

Mediated Political Scandals in four Nordic Countries

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Once upon a time....

- Scandals were rare events in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden during the first four decades after World War II
- The Nordic region a scandal-free zone! ... compared with other parts of Western Europe and the US
- Today: scandals come and scandals go, they have become a regular feature of mediated political life: The New Normal

The purpose of this book is to spotlight the way in which political scandals in four Nordic countries have been launched, directed, dramatized and interpreted through different genres of journalism – in an interactive tug-of-war between editors and various political actors. News institutions help to build political careers – and to tear them down. A mediated scandalization process can make the path from power to powerlessness, from a top position to exclusion, very short.

A number of questions are discussed: How important are the norm violations that have led to political scandals? Have the types of scandals changed over time? How may rivals and political opponents use mediated scandals? Are character assassination and demonization typical traits of a scandalization process? Are male and female politicians treated differently? *Scandalous!* is based on case studies and content analyses of mediated political scandals in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, including an analysis of the frequencies, types, characteristics and consequences of national political scandals during the period 1980–2010.

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SCANDALOUS! THE MEDIATED CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL SCANDALS IN FOUR NORDIC COUNTRIES

Edited by Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack

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A comparative strategy: cross-national research

- Denmark (Mark Ørsten)
- Finland (Anu Kantola)
- Norway (Sigurd Allern)
- Sweden (Ester Pollack)

Mediated scandals, that is **reported as scandals**, disregarding reality.

To develop into a mediated political scandal....

Mediated visibility

Intense public communication about an affair

Actors who are willing to condemn real or imagined misdeeds

Mediated political scandals

- The affair had to be characterized and mediated as a political scandal by **at least two national media organisations for at least five days**
- It had to involve a national politician (members of government, the party leadership or the parliament)
- A few exceptions: municipal scandals mediated and commented as scandals of national importance

Two different types of political scandals: two register

- 1) *Scandals concerning politics*: refers to scandals that principally belong to the sphere of public politics
- 2) *Scandals concerning politicians*: refers to politician's more personal actions and blunders
- In most countries and in most circumstances, scandals concerning *politicians* will dominate the media picture.

Table 1 Incidence of national political scandals in four Nordic countries 1980-2016.
Yearly average in different periods

Period	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	All countries
1980-1989	0,9	0,6	1,0	0,7	3,2
1990-1999	0,8	0,8	0,7	1,0	3,3
2000-2009	2,0	1,9	1,7	3,4	9,0
2010-2016	3,0	3,1	2,9	5,0	14,0
Total number of scandals	58	55	54	86	253

Some findings

- **Increased incidence:** mediated scandals have become more common. First and foremost after the millennium
- The **same pattern** in all countries, but most scandals in Sweden
- **Individualization:** emphasis on personal transgressions rather than collective responsibility and political acts.

Political consequences for Nordic Politicians Involved in Scandals by country, 2010-16 (%)

Consequence	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	All
Dismissal or resign	33	32	38	31	33
Other reactions sanctions	29	26	10	16	19
Limited to public debate and critique	38	42	48	53	47
Total	100	100	100	100	99
<i>n</i>	21	19	21	32	93

Scandalized politicians and their positions

The Nordic countries are parliamentary democracies with multiparty systems

A high proportion (46%) of the 93 scandalized politicians in 2010-16 had a government position (minister or state secretary)

Politicians in position of power are more exposed to scandal than others.

Type of norm transgressions

Most of them concern offences in
economic affairs

Second largest category is **unacceptable personal behaviour**

The third largest category is **abuse of power**

Talk scandals: a Swedish speciality

Largest amount of unacceptable personal behaviour (half of our cases) in Finland

Sensationalizing the trivial :The “Toblerone scandal” Mona Sahlin

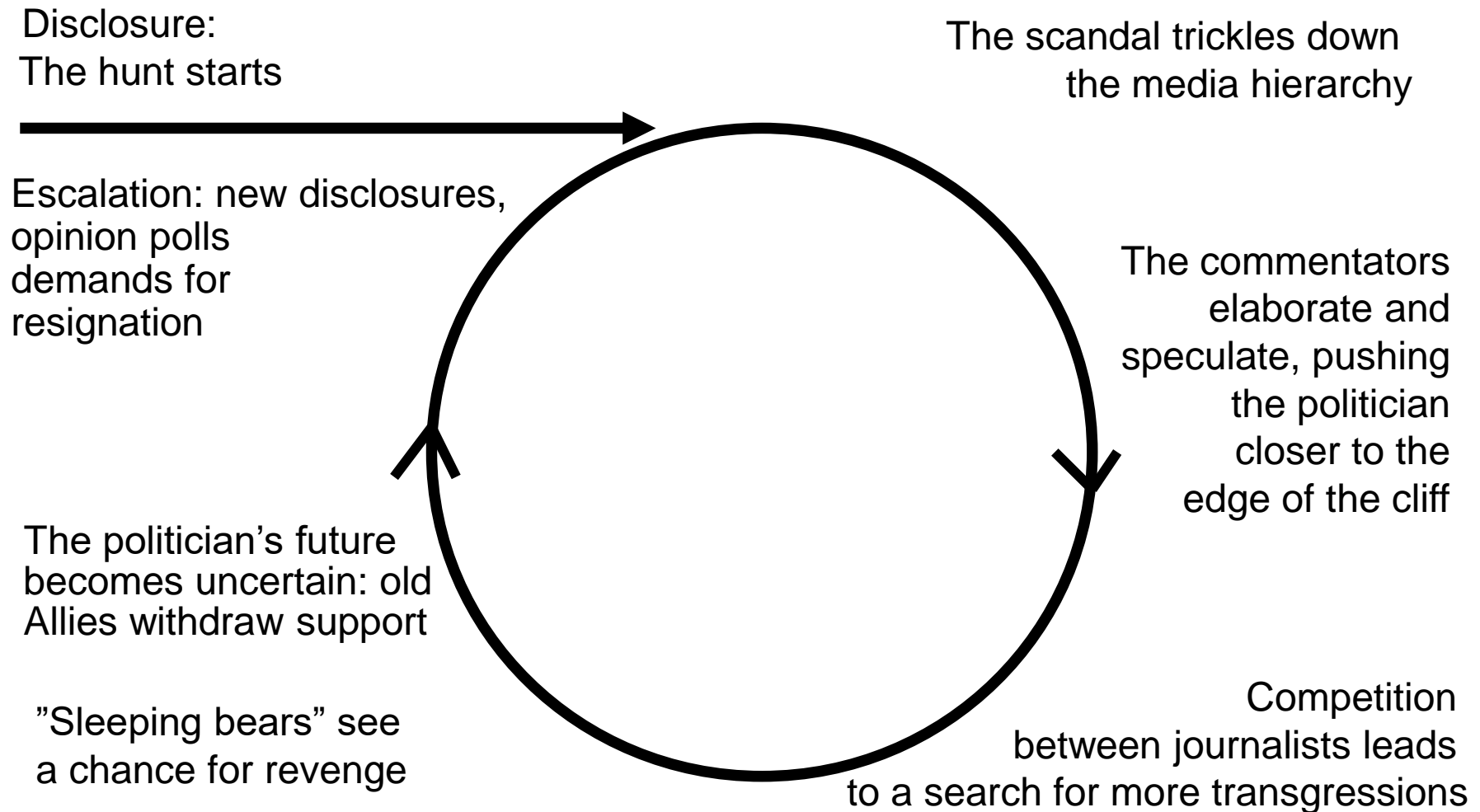


A central concept is *media hunt*, defined as:

- (1) wide-ranging, intense and critical reporting directed against one or more persons, organisations or institutions;
- (2) personal allegations concerning norm violations characterised as scandalous,
- (3) in a situation where many dominant editors and news media participate over a certain period of time,
- (4) adopting the same basic perspective, journalistic angle and dramaturgic concept, and
- (5) where the outcome is uncertain.

Figure 1. The hunt: conspiracy or cumulative effect?

A.T. Jenssen & A. Fladmoe



Scandals and gender 1.

- The number of women in politics has increased in the Nordic countries, and so has the number of scandalized women politicians.
But women politicians are not scandalized to a higher degree than their male colleagues
- Male politicians overrepresented in cases concerning corruption, sexual harassment and sex scandals.

Scandals and gender 2.

- **More resignations/dismissals** among women politicians, especially in government positions
- The Swedish “nanny-gate” and license-fee crisis in 2006: Two male ministers survived, two women in the government had to go.

Swedish members of the government 2006: the women resigned, the men.... Did not.

- Stegö-Ch Borelius Billström



Minister for Finance, too busy at the time....



Visuell Voodoo



Scandals in connection to #Metoo

A worldwide social movement in which women posted their personal stories about sexual harassment

Grew extensively in Sweden and Norway, less broad in Finland.
Limited public debate in Denmark.

Four Swedish cases concerning politicians, three Norwegian, none in Finland and Denmark.

Increased numbers of scandals: factors of importance

- Changes in political culture, mediatization of politics
- Changes in society's norms
- News institution's increased independence in relation to political parties
- News media are more numerous than before, more intermeshed
- Publication takes place on several platforms

Factors of importance 2.

- Commercial competition for the public's interest
- Encouraged use of anonymous sources in political journalism
- More pro-active style of investigative journalism
- Competitive situation favour political news with a potential for personal angles and dramatization
- Commentators as visible and important political actors.

Mediated scandals: a symbolic capital

Scandals also represent *symbolic* capital, boosting news organisations journalistic reputation as guardians of public life, strengthening their democratic legitimacy

Media can link their market orientation with a higher journalistic intent, holding power holders accountable and revealing what some of them would like to keep hidden.

Literature 1

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