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The journalists and the rabbits

The moment a person assumes the role of a reporter or political commentator and views a scandal through their eyes, the character of the scandal phenomenon changes inexorably. To a greater extent than the preceding chapters, this one will deal with journalism and politics as arenas and examine how the two of them interact today. It is especially politicians who are at the centre of public scandals, and for this reason it is mainly political journalists who through their work trigger and follow the development of scandals at close range. If one wants to gain insight into how a scandal appears from the other side and is experienced by journalists, it thus makes sense to turn to this particular group of professionals.

Research about the interlinked, extensive areas that deal with the commercialisation of the media and the medialisation of politics, as well as their potential consequences for democracy, may be said to make up a vital artery of journalism scholarship and media and communication science today, and I will partially write myself into these areas. What I want to contribute is an individual perspective on the development that so many researchers have studied critically and in detail, and, on that basis, investigate how this development is experienced by practitioners.

Culture continues to be a key concept. In this chapter, journalistic culture will come in for special attention – that is to say, the normative cement that creates coherence and meaning in the everyday lives of journalists, where spoken or silent agreements, rules, and routines govern journalistic work and the production of news.

The events surrounding Håkan Juholt, former party chairman for the Social Democrats, formed a recurrent component in my conversations with journalists. These events had taken place around a year and a half prior to my interviews. It was seldom I who raised this particular topic. Instead, the reporters were encouraged to let their thoughts range freely around a variety of political scandals.

The answer to the question of why this story kept recurring probably has to do with its exceptional character. Never before has a Swedish party leader – and, in addition to that, the leader of such a large party as the Social Democrats, which governed Sweden for so long – had such a brief and scandal-dominated career. Besides, some of the journalists I met had studied Juholt closely, both during the time of the media scandal and afterwards.¹ In this chapter, as in the others, attention is also given to a number of Swedish journalists whom I have not interviewed, but who have discussed and problematised the media-scandal phenomenon in various contexts within the framework of public debate.

The objectivity talisman

Having worked as a journalist myself for many years, I regard the use of emotions as a point of departure when analysing the work of journalists as virtually impermissible. Even so, emotions in relation to journalists' objects of study are precisely what I wish to investigate in this chapter, starting out from a question formulated by researchers Barry Richards and Gavin Rees, who have investigated British journalistic culture: How do journalists relate to their own emotional lives in the exercise of their profession, and how do they deal with the emotions of the people they encounter while doing their work? (Richards and Rees 2011:853). These two authors write that journalism as a profession, being of an expressive and creative character, naturally attracts creative people. On the face of it, one might assume that this would promote an emotionally reflective culture within the profession; but for various reasons, developments have gone in the opposite direction. Richards and Rees:

The 'free spirit' side of journalism cultures is balanced by the influence of a certain construction of 'objectivity', one that precludes excursions into the emotional. For this and other reasons, the picture of contemporary British journalism, as seen in impressionistic overview, is of a professional culture relatively unaffected by the turn to affect. (Richards and Rees 2011:854)

The authors argue that the so-called affective turn has reached neither British journalistic practice nor academic research on journalism.

1 For example, it may be mentioned that Margit Silberstein, together with political scientist Tommy Möller, has written a book about Juholt (Möller and Silberstein 2013). Anette Holmqvist of *Aftonbladet* scrutinised Juholt closely, too. It was she who uncovered (among other things) the so-called rent-allowance scandal – one of the reasons why I interviewed her in particular.

Similar circumstances can be said to apply in respect of Swedish journalism which has been inspired by Britain, not least within public service, where the BBC has been an explicit model. The development toward an idealisation of an objective and politically neutral journalism includes a number of nations and can be traced back in time for almost a hundred years. It began in the 1920s as a backlash against the propaganda spread by mass media during the First World War, and it also led to the concept of ‘news’ being redefined by professional organisations, such as the American news agency AP, the Associated Press. Gradually, in America as well as in Western Europe, both journalism and the news it produced came to adhere to guiding principles such as objectivity, impartiality, specialisation, source criticism, investigative methods, and autonomy.

Since then, the objectivity ideal has been problematised by both journalists and researchers. Nevertheless, it remains strong within the corps of journalists and has, to borrow an expression from Richards and Rees, a ‘*talismanic force within journalism practice*’ (Richards and Rees 2011:863). The opening words of the Swedish publicity regulations originate in this yardstick, with keywords such as relevance, independence, impartiality, objectivity, accuracy, factual accounting, and even-handedness – all necessary components of what one might term good journalism.

Yet another related concept has of late gained a firm hold in Swedish journalism and is used in order to safeguard its autonomy and impartiality: *consequence neutrality* or the *principle of consequence neutrality*. This means that a journalist should not consider the consequences of publishing a text, a photo, or a video or sound feature. She or he should not be influenced or hindered by the possible consequences that might follow from the publication of this item. Many newsrooms in twenty-first-century Sweden apply this principle, which is explicitly articulated in rules and regulations, here exemplified by a section from the policy of the Sveriges Radio news desk *Ekot*:

Our basic rule is that news dissemination is consequence-neutral. That a party stands to gain or lose because of our publishing something is no reason for us to refrain from doing so. We broadcast what is important according to the requirements of relevance and objectivity. It is not the news broadcaster’s task to consider who is favoured or disadvantaged by a certain news item.²

2 <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3113&grupp=20752&artikel=5789843> (accessed 7 March 2019).

When I interviewed Mats Knutson, political reporter at the Sveriges Television news programme *Rapport*, he asserted the importance of being consequence-neutral in his work. If an event is relevant one should report it, and if it is not one should leave it alone, was his unshakable basic rule. In either case, one ought not, as a journalist, to allow one's emotions to govern one's decision. That could, for instance, lead to special treatment being accorded to people in power towards whom the journalist as a private individual feels sympathy or antipathy, and that would be disastrous.

A circumstance that might be thought to militate against these creditable principles is that journalists are, in all essentials, feeling creatures, like the interviewees on whom they depend for the production of news. That is not something to which journalists readily admit, however; still less will they speak to other journalists about their experiences in the field and about emotions engendered by those experiences. It is a so-called non-topic, or, as one of Richards and Rees's informants put it:

[Journalists] rarely talk about this, because people don't see it as a priority. And it runs contrary to your training as a journalist almost; because your training tells you you're not the story. ... You talk about events but not as they affect you. (Richards and Rees 2011:858)

According to the results in Richards and Rees's extensive interview study among journalists, it was not deemed proper to openly convey your emotions to your colleagues, not even following traumatic experiences at work. That was regarded as odd and undesirable behaviour which was opposed to the neutrality ideal and might, in the worst-case scenario, throw a spanner into the works of the story itself. In fact, many of the journalists attempted to evade the researchers' questions, which had to do with the emotional experiences of working as a reporter. A disinclination to speak about feelings became apparent.

To be thick-skinned as a journalist seems to be a lingering masculine ideal which is encumbered with a number of paradoxes: Good reporters should have the ability to empathise, but should not allow themselves to be too much affected by the people they meet. Reporters should be able to convey other people's emotions without feeling very much themselves. Journalists should use a creative, preferably emotional language in order to attract an audience, but they should not themselves be affected by it. They should act rationally and matter-of-factly and stay neutral and objective, but at the same time use their intuition in their journalistic

work, where a so-called gut feeling should control the evaluation of news.³

Richards and Rees analyse these contradictions, arguing that one of the most important findings in their investigation has to do with the ambivalence that is prevalent within the professional corps concerning the concept of objectivity. In some contexts the concept implied political impartiality while suggesting an emotional distance in others. Sometimes these interpretations of the concept merged with one another. The authors argue that the distinction between expressing one's personal values in the reporting and showing empathy at work was lost, and that both of these were felt to contaminate the sought-after and exalted objectivity. It was not uncommon for journalists to argue, on the basis of both traditional and simplifying ideals, that feelings *always* jeopardised impartiality (Richards and Rees 2011:860).

If, as a journalist, I feel too much – that is, if I allow my feelings to provide me with information about the world around me and about how I myself and my fellow human beings relate to it and to one another – there is a risk that I will enter into compromises that diminish my impartiality and my duty to talk about reality such as it appears as neutrally as possible. For this reason, it is better to hold on to objectivity, no matter what that might mean. That is roughly how this opaque principle seems to be conceived. When I contacted well-known Swedish political journalists, I was of course well aware of this ideal, i.e., that good reporters should not be influenced by their emotions in relation to the subject or the person about whom they report, especially not journalists who cover politics. I was thus not overly clear about being interested in emotions in relation to my research area, but we did speak about

3 In spite of the female dominance in the profession in Sweden (Statistics Sweden (SCB) 2010), the idea of the solitary, emotionally unaffected, adventurous, and unassailable male reporter seems to live on – a kind of archetypal journalist who embarks on dangerous escapades, putting his life on the line in his search for the truth, and who drowns his sorrows, if any, in a few glasses of whisky instead of broadcasting his emotions and seeking comfort (see Jarlbrink 2006 for an analysis of the so-called heroic reporter). Cherished as well as caricatured, this ideal type seems to exert a stubborn influence, and many journalists still use it as a basis for their quest for a professional identity. The macho style of the hack reporter, the hatchet man, and the foreign correspondent serve as extreme examples of a culturally shaped agreement within the corps of journalists: we don't think too much about feelings in this business (see Melin-Higgins 2004).

emotions, as this chapter shows in a variety of ways. First, however, I will step on the brakes a bit and problematise the basic concept once more.

Scepticism – media scandals, do they exist?

In my meetings with the journalists, it became apparent that a few of them felt called into question by me as a researcher. Among other things, my introductory e-mails had aroused negative feelings in some of them. This was accompanied by a desire to explain themselves – alternatively defend themselves – when we met, which in its turn awakened a willingness in me to do likewise. On some occasions, for instance, I explicitly drew attention to my own background within the journalistic profession, as though to signal my prior understanding of the work involved. However, on the whole there was a good atmosphere during the interviews, which in several cases began with a critical discussion concerning the very concept ‘media scandal’ and a broad conversation about different *drev* (media houndings), which was the term favoured by the journalists themselves. The line of reasoning presented by political reporter Margit Silberstein of the Sveriges Television news programme *Aktuellt* may serve as an example:

MARGIT SILBERSTEIN (MS): I think it so easy to use the word *drev* [media hounding]. Of course I realise that when everybody moves in the same direction, that’s a hounding. ... But I also think that the people who feel exposed, that they very easily reach for that word. That it is a hounding and that it is the fault of the hounding, we get to hear that a lot, at least I as a journalist get to hear it. It’s the fault of the hounding and it’s the hounding that has led to a certain development that perhaps ended in, well, Juholt’s having to resign. There are many Social Democrats who think that way, that it was the journalists’ fault that Juholt had to go.

I: And don’t you agree with that, you who have studied ... [Juholt]?

MS: I agree that he was very heavily scrutinised, absolutely. That is a truth. But I don’t agree that it is the, whatever word one wants to use, fault of journalism. But it was journalism that brought out various things, so in that way of course we contributed. Do you see what I mean?

I: Yes, I understand precisely what you mean. What you’re describing is that the concept itself can also be used as a tool to strike back at the media?

MS: Yes, absolutely. (M27097)

From the point of view of the journalists, the term *political scandal* is thus to be preferred to other designations because it puts an emphasis on politicians as actors, rather than on the media and on the journalists. On the other hand, Silberstein felt that there is indeed such a thing as media hounding. She herself used the concept repeatedly during the interview in order to characterise what she described above as the occasion when all journalists move in the same direction. In the line of reasoning of political editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, Heidi Avellan, an ambivalence also manifested itself in connection with the concept:

But that it appears to be a hounding, everything appears to be a hounding today. It's no longer the case that there are *Rapport*, *Ekot*, and five daily newspapers to take into consideration. Now there is a myriad of different [actors] who ask questions and make claims. And this chatter, this punditry, is huge. Then you can call everything a hounding, merely as a description of the extent of the scrutiny. But obviously that doesn't make the scrutiny less relevant.⁴ (M27099)

In our conversation, Avellan questioned the careless use of the 'hounding' concept, claiming, among other things, that in public debate it had come to be a term that could be stuck on to almost anything. The moment the ground starts to quake beneath the feet of a politician and the extent of media reporting increases, interested debaters immediately interpret the situation as a hounding, in posts that may be politically motivated. When, for instance, a Social Democratic politician ends up in the media searchlight, party sympathisers generally think that the media are going too far; but when the accused person comes from the opposing side, the scrutiny is perceived as being justified and vice versa. The main problem is, she argued, that the purpose of the discussions is to devalue the journalistic work effort, often for selfish reasons.

Hanne Kjöllér, editorial writer at the big daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, agreed with this and argued that the potential suffering of the main figure cannot be allowed to determine the extent of the reporting. How it feels to stand there in the glare of the spotlight should not be a measure of whether journalists have gone too far or not. The reporting can be relevant and adequate anyway. In his or her capacity as a politician or another figure of authority, a person has a duty to admit to what they have done and come forward, no matter how unpleasant this may be. It may be edifying

4 See Avellan's comment in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (Avellan 2013).

that people are shamed in public, both on a private and a social level, she argued.

According to the reporters, the increasing number of scandals is thus evidence that journalists are doing their job. It could be seen as proof that the talk about the open society is not simply rhetoric, but is actually put into practice. It is sometimes pointed out that media scandals are an unknown phenomenon in dictatorships.

Media scandals are undeniably complex phenomena. On the one hand, they can be seen as a valuable scrutiny of power from which we as citizens in a democratic society benefit in various ways, and on the other as sensationalism and character assassination of individual politicians which risk lowering public trust in both politics and journalism. Today, high-level politicians must expect to be heavily scrutinised, and most of them regard this as a natural consequence of their choice of profession. However, it is possible to imagine that the fact that political scandals have come to be an increasingly frequent phenomenon will deter competent people from going into politics in the first place, especially as some scandals involve matters that are not especially serious. Former Minister of Culture Cecilia Stegö Chilò (Moderate Party) touched on this in her resignation speech after revelations about her unpaid TV licences:

I also want to direct a warm thank you to all those people who have in different ways supported me and my family during some stressful days. I have been the recipient of a lot of warmth, but I have also encountered great anxiety: What happens to our democracy if there is only room for flawless people in our politics? This is a big and difficult question which I cannot discuss here. But I hope that my experiences will not deter people like me: women, entrepreneurs, journalists, and independent public debaters from developing their ideas, following their convictions, and engaging in party-political work.⁵

In spite of this anxiety, Cecilia Stegö Chilò evinced an understanding of the work of the reporters, not least because she herself had worked professionally as a journalist for many years and had presented her own revelations about the abuse of power by politicians. Regarding the initial reporting about herself in 2006, she said: '[i]t was of course completely correct, they did nothing wrong from a publicistic point of view with respect to work on and publication of news. Of course it was above the fold!'⁶ Stegö Chilò understands

5 Press release, Prime Minister's Office, 16 October 2006.

6 'Above the fold' is a journalistic expression and that refers to the top half of the first page of a newspaper – a place that has traditionally been reserved for the most important news of the day.

the logic of the news and respects the journalistic duty of scrutiny, but was still critical of what she calls a witch-hunt. She felt that the mudslinging and the demonisation that followed were shameful both for her and for the journalists involved, and researchers agree with her. Neither the publication of the news nor the criticism of the event in question is a problem in itself. The complications arise when the attention of the media turns into a collective hunt where both major and minor missteps lead to big headlines and the coverage grows to such proportions that it assumes the character of war reporting. This happens in parallel with shrinking perspectives and a one-sided use of sources, where the moral story eventually takes over completely and is presented as a simplified battle between good and evil, where the individual politician is depicted as representing the evil side (Allern and Pollack, 2012a:188). In a conversation with the current Press Ombudsman in Sweden, Ola Sigvardsson, he established the following points:

If the issue is important and relevant to society, it is a good thing that many journalists and newsrooms move in the same direction, follow the course of events, and write about it. Then the hounding is desirable. The problem arises when the reporting becomes ever more attenuated and they still keep publishing as intensively. That's also when the affected person risks appearing as Beelzebub, that is, as a thoroughly evil person. (Telephone conversation, 19 September 2013)

Recurring in the interviews with the journalists was the assertion that neither the individual journalist nor the individual newsroom can control scandal reporting once it has gathered momentum. Perhaps the mechanisms of the hounding – which are, after all, acknowledged – are not good, but unfortunately the course of events cannot be halted. The process is beyond the control of individual actors. When I later listened to the interviews, the lines of argumentation made me think of the political term *TINA*, the acronym for the expression 'There Is No Alternative'. The following pages will investigate the significance of this fatalistic conviction in detail.

Undignified behaviour and a lack of independence

In all the interviews a good deal of time was devoted to talking about developments in the media market, in particular to what competition and digital development had meant for journalism. According to the reporters, that is where the answer lies to the question of why media scandals – a concept I nevertheless stick to – are becoming more numerous, and also why other kinds of political

reporting have taken on some components from scandal reporting, such as personification, intimisation, and dramatisation.

Margit Silberstein of Sveriges Television initiated such a line of reasoning by establishing that over time it has become considerably more difficult to be a high-level politician, because the news is continuously being reported nowadays. All reporters write for the Internet; all newspapers produce web TV; and everything proceeds at a furious pace. 'It's an incredible tempo, so I definitely think it's more difficult. There is always some journalist showing up', she said. For the journalists, the growing competition and the intensified pace mean that it has become more difficult to carry out one's work in a satisfactory manner. More must be produced in a considerably shorter time and by ever fewer contributors. As a part of this, claimed Silberstein and several others along with her, it has become more difficult to refrain from reporting about certain events that receive a lot of attention in other media, not least in the context of scandals. This development within journalism will be discussed a little later, but let us first examine the journalists' experiences of the scandals.

Silberstein described detailed scenes where journalists crowded around a person who had ended up in hot water and looked as if they were suffering a great deal. When I asked a question about what emotions this experience in the profession awakened in her, she answered: 'I don't feel good about having that role. I really don't.' She continued:

MS: There is something undignified in it, for the person who is exposed, but also for the journalist. You want to sit down like this and talk, but hunting someone ... it becomes so ... You stand there and wait outside the Chamber [of the Swedish Parliament] – Håkan Juholt had some party-leader debates that were incredibly hyped, then he comes out and we stand there with our lights, flashbulbs, and so on. It feels uncivilised, that's one way of putting it.

I: What's the alternative, then?

MS: No, if you want to be included, if you want to keep your job, you have to take part. So I don't know if there are any alternatives. Not that I can see. But you asked me to describe how I feel, and I don't like it. (M27097)

One does not refrain from participating in this type of reporting as an individual reporter, despite its being called both uncivilised and undignified. If one wants to keep one's job one has to take part, there are no alternatives, according to Silberstein. When I brought

up the increasing number of mediated scandals in the Nordic countries and in the Western world, Pontus Mattsson, political reporter at the Sveriges Radio news desk *Ekot*, also emphasised the competition in the media market as an explanatory model: ‘I believe the media competition has increased that [trend]. Information travels more rapidly and people are afraid of not keeping up, so one goes along instead of waiting to see what happens. The competitive element becomes clearer’ (M27100). He then described – sometimes graphically, sometimes critically – what the coverage was like in January 2012 on the eve of Håkan Juholt’s expected resignation, when journalists gathered in groups outside the Social Democratic party headquarters at Sveavägen 68 in central Stockholm. Mattsson was one of the reporters who stood there in the street, shivering in the winter cold, chasing news. After the fact he assumed a questioning attitude regarding the enormous resources that the media companies had spent in maintaining the surveillance outside the gate, a surveillance that went on for many days, round the clock, with little to show for it from a news perspective. He thought about what would have happened if the joint work effort had been invested in something else instead, such as more independent journalism.

PONTUS MATSSON (PM): Imagine the resources that were spent on people standing on Sveavägen hour after hour, day and night, waiting for a statement that never came, but, eventually, did come. Then I can feel that the proportions were distorted. I believe journalism in Sweden, the citizens, the newspaper readers, the radio listeners, would have got more out of all the overtime and salary resources if they’d instead been spent on journalists’ trying to scrutinise the policies of the Social Democrats, for instance. Or the policies of some other party. But then there are a lot of things that make it impossible to resist. People want to know.

I: What is it [they want to know]?

PM: Well, the basic thing is that we want to know whether Håkan Juholt will stay on as party chair or not, it’s a journalistic duty to inform people about this. (M27100)

Ekot is supposed to be a news leader. It is therefore impossible to refer to other sources at the symbolic moment when the party leader leaves his post. For this reason Pontus Mattsson, in spite of a certain amount of frustration, cannot leave Sveavägen and go back to his newsroom any more than the representatives of other media companies, who have an ambition to be news leaders as well, can do so. ‘I’m supposed to stand there’, he said emphatically. In principle,

then, it was right for him to stay – even though he was, on a general level, critical of the massive coverage on the basis of what these resources, in the form of licence fees, time, and competence, could have been used for instead. On a more personal plane, between the lines Mattsson expressed a feeling that is perhaps surprising in the context, namely boredom. Apparently, it can be both tiresome and tedious to stand waiting for a statement that never comes. At any rate, it does not appear to be particularly exciting.

PM: So when one of these stories has gone on for quite a while, then it just becomes sort of, at least I think so, a rel- [interrupts himself], then you want the whole thing to come to an end. I don't want to work with this issue any more.

I: So what does the resignation mean to you as a journalist?

PM: It means you can go home, something like that. (M27100)

There was no adrenalin kick during the drawn-out ups and downs surrounding Juholt for this experienced journalist, who rather seemed to view it as a necessary evil in his job to have to cover events of this kind together with thirty or forty colleagues. Instead he saw it as his duty to try to influence the situation by setting a good example and taking care not to contribute to the sometimes rancorous mood, neither in his actions on site nor in his reporting. However, the media themselves have no interest in putting a stop to this type of dramatised and scandal-orientated reporting, he maintained. On the contrary, many actors want to push the whole thing even harder, especially those media who have made dramatic revelations 'their thing'. Mattsson called this 'corporate branding'. 'Now there are new revelations!', 'We can do more!' Sveriges Television political commentator Mats Knutson was on the same track. He too claimed that it has become more difficult for individual actors to refrain from participating in this type of journalism.

I can say something about that, because my opinion when it comes to scandals and affairs is that we [the political reporters] who work with this are usually more restrained, even if we take the crap when we're criticised. Internally in the newsrooms, when we talk about what to do, we often argue against reporting about it, but the pressure becomes so great via other media that our editors and the people who sit there, internally in the newsroom, they feel that we are being left behind. Everybody else mentions it, and we don't. (M27096)

Anette Holmqvist of the tabloid *Aftonbladet* thought along similar lines, claiming that the change in the business is tangible. With her twenty-three years in the profession, she is able to put developments

into perspective, and she argued that it is ‘as different as chalk and cheese’ with respect to the intensity of news dissemination, both at a general level and in the context of scandals. During the most recent decade, more and more newsrooms have emerged that consist of a growing number of sections, with one news team for each section. In spite of this, neither she herself nor her colleagues at her paper can refrain from reporting; the idea would be almost absurd. Not even TV4 reporter Anders Pihlblad, who has himself been the subject of a media scandal, sees any solution to the problem. An individual newsroom neither wants to nor can refrain from reporting on an event that everybody else reports on to a massive extent. That would mean renouncing their fundamental duties as news producers.

These experiences emphasise what we already knew, namely that the structures within journalism are generally superordinated to the individual’s ability to influence journalistic production, where the collective awareness of the newsroom and the influence of the editor-in-chief and other managers have a dominant impact on the assessment and selection of news, at least in Sweden (Hultén, 1999:96; see Nygren 2008:48f, and Wiik & Andersson 2016:465–84). Mats Knutson, Margit Silberstein, Pontus Mattsson, Anette Holmqvist, and Anders Pihlblad testified that they – in spite of their undisputed standing as individual journalists – cannot refrain from reporting on matters that news editors, senior editors, and producers have deemed to be essential, even though they would sometimes like to. Specialist reporters usually have a high degree of autonomy in the exercise of their profession, which means that they themselves can control and influence what will end up as articles and features; but in spite of the special position of these informants, they seem to adapt to the logic of the newsroom when the chips are down. In fact, they not only expressed an understanding of and a loyalty to the prevailing order, they also defended it, doing what was expected of them at the end of the day. It is true that a form of resistance appears in the answers in the interviews, but this seems to be more rhetorical than practical.

The art of justifying one’s actions

I didn’t like it at all, but I had to do it. Most of all I wanted to leave, but I stayed anyway because it was expected of me. I actually said no, but somebody else decided I should do it anyway. It’s in the nature of the job to act in this way. Everybody else does it. The profession requires of me that I act in this way, if I don’t I will lose

my job. I have a duty to draw attention to those matters that everybody else draws attention to. I only expose other people's errors. It's not really a media scandal because it is the politicians who have made a mess of things.

This is roughly how the reasoning of the journalists could be summarised. How are we to interpret these recurring interview answers? In the terminology of sociologists Marvin B. Scott and Stanford M. Lyman, they are examples of *accounts*, i.e., explanations that implicitly or explicitly excuse an act. In order to describe the functions of this linguistic phenomenon in everyday life, they themselves use language that is almost poetic:

Our concern here is with one feature of talk: Its ability to shore up the timbers of fractured sociation, its ability to throw bridges between the promised and the performed, its ability to repair the broken and restore the estranged. This feature of talk involves the giving of what we shall call accounts. (Scott and Lyman 1968:46)

We are hence dealing with commonly occurring linguistic constructions which come into being in contexts where the actions of a person give rise to surprised or critical questions in other people, with the aim of preventing more questions and, by extension, conflicts. These constructions are especially apt to materialise in connection with modes of behaviour that the people surrounding an individual deem to be unfortunate, unnecessary, unsuitable, or inappropriate. Scott and Lyman argue that accounts serve as verbal links or bridges between people, links which we, usually without thinking about it, use in order to bridge the gap between our expected actions and our actual actions and make them comprehensible. Below, these linguistic models will be investigated more closely in relation to the journalists' statements.

Scott and Lyman initially divide accounts into two categories: excuses and justifications. The former is generally used in order to mitigate and alleviate the issue of responsibility in case someone's actions are called into question. A subcategory among the excuses, called *appeals to defeasibility*, corresponds to the journalists' answers to the interview questions in that the journalists often dwell on the impossibility of the situation, where they, despite their knowledge about and criticism of the mechanisms and consequences of media scandals, nevertheless acted the way they did – because their free will was limited. Such explanations are common in stories about coercion as well as about undue influence (Scott and Lyman 1968:47f): 'I had no choice but to do as I was told' is the essence of this

position. In this and similar lines of reasoning one can discern an element of fatalism, which is expressed more clearly in the type of excuse that Scott and Lyman call *scapegoating*. They describe it as follows: 'Scapegoating is derived from another form of fatalistic reasoning. Using this form a person will allege that his questioned behavior is a response to the behavior or attitudes of another' (Scott and Lyman 1968:50).

It was linguist Kenneth Burke who coined the expressions *scapegoat mechanism* and *scapegoating* in order to describe the actual linguistic act where a party is exposed to undeservedly negative treatment by another party, with the intention of attaining some form of relief for the latter (Burke 1945:406ff). His interpreter René Girard (1986) refers in his texts to the transgressions of norms that may occasion scapegoating, transgressions consisting in actions carried out by an individual or group which in some way offend or violate the values, ideals, and existential principles of the majority. This usually has to do with a number of unspoken expectations or presumptions – which may be more explicitly expressed through norms and rules-of-the-game – concerning the kind of behaviour that is considered good or bad, right or wrong, permitted or forbidden, appropriate or inappropriate, and that is usually organised within the framework of a culture. Many examples of the relationship of media scandals to scapegoating mechanisms have been provided in previous chapters of this book. A scapegoat may be said to be on the opposite side of what people at a certain point in time within a culture identify as good behaviour. He or she has done something that violates the rules, or has certain character traits which are seen as transgressing some norm or norms, and should be punished for it. The person who administers the punishment is thus carrying out a sort of social duty and therefore escapes punishment her- or himself.

In other words, journalists are only acting at the behest of someone else. Pushed to their logical conclusions, long lines of argument presented by some of the interviewed journalists adhered to a pattern: first, it was questioned whether media scandals exist in the first place; then, in spite of everything, their existence was acknowledged; after that, criticism was levelled against the phenomenon; and, finally, it was claimed that those who end up in a scandal only have themselves to blame. According to a recurring line of reasoning, the transgressions of people in power are the causes of the scandals, and for that reason the resulting developments are their fault. What journalists do is expose mistakes already committed. They neither can nor should be held responsible for the consequences of that

exposure. In addition, these consequences would not have had to be so serious if only politicians had learned to handle these types of events in a more reasonable manner. A lot of suffering for individuals who have ended up in hot water would have been preventable if people on the political side of things had acted rationally and professionally, and so on.

Not untrue, indeed; but the answers consistently lead away from the responsibilities of the journalists, and that, according to Scott and Lyman, is their very purpose. Scott and Lyman's 'justifications' are closely related to this attitude. 'To justify an act is to assert its positive value in the face of a claim to the contrary', they write (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). This category includes four subcategories that are particularly interesting in the present context and will be briefly explained below: *the denial of injury*, *the denial of the victim*, *the condemnation of the condemners*, and *the appeal to loyalties*. The first subcategory includes explanations which amount to arguing that the damage caused by (in this case) a journalist's actions was in fact if not richly deserved, then at least inevitable. In that respect, the actions may be considered permissible. By implication, this entails a rejection of the possibility that the person who was exposed to the actions might be a victim of them (*the denial of the victim*). Scott and Lyman mention individual politicians as examples of people who may be attacked with the justification that they deserve the attack, mainly because every politician represents politicians as a collective. Regarding the third subcategory, *condemnation of the condemners*, Scott and Lyman write: '[u]sing the device of condemnation of the condemners, the actor admits performing an untoward act but asserts its irrelevancy because others commit these and worse acts, and these others are either not caught, not condemned, unnoticed, or even praised' (Scott and Lyman 1968:51).

In the interviews with the journalists, there was a repeated explanation to the effect that other people were already committing these actions which, when taken together, create a media scandal; consequently, the journalists – implicitly – neither have to, want to, nor are able to refrain from acting in the same manner. In addition, and in line with Scott and Lyman's results, a defence of this type of action usually originates in the fact that in public life journalists are not only criticised, but also applauded and praised. A conspicuous Swedish example is the tabloid *Expressen's* so-called scoop from the autumn of 2009 concerning the previously mentioned Jan Guillou – an internationally established journalist and author – who was

identified as a ‘Soviet secret agent’ on newspaper billboards and in headlines. The scandal writings, which in their entirety covered over fifty pages, were not only censured by the Press Ombudsman; they were also honoured with a Golden Spade award by the association Föreningen Grävande Journalister (‘The association of “digging” [i.e., investigative] journalists’). The Golden Spade is a major journalistic award, and in this case the reason was stated as follows: ‘For spectacular revelations that changed the writing of history about an icon within journalism and social debate.’⁷ Since then, there has been complete silence about this ostensibly laudable change in the writing of history.

Since media scandals usually have a higher purpose and a kind of altruistic significance, namely that of ‘exposing the people in power’ and maintaining the morality of society (at least implicitly), transgressions on the part of journalists – as well as any personal injury caused by those transgressions – are justified. This type of reasoning is in its turn closely linked to the final linguistic neutralisation technique in Scott and Lyman’s survey, the *appeal to loyalties*. ‘Here the actor asserts his action was permissible or even right since it served the interests of another to whom he owes an unbreakable allegiance or affection’ (Scott and Lyman 1968:51). Loyalty and firm ties grow strong among journalists, which is one of many expressions of the ideology that has been called the journalistic institution or journalistic field (see Bourdieu 2005, Petersson 1994, Ekecrantz 1996, and Broady 1988). The ideology of this institution comprises self-sacrificing ideals as well as elitist and populist components, where the ability of a journalist to expose and see through people in power is considered vital to democracy (Petersson 1994). According to this way of thinking, the public is distrusted and exalted at one and the same time. The public does not have the ability to find the necessary knowledge on its own and therefore needs the journalist, who holds ‘the mandate of the public’ to scrutinise those in power. The revelations published by the journalist form the crowning glory of this mission. But it is easy to forget that it is the journalist who decides which knowledge will reach the public, and also what conclusions should be drawn from the revelations.

7 The reporting was freed by the Swedish Press Council, PON, which felt that the headline ‘*Expressen* avslöjar: Jan Guillou hemlig Sovjetagent. Tog emot pengar av KGB’ (‘*Expressen* reveals: Jan Guillou Soviet secret agent. Received money from the KGB’) had an unclear meaning. See Helin 2010, and Jan Guillou’s book of memoirs (Guillou 2010:471–554).

Journalists have another strong tie of loyalty to their audience. Niklas Svensson, a political reporter at *Expressen*, was careful to point out that he and his colleagues at the newspaper ultimately had the mandate of their readers, which is a form of confidence that must be preserved and lived up to. If, for instance, the readers want to know what Under-Secretary of State Ingmar Ohlsson did on Boxing Day in 2004, well, then it is up to the newspaper to find out, even if the coverage means that Ohlsson will suffer personally. Loyalty to their readers justifies the tough scrutiny, including the publication of unconfirmed rumours, idle gossip, and newspaper billboards with the word 'LIAR' next to a picture of Ohlsson's face (see Chapter 2). As a rule, tabloid journalists are prepared to go very far in order to satisfy the wishes of their audience, Niklas Svensson asserted, and that seems to be true.

Mats Knutson testified to the existence of a degree of sensitivity to viewers' reactions to scandal reporting in the newsrooms at Sveriges Television. During the so-called *ministeraffären* ('the minister affair') in Sweden in 2006, when two newly appointed ministers were removed from office and several others were exposed to harsh criticism and were scrutinised in detail by the news media for months, the audience eventually had enough. Telephones in the newsrooms began to ring, and email inboxes filled up: 'Don't you have anything better to do?' was the indignant message according to Knutson, whereupon the extent of the reporting was reduced. Since then, the audience's influence over both reporting in general and scandal reporting in particular has only increased, especially because of the opportunities provided by digital technology for interaction and dialogue with the newsrooms.

In addition, the journalist tends to become the main figure of the scoop, where balanced information is pushed into the background in favour of the heroic deed. Håkan Juholt touched on this during our conversation. He repeatedly claimed that it is not the affected individual who is the main character in the ritualised drama that a media scandal constitutes. Another player has taken her or his place.

HJ: The main character is the hunter, the quarry is secondary. I could have been any old animal. It's the hunter who is the main character, no doubt about it.

I: It's the journalist?

HJ: Yes, it's the person who lands the best-aimed shot, the one who hunts for long enough. They held no grudges against me, there were no journalists who had a personal aversion to me, absolutely

not. ... But it became a psychosis. ... And it was the hunter's own self-image [that mattered]. It was the columns of the political analysts, when they are allowed to stand and say that he'll be resigning tonight and then I didn't. How embarrassing that must have been for them. (M27102)

The concept of the ideology of journalism draws attention to the professional culture that is expressed through all the explicit or implicit norms, rules, codes, and agreements that regulate journalistic work. The following section examines these more closely, starting out from topical research on the development of the media business.

Honour, fame, and rabbits

It is well known that the most recent decades have brought unusual challenges for journalism, as the large traditional media houses with their flagship newspapers struggle to survive while journalism is increasingly devalued as a profession. The transfer from traditional, analogue news processing to 'the post-industrial organisation of newswork' (Deuze 2017:10f) is as tangible and challenging in Sweden and its neighbouring countries as it is in large parts of the rest of Europe and in the United States. At the centre of the theories on the post-industrial organisation of newswork are the particular challenges and opportunities which the digital era has brought to journalism on all fronts – technologically, economically, organisationally, ideologically, and culturally. Today, newswork takes up more and more space in formal or informal cooperation with the audience, who participate through 'a co-creative continuum ranging from sharing real-time information and providing eyewitness accounts, all the way to autonomously authoring news stories, shaping an emerging type of *networked* journalism' (Deuze 2016:11, original emphasis; see also Deuze 2005, and Beckett 2010). Within international media and communication studies, journalism research, and research on political communication, this development and the ideological influence of neoliberalism on the media – and, by extension, on journalism – have led to a plethora of concerned reports and scientific articles.

Studies show that commercial news criteria have been given increased space, even if the time-span involved is often a little too short to be fully convincing (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008:195–214). When these 'changes' are discussed, researchers occasionally – implicitly or explicitly – proceed from an idealised notion of the 1960s. But it is neither new nor surprising that media scandals sell,

and that journalism that sells is journalism that survives. Just as a reminder: the 2009 thesis of media historian Johan Jarlbrink, *Det våras för journalisten* ('Springtime for the journalist'), which describes the development of Swedish journalism from the 1870s to the 1930s, is filled with accusations against and ideas surrounding the unfavourable influence of commercial logic on so-called *smädesskrifvare* ('libellers') and *quickhetsmakare* ('wit-mongers') and their best-selling scandal writings. Those two categories are contrasted to serious publicists who, on the basis of sound knowledge, educated and enlightened the public. In brief, journalism rests on commercial grounds (Jarlbrink 2009:55ff). In addition, it makes sense to regard the increase in scandal stories in relation to the larger number of actors in the market. The more people there are who are able to flush out these stories, write about them, and publish them, the more common they automatically become.⁸

Bearing these critical points in mind, it is still possible to make use of some of the figures and arguments that have been supplied by media researchers Sigurd Allern and Ester Pollack (Allern and Pollack 2009:193–206). They argue that scandal stories are considerably easier and cheaper to produce, and attract a larger audience, than investigative political reporting about complex circumstances; consequently, the number of such stories has grown. Or, in the words of journalist Mats Knutson, '[i]t's easier and more profitable to describe a scandal, which perhaps doesn't mean anything to society at large, than to give an account of a societal development that affects everyone' (M27096). In other words, scandals become a simple, effective, and cheap way of attracting the audience and competing for the limited space in the media market, where the characteristics of popular journalism are gradually being transferred to political journalism (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2011:294–310). The linguistic techniques that occur in scandal stories, where journalists endeavour to capture people's attention through high engagement value, an intensified narrative tempo, and a popularised and hostile conversational tone as politics becomes a more or less entertaining

8 The testimonies of the journalists about increasing competition and a rising number of actors should also alleviate concerns, at least at some level, about the so-called crisis which journalism is said to be going through. Increasing numbers of journalists seem to work ever harder, if one is to believe the interviewees, but in a more widespread, varied, and indeterminate form than before.

spectacle, are useful in many contexts. Taken together, the increased scandal reporting could thus be seen as an example of an adaptation to a more crowd-pleasing political journalism that does not put too great a strain on the wallet while signalling that journalists devote themselves to newswork that scrutinises, exposes, and possesses relevance. By linking the adaptation to the market and the commercialisation of news to higher journalistic values, the scandal appears an almost ideal news product for media companies under pressure (Allern and Pollack 2012a:182).

The most important thing in journalistic competition, which has increased considerably during the two most recent decades according to both researchers and journalists, is and remains being first with the news. The competition and the contest among journalists and newsrooms are an established part of the professional culture and have been discussed in several studies (see Tunstall 1971 and Hartley 2011:98ff). Consequently, this is not a new phenomenon either; but it has become increasingly tangible, if one is to believe the interviewed journalists. A myriad of media actors, to borrow an expression from Heidi Avellan, are today fighting over space. The competition among these is not exclusively a matter of making money, but of acquiring a place in the sun, something that, of course, ultimately depends on economic circumstances. All media actors therefore have an interest in advertising themselves and their achievements in a way that, according to Pontus Mattson, has nowadays gone to extremes. As a part of this development, individual journalists have taken on roles as famous news anchors, experts, and social analysts. They have been turned into celebrities with shows, blogs, and image bylines that claim ever more space – a simple and cheap way in which to conduct journalism while marketing personal achievements.

The dream of many news producers is still to deliver news that everybody else quotes, sometimes called scoops, where, for instance, a revelation about the transgressions of a person in power at best fills newspaper pages for days on end, causes the public to come flocking, and impresses colleagues. When the revelation has been published, everybody tags along because nobody dares to sit on the sidelines – a powerful contributing factor to the reporting about a scandal very quickly becoming as massive as it is streamlined. I have already provided a number of examples of this process, but might mention my own research in this context; it shows how scandal stories adhere to a given dramaturgical pattern while being

thin at a general level with regard to content, in the sense that the news keeps repeating itself.⁹

There is something ambivalent about news value being measured on the basis of whether other media actors give attention to a news item, while at the same time everyone wants to produce their own, unique news. The decisive factor for the importance of a news item within this competitive culture is exclusivity, which is – paradoxically enough – determined by whether or not competitors follow it up. On this basis, it is possible to conclude that a news item, no matter how important and unique, quickly loses its original value if it is not taken up by competitors (Hartley 2011:98ff). There is a field of tension between an ambition to be innovative and being obliged to write about the same things that everyone else is writing about.

An expression that has been used about journalism in order to describe the interdependence among media actors is that the field has come to be more and more *structurally biased*, competition for attention and funds determining what journalists report on and how it is done (Pettersson et al. 2006:69–80). Structurally biased journalism

9 As previously mentioned, certain studies show that the conformity on the part of the scandals has been slightly exaggerated; there are counter-claims here at an early stage. This is an important observation. At the same time, the rewriting phenomenon shows up clearly when one analyses the scandals on the basis of form and content, i.e., how news items and articles grow legs and very quickly move from one newsroom to another while to a great extent retaining their original form during the move. Sometimes the effect is almost explosive, as when TV4 news anchor Anders Pihlblad in an interview on 30 October 2007 in the web edition of *Expressen* said the following about Under-Secretary of State Ulrika Schenström and her condition during the much-publicised evening at the restaurant, which led up to the scandal in question: ‘She wasn’t plastered, but she was damned merry.’ This conspicuous quotation, which was picked up by TT, not unexpectedly became a favourite with editors and was published in almost every Swedish newspaper during the next few days, both in the TT format and in their own articles, analyses, and columns. It is true that there were variations in the material, not least regarding the extent of the coverage; but with respect to content, the reporting was extremely similar in the twenty-eight newspapers that reported the statement. Up until now I have studied five scandals closely on the basis of extensive media materials (see Appendix): the so-called Toblerone affair (Hammarlin and Jarlbro 2012, 2014), the ‘Ingmar Ohlsson’ affair (Hammarlin 2013a), the Pihlblad and Schenström scandal (Hammarlin 2013b), and the sex-related scandals surrounding both our present King Carl XVI Gustaf and King Gustaf V (Hammarlin and Jönsson 2017). I have of course also studied other scandals that are discussed in this book carefully, but have not analysed them systematically.

turns inwards, reflecting itself in itself in an almost narcissistic manner, a point touched on by Pontus Mattsson. It is undeniably interesting that public-service media are also dragged on to this merry-go-round. Of course the Sveriges Radio news desk *Ekot* enjoys a greater degree of independence than the purely commercial news producers; but to forego the tempo, the very speed of the news flow, and, so to speak, to hop off while at full speed is fraught with danger. *Ekot* might suddenly appear fusty and outmoded, which would carry the risk of losing out with respect to status and confidence. Briefly put, one might say that only those who perish in the competition escape the rules of the game.

But does not the idea of the increasingly commercialised business of journalism risk obscuring the view? Journalist and author Göran Rosenberg (2000:39–47) does not hesitate when he writes that arguments of this kind embody a kind of evasiveness that is supported by a sometimes self-glorifying professional culture and should therefore be considered part of the accountability that was analysed above. It is simply not possible to see journalists as victims of circumstances when a media scandal occurs. They are not the rabbits, to use Rosenberg's vocabulary. They form part of the hunting team that hunts the rabbits. The first thing that happens during a hounding (a *drev* in Swedish; *drev* is the word Rosenberg uses) is that an intra-professional blindness to one's own defects arises as everybody moves in the same direction and therefore tends to look on what has happened in a similar way. This is partly because journalists use the already published news of their colleagues as source material. One observation thus gives birth to another observation which resembles the first observation, and so on. *Dagens Nyheter* editorial writer Hanne Kjöllér calls this a stage of 'follow my leader' where journalists, apart from using reliable sources, have also begun to listen to and themselves disseminate gossip, rumours, and hearsay. Eventually, they cluster in a kind of excited mob where affiliation to the group stands and falls with supporting the 'right' opinion. She sums up: 'There is a critical boundary when the right opinion becomes disliking someone. ... It becomes like belonging to a football team, that is, whether or not one's going to belong to the winning team.' In addition, every participant in the hunt has a need to have his or her own particular contribution endorsed. 'Then', says Rosenberg, 'the risk is that the hounding becomes self-confirming, meaning that it hounds the wrong quarry in the wrong direction on the wrong premisses' (Rosenberg 2000:43). The hunt is difficult to call off, however. It arouses feelings of intoxication, excitement,

and determination in many journalists: '[You] feel both the power of the pack and the intoxication of a burst of speed' (Rosenberg 2000:45). The energy of the hounding comes from a combination of different feelings and instincts that interact: the fear of missing a news item with significant prestige and attention value; the feeling of inclusion in a community where the values and ideals of one's own professional fraternity are promoted; and the competitive instinct that is at the very core of news culture, where the person who starts the hunt or gets to the trophy first at the end is awarded the Golden Spade. But over-eager participants in a hounding sooner or later mistake their own tracks for those of the quarry. That kind of hunt could end in a tragedy, writes Rosenberg (2000:43).

Feeling empathy

It is both interesting and problematic that individual responsibility seems to count for little with the interviewed journalists. They provide detailed descriptions of situations and circumstances that they, as individuals, are critical of and would prefer not to have to deal with; but at the same time they disclaim any responsibility by referring to a super-ordinated logic to which they have to adapt. This logic is embedded in language and can be made visible by means of Scott and Lyman's conceptual apparatus. 'The end justifies the means' is a recurring thought pattern. If the news is sufficiently important, and if a reporter wants to lead the news hunt as well as defend his or her place in the collective, that person will find acceptable reasons for stretching the limits of what would be considered dishonest during different circumstances. The 'end' is not always pretty. Swedish journalist Annika Ström Melin expresses this clearly and distinctly:

Anyone who has worked inside the media factory knows that there are often less than noble motives behind various so-called exposures. Those who speak the loudest about the media's mandate of scrutiny and never hesitate to let other people be pilloried are sometimes those who themselves seem to have a need for justification or a position. A person who is looking for stardom or fighting to secure a permanent position knows that all newsroom managers love a really juicy scoop. In such a situation, all means may seem permissible. How should this partly inherent, destructive force be controlled? (Ström Melin 2006)

It is also obvious that Margit Silberstein was speaking as a private individual when I asked her about the actual experience of hunting an obviously hard-pressed individual and exposing that person to

heavy scrutiny. When, in the above quotation, she said that she did not like it – that it felt undignified, indeed even uncivilised – she spoke as a fellow human being, not as a reporter. Word for word she said: ‘I don’t feel good about having that *role*’ (emphasis added), which bespeaks a view of herself as from the outside. Most of all she wanted to be exempted from participating, she said. Then she seemed to re-enter the journalistic function; she donned a sort of psychological reporter’s hat, declaring that she was forced to participate in this type of intense scrutiny if she wanted to keep her job. The rules of the game had to be followed. One could view this as her negotiating in real time with her individual responsibility, resolving to thrust such feelings as uneasiness, discomfort, and empathy to one side in order to be able to carry out her mission. In the nuanced little publication *Drabbad av journalistik* (‘Affected by journalism’), Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson provides the following comment on this issue:

Not all journalists strive to act in a morally defensible manner. They may think they have been given a mandate by their employers to do their best, which is often the same thing as being first with a piece of news. Other people can take the responsibility, i.e., the publisher. I do not believe in such a line of reasoning. Responsibility is basic for every single human being. Relinquishing moral responsibility amounts to making oneself less human. (Wigorts Yngvesson 2008:61)

In order to be able to assess where the boundaries for defensible behaviour are drawn, one will, apart from a professional framework, need self-knowledge, an ability to empathise, and the opportunity to judge the consequences of one’s own actions, writes Wigorts Yngvesson (2008:59f). So instead of entering and exiting one’s professional role, one should bring the moral values one has as a human being into the newsroom and allow one’s private morality to harmonise with one’s professional moral standards. If I myself can imagine acting in a certain way, it stands to reason that I should not judge somebody else for acting in that same way, argues the author, who investigated these issues in her doctoral dissertation through, among other things, a detailed study of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical theory of responsibility.

Levinas describes the imperative nature of responsibility (Levinas 1985, 1989, 1998). It is impossible to step away from, he argues. This becomes especially interesting in the light of commonly occurring excuses and justifications, since these, according to Scott and Lyman, ultimately aim to *renegotiate* individual responsibility by mitigating

and alleviating it (Scott and Lyman 1968:47). The point of departure in Levinas's philosophy, or view of life, is in the original ethical situation – that is, in the interaction between myself and others. According to Levinas, responsibility cannot be experienced – and therefore cannot be implemented – through collective agreements, because responsibility is personal. A striving for moral homogeneity, for example, by adhering to a mutually agreed-upon regulatory framework, limits the attention paid to the moral complexity of each unique situation and individual. Loss of uniqueness, claims Levinas, leads to a loss of responsibility itself. Instead of safeguarding what is unique, professional rules and an *esprit de corps* with elements of a self-celebratory culture risk turning us into role-players. So what would Levinas have said about Margit Silberstein's reasoning as described above? He could have emphasised that a person can never relinquish responsibility for the Other, i.e., a fellow human being. Every individual has a unique responsibility for the Other which is irreplaceable, a responsibility that, at bottom, makes me who I am. He writes:

Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly*, I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. (Levinas 1985:101; see also Levinas 1989:83, 1998:149)

But what does a meeting with the Other look like? How does it come about? By way of the face, Levinas would have answered. I cannot meet the Other with dissimulation, he writes, only face to face. Levinas's preoccupation with the face as the very gateway to responsibility is fascinating. The skin on one's face is the most naked skin, the most exposed but also the most decent, he says (Levinas 1985:89f, Tangyin 2008). The face holds power and vulnerability at one and the same time; my power over the Other, but also the Other's power over me, my vulnerability when I meet the vulnerability of the Other. There is a state of dependence here: I need the Other. Without the Other I do not see the world, only myself. In other words, the Other has a particular power over me. But – and this is important – the meeting with the Other is not automatically symmetric or reciprocal. I cannot expect that the Other will also do for me what I do for the Other. In other words, the meeting challenges my selfishness and my will to dominate. For these reasons, the point of departure in Levinas's ethical theory of responsibility is that I

always have a greater responsibility than everyone else in meetings with my fellow human beings (Wigorts Yngvesson 2006:242ff).

Göran Rosenberg regards the individual's independence of the group, and consequently individual responsibility, as a central part of journalism's original capital. In combination with a critical mindset, this is the *raison d'être* of journalism. He writes: '[t]he credibility of journalism is the credibility of its individual practitioners. Credibility is not created by intra-professional codes and rules. Least of all codes and rules that liberate the journalist from the responsibility to evaluate his or her own contribution' (Rosenberg 2000:46).

Niklas Svensson of the tabloid *Expressen* admitted that the coverage could go too far in scandal contexts and could be experienced as downright inhuman by the individual who is at the centre of the scandal. But that does not mean that it would be possible to stop trying to get in contact with this person around the clock, or to stop looking for her or him all over the country, in order to demand answers to a newspaper's questions. A lengthy section is quoted in order to illustrate how this reporter reasoned:

I: But can a person answer questions in that situation?

NIKLAS SVENSSON (NS): No, it isn't certain that you can ...

I: So one is really asking for the impossible?

NS: Yes, in certain situations I think that we in the media ask for the impossible from our politicians. In large-scale houndings or very extensive scandals, such as the Ingmar Ohlsson affair, where all the newsrooms are hunting in exactly the same direction. Of course it can lead to completely inhuman situations for the person we are all trying to reach. Obviously, I completely realise that, but at the same time I find it difficult to see how I as an individual reporter, or how *Expressen* as an individual media company, should let that keep us from trying to pose these questions ...

I: [*interrupts*] How does one solve this complex of problems then?

NS: It is a serious complex of problems, for an individual.

I: And partly also for the media companies, because you can't have the answers you want either.

NS: The alternative would then be to not ask any questions and not get any answers. Now we tried to ask the questions, but we didn't get any answers.

I: And then you do more right than wrong anyway, as journalists?

NS: Well, I'm not so sure about that. You have to look at it on a case-to-case basis. But in certain situations I think we should be self-critical and more cautious when everybody runs in the same direction. There is probably a good deal to be said for

trying to think about new paths for journalism in those situations. Of course when we have chased Ingmar Ohlsson for weeks with basically the same questions and we feel that we're not getting any answers to our questions, then maybe we should find another way to tackle the problem than just to continue chasing him.

- I: That leads to a pretty insipid journalism, the way you describe it.
- NS: Of course it does. ... It is an extremely empty journalism, absolutely. It certainly is. I think that all journalists have a lot to learn from earlier soundings and from earlier political scandals, and above all it is valuable to hear the politicians themselves relate after the fact how they experienced it. (M27101)

Several of the interviewed journalists expressed similar reflections. Anette Holmqvist at *Expressen's* competitor *Aftonbladet* felt that the situation today for an individual politician can be horrible and once again used one of Håkan Juholt's well-covered press conferences as an example. She described how she herself felt panic at so many people being present in such a crowded space. People could hardly move in the room, which was packed to overflowing; the air was bad, and it was hard to breathe.

Standing there in the posse, or whatever word we should choose. Being the target, even if people pose completely relevant questions. The simple fact that there are so many of us. It becomes intimidating. It can even become intimidating for oneself to stand there in the crowd and try to hold out one's tape recorder and shout out a question. Everybody's jostling and one can hardly get any air. That's how it is today. (M27098)

Margit Silberstein said that towards the end one could see that Håkan Juholt was suffering. His face showed that he was undergoing torment, which occasioned discussions in the *Aktuellt* newsroom as to whether they might take this into consideration in their coverage of him. 'But we didn't, and I don't think you should. It's sort of not our responsibility', she asserted.

Levinas's theory can hardly be given a more concrete framing. By averting one's eyes and thus abandoning the tormented face and looking instead to the self-affirming norms of the collective, individual responsibility can be negotiated away, without any further explanation. But of course it is not quite that simple. Silberstein did not relinquish responsibility, but shouldered it before the audience, the licence-paying TV viewers. She was also convinced that the reason why Håkan Juholt had ended up in a vulnerable position was his

actions, which were not acceptable to his own party. There were a not insignificant number of mistakes that had put him in a precarious position. In other words, it was not a hounding created by the media against him. Their only task was to report about the mistakes. And Silberstein chose to do that, performing actions that she as an individual journalist could wholly stand up for on a moral level.

Reading my whole interview with Silberstein from start to finish at a later date, I feel that my representation of her statements sometimes seems unfair, or, in journalistic jargon, heavily biased. Throughout our meeting she was responsive, open, and humble, and she often expressed criticism of herself and the professional body to which she belongs. On a personal level, she felt for the politicians who had ended up in hot water. ‘There is a kind of loneliness about these people as well, you can see how unprotected they are’, she said. In such delicate situations she is cautious. She emphasised the importance of choosing one’s words carefully and sticking to the facts, which is one way of expressing empathy. In other words, she took her humanity with her into her work. I broached the same issue with Mats Knutson:

I: You’re not just a commentator, you’re also out in the field. So you’ve met these people. Has that affected you at some point? Their expressions? I know, because I’ve interviewed them, that they feel really awful. Is that something you’ve reacted to on some occasions?

MATS KNUTSON (MK): Yes, sometimes. Of course one is sometimes struck by how haggard and vulnerable these people are in these situations.

I: What feelings does that arouse in you?

MK: Of course one reacts to it, obviously. But it isn’t a matter of ... one mustn’t let the reporting suffer. Because feelings are feelings. My comments on TV mustn’t be affected if at some point I feel sorry for a person, or feel that that person looks like he or she hasn’t slept during the last week. No, but on the contrary ... Perhaps it’s a way of rationalising what one’s doing. (M27096)

It seems as if my questions made Knutson hesitate a little. He went on to tell me that he has several times looked up politicians who have been affected by scandals and talked to them afterwards about their experiences, not in order to apologise but to try to understand the situation from their perspectives. At the same time, there is a degree of ambivalence in the above quotation, where the feelings that were in fact awakened were consciously ignored in favour of a so-called rational way of acting, which is consistent with the idea

of neutral, objective news journalism. Journalism researchers Barry Richards and Gavin Rees sound a note of caution regarding this type of commonly occurring ‘ready-made’ line of reasoning among journalists. So what are the risks associated with such a way of thinking and acting, according to them? Within what philosophical tradition can this way of thinking be found? On the basis of their study, they draw the following conclusions:

What we found ... is the particular danger that ‘objectivity’ as a lurking legacy of 19th-century positivism has for journalists in the emotional domain. Throughout our data there are repeated conflicts, ambivalences and confusions between empathy and sympathy, and detachment and dissociation. Underlying most of these is the belief, central to journalistic discourse about itself and largely uncritiqued, that emotion inevitably contaminates ‘objectivity’. (Richards and Rees 2011:863)

In other words, the danger is that journalists take the positivistically influenced objectivity as a pretext for not exploring their own moral boundaries, because they feel that emotions can rub off on so-called consequence-neutral reporting. But one’s feelings must be activated if one is to have some form of moral direction about how one should act. Both Richards and Rees’s extensive interview study among journalists and my own limited one indicate similar results: journalists are not just unused to speaking, but also unwilling to speak, of feelings in relation to their own professional activities. They dismiss emotional expressions as something that should be kept in check and that must not rub off on ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ reporting.

Of course, they share this niggardly attitude to emotions with many other professional groups; but there are circumstances that make this particularly troublesome when it comes to journalists. To a great extent, journalism works within an emotional domain in society and has a central role within what is usually called ‘the emotional public sphere’ (Richards 2012). It not only makes information available to a large audience but also filters it, shapes it, packages it, and gives in a particular slant, fairly often with the aim of arousing emotions, using language as a tool. For this reason, journalists need to reflect on their emotional skills and abilities, or what is usually called *emotional literacy* (Orbach 2001), to a greater extent than other professional groups. This is particularly important with respect to the journalism that is produced under today’s arduous conditions where factors such as increased competition, insecure employment,

news online, and round-the-clock coverage lead to a development towards a more intense tempo and a more brutal imagery, where the necessity for critical reflection about one's work becomes ever more apparent but is given less and less space (Richards and Rees 2011:864). 'The judgmental tone of voice is very harsh. It doesn't matter if it is in the entertainment pages or the sports pages or the current-affairs pages, it's very judgmental. It's harsh and judgmental.' That was how Håkan Juholt expressed the problem. In a cautious conclusion, Richards and Rees write as follows:

While journalists cannot be held responsible for the feelings of the public, nor of those whom they have encountered when reporting, they could consider more how their own reports may influence those feelings, and whether different ways of framing reports may have different downstream effects. (Richards and Rees 2011:865)

Time and again the authors return to the myth of objectivity, in which rationality is a virtue, as an urgent problem within journalism because it misleads many within the profession into believing that there is only one way in which to report a story, *one* single truth. This intellectual construct partly liberates the individual journalist from assuming personal responsibility for his or her reporting. In fact there are a large number of angles to every story, an unlimited number of facts to compile, hundreds of adjectives, lots of images to choose from, and so on. An abundance of variety and an extensive freedom become apparent – a freedom that entails responsibility and, not least, encourages the individual to accept responsibility as a person. Media researcher Roger Silverstone is on this track in his research about media and morality. Every person has to be responsible for his or her own responsibility, because its character is binding. Each and every one who participates in journalism should therefore shoulder her or his own personal responsibility for the shaping of it, he writes: 'the proprietors, editors, producers, journalists of the world's media. They have to be responsible for their responsibility' (Silverstone 2007:134). In addition, a feeling such as empathy could – somewhat unexpectedly – lead to competitive advantages in journalistic work. In my conversation with Niklas Svensson of *Expressen*, a thought-provoking line of reasoning was outlined pertaining to the unexplored relationship between humaneness and news value. Another somewhat lengthy quotation is called for:

NS: Our journalistic mission can be carried out even if we display a certain humanity, or at least think about how a person might feel. What can reasonably be demanded from this person in

this situation? ... Are there any other angles? Is there another point of entry here? Another way of working?

- I: If I interpret you correctly, compassion becomes a way out of the conformity?
- NS: Yeah, something along those lines. I don't mean that we have to limit the extent of our publicity; we can maintain that. If there are still relevant questions to be posed, and it's a relevant scandal to report on, then the extent doesn't have to be reduced. But just as you say, away from conformity, we don't have to plough the exact same furrow as everybody else.
- I: And then scandal reporting could actually become better?
- NS: Yes, yes, yes. Absolutely. Definitely. If more newsrooms would dare to take the step out of that furrow where everybody else is standing, then the coverage will absolutely become better. I'm completely convinced of that. And then I also think that some people who are affected would afterwards feel that, 'Yeah, but *Expressen* asked these questions and I still got to say my piece there about this thing.' Those things that they afterwards feel they never got to say. That's what I'd like to get at. (M27101)

Compassion as a route away from conformity in the reporting – this thought turns some conventional ideas about news journalism upside down. And that is precisely what media researchers Charlie Beckett and Mark Deuze do in their thought-provoking, polemical piece 'On the Role of Emotion in the Future of Journalism' (2016:1–6). They claim that journalism, with the advent of digital technology and in an era characterised by networking and connectivity, has to confront the idea of objectivity and neutral reporting and consciously move towards a more emotional journalism. Why? Because objectivity is obsolete. Technology today means that news consumption to a great extent takes place on our mobile phones, where news is mixed in with a hodgepodge of other things: 'Today's news professionals have to work in this world where their craft is blended into people's digital mobile lives alongside kittens, shopping, sport, music, online dating and mating rituals, pornography, and games' (Beckett & Deuze 2016:2).

Journalism, these researchers argue, has to respond to the changes in news consumption in the digital era. It has no other choice than to adapt to 'this affective media ecosystem', where news is linked to emotions to an even greater extent than it used to be. Beckett and Deuze claim that we can already see examples of this shift and take the reporting about the situation concerning migration in Europe as an example, arguing that we are seeing 'the normalization of affect as a potent force for more effective journalism' (Beckett &

Deuze 2016:4). The credibility of journalism in ‘the networked journalism age’ is to an ever greater extent determined by its emotional authenticity, they say, as transparency and openness between news producers and news audiences appear increasingly essential. While they write in an exhortatory manner, they are clearly aware of the risks involved in an emotional journalism where sensationalism and transgressions risk diminishing reliability. ‘The challenge for the networked journalist is clear’, they write, ‘how best to sustain the ethical, social, and economic value of journalism in this new emotionally networked environment’ (Beckett & Deuze 2016:5).

Concluding comment

This chapter paints a complex picture of the relationships of journalists to the emotions that the exercise of their profession may evoke. On the one hand, emotions are something one should not concern oneself with, according to a mindset where traditional but nebulous ideals surrounding objectivity, impartiality, and neutrality form an explicit or implicit basis. If one actively explores one’s feelings during meetings with – for instance – politicians, there is a risk that one might start to engage in positive or negative special treatment, which would be fatal for the reporting. On the other hand, very special feelings arise in connection with being on the scent of a scandal, and that obviously affects the actions of both newsrooms and individual journalists. Rationality as a virtue is swept away and replaced by a collective instinct for hunting and competition that is perhaps not experienced by all journalists – what Pontus Mattsson spoke about had more to do with boredom – but that becomes visible in the wake of a scandal in the form of an inquisitorial, one-sided, and repetitive journalism, manifested in heavily biased articles, a lack of nuance, the elimination of a right to reply, and a hunted protagonist who feels miserable for a long time.

It also seems as if unwillingness to allow the emotions that the profession engenders to show may lead to a disinclination to reflect morally on the scandal situation. The journalists whom I interviewed felt empathy with the affected person and sometimes also tried to express this by, for instance, showing more consideration than usual in their work. But actually leaving the hunted person alone – after relentlessly pursuing her or him for days or weeks on end, with ever more watered-down reporting as a consequence – does not seem to have been an option. Instead, a psychological reporter’s

hat was donned, like an item of protective clothing, against the emotional weaknesses of the unreliable private individual. Like Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson, I do not believe in such a division into private and professional roles. Moral responsibility is fundamental to each individual. Relinquishing this responsibility amounts to making oneself less human.

To some degree at least, journalists pawn their original capital during a media scandal, and most people realise that once the intoxication has abated. For this reason even successful hunts, where the quarry is brought down, usually occasion certain pangs of conscience among journalists when, under the auspices of *Publicistklubben* (the Swedish Publicists' Association), they afterwards debate the course of events in a self-critical frame of mind. That is when they call me and want me to speak about my research. Many journalists are thus aware of being caught up in behaviour based on group pressure and a common driving force, rather than on individual reflection and critical consideration, as is apparent not least from the analyses made by the journalists themselves that have been foregrounded in this chapter. A journalistic hounding is triggered when all the implicit and accepted coded signals of the news culture together signal a shift into hunting mode, when the equivalent of a rabbit is put in front of the equivalent of a pack of dogs, writes Göran Rosenberg (2000:46). Then it is difficult not to participate in the hunt, as it is sometimes difficult to justify the hunt afterwards. Clearly, though, individual journalists could profit from training their ability to recognise the rabbits and learn to resist the instinct to hunt them, not to mention what journalism as a whole would gain from such increased awareness. The last word goes to Mats Knutson of *Sveriges Television*: 'Even so, people think that we overdo it, that we are too harsh, that we push it too far. As a result, I believe it affects and diminishes [public] confidence in us when we go in for this type of reporting' (M27096).