SYMPOSIUM

Tuning in to Scandal: Television News Coverage of Congressional Scandals

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It is undisputed by scholars in political communications that in modern, complex societies, the mass media acts as an informant so that the public may have an "ear to the ground" regarding matters of political and social importance. Because of this attention, politicians spend considerable time attempting to cultivate positive perceptions of themselves and their behavior. Public officials generally have no incentive to advertise behaviors that may put them in a negative spotlight, and often can avoid negative attention from the media. The mass media, however, is most vital to the functioning of a representative system when it is not only reporting the successes of public officials, but also reporting their malfeasances and wrong-doings (Puglisi and Snyder 2011). Public officials may bargain with the media to avoid unwanted press attention, and the media act strategically when deciding what information the public receives and how it is framed (Fogarty 2009). Political scandals are especially susceptible to media attention, the common belief being that journalists will jump at the chance to investigate and convey information about the spectacle to the public.

The contemporary fascination by scholars with political scandals has largely been a product of the post-Watergate era and the decrease in public trust in political officials that has occurred as a result (Entman 2012). In the first 15 years after Richard Nixon's resignation, "more than 400 relatively senior officials and candidates for federal office…have been publically accused in the national press of personal wrong doings" (Garment 1992, 3). The rise of reporting on scandals has seen a number of examinations from scholars and journalists interested in the phenomenon, generally relying on cross-sectional analyses of a particular scandal to understand its impact (Bowler and Karp 2004; Dimock and Jacobson 1995; Lawrence and Bennett 2001; Zaller 1998) or several case studies to more broadly examine the politics of scandals and the resulting news coverage (Entman 2012; Ginsberg and Shefter 1990; Sabato 1991; Sabato, Stencel, and Lichter 2000). While certain scandals—such as those involving political leaders like the President or Speaker of the House—garner up-to-the-minute coverage and seemingly endless press attention, many others receive only scattered bursts of illumination from the media. This is especially true of scandals involving members of the US Congress, many of whom are seen as being less than newsworthy (Cook 1989). Fluctuations in the media's attention to scandals involving political actors raise the question: what exactly causes the media to latch on to one event over another?

GATEKEEPING, MEDIA ATTENTION, AND POLITICAL SCANDALS

The decision of what events journalists choose to cover and how much time is allocated to certain events is a result of numerous day-to-day decisions made by those in the news industry, the norms and traditions of news making, and the interactions that occur between agencies. These factors blend together to form the media's agenda. For any potential story to become a news item, it must first move through the developmental process of writing and editing, collectively known as the gatekeeping process of the news media. Gatekeeping is key to the media's political power and allows the news industry to effectively control the perception of the "real world" by manipulating the distribution of information to the public (Soroka 2012). That is, if we assume in a standard day there is a normally distributed level of information that could lead to a potential news story, then the news industry's gatekeeping power skews this distribution so that only a small, more manageable and "newsworthy" fraction of information reaches the populace at any given time.

Newsworthiness, the journalistic test to decide whether a piece of information "passes through the gate," is based on factors related to journalistic norms and industry standards and has also been linked to the tone, either positive or negative, of a piece of information. Negative information is often thought to be newsworthy in the eyes of the media (Altheide 1997; Patterson 1994; Soroka 2006; 2012), and has also been found to keep the attention of the public more readily than positive information (Freedman and Goldstein 1999; McDermott, Fowler, and Smirnov, 2008; Vonk 1996). Because politics is chiefly a mediated experience, proponents have argued that the effects of this sort of news-producing and disseminating process has become more vital and important in terms of its impact on citizens and their perceptions of government (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Franz et al. 2008; Franz and Ridout 2007).

Political scandals, inherently negative events, should therefore be ripe for media attention. However, Entman (2012) notes that there can be considerable silence from the media concerning certain scandals. Scandals oftentimes focus the media's primary attention on either the characters involved in the events in question, or on the role of leadership in allowing the misconduct to occur. For a scandal to gain the attention of the public, a misdeed or malfeasance by a public official must satisfy several conditions emphasizing the severity of the transgression, the social costs endured by the population because of the misconduct, the magnitude of publicity placed on the transgressor, and the political impact of the event (Entman 2012). These conditions are satisfied to some extent with all scandals; however, the level

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of complexity intrinsic in explaining some scandals to the public, and the vulnerability of those involved, also plays a key role in whether news agencies focus an extended amount of time on the matter. Hence, many congressional scandals, such as the House Bank scandal or the Abramoff lobbying scandal, receive only scattered bursts of attention by the media because they often involve several transgressors and can be difficult to fully explain to the public because of the nuances of the accusations.

OVERCOMING SCANDAL SILENCE

The interest here is why certain scandals overcome the media's gatekeeping hurdle. To examine the factors that affect broadcast coverage of congressional scandals, a sample of 28 scandals was used utilizing information from various government sources. Scandals were included in the dataset if (1) the event specifically involved an accusation against a member of Congress during his or her tenure in office and (2) the event led to an investigation from the local authorities, the Department of Justice, FBI, or the chamber's Ethics Committee. Unlike previous studies of congressional scandals (Bowler and Karp 2004; Puglisi and Snyder 2011), scandals involving sexual misconduct were also included because such incidents are believed to be prime targets for media exposure due to the relative simplicity of explanation and because they can readily capture the public's attention.

Scandals were coded from January 1, 2000 until December 31, 2010. Certain investigations were truncated because of the length of the investigations. Overall, nine scandals involve members of the Democratic Party, and 19 scandals involve members of the Republican Party. Seven of the 28 scandals involved sexual misconduct. The frequency of coverage for each scandal was calculated using a keyword search of the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which collects regularly scheduled newscasts from the three major networks and one hour of general interest news reporting from cable networks as well as major news events. The archive also includes "magazine" shows, such as CBS's *60 Minutes* and ABC's *Nightline*, which provide longer, investigative reports on current news items.

when they occurred, a feature that was not regularly mimicked by comparable investigative programs on the other networks. CBS news had the lowest average reporting time, with the standard segment lasting 3:17 minutes in length. Overall, all of the sampled agencies focused more attention, on average, to scandal coverage compared to other news segments. The industry average for news segments, according to the Pew Research Center (2013) last approximately 2:22 minutes. This suggests that scandal coverage does warrant more attention compared to other kinds of potential stories and may be treated differently than standard news items when the media chooses to focus on the story. What is still at question, however, is what factors lead to the decision to focus on scandals more than other types of stories?

NETWORK AND CABLE ATTENTION TO SCANDAL

To examine what factors cause some scandals to pass the gatekeeping barrier, I use a rare events logistic regression that considers the inflation of zeros in the data due to the rarity of scandal coverage (King and Zeng 2001; 2002). The factors believed to be influential to the decision-making process include characteristics of the legislators, such as their party identification, political extremism (measured using the absolute value of the DW-NOMINATE Scores), and what chamber of Congress they serve in, as well as whether their party is in the majority. An interaction term for ideological extremism and being a member of the majority party was included as well to test for any marginal effects. Likewise, characteristics of the scandal are included to test whether certain investigative agencies are more interesting to news makers than other. Specifically, investigations by the FBI, Department of Justice, and the Congressional Ethics Committee are coded to indicate whether an investigation was currently ongoing. Dummy variables were also included to indicate whether the scandal involved sexual misconduct on the part of a legislator, or if the member was involved in the lobbying scandal involving Jack Abramoff. Finally, public opinion of the institution itself is considered utilizing a lagged variable of congressional approval using data from the monthly Gallup polls.

Overall, nine scandals involve members of the Democratic Party, and 19 scandals involve members of the Republican Party. Seven of the 28 scandals involved sexual misconduct.

Figure 1 presents the average length of time (in minutes) spent discussing scandals by the five news networks sampled during January 2000 to December 2010. As figure 1 shows, the cable network CNN spent the most time focusing on scandal coverage, with news segments lasting nearly 15 minutes on average, more than double the amount of time spent by any of the other news agencies. The other sampled cable network, Fox News, spent only 5:50 minutes on average per segment covering a congressional scandal.

With regard to network news agencies, ABC news had the highest average reporting time for covering scandals, with the standard segment lasting 7:17 minutes when reporting on scandals. This amount of coverage may be because ABC's *Nightline* program regularly featured in-depth investigations into scandals

Table 1 presents the analysis of the rare events logistic regression for network and cable news stations. Beginning with representative-specific variables, the analysis shows that contrary to theories that posit scandals providing an outlet for the minority party to seize power from the majority because of negative media attention (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990), the analysis finds that simply being a member of the majority does not increase the likelihood of a scandal being covered by the media. For network newscasts, being a member of the majority decreases the probability of news reports by -19%. Cable news broadcasts also spent less time focusing on scandals involving the majority party, decreasing the probability of news coverage by 34%.

Next, while being a member of the Republican Party does not significantly affect the likelihood the event becoming news,

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being a member of the House of Representatives does have a negative impact on whether or not a scandal makes the news. This result falls in line with previous studies examining the House and the general difficulty that members have in gaining news coverage (Cook 1989; Vinson 2002). For network television broadcasts, a House scandal caused a reduction of the probability of news coverage by -20% compared to the other chamber. Cable news reports were also less interested in House members, with a decrease in the probability of scandal coverage by -23%.

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Also notable to whether a political scandal comes to the attention of the public is the ideological distance of a representative from the median voter in the chamber. Ideological extremism is found to decrease significantly the likelihood of reporting on scandals for both network and cable news channels in the sample. For network broadcasts, a change in the ideological extremity of a member from the minimum value of 0.111 to the maximum value of 0.778, decreases the probability that a member will be the focus of news coverage by -76%. Cable broadcasts had a similar reduction in the probability, decreasing by 78%. A change from the mean ideological distance (0.445) to the maximum likewise decreases the probability of scandal coverage by -53, and cable coverage by -41%. What is interesting, however, is that while ideological extremeness and majority party status decrease the likelihood of scandal news coverage individually, the ideological extremeness of members when they are in the majority party does significantly increase the likelihood of coverage. Increasing the ideological extremity of a member of the majority from the minimum level (0.000) to the maximum (0.778) had the effect of increasing the probability of scandal news coverage on network and cable news stations by 82.39% and 91.12%, respectively. A shift from the mean score (0.284) to the maximum likewise increased the probability of news coverage by 19.11% on networks and 36.45% on cable.

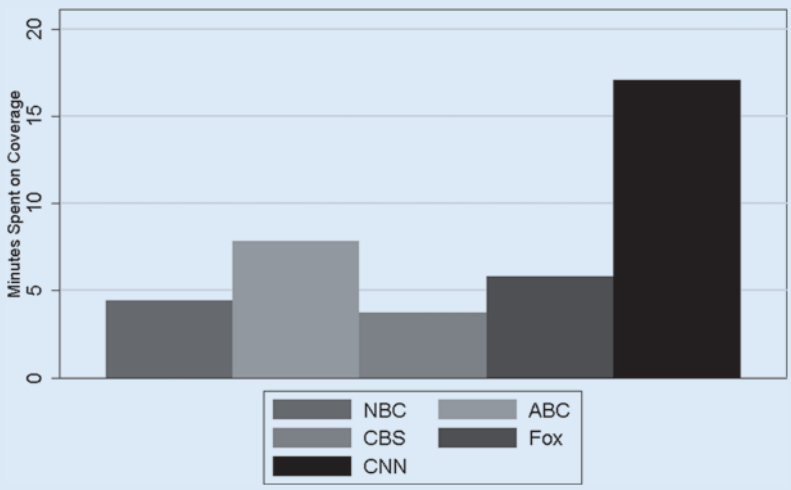
Moving to the impact of the agency involved in investigating a scandal, the results in table 1 show that investigations by the Ethics Committee were most likely to instigate some kind of news report, followed by investigations by the Department of Justice. FBI investigations were found to be significant as well, but only in increasing cable news coverage. Being under investigation by the Ethics Committee increased the probability of a scandal coverage by 74.53% on network television, and increased the probability by 60.41% for cable networks. Investigations by the Department of Justice came in second to Ethics Committee investigations, increasing the probability of news reports by 50.15% on network broadcasts and 36.96% on cable networks. FBI investigations, which are often conducted with greater confidentiality than investigations by the other agencies, still led to reports by cable news agencies, increasing the probability of news coverage by 27.85%; however, the coefficient was nonsignificant for networks.

Looking next at specific characteristics of a scandal, the findings in table 1 show that being embroiled in a scandal involving sexual misconduct does not significantly affect whether a scandal becomes news. It is likely that because many sex scandals involves rank-and-file members of Congress who do not have a following outside of their district or state, national news agencies are less likely to focus on such behavior. Also interesting is that members of Congress who were implicated in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal had a lower probability of being mentioned in network news reports, compared to other scandals in the dataset. Being involved in the Abramoff scandal decreased the probability of being mentioned in a news report by the three major networks by -30%. This finding is likely because news norms tend to focus on a singular figure when reporting on scandals, and while certain members of Congress were focused on more than others, most of the attention focused on Abramoff himself, allowing legislators to create distance between themselves and the corruption investigation.

Finally, the analysis in table 1 shows a significant link exists between public

Figure 1

Average Time Spent on Scandal Coverage by News Network



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opinion and the likelihood of scandal coverage. According to the findings, the higher the public's approval of Congress is from the month before the breaking of a scandal, the lower the likelihood of a scandal becoming news. This serves as a confirmation of previous work done by scholars of mass opinion and news agenda setting, such as Zaller (1998), who note that public opinion does seem to have an impact on elite-level discourse in news programming. Shifting from the minimum approval during the time period (14%) to the maximum (84%) causes a decrease in the probability that a scandal will be reported by network news agencies by -29%, and decreasing the probability of cable coverage by 90%. Moving from the minimum approval rating to the mean approval for the time sampled (36.9%) decreases the likelihood of network and cable coverage by -7%, and 47%, respectively.

While members attempt to downplay and spin issues stemming from their own misconduct or the misconduct of their colleagues, the public is largely dependent on the mass media to decide what scandals garner attention and how long that attention is focused on a particular event before moving on to other matters.

Table 1

Network and Cable News Coverage of Congressional Scandals

	NETWORK COVERAGE	CABLE COVERAGE
House	−1.106**	−1.173**
	(0.33)	(0.41)
Republican	0.204	0.313
	(0.37)	(0.44)
Ideological Extremism	−8.391**	−7.206***
	(2.45)	(1.97)
Majority Party	−3.880***	−4.846***
	(0.86)	(1.04)
Sex Scandal	0.437	0.645
	(0.59)	(0.46)
Justice Dept.	2.431***	1.760**
	(0.56)	(0.57)
FBI	0.749	1.321**
	(0.48)	(0.45)
Ethics	4.432***	3.960***
	(0.38)	(0.46)
Abramoff	−1.542***	−0.415
	(0.44)	(0.50)
Lagged Public Opinion	−0.024*	−0.032+
	(0.01)	(0.02)
*Ideological Extremism * Majority Party*	10.320***	10.302***
	(2.62)	(2.50)
Constant	−0.777	−0.356
	(1.12)	(1.19)
N (All Obs)	2647	2647
AIC	0.279	0.282
Chi^2	455.70***	338.50***

+$p<.10$; *$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$

Coefficients and standard errors are based on a robust-clustering on a unique legislative ID.

CONCLUSIONS

To maintain power and successfully win reelection, members of Congress and other public officials must allocate time and resources toward maintaining a positive opinion of themselves in the electorate. The media is generally seen as a sphere in which politicians may bolster the perception of their actions with the public; however, members of Congress are often suspicious of media interest because this can focus attention to areas that legislators do not want. Focusing on the concept of media gatekeeping, the analysis here shows that while factors such as reports of official investigations by government bodies will bring some media attention on legislators, representatives' characteristics and unique qualities of the scandal may mitigate such coverage. The results here also mirror previous findings in newspaper reporting of scandals done by Puglisi and Snyder (2011), who find that market-driven factors of news production (specifically the demand for information by consumers) are correlated with what gets covered in newspapers overall, irrespective of the newspaper's political affiliation.

One general conclusion that can be made from the analysis echoes conclusions made by Bowler and Karp (2004), who state that the most important lesson from research on political scandals is relatively simplistic: "if politicians really are worried about the public's declining regard for them the easiest part of the problem to tackle is—presumably—their own behavior" (284). While members attempt to downplay and spin issues stemming from their own misconduct or the misconduct of their colleagues, the public is largely dependent on the mass media to decide what scandals garner attention and how long that attention is focused on a particular event before moving on to other matters. ■

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