

## Gossip, rumour, and scandals

In this part of the book, the analysis of the relationship between the interpersonal and the mediated dimension of the public scandal is deepened.<sup>1</sup> The preceding chapter made it clear that these dimensions are more or less interwoven, a circumstance to which media researchers have not paid a great deal of attention because they have, as a rule, chosen to focus on the media themselves, employing a narrow definition of the ‘media’ concept. In order to acquire an idea of the inherent mechanisms of the scandal phenomenon, the focus in this chapter is on how interpersonal communication influences and interacts with mediated communication. The overall question is: How is a media scandal possible? Through which media is it created? The text is divided into two parts: a detailed historical analysis and an analysis of a contemporary case. The point of departure is located in historical material, consisting of secondary sources in the form of literature, together with primary sources in the form of interview material and present-day media sources.

### Mediated orality

The seminal work on the topic of media scandals is British sociologist John B. Thompson’s *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (2008), which was mentioned in both favourable and critical terms in the preceding chapter. It is in many ways an insightful analysis of the history and particular characteristics of mediated scandals, but there are also some things missing. For instance, the author initially devotes some space to establishing the difference between the concepts of gossip, rumour, and scandal, in spite of just having confirmed the kinship among these words

---

1 This chapter is a revision and further development of an article published in the cultural historical periodical *RIG* (Hammarlin 2013a).

(Thompson 2008:25–8).<sup>2</sup> A matrix that is presented early on in the book cannot be misunderstood: Thompson really does mean that a phenomenon that he calls ‘local scandal’ is distinctly different from a mediated scandal (Thompson 2008:61). In the former category, both the revelation and the disapproval are created through oral communication face to face, while in the latter category this happens through mediated communication. To my mind it is doubtful whether distinguishing among closely related words and phenomena in the way Thompson does enriches the analysis. In fact, I believe it becomes limiting. I would venture to claim that it is a mistake to see the processes of media scandals as separate from the everyday talk that is produced in face-to-face meetings, an idea that Lars Nord, a Swedish professor of political communication who has studied Swedish political scandals, seems to take as his point of departure: ‘What differentiates the modern political scandal from the classic one is that the scandal no longer derives its nourishment from discussions and conversations among people, but is mainly conducted in the media’ (Nord 2001:20).

There are several problems with this statement. First of all, it is unclear what Nord means by the ‘classic’ scandal, which he contrasts to the ‘modern’ scandal. The lack of clarifying examples and a historical anchoring leaves his claim unsupported. Secondly, there is an overemphasis here on a kind of distinction between media and people. Everyday talk – or, for that matter, gossip – among people is interwoven with mediated scandals and supplies them with nourishment, not least because people who work with media live and operate within a cultural context, just like everybody else. These people are, in their turn, in constant mediated as well as direct contact with ordinary citizens for tips and ideas about possible follow-ups and further investigation of the scandal. In addition, in everyday life in twenty-first-century Western culture, it has become increasingly difficult to draw clear dividing lines between, for instance, conversations via social media and ‘conversations among people’. The following quotation from anthropologist Elizabeth Bird, who has studied modern mediated scandals, brings out the essence of the problem and forms a suitable point of departure for the continuation of the present discussion:

Indeed, in many ways, the notion of ‘scandal’ is more firmly embedded in the oral, interpersonal dimension of our lives, rather than the

---

2 See the Introduction to this book.

media dimension (although these are closely intertwined). The media play the role of the storyteller or town crier, but the scandal gains its momentum from the audiences. (Bird 2003:31)

Consequently, it is everyday talk among people and its relationship to scandals that I try to foreground here, ‘the chitchat that keeps social life lubricated’, as sociologist Herbert J. Gans calls it. In this continually ongoing small talk, news about scandals may serve as raw material; but gossip and the spreading of rumours can also stimulate professional news distribution, something that Gans would describe as a commonly occurring meeting between everyday news and professional news (Gans 2007:162).<sup>3</sup>

By way of introduction, the word ‘gossip’ is in need of elaboration. Here I support anthropologist Max Gluckman’s interpretation, in which he sees this type of moralising orality as an integral part of culture. He emphasises, among other things, the unifying function of gossip, insofar as people are brought together in discussions raised by the moral issues contained in gossip, even if views on what is right and wrong may differ. ‘Gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life’, he writes (Gluckman 1963:308). The author uses gossip and scandal as a conceptual pair, ‘gossiping and scandalizing’, and continues: ‘their importance is indicated by the fact that every single day, and for a large part of each day, most of us are engaged in gossiping’ (Gluckman 1963:308).

This engrossing activity, which many of us neither acknowledge nor register because of its both embarrassing and everyday character, is a culturally determined process with particular, if unspoken, rules. For instance, it is, at least in Sweden, felt to be normal behaviour to lower one’s voice or close one’s door when discussing something compromising about a person who is not present. Gossiping is occasionally concluded with the exhortation ‘Don’t tell anyone!’ – a kind of adjuration that confirms rather than hinders the ability of the spoken word to travel quickly and freely. An appeal such as ‘Tell only a few people about this!’ would have been more apt. The word *slander* is multifaceted. It is etymologically connected to the word *scandal*, as was mentioned in the introduction to this book,

---

3 The news genre is complex and makes up its own field of research, and I will therefore not delve into this matter in greater detail. It is the scandal (which can indeed be considered a kind of news in itself) as a phenomenon that is at the centre of this book.

and covers expressions such as *bullshit*, *tittle-tattle*, *defamation*, *the spreading of rumours*, *gossip*, and *innocent small talk*. The word *gossip* has existed since the sixteenth century as a word denoting a person, usually a woman, ‘of light and trifling character ... who delights in idle talk, a newsmonger, a tattler’ (*OED Online*, s.n. ‘gossip’). Since the nineteenth century, the word has also come to mean the act of gossiping itself. According to *The Swedish Academy Dictionary (SAOB)*, the Swedish equivalent of the *OED*, the first evidence for the Swedish word *skvaller* (gossip) – which can be said to include both the concepts of *gossip* and *slander* – can be found in a version of the New Testament in Swedish from 1526, *Thet Nyia Testamentit på Swensko* (‘The New Testament in Swedish’), also called ‘the Vasa Bible’. Here *skvaller* seems to mean *fåfängligt tal* (‘vain speech’) (*SAOB*, s.n. *skvaller sbst*<sup>3</sup>). The *SAOB* also points to the mobility of the word; one idiom is *löpa med skvaller* (‘go around gossiping’). This idea can also be found in English, where Washington Irving’s character Ichabod Crane owes his popularity to his being ‘[a] kind of travelling gazette, carrying the whole budget of local gossip from house to house’ (*OED Online*, s.n. ‘gossip’; the quotation is from Irving’s ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’, 1820). Gossip can be about the relationships of other people, and can be irrelevant but also disparaging. It can be equated with prattle and loose talk, but also with rumour and defamation. Gossip can be harmless, but also malicious. The *SAOB*, for instance, describes gossip as something disloyal and unsporting. One does not gossip about one’s friends; that is, gossip would in this sense border on a kind of treason. However, anthropologist Max Gluckman, like many of his anthropologist colleagues, argues that gossip is socially valuable – indeed even necessary, because of the moral questions which it tends to encompass. When he himself gossips about friends and enemies, he is therefore aware of performing a kind of social duty, he writes, ironically continuing: ‘but ... when I hear they gossip viciously about me, I am rightfully filled with righteous indignation’ (Gluckman 1963:315).

The relationship of gossip to truth is complex. We can gossip without telling falsehoods or lying; the talk can just as well be about things of which we are convinced, but it can also, as has previously been pointed out, have to do with half-truths, fabrications, and malicious lies. Perhaps it is precisely this possibility and ambivalence that make people both spread and listen to gossip. For what if things were this way? Can it be possible? The old saw ‘no smoke

without fire' points to the driving force behind at least a certain type of gossip.

It never occurs to Gluckman to endeavour to differentiate between gossip and scandal. On the contrary, he writes about them as though they were deeply interconnected phenomena. To draw dividing lines between rumour, gossip, and scandal, as Thompson does, is perhaps necessary in order to delimit a research area; but between the spoken and the mediated, between everyday talk and public conversation, between the newsroom, the living room, and the street, if you will, there are quite a few new things to be learnt about this phenomenon. For this reason, I will pursue my inquiry in that direction.

### *Chronique scandaleuse*

When examining the matter more closely, it becomes clear that scandals have been mediated for centuries, and that general person-to-person conversations about them have played a notable part in that process. In a historical perspective, the oral distribution of news should in point of fact be considered a form of mediation. By looking at mid-eighteenth-century France and England, I hope to be able to clarify certain similarities and connections between so-called modern and classic scandals (to refer to Nord's expression), in particular with regard to the oral dimension of this phenomenon.

Book historian Robert Darnton has investigated the history of scandals in great detail. He takes his readers on a journey to a smelly, noisy, and tumultuous, but at the same time organised, France during the Enlightenment, when news was conveyed through a complex media system. The assertion that we have recently entered the information age is the most misleading of all platitudes now in circulation, he observes (Darnton 2004). Paris at this time was abuzz with sound, life, talk, and a continually ongoing exchange of information. Songs were sung and poems recited, gossip passed from one person to another, rumours were spread, and the few newspapers in existence were read aloud (Darnton 1997, 2000, 2005, 2010). News distribution was a natural part of the many occupations of everyday life.<sup>4</sup> In order to find out what was happening, people would go to so-called *nouvellistes de bouche*, whose task it was to spread oral news. Darnton translates this French expression into *gossipmongers*. The word exists in several variants,

---

4 At least for privileged citizens of the male sex.

which he uses as synonyms in his presentation, such as *scandal-*, *rumour-*, and *newsmongers*. This is interesting in the present context and additionally underlines the kinship among these phenomena. These professional telltales could be found both indoors and outdoors, and they attracted large numbers of people who wanted to hear the latest about the latest. In the heart of Paris there was, for example, a large and splendid chestnut tree under which people gathered to partake of the news that was delivered; or people would congregate in one of the hundreds of salons and coffee-houses that existed at that time, where special areas were provided for rumours, gossip, and confirmed information.<sup>5</sup> People circulated within these areas, discussing what they had heard or read, thereby creating a kind of early newsroom (Darnton 2005:33, see also Holmberg et al. 1983:13).

Early journalism differed in a number of ways from today's manner of reporting events, not least because of technological developments and the professionalisation of journalism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; but certain things seem to have remained intact, such as a fascination with the sensational, scandalous, and personal. The contents of many of the pamphlets, ballads, and news books that were printed almost three centuries ago with the aim of spreading news were taken from the talk in the coffee-houses and dealt with unexpected, surprising, and shocking events, often involving people with high positions and prestige. They can be summarised as cautionary tales criticising those in power and constituting a form of popular entertainment. Anthropologists Elizabeth Bird and Jesús Martín-Barbero use the concept of melodrama to describe this genre which, they argue, brought in 'the "I can't believe it" dimension of life' (Bird 1997:115, Martín-Barbero 1993:112–20; see also Stephens 2007:90–115).

In particular, people in Paris were treated to gossip about Louis XV and his entourage. That might appear to be an innocent pastime, but in fact it was the direct opposite. Whereas press historian Mitchell Stephens (2007:94ff) depicts mediated gossip as a harmless *fait-divers* phenomenon, Robert Darnton argues that it has to do with popularly anchored means of communication which have at least to some extent been used in order to question the prevailing social order. This *bruit public* ('public rumour' according to Darnton)

---

5 This well-known chestnut tree was known as the Kraków tree, probably because of the heated discussions that took place beneath its branches during the War of the Polish Succession.

was closely connected with the formation of *l'esprit public* (public opinion), something the regime was aware of and feared (Darnton 1997:14–17).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the French police were given the task of preventing the dissemination of rumours because it was understood that dangerous talk could escalate into scandals, which constituted a threat against those in power in the country at a time characterised by political change. Even if the King's sovereignty was total, public opinion – that is, the people – had a fair amount of influence over which ministers had to leave their positions and which could remain in their posts (Darnton 2004:110–19). In addition to regularly seizing blasphemous writings and meting out severe punishments for printers and publishers, the police also tried to suppress oral news distribution, another word for which would be gossip. The records of the Bastille which have been preserved for posterity speak about the arrests of individuals, quite a few of whom had some form of elevated social status, on the grounds of a type of crime called *mauvais propos* or *mauvais discours* (roughly, 'bad speech'). These entries could take the following forms:

- 16 April: the chevalier de Bellerives, former captain of dragoons, for discours against the king, Mme de Pompadour, and the ministers.
- 9 May: The sieur Le Clerc for mauvais propos against the government and the ministers.
- 10 May: François-Philippe Michel Saint Hilaire for mauvais propos against the government and ministers. (Darnton 2005:34; see also Darnton 2010:50–1)

It was arduous work to identify who had said what about whom, and many innocent people fell victim to the operations of the police. This did not prevent the number of arrests for bad speech from quickly increasing in number in the 1740s and thereafter. By means of a dense network of detectives with their ears pricked, the police collected information on what people were talking about in the salons, parks, and marketplaces, which resulted in long, detailed reports that formed the basis for the arrests.

Accounts of news distribution, public scandals, and politics in England at this time also suggest that gossip, rumour, and scandals were closely connected phenomena. Oral information about the excesses of the libertines – which to a considerable extent took place in special clubs designed for luxury living, erotic adventures,

---

6 The words *opinion* (public opinion) and *publicitet* (publicity) were also introduced into the Swedish language at this time (Holmberg et al. 1983:13).

miscellaneous unchristian entertainment, and the circulation of radical manuscripts – spread throughout the kingdom and also assumed written form in a literary genre that had been inspired by French scandal journalism. The collective name of this type of writing was the *chronique scandaleuse* – a broad genre within printed news distribution via so-called *nouvellistes à la main*. Darnton describes it in the following way: ‘A muckraking and mudslinging journalism, which built up an account of contemporary history by tearing down the reputation of public figures, beginning with the king’ (Darnton 2005:23). This was a journalism that makes the tabloid press of the 2010s appear tame in comparison, and as France moved towards the Revolution, the tone became even more hostile (Darnton 1997:14–17). Moralising as well as entertaining songs, verses, drawings, leaflets, images, and pamphlets told compromising stories about the people closest to the king, usually ministers, noblemen, and society ladies with alleged or real connections to the libertines and their scabrous way of life, all intended to annoy and belittle the king, George III. Historian John Brewer follows the progress during the 1760s of publicist and libertine John Wilkes, who tenaciously spread a form of propaganda geared to exposing the lack of sexual morals at court and connecting it to political malfeasance. The purpose of this vigorous literary genre, argues Brewer, was to expose political intrigue – whether true or false – which had previously been hidden from the public, putting these revelations to use in attacking the personal moral standards of the country’s leaders and, by extension, their power and influence (Brewer 2005).

In mid-eighteenth-century Sweden, there were similar periodicals which produced person-orientated sensational journalism, one of which bore the telling title *Stockholms Squallerbytta* (‘The Stockholm tattler’). There were political pretexts for this type of printed gossip, but some scholars maintain that the purpose of these publications was mainly financial gain. Scandals sell, then as now (Holmberg et al. 1983:26). In particular, poetry was written and gossip was spread about people with power and influence. As is the case today, it was privileged people in society who had to put up with this type of less than flattering verbiage, a circumstance that underlines the inherent meaning of mediated gossip and its relationship to power, according to literary historian Blakey Vermeule: ‘Gossip is always concerned with power. It follows in the track of the great and never clings for very long to the down and out. People gossip up’ (Vermeule 2006:105).

Eighteenth-century media scandals thus did not only exist in order to amuse readers or make money from journalism. The libertines

wanted to relativise the established norms of society and were aware that texts with an erotic content could be regarded as attempts to spread atheistic ideas and prohibited criticism of the king. Just like the French, the English were aware of the risks involved in spending time in coffee-houses and salons, picking up news. This early form of scandal journalism also existed in the Nordic countries, where periodicals, pamphlets, poems, cartoons, defamatory ballads, and satire were employed as means of taunting those in power. New ideas according to which the press was an institution for discussion and enlightenment with regard to social issues emanated from England and France. Among other things, people learned from the French and the English methods of spreading criticism of contemporary society in the guise of satire, allegory, or caricature, because censorship made direct comments on political issues impossible (see Holmberg et al. 1983:13–44, Åhlén et al. 1986, and Carlsson 1967).<sup>7</sup>

All in all, this indicates that the gossip and scandals of a political nature that were disseminated, regardless of which medium was employed for the purpose, cannot be reduced to innocent prattle. They were part of the criticism levelled at a country's regime, which is why energetic efforts were made to silence the flow of words which, in spite of the efforts of the police, seeped into both texts and institutions, for instance the royal courts. A person's good name could be ruined if gossip was transformed into printed text; but oral rumours also constituted material for power struggles at court, writes Darnton (2005:25).

### Gossip and scandals in today's media system

At least four considerations become visible in this historical example:

- 1 For centuries, mediated scandals have been used as tools for questioning the prevailing power relationships in society, not infrequently using humour as a weapon.

---

<sup>7</sup> Here, too, it was dangerous to express open criticism of the authorities through the varying forms of media. Proof of this can be found in historian Karl-Ivar Hildeman's analysis of libellous writings in the Nordic countries, where court records show that people who wrote and performed compromising lampoons and satirical ballads could be condemned to banishment, or even decapitation (Hildeman 1974). This type of folklore intended to taunt power became increasingly widespread and refined as people from a larger number of social strata learned to read and write, and it is – as is well known – still alive and well today (see Broberg et al. 1993).

- 2 As a consequence of this, gossip, the spreading of rumours, and scandals were regarded as threatening phenomena by the authorities, an anxiety that still survives in our time.
- 3 For a very long time, scandals have been mediated, often in the form of news. This mediation has occurred in an advanced interaction with the communication that arises on an interpersonal level face to face, a kind of communication which should be considered a form of mediation on the border between the folkloristic and the journalistic.
- 4 This, in turn, indicates that media systems are characterised by interaction and continuity among old and new media. Older media do not disappear just because new ones emerge. (Harvard and Lundell 2010:8)

The different paths that can be taken by a narrative about a scandal seem to presuppose rather than exclude one another. Can this said to be valid in our own time as well? A truthful answer will probably be ‘both yes and no’. No, because technology has transformed the opportunities for communication in such a comprehensive manner that it is difficult to draw any parallels at all (temporal rapidity). Yes, because people are cultural creatures, regardless of whether they live in the 1750s or the 2010s, and as such they are the same in some respects (temporal resilience). For example, people’s need to both convey news and inform themselves of what is going on appears to be comparatively constant over time, and so is the way in which that is done: through communicative exchange via the available means and channels (Stephens 2007:7–16). In addition, gossip and scandalous news appear to be persistent phenomena that have a particularly marked effect on the audience, regardless of whether this audience was alive during the Enlightenment or lives in the post-industrial era. So let us not drop the issue, but instead investigate how gossip, rumour, and scandals move within the media circuits of today.

In order to do this, I would like to examine the concept of the *media system* and consider the following claim: by looking at the oral dimension as a part of the media system, we can catch sight of some things that would otherwise have remained hidden. The moment that communication among people, face to face, is seen as a more or less integrated part of the communication that is happening via (other) media, a number of new questions and speculations arise. This point of departure opens up new possibilities. An example of research along such lines is the attempt made by media historians Jonas Harvard and Patrik Lundell to construct an extended historical

view of media systems where intermediary connections are made visible, and where the system is seen to make up the sum of the reciprocal relationships of the different media at a given point in time. According to them, the metaphor of the system could be seen as a methodological tool and a reminder of the connections among phenomena that cannot always be seen on the surface (Harvard and Lundell 2010:15). Two possible themes in relation to analyses of media systems are foregrounded by these authors: the spatial dimension and the social dimension. The first-mentioned dimension encourages examinations of relationships between the physical locations where media are produced and consumed and the imaginary spaces that are represented and distributed through the media. The latter dimension sheds light on the tension among actors, both face to face and within large organisations and institutions. Interest is directed at how the media system is used by actors, and at the symbolic communities of shared interests and values of which these actors hence become co-creators (Harvard and Lundell 2010:16). In the ensuing pages, these ideas will be tested on the contemporary media system, first of all with regard to how gossip, rumour, scandals, and news distribution can take place, something that raises further questions. Through which media, in a broad sense, are scandals created, and how do these media interact?

### Digital town squares

Press historian Mitchell Stephens argues that digital technology has entailed a kind of return to an older form of news distribution where anybody can contribute to the news flow, or, in Stephens's own words, 'the ability of individuals, lots of them, to be newstellers' (Stephens 2007:14). In this respect, social media appear as a paradise of everyday talk where infinite opportunities for quick exchanges of information are offered, which means that they cannot be dismissed as trivial. This flow of information is not particularly honourable; rather, it is the mere background babble of the people in digital form where neutral information, revolutionary statements, and pure nonsense are mixed – background babble that may nevertheless have a decisive impact in sensitive situations. Protected by anonymity, gossip and the spreading of rumours flourish on forums such as the global Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan, as well as on their national equivalents such as the very popular – in terms of the number of users – Swedish Flashback Forum (see the introduction to this book). The unsorted quantity of voices makes these digital town squares

into perfect breeding-grounds for news where rumour and gossip can be published at a much earlier stage than in traditional newspapers, because digital town squares often lack an editor with responsibility for content and do not have to adapt what they publish to rules pertaining to press ethics. In newsrooms, no matter how self-assured they may appear to be, it has therefore become a matter of prestige to use social media as a research tool in daily journalistic work.

Social media also shine a light on the vagueness of the boundaries between oral tradition, written text, and mediated communication, for how should one regard the special language forms of the Internet, which some linguists have classified as hybrids of speech, conversation, and writing? What is, for instance, a chat conversation – spoken text or written speech (Dresner 2005, Baron 2010)? A few years ago, the periodical *language@internet* devoted a special edition to investigations of the numerous conversational and oral features in the type of communication encompassed by the designation CMC, *Computer Mediated Communication*, which is text-based (Herring 2011). Any attempt to construct a boundary where oral tradition ends and printed tradition begins – or where conversation face to face is seen as something completely different from conversation via computer programs – appears to be fruitless (see Stephens 2007:7–47). Oral and written forms of expression have existed in parallel – or, rather, been entangled – over the centuries, fertilising one another; and they continue to do so today. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur has, for instance, claimed that writing is an activity that runs parallel with speech, but occasionally writing takes the place of speech and appropriates it (Ricoeur 1988:35f).

The traditional daily newspaper, which has gone through a metamorphosis over the past few decades and is now much more than just text on paper, may serve as an example here. Transformed into a complex multimedial meeting place, where the Internet, television, radio, and telephone converge, it is a typical example of communicative development in our time, where writing, conversation, talk, images, and actors are mixed into an unorthodox melange. In addition, like the *nouvellistes de bouche* of yesteryear, today's journalists talk intensively during their working hours, both with one another and with other people. The hunt for news springs from a continuous flow of communication by way of face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, emails, text messages, chat messages, and tweets. There is quite a lot of prattle and gossip even in the most respectable editorial offices. That statement is not intended as a critique of journalism; the point is that the connection between everyday small

talk, gossip, rumour, and news lives on, at least to a certain extent. For instance, an attentive local reporter knows that it is the proprietor of the local grocery shop one should call in order to find out if something interesting has happened. This person, if anyone, overhears what newsroom staff usually refer to as hot topics, that is to say, the things people are actually talking about.

On a fundamental level, the exchange of news today happens in the same way as it always has, namely through interpersonal communication. The technological advances do not seem to have brought about a cessation of everyday small talk and oral news distribution among people. If anything, some kinds of technology have gained ground precisely because of our pressing need to communicate with one another, by offering a greater number of accessible pathways for the flow of words. In the next few pages, I conduct an empirical examination of these conditions in a case where we follow the progress of a modern Swedish scandal, from gossip and rumours among ordinary people, journalists, and politicians on to the blogosphere and then out to the big newsrooms and, finally, into the everyday life of the affected individual. This takes us back to a dramatic twenty-four hours in contemporary history, which occasioned an unusually long-lasting and far-reaching media scandal in Sweden.

### The rumour about Under-Secretary of State Ingmar Ohlsson

In connection with the earthquake in the Indian Ocean and the subsequent tsunami disaster on 26 December 2004, when around 250,000 people, including 543 Swedes, lost their lives, the work performed by the Swedish Prime Minister's Office was exposed to heavy criticism in the media. An opinion shared by many people was that the authorities had reacted too slowly and unprofessionally, and had lacked a sustainable disaster plan just when it was most needed. Comparisons were made to other countries, for instance Norway and Italy, which had been on site quickly in order to rescue people in distress and take care of the deceased. The Swedish government appeared sluggish, with a clear lack of direction and practical ability.

During this time Ingmar Ohlsson worked as an Under-Secretary of State, a highly placed civil servant, and as such he had an important role to play in the actions of the Prime Minister's Office. In his capacity of decision-maker on duty on the day in question, and as the right-hand man of the Prime Minister at the time, the Social

Democrat Göran Persson, Ohlsson became a central figure in the public debate. A summary of the media scandal surrounding Ingmar Ohlsson cannot be provided here, because it came and went with varying intensity over several years. For that reason, the ensuing pages focus on a minor part of it, the part that had to do with a rumour about a mistress.

After the catastrophe, media attention was directed at Ingmar Ohlsson's claim that he had visited the Government Offices, Rosenbad, during the actual day of the disaster. He also said that while he was there, he had used the telephone and the Internet to inform himself about the situation in Thailand, where thousands of Swedes found themselves in something that resembled a war zone. Among other things, he claimed that he had spoken on the phone to Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Hans Dahlgren, something that Dahlgren denied. Dahlgren's version was supported by telephone records, and during a hearing in the Standing Committee on the Constitution (KU) in 2006, two years after the tsunami disaster itself and in the midst of an ongoing election campaign, Ohlsson said that he was no longer sure of the information he had supplied previously (Government Committee Report 2005/06:KU8).<sup>8</sup>

The rhetoric from many actors was harsh and condemnatory, not least from the political opposition. Among other things, the conservative daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* provided space on its opinion pages for opposition politician Carl Bildt (Moderate Party) – also known for his international missions as a peace negotiator and for his role as Swedish Foreign Minister (2006–2014) – where he claimed that it was beyond reasonable doubt that Ohlsson was lying during the high-profile hearings in the Standing Committee on the Constitution, and that Ohlsson had been telling lies all the time. The end of Bildt's text is dramatic: 'If we accept the lie today, we have sanctioned the lie tomorrow as well. Then we are looking at a systemic change into the realm of mendacity' (editorial on 21 June 2006). The hearings eventually came to an end, but some questions remained unanswered, according to many critics. Where had Ohlsson been on the day in question? Had he really visited the Government Offices? Was he trying to hide something?

---

8 A disaster commission later arrived at the conclusion that Ingmar Ohlsson had not been particularly focused on the tsunami during the initial period of slightly more than 24 hours following the disaster, and that his performance had been inadequate, something that deserved criticism (Ministry of Finance 2007:44).

As a consequence of the questions that had not been cleared up, a rumour began circulating in the newsrooms of the evening tabloids. Suddenly the Prime Minister's Office received a torrent of telephone calls from journalists, all of whom wanted comments concerning the oral information that Ohlsson had in fact been at the house of his colleague Jane Davidson (fictitious name) on the day of the disaster. As a result of vigorous denials, nothing was written about this matter at the time; the established media chose not to publish because the rumours remained unconfirmed. But the gossip and the spread of rumours did not stop. They lived on on the Internet, where some right-wing campaigners had decided to influence the election campaign by pushing the issue further. For example, in February 2006, a blog called *Right Online* published information that Ohlsson 'supposedly' spent Boxing Day 2004 with Deputy Director-General Jane Davidson instead of working.<sup>9</sup> The language is significant here. It invites the application of a method developed by ethnologist Lars-Eric Jönsson and myself, where we as researchers make an effort to listen to *talk-like text* (Hammarlin & Jönsson 2017:93–115). When it comes to digital texts of this kind, but also the texts of news media in the context of scandals, we argue that it is important to pay attention to evasiveness, that is to say information from anonymous sources, information that seems to come from no specific sources at all, and claims formulated in the passive voice ('it is said') or in other ways with an unclear agency ('it is claimed', 'is supposed to', 'probably has', 'is likely to have had'). Conflicting information, disclaimers, and disagreements are also significant text categories which should be examined, with special reference to signals about rumours and gossip and how these can be connected to journalistic reporting. With support from the work of Robert Darnton, we believe that it is possible to identify and investigate the spoken word's colonisation of, and relationship to, written text (Hammarlin & Jönsson 2017:93–115), a process that I will explain in greater detail below.

The blog hinted that Jane Davidson and Ingmar Ohlsson had a romantic relationship. Among other things, the blogger in question, liberal lobbyist Johan Ingerö, had been inspired by the harshly criticised but successful (in terms of the number of visitors) site Flashback, where a so-called thread had been started around the

---

9 Archived remnants of the blog can be found here: [http://rightonline.blogspot.se/2006\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://rightonline.blogspot.se/2006_05_01_archive.html) (accessed 7 March 2019).

same time by an anonymous writer. The thread began with the following post:

It is rumoured in the corridors of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs that one of GP's [Göran Persson, Prime Minister at the time] Under-Secretaries of State, I\*\*\*\* O\*\*\*\*\*, was not at all at the Government Offices on Boxing Day after the tsunami, but at the house of his mistress, J\*\*\* D\*\*\*\*\*, Deputy Director-General at the Prime Minister's Office. In order to hide this, our good IO was pleased to lie about cycling down to the office and carrying out great deeds in order to save Swedes in distress. Against this background it is not difficult to understand that very few of his colleagues met him in the office.<sup>10</sup>

A rumour circulating in the corridors of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will, through the murmur of an indefinable number of voices, find its way to the people. Alternatively, it is a popular rumour that finds its way upwards through the social hierarchies. It is probably a matter of circular movements. On Flashback, the rumour is made visible and in some way real through its continuously preserving, albeit variable and chatty, thread, where a kind of dark popular humour combined with an explicit mistrust of politicians takes shape. This kind of humour is typical of political satire and similar to the libellous writings against the authorities that Darnton and Brewer describe as accompanying political scandals 250 years ago, exemplified by the following quotation:

Well, what do you know, she's quite handsome, isn't she ... Then I understand why the man with the 'non-existing chin and the shifty eyes' didn't prioritise the tsunami disaster. Surely it's more or less an established fact these days that he spent the night with the woman in question? Let's hope he's married and his wife doesn't know, otherwise the scandal factor will be considerably lower ...<sup>11</sup>

A certain amount of covetousness is expressed here. The writer is hoping that the whole matter is going to turn out to be thoroughly disreputable so that there is a 'proper' scandal, something that goes on for a long period of time and may serve as a source of amusement,

---

10 Thread: 'Skvaller om en viss statssekreterares närvaro på Regeringskansliet' ('Gossip about the presence of a certain Under-Secretary of State at the Government Offices'), Member: 'Monarkisten' ('The Monarchist'), 16 February 2006, #1.

11 Thread: 'Skvaller om en viss statssekreterares närvaro på Regeringskansliet' ('Gossip about the presence of a certain Under-Secretary of State at the Government Offices'), Member: 'Petter Utas', 16 February 2006, #14.

self-satisfied glee, and conversation. However, the whole post is likely to have been written ironically, as indicated by the use of an emoji. It is also worth noting that the gossip about Ohlsson's mistress has here been transformed into 'more or less ... established fact', but with the hesitant 'surely' inserted as a reservation and with a question-mark at the end. I interpret this not simply as a sign of gossip but as gossip *per se*, with patent elements of orality and conversation, where hesitation and possibility may be seen as the very engine of this kind of talk. The question 'Can this really be true?' is conveyed to the reader who is thus encouraged to pass it on, in order to gain clarity. However, truth is not as important as the talk about the event and the opportunities for moral reflection that it offers.

There are also posts that criticise the media, written by people who argue that the Flashback thread was in fact created by tabloid journalists in order to garner more information about the rumour – a dubious research method, according to members of the forum:

Interesting that some person (a journalist at AB [*Aftonbladet*]?) first lets the 'bomb' go off at a 'more or less obscure site' (in the eyes of the authorities) such as [Flashback], in order to be able to take it to the general public later, through the newspaper.<sup>12</sup>

The blogger Johan Ingerö subsequently wrote several posts on the theme of 'Ingmar Ohlsson's mistress', and all at once the number of visitors to his blog multiplied. He said later in an interview that he was angry at the established media because they did not write about the rumour, although at least the tabloid people 'knew' how matters stood (Nilsson 2006). The gossip spread to some fifteen blogs, and it soon came to be a kind of truth that Ohlsson's difficulties in answering the question of where he was and what he was doing on Boxing Day were due to his having had an affair with Davidson. In connection with this, a tabloid-initiated hunt for Ohlsson began where nothing was said explicitly, but where receipts from his flights and restaurant visits together with Göran Persson and other government staff were scrutinised. The reporting was illustrated with pictures of Ohlsson and his colleague Davidson, side by side, and could take the following form: 'According to increasingly stubborn rumours, Ohlsson was not at all in his room at the Prime Minister's Office on this day, 26 December 2004. This information states that Ohlsson

12 Thread: 'Skvaller om en viss statssekreterares närvaro på Regeringskansliet' ('Gossip about the presence of a certain Under-Secretary of State at the Government Offices'), Member: 'ABZeta99', 16 February 2006, #23.

was at that time engaged in pursuits belonging to the personal sphere' (Hedlund and Svensson 2006a).

The similarity to the Flashback post above is striking. Even though the text merely, if insidiously, hints that Ohlsson was with his alleged mistress, it offers limited scope for doubt in combination with the publication of the pictures. It is interesting that *Expressen* explicitly describes its sources as rumours, and that it still chooses to publish them. It is also a diabolical touch that the rumours are referred to with the words 'this information states' in the next sentence, an expression that formalises them linguistically into a more established, neutral category of materials for journalists.

In fact, rumour as a genre – which is included within the broader category of gossip – should also be considered a form of news that does not inform so much as it orientates. People who partake in rumours are better able to find their way, and act, in the contexts in which they live and work. A discussion that is based on rumour is not so much about the event itself, true or false, as it is about what to think about the event. The rumour circulates because ignorance about the news could entail a form of danger, either physical or symbolic. One might say that the rumour acts as an alarm clock. People talk in order to know. In addition, a rumour is dependent on the media's attitude to it. Its duration and dissemination are determined by whether they choose to keep quiet about it or, conversely, allow it space in broadcasts and newspaper columns (Kapferer 1988:48–63).

Suddenly, the previous caution vanished and the evening tabloids, the morning newspapers, radio and TV programmes began to report the rumours about Ohlsson's alleged mistress. It was done in a complex manner, in the sense that it was the very dissemination of rumours and the ensuing denials that became the news in certain channels, exemplified by a news item from the Sveriges Radio (public service) news programme *Ekot*:

Social Democratic party secretary Marita Ulyskog today accused the Liberals of having spread false rumours about Under-Secretary of State Ingmar Ohlsson supposedly having had a love affair with his closest colleague, Deputy Director-General Jane Davidson. According to the rumour, Ohlsson is supposed to have been with Davidson when the alarm about the tsunami disaster came on Boxing Day 2004.<sup>13</sup>

---

13 Sveriges Radio, *Dagens eko* ('The daily echo'), 18 May 2006, telegram.

The denial is full of conversational elements, such as ‘supposedly having had a love affair’, ‘according to the rumour, Ohlsson is supposed to have been’, and so on; their presence places the denial right in the middle of the flow of intense prattling that was going on about Under-Secretary of State Ohlsson at this time. The purpose of the denial may have been to limit the spread of rumours, but if anything it served to confirm and reinforce them, according to the motto ‘everybody else talks about and reports this, and for that reason we neither can nor want to refrain from doing so ourselves’. The fact that one of Sweden’s most reliable newsrooms chose to provide space for the rumour in their broadcasts can be seen as a kind of elevation of it, a confirmation of its significance which raised the rumour from the street to the serious newsroom.

The then editor-in-chief of the tabloid *Aftonbladet*, Anders Gerdin, claimed that the intense reporting in his newspaper had nothing to do with what was written on social media. In an interview at the time, he said that it was unacceptable that the Prime Minister’s closest aide was unable to account for his activities on the day of the greatest catastrophe that had befallen Sweden since the loss of *MS Estonia* in the Baltic in 1994 (*Fokus*, 19 May 2006). *Aftonbladet* therefore chose to expose Ohlsson to particularly intensive scrutiny, although two years had passed since the tsunami disaster. Media analysts claim that this is the first case in Sweden where blogs affected media coverage during an election campaign. The united force of the bloggers compelled the established media to address the issue again (Nygren et al. 2005). But there was nothing new to tell, which is why the reporting came to revolve around rumours and gossip instead. And it was obvious that many more actors cultivated the rumour in addition to the bloggers. An intricate and agitated conversation went on among newspaper editorial offices, blogs, Flashback threads, and other social media.

To Jane Davidson and Ingmar Ohlsson, the reporting meant that they were forced into a protracted merry-go-round of denials. In an autobiographical book, Ohlsson writes that he felt disgust at having to call individual reporters at different newspapers in order to deny the rumours. He continues:

The absurd and unpleasant thing about this affair is that the media immediately transfer the burden of proof to the victims, not to the people who are spreading the rumours. Having to devote time and

effort for a number of months to continually rejecting this modern variant of ‘Have you stopped beating your wife?’ is among the most repulsive things I have experienced.<sup>14</sup>

This part of the scandal, which he himself describes as its second phase – there is a third phase, too – came to an end with his asking for a time-out period from his position.

### Hot topics

I met Ingmar Ohlsson for an interview in an anonymous-looking office at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (UD) in Stockholm. The following pages focus on the spreading of rumours about him and Jane Davidson and on his recollection of those rumours as expressed during our meeting. Ohlsson describes the origin of the rumours as ‘a hot topic’, which in this case refers to loose small talk or gossip in the corridors that spread both in tabloid newsrooms and at UD:

As far as I understood afterwards, this was what people were talking about. The first time I get to hear of it is from a cabinet minister, a Social Democratic cabinet minister who had met a former leading politician from the Moderate Party at the airport, and this politician had cheerfully told him about the rumour and that he had heard it from [a senior figure in his party]. ‘And [this person] knows what’s going on at UD’, he says. That was the first time I heard it. So there was talk about it among what’s known as the ‘gossiping classes’, that is to say, this coterie of leading politicians and journalists in Stockholm.

Ohlsson had previously said in public that the senior Moderate Party politician was behind the dissemination of the rumours, a claim for which he was attacked by some writers, among others Linda Skugge. A well-known writer at this time, Skugge did not pull her punches in her ironically formulated criticism which was published a year and a half after the hearing in the Standing Committee on

---

14 This is a translation of a passage from Ohlsson’s book. Since ‘Ingmar Ohlsson’ is a fictitious name, it was not possible to use the person’s real name in order to produce a reference here. The original Swedish version of this book used Ohlsson’s real name – it would have been pointless to try to disguise it – but as the present publication is intended for an international audience and published Open Access as well as in print, anonymity for the protagonist was deemed to be preferable.

the Constitution, two years and nine months after the tsunami disaster:

Poor, poor little [a diminutive of Ohlsson's real first name]. He claims that it was Big Bad [senior Moderate politician] who was behind the rumours about the Woman with whom [he] is said to have been canoodling instead of helping people in distress during the tsunami. But because 'both of them have denied' this claim, does that mean it's not true? Since when were a few denials enough for a claim to not be true? (Lagercrantz & Skugge 2007)

In fact, Skugge underlines the hopelessness of trying to check the spreading of rumours once it has started. If Ohlsson remembered things correctly, the rumour went through three links before it reached him, something that indicates a whispering game according to a traditional 'and then he said, and then I said' model. In addition, he indicated that gossip among journalists and politicians – 'the gossiping classes' – was not a coincidence, but a well-known, well-established phenomenon. Denials to the media led nowhere. The telephones kept ringing. 'That is ... a typical element of hounding logic,' writes Jan Guillou, 'that a lie can be repeated as many times as you want for as long as you want until it becomes the current truth' (Guillou 2010:546). Putting an end to the rumours required certain efforts on the interpersonal level. Ohlsson and Davidson eventually decided to conduct personal confrontations with the people whom they knew to have been active participants in the gossip:

We were pretty quickly able to find out who talked most about this. So we looked up these people, one by one, and we talked to them and asked, 'Why are you saying this?' Very interesting experience. In total we talked to perhaps eleven, twelve people who we understood were instrumental in spreading the rumour. They may not have been the origin, because we don't know who started the rumour. But as I said earlier, they were instrumental in their manner of spreading it. It actually had a certain effect. And of course it was interesting to see who these ten, twelve people were. I can say that they were all men, and they were all older than I am.

Ohlsson felt that gossip and rumours of this kind often affect a woman more than a man. In an elitist, male-dominated world like the one at UD, it appeared to some men an impossibility that a young and, in addition, beautiful woman could have a meteoric career exclusively on the basis of her merits. There had to be another reason for the promotions, the speculation went. Apart from the fact that Ohlsson's antagonists wanted to render him harmless by

sully his reputation, suspicion was cast on Davidson because of her femininity, about which she could not really do anything, while at the same time her competence was questioned.<sup>15</sup> In our conversation we also touched on the stock phrase ‘no smoke without fire’, discussing the hopelessness of trying to prove one’s innocence:

I was often asked, ‘Can you prove that you don’t have a relationship?’ That’s a completely astonishing question if you think about it, and it all had to do with this ‘no smoke without ...’. People saw us together all the time, and it’s obvious that it can’t just be a professional relationship, right, it has to be something else, sort of. ... We investigated the possibilities of bringing an action for defamation, because the damage requirement was clearly fulfilled. But then the lawyers say, ‘You have to be able to prove it.’ How the hell do you do that? You can’t! There is no way. I mean, how you do it? How do you prove that?

Well, how would Ohlsson have been able to prove that he had not had a relationship with Davidson? By showing people text messages and emails that had never been written and never been sent? From a historical perspective, it is interesting that it was a rumour about a mistress that was put about in order to ‘get at’ Ohlsson. In eighteenth-century England and France, mistresses often featured in the spreading of rumours about the sexual activities of royalty and other people in power, with the aim of undermining their positions and amusing the listener. John Brewer (2005) provides several examples of this, as does Robert Darnton, who among other things follows the creation of the scandal book *Anecdotes sur Mm. la comtesse du Barry*, from oral gossip to hard covers. Darnton writes:

[It] is really a scrapbook of these news items strung together along a narrative line, which takes the heroine from her obscure birth as the daughter of a cook and a wandering friar to a star role in a Parisian whorehouse and finally the royal bed. (Darnton 2000:9)<sup>16</sup>

15 These gendered processes within politics and other male-dominated environments have, coincidentally, been written about in an elegant fashion by political scientist Maud Eduards, in the book *Kroppspolitik: Om Moder Svea och andra kvinmor* (‘The body politic: On Mother Sweden and other women’) (2007).

16 There was a great interest in the promiscuous lives of kings, which were considered in relation to their political abilities. In a police report, written by a so-called spy and framed as a dialogue, we can follow the talking as well as the listening at this time: ‘At the Café de Foy someone said that the king had taken a mistress, that she was named Gontaut, and that she was

Clearly, then, this is a long-established tradition, at least from an international perspective. The United States is much to the fore in this context; the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, Anthony Weiner's sex-chatting in 2011, and the accusations regarding Donald Trump's alleged sexual harassment of women in 2016 are examples of sex scandals that have had global dissemination. But this type of rumour about mistresses and politicians, or, as in this case, a civil servant, is not common either in Swedish politics or in Swedish political journalism, rather the opposite. This was probably why the reporting about Ohlsson and Davidson occasioned a certain amount of debate concerning press ethics. Niklas Svensson, a political journalist at *Expressen* who was one of the reporters that urged on the scrutiny of Ohlsson, underlines the special character of this case, but at the same time confirms that gossip and the oral spreading of rumours always gather momentum when a scandal gets under way. Both anonymous and named sources, from so-called ordinary readers to actors connected to the event, contact the newspaper with a large number of tips regarding the main protagonist. It then becomes the task of the editorial staff to sort out this flow of information.

In professional terms, the criticism of the deficient handling of the disaster and the subsequent scandals led to Ohlsson's being deprived of his duties at UD. According to his own version, he was put in quarantine, something he describes as the hardest punishment of all. It took several years before he was allowed to work with qualified tasks again.

There is thus quite a lot of talk about the melodramatic stories supplied to us by the media, then as now; people sigh, laugh, guess, and problematise in the course of everyday conversations. 'A scandal

---

a beautiful woman, the niece of the duc de Noailles and the comtesse de Toulouse. Others said, "If so, then there could be some big changes." And another replied, "True, a rumor is spreading, but I find it hard to believe, since the cardinal de Fleury is in charge. I don't think the king has any inclination in that direction, because he has always been kept away from women." "Nevertheless," someone else said, "it wouldn't be the greatest evil if he had a mistress." "Well, messieurs," another added, "it may not be a passing fancy, either, and a first love could raise some danger on the sexual side and could cause more harm than good. It would be far more desirable if he liked hunting better than that kind of thing" (Darnton 2004:110–19; the exact page is unfortunately not clear in the version of the text to which I have access, made available through the database of Lund University Library).

that is relatively longlived must enter the public conversation', writes Elizabeth Bird (Bird 2003:38, see also Martín-Barbero 1993:104). Bird has attempted to show this by interviewing so-called ordinary people in order to define their attitudes to media scandals, an issue that leads us to the interesting question of why such scandals exist in the first place and what purpose they serve. Taking the statements made by Bird's informants as a point of departure, these scandals seem to possess a special ability to bring out people's attitudes to and experience of morals and norms through the values and boundaries expressed in them (Bird 2003:32). She writes: '[t]he very questioning and speculation invited by scandal may help people discuss and deal with issues of morality, law and order, and so on, in their daily lives' (Bird 2003:39). This conclusion, which is in line with Max Gluckman's interpretation, is hardly controversial. The media scandal could be seen as a kind of tool that is used in everyday contexts in order to discuss what may be considered acceptable moral behaviour in a certain cultural context and at a certain point in time. When people speculate about scandals they seem to look for answers in their own life experiences, and in general they are more interested in people who have some form of bearing on their own lives: How would I act if it happened to me? What would the people around me say? What can I do to avoid ending up in a similar situation? (Bird 2003:25–47).

Sociologist David Wästerfors is on a similar track in his research on corruption scandals. He writes that it is impossible to separate people's responses to scandals from scandals as phenomena, and vice versa. The response from the surrounding community is a direct prerequisite for the development and survival of scandals. 'When somebody calls out "scandal!", somebody else has to respond to this exclamation, otherwise there will be no scandal', he claims (Wästerfors 2008:63; Wästerfors 2005). Wästerfors likens this collective response to scandals to Victor Turner's description of a social drama, where the response represents its redressive or corrective phase. After the crisis that arises because of the alleged or real transgression of norms in the drama in question, a playful and active state of symbolic vagueness ensues. Order is restored and symbolism is gradually rectified, and this is done in a number of multifaceted and contradictory ways, not least through the forms of conversation and discussion where rumour, gossip, fact, opinion, speculation, condemnation, apologia, humour, sarcasm, irony, and satire find expression. The voices are characterised by polyphony rather than opinion (Wästerfors 2005:153).

### The spatial and the social dimension

At the end of this chapter, I want to reconnect to the concept of the system and to those comprehensive themes that Jonas Harvard and Patrik Lundell (2010:7–25) recommend for inclusion in investigations of media systems: the spatial and the social dimension. Beginning with the first, the development of the Ingmar Ohlsson media scandal obviously encompasses a number of physical locations and spaces, such as the home, the living room, the lunch room, the physical town square, the digital town square, a large number of newsrooms, and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs as well as other official institutions. It is interesting to follow how gossip moves among different environments, from an undefined public space – sometimes called ‘the street’ – to digital forums, newspaper editorial offices, the government, and public authorities. One purpose behind the detailed description of the Ingmar Ohlsson case in this book is to demonstrate how this talk may be considered significant and influential depending on who is gossiping and who is listening, when it happens, and what the tittle-tattle is about.

But what is the point of regarding the communication and exchange of information that occurs in all these places and spaces as part of the spatial dimension of a media system? Why not draw the boundary at the media themselves, the editorial offices, and the digital town squares? It is, after all, media scandals that are being investigated here. The answer is that such restrictions would be unnecessarily limiting, blocking the broader view. In an attempt to widen the media concept and, for instance, as was done above, put the linguistic content of media texts in relation to the movements, actions, and statements of different actors, interwoven flows of words appear which move on different levels in different environments with a noteworthy synchronicity. Taken together, they make up intermedial connections: they reflect and affect one another; they shape and develop one another; and they collaborate and interact with one another (Harvard and Lundell 2010:7–25).

The analysis above is a case in point. On a concrete plane, it showed how talk, rumours, and gossip, both in actual corridors and in social, digital media – and including actors from outside the media business – can be colonised in the written journalistic text, and how this in turn can give rise to further oral conversations. At a first glance, these intersecting routes do not appear; but by means of the system concept, our thoughts can be liberated from conventional genre divisions where mediated communication is routinely

distinguished from interpersonal communication. That leads us on to the next theme: the social dimension that is connected to the spatial one. What actors move in these spaces and in these locations? If we include the results of the analysis in Chapter 1 in the answer to this question, an extensive network of people appears: those who have no relationship to the scandal and its main figure other than as a media audience, and those who do have connections to the protagonist. This second group comprises family members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who are affected by and who themselves affect the development of the scandal. Or, as Wästerfors asserts: if nobody out there responds to the call of the scandal, it dies. Few people would doubt the truth of that. If the competing newspapers do not pick up the thread, if reactions from the audience fail to appear, and if the tip-off telephone falls silent, the story ceases to be relevant for journalists to report about (the tip-off telephone may be regarded as a tributary to a major river of gossip).

Because of its incorporated orality, the scandal, seen as a media phenomenon, appears to be something that cannot be reduced to unambiguous causal connections. Instead, the complexity and interplay of forces should be acknowledged and studied, media hierarchies that are usually taken for granted being regarded as relative (Lundell 2010:98). In addition to the classic media that everybody recognises, a number of varying media forms have played a role for the development of the scandal, or, rather, for its very existence. In order to answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter – how is a media scandal possible? – many phenomena that are traditionally placed outside what is defined as media must be included in the analysis. For the answer is that a scandal becomes possible through all these varying and interwoven forms of communication, all these actors and texts, all these movements and flows, all these spaces and locations, at a certain point in time, in a certain cultural context. It therefore seems almost uncontroversial to regard the gossip and the spreading of rumours in the corridors of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and in the tabloid editorial offices – and thus also the actors moving in these spaces – as media in a long chain which are seen, if one looks closely at them, to make up a single composite system.

Nevertheless, one question remains to be answered: What imaginary spaces were created and re-created through the reporting on Ingmar Ohlsson? This question includes the symbolic communities of interest and value of which the media system is a co-creator at a given point in time (Harvard and Lundell 2010:16). The imagined

community represented by the nation, is the less than surprising answer. The scandal, or rather scandals, surrounding the Under-Secretary of State were occasioned by one of the worst disasters in modern times with respect to the number of Swedes killed and injured. Newspaper material from the time contains a multitude of data and analyses concerning the nation's lack of ability to protect its citizens in the event of a catastrophe occurring at a great geographical distance from Sweden. Repeated comparisons were made to other nations that were quickly on site in the affected area with evacuation aircraft, crisis teams, and trained medical personnel. Interviews with affected Swedes on the ground in Thailand, who expressed anger and bitterness at the authorities' inability to act, were standard features in Swedish media directly after the event. The contrasts were emphasised time and again: pictures of apparently incapable and paralysed politicians with stony faces going in and out of the Government Offices were published next to photos of desperate people searching for their injured or dead family members in overcrowded Khao Lak hospitals. The words Sweden, Swedes, and Swedish citizens appeared frequently in the texts.

In connection with the mistress rumour a few years later, it was yet again an ill-concealed contempt for politicians that was expressed in the media material. If one includes the 179-page-long Flashback thread entitled 'Skvaller om en viss statssekreterares närvaro på Regeringskansliet' ('Gossip about the presence of a certain Under-Secretary of State at the Government Offices') in this material, a thread containing over 2,000 posts, this contempt becomes even more apparent. In this thread scorn was manifested not only for politicians but also for the cowardice of traditional media, as exemplified by the following comment: 'a wonderful mess of government spokesmen who get ever more deeply entangled in lies and the abuse of power, but the media will probably lie down flat in response to pressures from above'.<sup>17</sup>

The reporting about Ohlsson must be seen in that context. In connection with the tsunami disaster, he became a symbol for the cracks in the edifice of the nation. This type of response to scandal, characterised by discontent and condemnation, produces a variant of an imagined community, namely cultural intimacy. With reference

---

17 Thread: 'Skvaller om en viss statssekreterares närvaro på Regeringskansliet' ('Gossip about the presence of a certain Under-Secretary of State at the Government Offices'), Member: 'jaha jovisst' ('OK fine'), 9 March 2006, #121.

to this concept, which originates with anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, David Wästerfors writes that such an imaginary community is not based on self-esteem and honour but, on the contrary, on shame (Wästerfors 2005:164). The cultural communities of nations depend on both collective self-criticism and collective pride. In Herzfeld's own words: 'National embarrassment can become the ironic basis of intimacy and affection, a fellowship of the flawed, within the private spaces of the national culture' (Herzfeld 2005:29).

### The role as an *exemplum*

The Ohlsson story demonstrates the varying, not to say paradoxical, functions of the media scandal as well as its inherent complexity: for centuries, gossip, rumour, and scandals have been employed as revolutionary material in order to question the prevailing order; but they have also been used as tools geared to upholding this very order through a collective maintenance of social norms and boundaries of a basic, almost religious character, such as 'thou shalt not lie', 'thou shalt not steal', and 'thou shalt not commit adultery'. In this collective pursuit, the main figure of the scandal is given the role of an *exemplum*. This concept has its origins in the Middle Ages, where the *exemplum* constituted a popular literary genre of its own, in which the lives of famous people were used as examples of either good or bad acts in a kind of moral, cautionary story (see Scanlon 2007). Becoming the object of gossip is the same thing as being chosen for the *exemplum* role (Stephens 2007:94). Few things give the public such intense pleasure as first jointly celebrating collective heroes, putting them on pedestals, and then transforming them into scapegoats, seeing them plunge to the ground and be destroyed. 'To fall from grace' is an anthropological idiom that describes the process in a graphic fashion: 'Grace, like honor, is associated with power and with royalty ... To lose power is "to fall from grace", "to be put down", "to go out of favor", "to be disgraced"' (Pitt-Rivers 2011:445). The Germans speak of *Schadenfreude*, a word that by combining *Schaden* (harm) with *Freude* (joy) explains the self-satisfaction involved in hearing about or witnessing someone else's misfortune. Ostracism, which was discussed in the preceding chapter, and its limits are also relevant here. The person to whom the role of *exemplum* is assigned is *de facto* noticed and included in the community; he or she is a person one cares about, even if the consequences can be both stigmatisation and branding.

## Concluding comment

In conclusion, I want to refer back to Lars Nord's statement that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter: what distinguishes the modern political scandal from the classic one is that the scandal no longer derives its chief nourishment from discussions and conversations among people, but is primarily conducted in the media (Nord 2001:20). On the basis of the preceding discussion, one could maintain that this statement is not borne out. Similarly, John B. Thompson's chronological calculations, where rumours and gossip are said to lead up to a scandal according to a model based on some form of three-stage rocket, seems too linear to fit our motley reality (Thompson 2008:25–8). What emerges instead is a media system that is both complex and circular (Bird 2003:32).

In this section of the book, I have attempted to illuminate the context from which the media scandal springs. I have focused on the relationships between the written and the spoken, between the oral tradition and narratives in the traditional media, using a specific historical example in order to enhance our understanding of the contemporary world. From time to time, there have been expressions of surprise that some scandals never really caught on, even when they were considered to be serious. They somehow petered out, for unclear reasons. The usual explanation is that the story in question was difficult for journalists to narrate. My analysis of how a scandal arises, through a media system with extensive offshoots and a multiplicity of forms of expression, takes the line of reasoning a step forward: if a story is difficult to narrate to the person who partakes of the news, there will be no scandal. If the moral of the drama is obscure, there is nothing to talk about. In other words, it is the oral narration *per se*, the story-telling that happens wherever there are people, that gives the mediated scandal wings and determines its duration and dissemination. 'What? Is this true?' we exclaim, and pass on the story.

So what kind of journalism has been examined in this chapter? Gossip journalism? Tabloid drivel? Perhaps; but it is also a matter of political journalism on the border of popular culture, a political journalism which moves within the historically persistent and lucrative domain of spectacle, scandals, and celebrities, according to media researcher John Hartley:

An endless succession of scandals, from royal mistresses to Monica Lewinsky, continually remind us that sex remains one of the most potent elements of political journalism. The staples of popular culture

– scandal, celebrity, bedroom antics – are the very propellant of modern journalism and therefore modern ideas. (Hartley 2008:687)

Celebrities and scandals form a persistent part of news journalism, bordering on the informal character of the spoken word. There are no indications that these circumstances are changing; if anything, an ultimate fusion seems to be taking place between journalism and popular culture in the digital age, where journalism not only studies popular culture as an object but also forms part of it (Hartley 2008).

In the ensuing chapter, the complex relations among different forms of communication will once more be at the centre of the analysis, but this time with an anonymous private individual at the centre of events.