of the radio, the last wish of an American woman on death row was to find out what would happen to the characters of her favourite soap opera in the next season. In the same way that convicts want to say farewell to their family members and know what will happen to them after they are no longer around to find peace, this woman on death row wanted to find out about the future of the soap opera characters that had become her family in the loneliness of her prison cell (Rosen 1986). It is noteworthy that both the management of the prison and the radio company found the convict's request natural and satisfied her request.

8.

In regard to their forms, fictitious soap-operas cannot be defined as being the same as the media gossip in tabloids, which have a semblance of truth at their core. However, their social function and use by individuals show surprising similarities. The above example confirms that soap operas, tabloids and other programmes in the various media genres fulfil the same kind of ritual-based communal role – providing information, inclusion and entertainment – as gossip in oral culture. Moreover, as could be seen from the afore-mentioned story, the media functioned as a virtual community for its audience – the woman on death row – despite her being excluded both physically and socially from all real communities. Viewed in this context, the aesthetic criticism expressed about popular culture – be it tabloids or soap operas – i.e. that it uses stereotypes can be interpreted in a new light. One instinctively asks the question if it was not more appropriate to evaluate formula stories not according to the critique of tastes based on elite culture but rather interpret them in a sociological context. In this case, the formal characteristics of tabloids should be seen as features akin to those of rituals in the service of stylising community-building and intimacy-creating processes (Cawelti 1976).

9.

Based on the above, one might be tempted to think that gossip carries a positive meaning and people greatly appreciate the role this kind of strange hearsay plays in the lives of communities. On the contrary, we know that this is not the case since gossip is clearly condemned by public opinion and nobody likes to be associated with all sorts of – often untrue – hearsay behind their backs. This contradiction calls for an explanation. How is it possible that people actively take part in

gossiping, even profiting from it, while they publicly condemn the same? One possible explanation is that gossip is seen as regulated by oversimplification and excessive pretentiousness, which – contrasted with institutionalised law or morality – are based on customs of questionable criteria. In other words, the main criticism of gossip is that it passes overall judgement without the possibility for individual differences. Gluckman precisely observed this when writing that participation in gossiping and knowing what gossip was going round were mandatory for all the members of a given community to some extent since those who are not in the loop not only suggest that they do not take a real interest in the affairs of the community but also that they might not regard the community's rules as being applicable to them. At the same time, he also observed that excessive gossiping and the excessive communal control it entails – i.e. judging someone exclusively based on the opinion of others and not based on someone's personal experience of that person – is rejected both by modern public opinion and traditional communities. Society's ambivalent response to gossip suggests that the weakness of normative regulation through gossip is not only its use of excessively abstract criteria but also its arbitrary use of the same. To rephrase, although gossip is an important but not exclusive and unarguably legitimate form of society's judgement of people.

10. Despite its originality, the problem of Gluckman's theory on gossip is the same as it is with structuralist social theories in general: they regard a society's system of norms as permanent and homogenous, when in reality norms in modern societies are not permanently determined by tradition but rather shaped over and over again during direct everyday communication and indirect communication mediated by the media. Furthermore, more than one form of such systems are used simultaneously; some are central and dominant, while others are peripheral and culturally inferior. This is the only way to understand why so many people see gossip as problematic based on the extreme subjectivity of the information it conveys and the often unfounded desires and fears they monopolise. One of the gravest criticisms about the tabloids – in connection with their roots being traced back to gossip – is that they do not report objective facts but are popular interpretations in which desires and fears play a more important role than the authentic and unbiased account of the actual subject. It is well known that desires and fantasies not only complement real events but often completely substitute them, thus replacing actual events with fictitious stories. Hence, there is an obvious contradiction between the objectivity expected by the public, and especially by the professional ethics of the media, and the imaginatively enriched tabloid stories. This, however, speaks volumes not only about tabloids but also about the media. In order to understand how such an ambiguity can exist within the media, we will shift to a new perspective in the next section and focus not on the links tabloids have with oral tradition and gossip but instead analyse their unique role within modern media.

Tabloid and Quality Press

11. In the past one or two decades, a great many publications have voiced their criticism of the so-called professional objectivity of the press and the media in general, interpreting it as an ideology and a social product (Gans 1979; Schudson 1978; Tuchman 1978). They claim that the objectivity of the media, i.e. giving preference to information rather than to entertainment can be seen as a professional ideal of journalism instead of its practical reality. In their criticism they state that

emphasising the opposition between information and entertainment only casts a shadow on that information and does not mean another, higher class or level of processing facts but rather refers to a narrative protocol of varying social importance, which has its own formal and symbolic script just like entertainment. "The term *information* carries social weight. It does not merely denote a set of indisputable facts, but argues that some science like styles of imagination , such as news, be privileged in public discourse. Yet dozens of newsroom studies continue to affirm that news is the product of specific social and organizational practices, ranging from bureaucratic procedures for gathering news, to economic decisions about deploying resources, to reporters' habit of writing for one another." (Pauly 1988:253) The author of the quoted study ironically notes that although the editors of respectable quality papers appreciate daring and outspoken editorials openly avowing to influence public opinion, in reality only a few people read these articles and their impact is only moderate. The majority of readers are happy to just go to the sports pages, the gossip column and the radio and TV guide, and they do not even mind that they have to prod through advertisements in the process. "The daily newspaper, – concludes Pauly – flourishes precisely because it allows producers and consumers alike to carve out their own symbolic social spaces in a way that does not undermine the merchandising principles that make such newspapers profitable" (Pauly 1988:255).

12. Schudson compared the populist tabloids of New York in the late 19th century with the 'respectable', quality papers that were launched at the time. He described the differences he identified as the opposition between popular culture and middle class culture. According to this, the differences in style and tone between two types of journalism expressed the dissimilarities between the life situation and experience of the wealthy middle-class and the poorer lower classes. "The *Times* wrote for the rational person or the person whose life was orderly. It presented articles as useful knowledge, not as revelation. The *World* had a different feel to it; in tone and display it created the sense that everything was new, unusual, and unpredictable. There is every reason to believe that this accurately reflected the life experience of many people in the cities" (Schudson 1978:119).

13. Hence, the difference was not primarily textual since both types of journalism were moralising in nature, both conducted a public discourse on 'Good' and 'Evil', and both exploited the rhetorical tools of irony, innocence and guilty conscience to manipulate their readers emotionally and morally. The more noticeable difference concerned the content of the news as members of the middle class and those of the lower strata of society were shocked and outraged by different things and regarded different subjects as objectionable and ridiculous (Ehrlich 1996). The difference was not merely between two competing worldviews but also between two kinds of aesthetics, which had reflected the difference between two types of cultures since the Middle Ages. Official, rule-following and monolithic liturgical rites can be cited as the precedent of serious, 'elitist' journalism, while the origins of popular journalism can be traced back to the spontaneous, rollicking folk carnivals of the past that gaudily celebrated the prevailing views being turned upside down and a temporary freedom from established order. Based on this, following in the footsteps of Fiske, Glynn (1990) talks about the aesthetic difference between "bourgeois" and "transgressive" aesthetics.

14. Comparing these two types of journalism, the following opposites can be established:

quality journalism	tabloids
fact-finding	tabloids
national culture	popular culture
middle-class	lower strata of society
professionalism	popularity objectivity sensation
distance	identification
argumentation	shocking
information	entertainment
bourgeois aesthetics	transgressive aesthetics
tasteful	vulgar
conviction	laughter

15. While there is no doubt the above opposites exist, in recent times the emphasis was shifted from the existing differences between the two types of journalism to the relative nature of these differences, which extends to the professional aspects of media production and the social level of media consumption. For example, the journalist Ehrlich, who transferred from a prestigious news editorial board to a tabloid column claimed, this his entire life he did exactly the *same* work. Only the *genres* has changed. (Ehrlic 1966) Schudson's conclusion, namely that *The Times* and *The World* seen as mutually exclusive at the turn of the century was not as clear cut as one might think based on their differences still has relevance today: "More educated and more wealthy people read not only the *Times* but the 'story' newspapers and magazines, though they do so with a feeling of shame. Today, studies of television viewing indicate that highly educated people do not watch significantly less television, or even 'better' television, than the less educated - they simply *feel* differently about it (...) Pulitzer, in 1984, mocked Matthew Arnold's criticism of sensational papers, noting »Like everybody else, Matthew buys and reads the newspapers that are racy«" (Schudson 1978:116–117). By using the name of Matthew Arnold, a conservative elitist cultural critic, Pulitzer, himself a populist, wanted to point out that it was very often only the tabloids that published gossip that everybody already knew about but the 'respectable' press deemed it unworthy for publication. Examples could go on and on. It is enough to remember, for example, that Clinton's sex scandals were first published in tabloids, while the leading papers covered them reluctantly and with significant delay, at the point when their content could no longer be denied.

16. The negative professional reputation of tabloids regarding it as agents of media gossip should be understood as rituals that reflect the idealised notions about journalism and not its real situation. It is more accurate to see the public condemnation of tabloids – which, as could previously be seen, is often coupled with individual curiosity and acceptance on a private level – as a way of redeeming the representatives of so-called serious journalism of their guilty conscience felt for violating the professional taboos of the genre (Pauly 1988). Thus, sociologically speaking, when the two types of journalism are opposed to each other and

tabloids are morally condemned, it is far more important to emphasise the community-building and intimacy-seeking role that tabloids play in society.

Media Scandals

17. Is there a point in distinguishing between gossip and scandals mediated by the media? What is the difference between these two kinds of tabloid phenomena? When and under what circumstances does gossip turn into scandal? In order to answer these questions, we need to thoroughly study the characteristics that connect gossip and scandals and those separating them. Let's begin with the similarities. Both media phenomena carry a fundamental moral dualism, i.e. they question the prevailing customs, while at the same time they confirm the same through the condemnation of the events they cover. As Lull pointed out, "the scandal functions simultaneously as a moral anchor in a sea of conventionality, and as a vigorous challenge to mainstream social values conditioned by the substantial forces of ideological and cultural hegemony" (Lull-Hinemann 1997:2). Another common feature between gossip and scandals is that they provide a symbolic domain well known and used by the audiences, in which issues pertaining to values are debated directly through emotionally-driven content, which is of especial importance because the moral systems of modern societies are never ultimately fixed.

18. Going on to the differences, it transpires that gossip – in contrast to scandals – are typically affairs of less gravity, based on curiosity and can relate to any aspect of people's lives, i.e. not only moral ones (Thompson 2000). Gossip – unlike scandals – can end in a tone of acceptance, not only one of condemnation. Most importantly, scandals leave the realm of private life and enter the public domain, while that is never the case with gossip. "A media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change" (Lull-Hinerman 1997:3). Hence, scandals do not have the impersonality and uncertainty that are linked to the sources of gossip; neither do they begin with the 'it is said that' opening line so common in the case of gossip. In other words, scandals are not underpinned by the intimacy associated with gossip but rather by personal condemnation using facts, and the targeted person not only knows about it but is called to provide an explanation to the public. Tabloids containing gossip focus on the personal relationship that exists between the storyteller and the listener, with the role of the teller being dominant and that of the listener passive, whereas if the violation of a rule is divulged to the public sphere and is inflated into a tabloid scandal, the impersonality of the source becomes the key element. When it comes to scandals, the teller's superiority resulting from his or her knowledge of the gossip ceases to exist, and instead of the news itself, its interpretation will be at the focus of interest; i.e. the limelight will be stolen from the source of the information and shifted to the media and the audience. This forms the basis of Thompson's observation, when he writes the following: "Experiencing mediated events is never just a matter of passively receiving the messages that are presented to us: as recipients, we are always actively involved in making sense of these messages, reflecting on them and discussing them with friends and others with whom we interact in the course of our daily lives" (Thompson 2000:87). The above similarities and

differences briefly discussed in relation to gossip and scandals provide valuable insight into the two types of tabloids but are insufficient if we want to fully understand the modus operandi of scandals.

19. In order to obtain a more comprehensive and theoretically grounded picture of scandals, a 'genre' long neglected and held in contempt by social scientists, I will now present a critical examination of John B. Thompson's book titled *Political Scandals*, in which scandals were referred to as an important social phenomenon worth studying (Thompson 2000). Thompson broke with the convention of regarding scandals as superficial events that conceal 'real' social problems, such as unemployment and healthcare. He rejected the moralising approach, according to which the proliferation of scandals indicate some kind of moral deterioration of public life, and instead of this he undertook the in-depth analysis of the social and cultural tissue of scandals. His themes, perspective and – as later can be seen – his theoretical conclusions differ from those proposed by the neo-Durkheimian approach to media scandals, which I ascribe to and will discuss in detail at the end of this study. Thompson's fascinating book is a seminal source for those wanting to know more about the theoretical issues and social patterns linked to media scandals, thus serving as an ideal starting point for exploring this complex subject.

20. Researching the etymological history of the word, Thompson discovered that similarly to other words with its meaning relating to value judgement, the meaning of the word 'scandal' has a religious origin. The word *skandalon* first appeared in the Greek version of the Old Testament and meant trap or obstacle (Thompson 1997). The original meaning of the word was linked to the following: people following the path pleasing to God were constantly tested; they secretly had the opportunity to violate the moral codes and their judgement depended to a great extent on how they responded to these spiritual tests or moral traps. Thompson writes that from the 16th century onwards, this religious aspect of moral testing was increasingly pushed to the background and replaced by worldly, sensuous temptations. Hence, from that time scandals mainly referred to the violation of moral, social and legal, rather than religious rules.

21. According to the definition in Thompson's book, "»scandal« refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response" (Thompson 2000:13). The author maintains that an event has to have a variety of characteristics to become a scandal. There is no scandal if no value, norm or moral code is violated, and it is also crucial what kind of value is in question. If an affair is too banal, it is unlikely to grow into a scandal as it is not important enough, while if the event is the violation of a norm of grave importance, it will not become a scandal either as it is qualified as a crime and is a matter for the courts. Hence, scandals fall within the range of medium-level violations of norms (King 1986; Tomlinson 1997). We cannot speak of a scandal if acts committed in secret are not exposed, or exposed with such a delay that by then they have lost their relevance in the public eye. Finally, we cannot call something a scandal if the given act was not committed in secret but openly since in that case there is nothing that can be exposed. The disapproval of public opinion is another vital requirement for an act to be called a scandal: if people are ambivalent about or uninterested in it, the act is just seen as a violation but not a scandal. It is crucial for the 'despicable act' to be condemned by the public loudly and clearly. Lastly, a violation of a rule cannot be regarded a scandal

unless its exposure damages its perpetrator's reputation and social recognition. Scandals can be exacerbated by so-called secondary violations, which are not really linked to the primary violation but rather to its perpetrator trying to hide it. Examples of this are hypocrisy demonstrated in a debated issue, keeping a conflict of interest a secret or denial of the act. In many cases the secondary violation is elevated and becomes a more serious accusation than the original act that triggered the scandal. Examining the possible behaviours, Thompson proposes that someone accused of violation has three alternatives. They can refuse to accept the charge if they think there is no solid basis or proof for it, they can admit to their grievous 'crime' and express repentance, or the 'protagonist of the scandal' can quote a unique circumstance or 'higher principle' using these to neither refuse, nor demonstrate repentance for his or her action.

22. Publicity plays an invaluable role in scandals, while the meaning of what is constituted by 'publicity' has undergone significant change. The 'local scandals' linked to traditional publicity, based on actual presence, spread slowly and reached fewer people, whereas today's 'media scandals' become common knowledge to the whole world virtually in the same moment. (Thompson 2000) Although scandals are as old as human history, the growing influence of the media has resulted in an extreme jump in their numbers in recent decades. As Lull writes, "Following the church and the state, the media have become the third major player in the history of modern social influence, including the construction of moral discourses resulting from intentional production of scandals" (Lull-Hinerman 1997:8). To conclude, it can be stated that an event by itself is not a scandal, unless it is made into one. In other words, the media and scandals are not only indivisible from each other but there is no scandal without the active and planned participation of the media in this process. The media not only have the capacity to erupt and sustain scandals but also to relativise, minimise or omit them.

23. Thompson sees it as his primary goal to establish why scandals are more frequent nowadays and what part the change in social structure plays in this trend. In order to avoid the trap of overgeneralisation, he narrowed his scope to one type of scandal, i.e. political scandals, and within that he primarily examined how the interests of those in power operated rather than analysing the aspects of value in these cases. Besides its indisputable advantages, his limited approach was predetermined to come up against all the difficulties that eventually prevented him from providing an in-depth picture of scandals in their complexity. This problem will be addressed later.

24. Applying the well-known formula of sex, power and money, Thompson defined three ideal types of political scandals and discussed them in his book with utmost thoroughness. In his classification sex scandals are about the private love affairs of politicians, corruption scandals are about the misuse of funds, and power scandals are about the violent abuse of political authority. These scandals, seemingly remote from each other, are linked by the fact that in each case the violation took place in an area associated with politics and, thus, regardless of their original nature, they were automatically labelled as political.

25. In his view the chief reason for the greater number of scandals was the increase in the publicity of political leaders and famous personages in previous decades, allowing greater insight into their private lives and activities, both of which had

been closed to the public before. The concept of 'visibility' was explained by Erving Goffman through the use of the categories of "front stage" and "back stage". According to Goffman's well-known definition, the "front stage" is the picture people present about themselves to the outside world and the "back stage" is what they keep hidden from people. As Thompson argued, the media ended this duality since it lent visibility and publicity to those areas that had previously been unknown to outsiders. Nowadays public figures have no or limited control over what becomes public and hidden because of the omnipresence of the media. This has significantly increased the vulnerability of politicians and celebrities and the increased number of scandals is simply a reflection of this vulnerability having assumed a universal scale (Thompson 1995; 1997). Furthermore, the incitement of modern scandals would be inconceivable without the media while technological progress has transformed our experiences of scandals. We gain an insight into details – either directly described or visually or electronically recorded – that not only put whoever breached the norms into an indefensible position but even prompts the public to jump to conclusions about them. For example, Nixon would not have had to resign from office had it not been for the Nixon White House tapes, on which were his conversations about the cover-up of the Watergate scandal. The Rodney King scandal would have never happened either if a driver who happened to be passing by had not recorded with his camcorder how policemen were kicking the black man lying on the ground. Thompson points out, however, that technological progress alone would not have been enough: the change in journalism was a crucial factor. From the 1960s, the increasing distrust in those in power led to changes in journalism all over the world, which greatly contributed to the increase in the number of revealing reports and, thus, scandals. In his explanation of scandals, Thompson assigned great importance to the changes in political institutions and culture. In recent decades the legalisation of competences had become standard in the formal regulation of democratic political institutions. This means that in cases where people had previously been able to make decisions based on their personal decisions or consideration of a smaller organisation, legal regulation had become increasingly dominant, thus, the definition of the violation of rules was simpler and easier to apply. Equally important is the fact that in post-industrial societies there was a shift away from the earlier class-based party politics or 'ideological politics', which targeted traditional voters. The decrease in the solid voting base of the political parties, winning over uncertain voters came to the fore. These people could be reached not with political slogans but rather with the 'politics of trust'. What Thompson meant by this is that modern publicity is less and less ruled by clashes between ideological convictions and more and more by appealing to the public, focusing on the trustworthiness, personality and character of politicians. Hence, scandals can be regarded as the routine testing of trustworthiness in modern societies, applied regularly by political adversaries and the press to test people in public roles. Needless to say, this has led to a considerable expansion in the 'targeted' events since practically any event can become a scandal, which explains to a great degree why the number of scandals grew so astoundingly.

26. Thompson maintains that there are three widespread explanations of scandals in social sciences: he calls them trivialising, subversive and functionalist theories. In trivialisation, which he linked with Habermas, personal affairs by far outweigh important social issues, which resulted in the end of rational and critical publicity. He writes: "Habermas did not explicitly address the theme of scandal, but it would

not be difficult to develop an argument about the rise of mediated scandals and their impact on the basis of his account. The rise of mediated scandals testifies, one could argue, to the decline of the public sphere; it represents the colonization of public space by personal and private issues, and the triumph of entertainment values over the concern with reasoned argument and debate" (Thompson 2000:239). According to Thompson, there is truth in that the media played a part in the reduction of critical publicity, but its role is misrepresented in several important questions. Firstly, in the trivialising theory the past is idealised and it is presupposed that once there was an ideal publicity and press, but this is not substantiated by historical data. Also, the criticism of the media for trivialisation is at best applicable to one type of political scandals, namely sex scandals, while it disregards the great service scandals revealing corruption and the abuse of power had done to make the system of political institutions more democratically transparent. It is also noteworthy that scandals not only enhanced the marketability of press products but also played an instrumental role in the modern discourse on trust, respectability and power. As Tomlinson also expressed in his criticism of Habermas's idea of radical publicity: "Scandals may not pose the most urgent moral-political issues of our time, but they do generate significant amounts of popular moral discourse" (1997:69).

27. The second, "subversive theory" of scandals, as Thompson calls it, claims the exact opposite to Habermas. Adherents to this theory see scandals published in tabloids as liberating manifestations of 'popular resistance' against the prevailing political and cultural elite, i.e. the oppressed laughing at those in power. He associates this approach with John Fiske, a representative of the political sociology of culture and accepts that "the merit of this approach is that it urges us to think about cultural works in a differentiated fashion and to recognize that certain genres of popular culture, including the tabloid press, may operate according to their own distinctive norms, conventions and aesthetic criteria" (Thompson 2000:243). On the other hand, Thompson says that social structure is grossly oversimplified in Fiske's "subversive theory" when it is presented as a dichotomy between "the powerful" and "the people", and he questions whether ridiculing those in power really calls into doubt the validity of any values or norms and whether it really undermines existing power relations. In Thompson's view, the subversive explanation doubly distorts the understanding of scandals when it negatively exaggerates the political complicity of the official press while positively magnifying the power of tabloids to radically upturn existing systems.

28. Finally, according to the third (Durkheimian) theory, the role of scandals is to consolidate a society's value system by way of rituals. "This »functionalist theory of scandal«, as I shall call it, is indebted to Durkheim's account of religion. Just as religious practices serve to reaffirm the collective sentiments and ideas which give unity to social groups, so too scandals serve to reinforce the norms and conventions which were transgressed by the activities in question. In our modern, mediated world, scandal is a secularized form of sin" (Thompson 2000:235). As Thompson sees it, this approach works when applied to the explanation of sex scandals but not in the case of corruption and power scandals. He quotes Jeffrey Alexander's Durkheimian analysis of the Watergate scandal as an example. '»Watergate« was turned into a symbol of pollution which was threatening to contaminate the very centre of American society, thereby eliciting deep fears and anxieties which were addressed by instigating a ritualized process of sacralization and

purification' (Thompson 2000:236). Thomson sees this explanation of political scandals as misleading and in his view the Watergate case was chiefly handled within a legal and legislative framework with the religious metaphor and idiom being manifest only at the level of rhetoric. In my view, however, at this point Thompson's criticism does not hold water. Alexander's studies written on the Watergate scandal as well as the analyses written by several of his students on public scandals – including Ronald Jacobs's pieces on the Rodney King case – suggest something different (Alexander 1989; Alexander-Smith 1993; Jacobs 1996; 2000). The representatives of "new American cultural sociology" – as neo-Durkheimian sociologists refer to themselves – examined political scandals and the conflicts of values in civil society, and *not* sex scandals. Thompson's criticism of the "functionalist" theory of scandals is also problematic because he claims that according to the neo-Durkheimian theory there is a solid order in society which can only be maintained with a constant presence of scandals, which can cyclically consolidate norms. Thompson's view is based on him putting an equation mark between the value systems of traditional and modern societies. However, his argument fails if we do not regard the social order of modern societies as a given but rather as a constructed order which is not simply confirmed by scandals and other sanctions but much rather openly and continually reconstructed and often changed. The same is true about Thompson's statement in which he claims that, unlike Alexander proposed, Nixon's resignation did not result in the renewal of the value system in American society but, on the contrary, in the increase of cynicism about politics, its institutions and the presidency. The question arises: why couldn't cynicism and the desecration of presidential power be the tools of renewing democracy? Especially, since Thompson himself wrote elsewhere that the Watergate scandal engendered an important change in America's social structure, as a result of which the previously marginally important political scandals became important components of public perception and, moreover, nowadays are the most important means of social influencing. Finally, Thompson also criticised Alexander for not devoting attention to the analysis of scandal as a special social phenomenon when discussing the Watergate scandal but only used it as an illustration to support the neo-Durkheimian theses about society. I will return to this criticism and the debate that developed around the neo-Durkheimian theory at the end of my study, after the discussion of Thompson's own "theory of scandals".

29.

After a review and critique of the above three types of possible theoretical interpretations it is time that we recognised the fourth approach, which Thompson tends to regard as the most suitable for providing an explanation for political scandals. Quite deliberately supporting Bourdieu's theory on the political field and symbols of power, Thompson defines moral capital as a kind of capital that is indispensable for the development of political influence and legitimisation. He argues that moral capital is fragile and its accumulation requires a great deal of time since esteem is based on the value judgement of others, and this in itself entails disputability and the possibility of disagreement, which substantially slows down the development of uniform public opinion. In his view, as opposed to economic capital, which, if used, decreases, the characteristic feature of moral capital is that it does not necessarily decrease if used, and indeed can even increase. However, it can run out from one moment to the next, if abused; moreover, in contrast to other kinds of capital, it is difficult, if not impossible, to accumulate again. Among those politicians whose scandals he analysed - Richard Nixon, John Profumo, Gary Hart and Jeremy Thorpe – not one was in fact capable of returning to

political life again after they fell from grace. Thompson claims that these characteristics of esteem and trust help to explain why scandals are so significant in politics: because scandals are the cruellest means in the destruction of moral capital, which is indispensable for politicians. In his view, scandal can be regarded as an attack upon, or at least a test of, the symbolic capital of parties and politicians based on trust and reputations, i.e. the non-political means of a political struggle. He summed us this connection by saying that 'The essence of this approach can be succinctly stated: *scandals are struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake*' (Thompson 2000:245).

30. Throughout *Political Scandal* Thompson speaks of values, norms and their infringement, which enables him to grasp the essence of scandals in their moral characteristics. The development of this recognition makes the book an important and exciting read. At the same time, the narrow focus of his investigation on political scandals prevents Thompson from more thoroughly and consistently discussing the moral characteristics that are at the heart of scandals. Of course, it is true that political scandals are aimed at demolishing moral capital, trust and reputation, and form part of the struggle for symbolic capital. The problem is Thompson's reductionism, i.e. he limits his discussion to showing how the various groups try to destroy one another's moral capital in the ruthless battles waged for positions. The sociological reductionism of his moral interpretation results in his interpreting the struggle for reputations and trust as one that is separated from the economic and political battles but has neither autonomy, nor independent constitutive power; hence, it is merely the barely concealed facade of a struggle for power. It follows from his proposition that morality and emotions are subservient to the calculations of strategy. In a word, in his interpretation the problem of the political integration of the system has taken precedence over the moral integration of society. Thompson's voluntarily imposed conceptual and methodical self-limitation is all the more senseless since his analysis of the moral characteristics of scandals is essentially sacrificed for nothing. His wish to restrict his study exclusively to political scandals in order to make his analysis more homogeneous and accurate is in vain as even at this cost his description of political scandal cannot be complete. He himself is aware of the one-sidedness of his argumentation, referring to this in his notes as 'In characterizing scandals in this way, I do not want to suggest that scandals are only struggles over symbolic power, and that the only things at stake in scandal are reputation and trust' (Thompson 2000:245).Elsewhere he mentions that he is aware that moral issues also play a central role in different kinds of scandals, and not just in political ones. He admits, for example, that the popularity of film stars and pop stars can also be placed in jeopardy by scandals but since he excluded them from his analysis from the outset any analysis of scandals besetting stars was out of the question due to his thematic self-censorship limited to politics.

31. A different kind of typologising of scandals would be tenable: one that would provide a deeper insight into the normative regulation of society. In the following – merely to illustrate my argument – I will briefly present such an alternative typology. Let's take Lull, who differentiates between three types of media scandals: institutional, psychodramatic and star-related (Lull-Hinerman 1997). He regards the first as impersonal and connected to the "scandalous management" of an institution. The second one concerns average people, whose scandals are seen as being of public interest because they pertain to events that could happen to anyone.

Finally, the third kind of scandal is about the skeletons in the closet of 'special people', such as stars and politicians, and the outrage of the public is expressed as 'that even famous people finally must be held responsible to society's moral expectations' (Lull-Hinerman 1997:21).Within the violations of moral boundaries Lull further separated the concepts of "guilt" and "shame". In his distinction guilt refers to an immorally improper act, and shame to the lack of moral integrity. "Guilt is what you have done; shame is who you are. Clearly, shame is far more condemning than guilt" (Lull-Hinerman 1997:26). Public opinion is more scornful of 'shameful' acts than 'guilty ones' because the former not only break the rules but do not accept the validity itself of the rules, i.e. they question the fundamental order of the community. However, Thompson cannot express his views on the internal operation of moral order since his model, which is reduced to political scandals and their aspects pertaining to power, is simply not suitable for independently thematising moral issues.

The Neo-Durkheimian Interpretation of Media Scandals

32.

Besides its deficiencies, Thompson's explanation has contradictions that can be clearly seen during the critical study of the previously discussed theoretical alternatives. In the following section I will discuss only those that have a close connection to the neo-Durkheimian approach, and I will argue that scandals can – and must – be interpreted in such a way that they are not reduced to the realm of political conflicts. I propose that scandals be seen as means of a public debate for defining the principles of constructing moral capital affecting any area of the social domain. Instead of Thompson's political-sociological interpretation of scandals, I give preference to the neo-Durkheimian cultural-sociological approach, which identifies a public debate that develops in scandals when society's value system is violated. This debate is both restrictive and constructive in its nature: while introducing bans, it also allows the construction of new rules. In this approach, the key element is a symbolic struggle between Good and Evil, which determine a society's fundamental values, rather than an individual's reputation or the moral capital of political parties and groups, although the latter ones clearly also play a part. Another difference between this approach and that propagated by Thompson is that the aforementioned struggle serves as a reference point for all, regardless of them being directly involved in the given scandal or not. Those who become part of a political scandal not only violated the rules of politics but also breached fundamental moral norms and through that the general value system of society. Their violation of rules is seen as incongruous with the generally accepted rules that are expected to ensure order and security in the world (Caillois 1959). This is why people who end up in scandals think that the reactions given to their action are exaggerated and extreme and why the political groups concerned believe that what they see as an everyday event has been 'blown out of all proportion' in scandals. Although they do not understand why but they can precisely see that the events caused by the scandal are beyond their control, and their act is perceived as being more than just a local breach of rules (when in fact that is all it is), moreover, as posing a threat to society's values on the whole. Those involved in scandals do not understand that the essence of scandals is that they induce ritually inspired defence mechanisms in society aimed at preventing the chaos and lasting damage that these violations of norms could create in the community's moral order. In other words, the focus is no longer on a specific event: what is at stake is the

protection of a value system. However, in modern societies this does not go hand in hand with automatically restoring the former value system.

33. The emotional and moral shock generated by scandals provides an opportunity to recontextualise the values of society, formerly believed to be unshakable, i.e. to revise and adapt them to the requirements of the modern world. As opposed to the political explanation of scandals, in a cultural sense their publicity does not only function as a huge arena where a struggle goes on for the destruction, appropriation and redistribution of the existing, albeit scarce moral goods. This struggle is also present but the emphasis is on the assumption that publicity is a collective – sacred – resource. Publicity enables the members of society to form a new and creative connection with the moral codes, discourses and narratives made visible by the scandals; this provides the opportunity to collectively renew the beliefs, norms and identities of individuals and groups. It is barely incidental that after 'trying to resist' (as he himself said) the normative interpretation of scandals in his work, on the last pages of his book Thompson was forced to resort to this interpretation – even if only in a sketchy form. He had no option but to draw a conclusion that directly follows from his own concept while also contradicting it in several respects: "Now, by way of a conclusion, I want to address some issues of a more normative kind about how we should assess the contribution that scandals have made, and are likely to make, to the quality of our public life" (Thompson 2000:263). This realisation came too late, however, and remained only a promise. Therefore, the last part of this study will be devoted to the normative aspect, which Thompson recognised but which is nevertheless often ignored when scandals are examined as public moral rituals.

34. Thompson himself noted that the course run by media scandals has several phases: "We can distinguish four main phases of the mediated scandal: first, there is the pre-scandal phase; second, the phase of the scandal proper; third, the culmination; and fourth, the aftermath" (Thompson 2000:73). Although in his book he discussed these phases in detail, he was not really able to analyse them on a conceptual level. Thomson's careful avoidance of using the term ritual is all the more difficult to understand because he refers to the "sequential structure" and "phases" of scandals just like Arnold van Gennep, the father of the theory of transition rituals (van Gennep 1960). Van Gennep argues that the first stage of transition rituals is characterised by separation, the end of continuity and the violation of rules, and that is followed by the second stage, i.e. distancing or liminality, the suspension of rules and, ultimately, chaos. The second stage – the key element of which is the symbolic struggle between Old and New, Good and Evil, and which separates the order that existed prior to the ritual and the one after it – is generally regarded as the most important stage from the perspective of studying social and cultural changes (Turner 1966). The third stage is integration with the aim of restoring continuity, reconciling conflicts and formulating new rules.

35. Thompson could have easily used the concept of rituals in his moral explanation of scandals. The way he presents scandals becoming public knowledge could be the first stage, his presentation of the violation of rules as the gradual unfolding of a moral drama could be the second, while the ritual of atonement and the purification of values harmed by the scandal could be the third. He probably did not choose this path because he studied scandals from the perspective of those directly affected, i.e. the 'participants' and not in the context of social judgement

from outside the affected group; in other words, he based his approach on the intentions of the political players and not on the interpretations, comments and statements expressed through public opinion. This takes us to the problem which, in my view, is the weakest point in Thompson's theory, namely that he disregarded the impact of social reception in the interpretation and process of scandals. In his theory, the scandals are half the responsibility of the media, and half that of the political opponents, while the population – the readers, listeners and viewers – are only passive observers of the political conflicts in question, or as Thompson (giving himself away) refers to the viewers of debates: they are the "non-participants". Regretfully, he disregards how through scandals people get involved in debates focused on the central (sacred) values of society. He also ignores the role the collective participation the public plays in the evaluation and final outcome of scandals. (No matter how much the media and the Republicans wanted to hype up the Monica Lewinsky case, Clinton retained his popularity and the case was taken off the agenda.) In the next section I will discuss the process, missing from Thompson's theory, as a scandal, like a ritual, makes the public participants in the events.

36. Lull claims that scandals satisfy an important collective need: "what audiences want is a moral code they can use to understand and evaluate human conduct. (…) Scandals, thus, are powerful partly because of their situated lack of *moral* ambiguity" (Lull-Hinerman 1997:3–4). Bird also argues that scandals could not exist without people's everyday need for them and that the exaggerated narratives of the popular media indeed satisfy this deeply seated moral need: "The notion of » scandal« is more firmly embedded in the oral, interpersonal dimension of our lives than in the media dimension (although these are closely intertwined). The media play the role of the storyteller or town crier, but the scandals gains its momentum from the audiences" (Bird 1997:105). Bird did not stop at this point as he wanted to identify the forms in which scandals exert their influence, the ways in which they are internalised by the public. He established four stages in the collective appropriation of scandals: 1. speculation, 2. personification and participation, 3. the carefree enjoyment of the exciting story, and 4. the distancing. This division apparently follows and applies to scandals the stages defined by van Gennep and Turner in connection with transition rituals. The first stage, speculation, is not actually part of the scandal but is a preliminary stage when rumours spread about some event but nobody knows what it is. In many respects, this stage should be rather defined as gossip and shows an internal yet loose connection with scandals, discussed in the first part of this study. The second stage is the actual breakout of the scandal, "when everyone knows that everyone knows" (Merry 1984:275). When a violation of a rule becomes certain, it immediately divides the public. The distance between the protagonists of the scandal and the public ceases to exist. Everybody makes a stance, this or that way, either by identifying with the persons who got mixed up in the scandal or by condemning them. For example, some people saw Oliver North, responsible for secret American weapons transactions, as a misunderstood national hero, while others called him a lowly cheater. As Bird writes, it can also happen that somebody does not share the opinion of either of the two main camps of the public but represents a special, individual opinion. The third stage is the culmination of the scandal, when everybody is passionately talking about it but no consensus has been formed in order to conclude the events to everyone's satisfaction. Adopting the pattern developed for transition rituals, this corresponds to the liminal stage, when events are grotesquely turned upside down

and ridiculed. At this point chaos and uncertainty dominate, and everybody is overwhelmed by the thrill known from children's stories: "Who would have thought? What a surprise!" The final stage of scandals - as rituals - is when a consensus is reached about the event and the public begins to distance itself from the story. The readers and listeners conclude the events with a verdict such as this: "The participants in the scandal are flesh and blood people, who had a misfortune, but it is just a story after all, and whatever happened, it's over and life goes on". This brings the moral drama, which was at the centre of the scandal, to an end, it loses its power and can no longer hold sway over everyday discourse. It withdraws into the realm of routine and everyday life is once again ruled by the usual affairs with predictable ends. It is this last stage – already outside the sphere of rituals – that ends the process of approval or rejection of the moral values featured in the scandals.

Closing Thoughts

37.

Carey argues that communication rituals can be distinguished from other communicational forms conveying information in that the former is an expression of a community's value system and identity. If the 'transmissive' forms of communication denote the spatial transportation of information, Carey wrote, then the communication rituals serve the purpose of holding together a community over time through ceremonies (Carey 1989). In other words, the rituals of communication are the symbolic and collective adaptations of social events, i.e. dramas. They help us experience the news of the world as part of a larger yet still human-scale drama, appealing not only to our minds but also influencing our emotions and moral judgement, while making us participants in the given events. In the context of communication rituals can be compared to 'transformers', which convert factual social events into metaphorical, 'parasocial' events. This means that thanks to the ritual we are not only part of a discourse pertaining to some information but we actually take part in a drama addressing the significance, meaning and communal context of this information. To sum up, we need the rituals of media to be able to access values, which are fragmented and hidden in our everyday lives, and be able to thematise them and thus see the world in its integrity again (Császi 2001b).

38.

Initially, the rituals of media only denoted accounts of extraordinary events such as broadcasts on President Kennedy's funeral, the Olympic Games and the televised report on the American moonwalk (Dayan-Katz 1992; Császi 2001b). It was their common characteristic of all ceremonies that they took participants from the mundane to the special, from the profane to the ideal. That is, media rituals helped to consolidate and positively regulate society, acting as a means of communicating with transcendental values. During the discussion of gossip and scandals, I argued for broadening the definition of communication rituals and include the various forms of tabloids in it, namely those that do not address the special events of life but, on the contrary, those that could happen to anyone anywhere: accidents, criminal acts, rumours and scandals (Császi 1999b). In other words, besides accounts of special events, tabloid news should also be counted among media rituals in that they tear us away from everyday routine, although, undoubtedly, tabloids do not take us into a transcendent realm but allure us to join the parody-like carnival of violations of norms, rules and taboos. Their aim is not

transcendence but trespassing, not sublimation but shocking, and not idealisation but ridicule (Császi 1999a).

39. Gossip and scandals are social categories, not constructed by the media but adopted, shaped, used and mediated, in the same way as in the case of festive and ceremonial rituals. According to Bakhtin, before modernity people were dwellers of two realms: the official world and the life-world: they were dwellers of ceremonies and carnivals, dwellers of seriousness and laughter (Bakhtin 1982). We all know that this duality applies to the experience of (post)modern man with the not negligible difference that nowadays we participate in the rituals of both worlds not merely through direct interactions, like people in the traditional eras, but also through the rituals of media.

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