

Concluding words

In his famous meditation upon cities teeming with life, Italo Calvino wrote a couple of lines about the cultural recommendations and limits that are communicated to citizens in the signs that crowd together in street corners:

Other signals warn of what is forbidden in a given place (to enter the alley with wagons, to urinate behind the kiosk, to fish with your pole from the bridge) and what is allowed (watering zebras, playing bowls, burning relatives' corpses). (Calvino 1997:11)

Only a tiny proportion of the cultural, regulatory system to which people must relate can be communicated through signs, whereas a considerably greater part of our understanding of the circumstances and restrictions of the community happens through informal talk, for instance in the form of gossip. The media scandal as a phenomenon is good at revealing these often unspoken and emotionally regulated cultural agreements. It makes the boundaries of cultural life visible, allowing us to examine those boundaries by talking about them and exploring them emotionally together. The precise location of the boundaries distinguishing the acceptable from the unacceptable, at a given point in time and in a certain context, is rarely crystal-clear from the start. If it had been, and the boundaries had been beyond dispute, there would have been very little need for degradation rituals in the form of mediated scandals and public shaming. The scandal serves as a point of support in everyday life, a foothold from which we can push off and look at vital questions together.

Emotions are both individual and shared, and they shape our understanding of ourselves and our travelling companions in the continuously ongoing social and natural flow of daily meetings between people and things. Emotions give us a collective direction, a joint cultural foundation on which to stand; they connect us to

the surrounding world, situating us in the lifeworld. In this book, an empirical focus on what emotions *do* – both to people and to media, in a wide sense of the word – has contributed new insights into the media scandal as a phenomenon, but also into the media system, where a traditional interpretation of the ‘media’ concept appears so limited that it becomes downright misleading. The media system has also been studied empirically in this book; that is, it was not defined beforehand, but its nature was discovered as the research progressed.

This striving for openness and flexibility has to do with the conviction that a certain media fixation among some researchers is linked to a preoccupation with the present; but, as Robert Darnton writes: ‘every age was an age of information, each in its own way’ (Darnton 2004:119). The oral history of scandals has neither been replaced nor ceased to exist, but lives tangled up in the conversations online that interact with the movements in traditional mass media. Everything is then stored digitally and creates a form of vibration that can be heard into the future, a kind of variable *echo archives*. Today, everybody with an Internet connection can contribute to and influence the more fixed stories that are produced in the form of texts. I see gossip as a kind of democratic component in the media scandal which is not at all new and which in part challenges accepted ideas about the media system, where traditional mass media are customarily and through force of habit considered to possess the greatest power, a state of affairs that risks undercommunicating the power of audiences. If nobody responds to the call of ‘Scandal!’, there will be no scandal. Conversely, if viewers, listeners, and readers urge on the pace of the scandal, the intensity of the reporting increases. If they react to and act on the scandal in their everyday lives, it adds to the troubles of the person at the centre of it. If the audience grows weary of the scandal, the newsroom will adapt the reporting to suit this satiety. There is a degree of sensitivity here on the part of news producers, an ear to the street, if you will.

Science has, according to media researcher John Hartley, consciously or unconsciously adapted itself to the desire of journalism to come across as a serious activity, which has resulted in less attention being paid to some less than flattering journalism and ditto journalistic methods (Hartley 2008:689). I agree with him about this, as I do when he writes that large parts of journalism, including that produced by the news media, *is* popular culture (Hartley 2008:689). To view gossip, which takes place face to face, as an integral part of the spatial and social dimensions of the media

increases the understanding of the complexity and temporal resilience that characterise the phenomenon of media scandals. What I have wanted to bring out is the circular character of the food chain where gossip, journalism, the exercise of public authority, and political considerations form an intricate network, without clear hierarchies or directions for the flows of information. In this sense, gossip-influenced and gossip-dependent journalism is not by definition bad or inferior. Undoubtedly, more studies on news journalism need to be conducted with respect to its oral, informal methods – not least now, in the midst of the shift of journalism from industrial production to ‘an emotionally charged networked environment’ (Beckett & Deuze 2016 1). In earlier times, informal talk – gossip, among other things – was something that mainly took place through oral meetings face to face, whereas today informal talk is being transformed into a text–talk hybrid on the Internet, which, with its archiving functions, gives this hybrid a different weight. This is why we must all hone our source-critical tools – professional journalists, the audiences of journalism, and researchers into journalism alike.

The openness, availability, rapidity, and opportunities for preservation of the digital communication arenas have changed the position of scandals, gossip, and rumour within, as well as their influence on, the public conversation of citizens, with profound consequences both for individuals and for society. Dimensions such as dissemination, scope, and speed must be taken into consideration in order to understand this change, which has created greener pastures for fabricated news and conspiracy theories. There is doubtless a need for research geared to contributing to increased knowledge and awareness of the moral issues and problem complexes that follow in the wake of the transformed opportunities for gossip, the spreading of rumours, talk-in-text hybrids, and other types of orality in the digital media environment.

It should be added that scandal audiences have been given far too little attention so far. In order to understand mediated scandals in depth, we must achieve a better comprehension of how they are received and used by their audiences, as well as how they elicit the engagement of these audiences.

Today, the media scandal as a phenomenon is the subject of public debate as well as of scholarly analysis, as in this book. In addition, there are firms of consultants that offer their services to the main figures of scandals when the situation becomes acute. Possessing detailed knowledge about the particular dramaturgy of scandals, they are able to calculate beforehand what will happen

and what protection the affected individuals will need. And now, within this emerging field, we also have the people whom Erving Goffman, with characteristic cynicism, calls ‘a circle of lament’ (Goffman 1990a [1963]:32), consisting of people who share precisely this type of bitter experience and write what I have called fellowship-of-the-hounded letters to one another. On this basis, one could draw a cautious conclusion that media scandals in future will see a reduction of their strength. Through public scrutiny and a loss of uniqueness, we might anticipate a devaluation of the scandal’s effects in the form of exclusion and public shaming. When an unusual experience such as this one becomes more common, it will probably also become less threatening. At the same time, the functions for preservation on the global Internet mean that it becomes increasingly difficult for scandalised people to begin anew, to be given a second chance. In the digital era scandals are stickier than ever, being virtually impossible to wash off.

In addition, it is possible to discern a certain satiety in the Swedish audiences, at least when it comes to political scandals. It appears to have become more difficult for the media to whip up the public mood with a tepid revelation about a newly appointed minister. Perhaps this is due to the rigorous background checks that are routinely made within the parties before each new ministerial appointment, where skeletons in cupboards are revealed beforehand; alternatively, it may have to do with the audiences having grown tired of stories that no longer titillate or surprise. ‘There are institutionalised ways and mechanisms for preserving an optimal degree of novelty, i.e., there are existing cultural patterns for the preservation of the degree of novelty’ (Asplund 1967:105).

At the same time, unmasking oneself publicly and expressing hatred against individuals – any individual – is easier today than it used to be because of technological developments. It is no longer necessary to be a member of the elite in order to have one’s reputation publicly besmirched. One no longer has to have a special position in society in order to keep a well-polished personal apologia at hand, because anybody, no matter who they are, may come to need one. As a consequence of this, a bright future is predicted for the growing companies that offer the digital services ‘reputation management’ and ‘reputation control’, and who target ordinary people. There will not be fewer scapegoats who embody guilt and apologise in the glare of publicity. There will be more. Next time it may be you or I who stand there, the blush of shame on our faces.