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Moralism, Constructivism, Relativism: Identifying and Describing the Approaches of Research on Scandal

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Abstract

Scandals are an inherent part of our society and therefore explored by different academic disciplines. The enormous diversity in approaching the phenomenon of scandal exacerbates its systematization, which has not yet taken place in an inter-subjective, understandable manner by using distinctive features. Our study aims at closing this gap by identifying and describing four approaches in research on scandal: the group of "media-oriented constructivists", "strategic constructivists", "society-oriented moralists", and "internet-oriented relativists". In part, these approaches differ substantially in recognizing the causes, the process, the functions or the evaluation, respectively, of scandals. Additionally to fundamental differences, this study brings to light the commonalities, connecting factors and blind spots of the different approaches.

Introduction

The public outrage concerning more or less severe grievances seems to be omnipresent in today's media landscape. Every once in a while, high-level politicians or celebrities find themselves in the spotlight of media attention – one might remember the sex scandals of Prime Minister of Italy Silvio Berlusconi or the NSA-scandal caused by Edward Snowden's revelations in recent months and years.

However, one may define scandal, in the last decades it gained increased importance regarding the frequency [1-3]. Regarding the quality, there is no doubt about the relevance of research on scandals in the social sciences, because after all – scandals effect the reputation of the person under scrutiny, power relations, and the set of values of a society [4].

Because of the social relevance as well as the complexity of affairs, there is a multitude of different perspectives within the research on scandal. This is due to the inter-disciplinarity of scandal research. Not only communication studies [5-9], sociology [10-13], political sciences [4,14-16], economics [17,18], historiography [19,20], but also literary studies [21,22] are concerned with the phenomenon of scandal. The scientific approach ranges from simple scandal chronicles over scandal criticism, where the original scandal creation of the media is criticized by offering alternative interpretations to the issue, to the analysis of scandals, where the characteristics, dynamics, and functions of such an affair are systematically explored by using case studies and quantitative procedures. This leads to a phenomenology of scandal [23]. With their broad perspective, these scandal analyses seem to be of great importance for the field of communication studies. Nevertheless, a comprehensive systematization of the different and partly new research methodology is still lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify and to characterize approaches of the research on scandal. The identification and characterization of these approaches, which potentially differ in recognizing the causes, the processes, functions, or evaluations of a scandal, is essential for three distinct reasons.

1) Structuring: These approaches help us to focus research and to systematize findings. The identification of approaches to the topic is a prerequisite for reviewing and structuring the state of research and for the understanding of how individual findings relate to each other.

For example, the findings of studies that substantially differ in their comprehension of scandal cannot be compared.

2) Transparency: The identification of approaches provides transparency about which general principle underlies the research approach. In this context, transparency is important, because approaches are not only connected to social norms and values, but also tend to reproduce themselves by looking at the same actors, in the same way, with the same background knowledge. For example, empirical findings that the media play a crucial role in the process of scandal might be the consequence of numerous studies defining scandal as a construction by journalists, who are assumed to be powerful within certain societies.

3) Comprehension: The identification and description of approaches with distinctive features enables us to uncover the blind spots of the various approaches. The world is far too complex for anyone to assume that problems always lie within the scope of an approach. Hence, research can gain a more comprehensive view of a problem by considering the limitations and alternative interpretations of different approaches. For example, if the approaches differ in what they regard as the cause of a scandal, the connection of those approaches could enable a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that lead to scandals. The applied method is a comprehensive literature analysis that contains studies from the field of communication science, sociology, political sciences, and partly economics. In order to analyze this heterogeneous literature, we designed an analysis tool with distinctive features, derived from the academic consensus (2.1), former systematizations (2.2), and theoretical reflections (2.3). By examining the research literature with this tool, we aim to explore approaches of the research on scandal.

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Derivation of the Analysis Tool

In the following part of our article, we will develop an inter-subjective understandable analysis tool, which integrates the criteria by which we explore the literature. This will enable us to identify and categorize the distinctly different approaches in the research on scandal.

Academic consensus

The academic consensus can be summarized as follows: The scandal is a human [4,24], democratic [16,25], contextual [15,24,26], and temporal phenomenon [15,27,28] in which the supposed abuse of norms [4,10,29] of a well-known person (the scandalized) [10,30,31], will be revealed by a so-called 'scandalizer', leading to public outrage [4,10,15,24,25].

Previous systematizations

Despite the remarkable revival of research on scandals in the last decades, only a few systematizations of the body of research exist to-date [4,5,9,32]. With a strong focus on US literature, Adut [32] presents a rough systematization into two factions: The objectivists and the constructivists. The objectivists are identified as mainly interested in the nature of norm abuses that elicit public outrage. In this scenario, scandals are regarded as the tip of the iceberg and allow us to draw inferences about the structure of organizations and groups. The second group, the constructivists, concentrates on the reactions that scandals provoke [33]. Here, scandals are understood as social control mechanisms and rituals that are used by the society, the media, or individuals to assure one's personal identity by classifying others and their behavior as deviant. The weak points of this theoretical approach are the insufficient explanation of varying reactions to a potentially scandalous matter of fact and the disregard of scandal dynamics that lead to the empowerment or weakening of a norm.

With a strong focus on German literature, Siebert [9] explores two theoretical perspectives: The first concept understands scandal as a clear violation of societal norms and regulations. When a scandal takes place, the offender gets punished and the order, or norm, is restored. In this approach, scandal serves the 'good' of a society. The second concept speaks of a scandal, when the 'scandalizer' (the agent creating the scandal) is able to define the actual situation as scandal. This means, that an affair is an instrument of power to enforce one's own interests, defend or expand one's own power, and minimize a competitor's influence [9].

Hartung [5] finally identifies three concepts: The first focuses on the matter itself. It is seen as a symptom for societal conditions and enables us to see the antinomian reality of politics and their representatives. This approach thus tries to correct the self-portrayal and image of politicians. The second approach highlights the cause, process, and the resolution of an éclat and tries to identify a phenomenology of scandal. Here, scandals are understood as "phenomena that are created by certain people in certain situations for certain reasons" [5]. The third perspective tries to answer the question about what can be learned from dealing with scandals [32]. Representatives of this approach see an affair as an opportunity to learn about which norm abuses cause outrage among the public, which societal regulatory processes can take place, and what they tell us about the specific culture of a country.

However, all those systematizations lack a specific analysis tool that allows for a replicable classification, thereby identifying approaches and enabling comparisons through specific, distinctive features.

Criteria of the analysis tool

While searching for distinctive features of various approaches in a theoretical way, the first feature that comes to mind is the cause of a scandal, second the process, und finally the function and the resulting evaluation of scandals.

Reasons for the onset of scandal and its increase in quantity: Against the backdrop of Siebert's systematization [9] one can implicitly derive the "cause for the onset of a scandal" as a distinctive feature. An important question is whether an objectively identifiable abuse of a social norm is the cause of the scandal, or whether individual agents try to subjectively define and construct the scandal. As mentioned in the introduction before, academic consensus exists about the quantitative increase of scandals. In this context the question arises, what the different schools of thought identify as reasons for this development. The various approaches may differ in the causes they identify and to which degree they weigh them.

Key role in the process of scandal: For any scandal it seems to be relevant which agent is the key player. Indeed, there is consensus concerning the central actors in the process of scandal, but the perspectives may differ in the attribution of importance. Is the 'scandalized', the 'scandalizer', or the public the key player? Especially for communication studies, it seems relevant to explore which role the media play compared to other agents in the process of scandal.

Popularity of the scandalized: Focusing on the group of actors who are the subject of a scandal, it has to be clarified which characteristics the perspectives attribute to them. A critical question is whether just well-known people can become involved in scandals or if, in times of online-media, relatively unknown people can become the target of public outrage as well.

Scale of scandal: Basically, scandals may differ in intensity, meaning the duration and scale of public outrage. The relevant question here is which factors link the different approaches link to the scale of outrage.

Main function and evaluation of scandals: The discussion of the functions and the evaluation of affairs are critical for the research on scandal. One may debate whether scandals empower the set of norms of a society, or whether they are used as a power instrument by the media. Finally, the understanding of scandal and the focus of the approach appear as distinctive and comprehensive features derived from Hartung's systematization [5].

Approaches in Research on Scandal

All in all, we were able to identify four approaches by utilizing the characteristics mentioned above. An approach is not necessarily constituted by the quantity of scholars who research it, but rather characterized by a distinctive and/or original view on the phenomenon on scandal.

Society-oriented moralism

The first group that can be called, society-oriented moralists' [4,10-12,33,] regards scandals as "intrusion of disorder into social order" [11], as "spot tests in the nether regions of [norm]-unofficiality" [10], and as context-bound events that can only be understood in front of a normative societal background [15]. Moralists consider a so-called scandalized's exception to the norm as the reason for the onset of scandal [27], which is why the person at the center of the scandal plays the key role in the process of scandal. "Some form of transgression is a necessary condition of scandal: there would be no scandal without it"

[4]. In line with that, Jacobsson and Loefmarck [33] define scandal as "a collective outburst of outrage caused by a norm transgression that is made public and that is experienced as an offence by a norm audience (or, if we so wish, by a collective conscience)" [32]. However, not only the fact that the person at the center of the scandal has violated a norm makes them a key player [34]. According to Imhof [12], the presence and invariance of mandatory values and norms provide the culprit with a possible orientation, and therefore (on the other hand) the freedom to ignore these values, i.e., he or she would have been able to act compliant to those rules. In this view, he or she is indeed responsible for the scandal, which does not mean to neglect the enormous impact for example political cultures have on scandals [35]. Moreover, the morally reprehensible actor often contributes to the onset of a scandal by ill-fitted crisis management. When the initial violation of a norm is not sufficient for causing a sensation, it is indeed often the culprit's denial and misconception of facts that is regarded as a minor transgression, which brings leverage to the scandal in the media. Thompson [4] calls these mistakes "second-order transgressions". In doing so, the person at the center of a scandal becomes a public person. This relates to the fact that only famous people in correspondingly higher positions can fall in a way that sparks public sensation [10]. Moreover, ordinary citizens' violations of norms are mostly resolved by social exclusion or local jurisdiction, while powerful V.I.P.s are rather able to avoid sanctions [15]. Therefore, the scandal does not only deal with the violation of moral norms of action, but rather with the violation of these norms by the powerful [15]. The scale of the scandal is based on two indicators: On the one hand, the committed violation of the norm matters: "It is the significance of the violated values which determines the magnitude of outrage" [10]. On the other hand, the basic conflict between the values of different social systems and interest groups matters. Hondrich [10] regards scandal as a means of the dominated in the fight against the dominators, which helps society to newly determine the range of legitimacy and to make the powerful obey the rules they enacted. Consequently, the more the public feels that the VIPs are advantaged, the more they will bristle at the violation of norms by them – and therefore, the larger the scale of the scandal. Hondrich [10] and Lull and Hinerman [34] regard the scandal as an instrument for arguing conflicts via values. Therefore, the more a conflict about certain values can be argued out by means of a scandal, the more likely several communities of values will participate, thereby, increasing the scale of the scandal. Following these interpretations, the increase of scandals can be traced back to the increase of conflicts over values and the increase of polarization between powers and society. Imhof [12] considers the overload of high requirements on public figures to be the reason for the quantitative increase of scandals. While the average citizen can call for privacy (in most cases), today this is mostly no longer true for public figures. Politicians, managers, or celebrities must have a clean slate in their public as well as in their private life.

All in all, society-oriented moralists mostly welcome the scandal by regarding it as a corrective against undesirable developments [36] or an instrument for checking on the elite [11]. Tomlinson [37] regards providing contexts for moral reflection and debate as the main function of scandal. The strength of this approach is the explanation of societal preconditions for scandal and its collective consequences. However, the approach is in need of explanations for the dynamics within the ongoing scandal, in addition to the lack of empirical evidence and a critical view on the consequences of a scandal. How can a normative consensus be reached? How do power relations change? Who acts how, and how does it affect society? A correlative point of criticism is that the proponents of the approach assume that a normative consensus emerges after a scandal. However, this is at least questionable with regard to our increasingly pluralistic and individualistic society. Furthermore, it is not explained why one violation of norms leads to scandal, while another (which might be even more serious) does not even cause a stir. Although the moralists concede that the media are part of the discovery and revelation, they do not demonstrate the role they play after the revelation. Finally, the question remains whether it would be better to integrate the media as a distinct power factor into the analysis?

Media-oriented constructivism

While for society-related moralists, the media function is confined to the revelation of the scandal, the media-oriented constructivists [5,7,30-32,38-41] bring the media into sharper focus. Consequently, the reason for the onset of the scandal is not a violation of a norm by a person, but the act of affixing of the label of scandal to an actual situation. According to Hitzler [41], the concept of scandal refers to the successfully implemented and therefore accepted label of something not conforming to the norm. Hartung [5] holds a similar view by considering scandal as the result of intentional action and by regarding deficits and violations of the norm as neither a sine qua non nor a sufficient condition for scandal. Some authors even go to great lengths of exposing not only the scandal, but also the underlying set of norms as a journalistic product [40].

This raises the question of who plays the key role in that communication process? Here, the media are considered playing the key role [9,39], acting not only as a neutral information transmitter, but also following their own agenda [31]. Kepplinger [6], as well, sees the media not solely in the disclosure role, because "scandals are not predetermined issues which can be uncovered and reported". Instead, he interprets scandals as the consequence of public communication about deficits, which the media can orchestrate and construct purposefully. Burkhardt [39] even introduces the "media scandal", regarding it as a distinct type of scandal, into the scientific discourse. Therefore, if we assume that the media produce scandals purposefully, the scale of the scandal depends on the media's power to define the scandal and their ability to publicize the incident as such. Hence, representatives of this approach focus on the journalistic working process within the scandal at hand. Studies analyze for example the elements of pillorying media coverage [42], the question of conditions for the journalistic success of publicizing the scandal [5] and the mechanism employed for this purpose [6]. They also examine the process and progression of the scandal with specific attention to the media [30] and the impact of media coverage on the population or audiences [9]. Thereby, similarly to the moralists, the persons at the center of the scandal are famous and have a high reputation and responsibility due to their social status. That is the case because the social and symbolic capital is being updated and negotiated during the scandal [30]. According to the media-oriented constructivists, the increase of scandals can be predominantly traced back to the following changes in the media system: "Commercialization and differentiation of the media system; professionalization of investigative journalism; establishment of new information technologies and increase of media prominence associated with that" [39]; the media's tendency to move into entertainment, tabloidization, round-the-clock cable networks and internet news services, social media and trivialization (i.e., means that can be well placed in the context of scandal), as well as the stronger media competition for customer loyalty/followers [31,42,43]. Against this backdrop, scandals are predominantly believed to be negative. Even though the scandal can be an important corrective when the

control mechanisms of the democratic society fail, [7] the existence of scandals are at the same time indicators of freedom and transparency within a country. However, the total cost-benefit-balance-analysis is questionable [6]. The dark side of scandals is illustrated by fictitious scandals that impair alleged abusers as well as by rash decisions like the slaughter of 50.000 healthy cattle during the 2001 mad cow disease scandal in Europe [6]. Another example is the supposed killing of a six-year old boy by neo-Nazis in a small German town. Media coverage suggested that Neo-Nazis drowned the child, thereby accusing by-standing citizens of non-assistance (i.e., violation of the Good Samaritan laws). However, in the end the boy's unfortunate death turned out to be the consequence of a heart attack, which had nothing to do with neo-Nazis [8]. Scandals do not strengthen society, as the society-oriented moralists assume, but rather lead to distrust and apathy [6]. They disproportionally attack the authority of the culprit and distract from the real problems. For example, these scandals present politics as a dirty business and often do not lead to the resolution of problems, but merely increase the damaged image or reputation of the person accused of the scandal [30,31]. The strength of this approach, on the other hand however, consists in the explanation of the scandal process from the media's point of view and in the comparison between reality and media staging. Moreover, this approach can go back to qualitative as well as quantitative empirical findings, from which scholars derive scandal theories. The blind spot of current research in that field, i.e., how media coverage affects the public, has been shrinking during the past few years [9,42]. The following factors can be considered weaknesses of the approach: First, the lack of a long-term-study; for example on attitude change of the public or on the role-perception of journalists in terms of media coverage of scandals. Second, the approach assumes a central journalistic commission that coordinates journalistic accusation. Third, the approach always regards the media as scandal creators, which can be questioned with regard to single-case-studies [44]. Finally, the view on scandals is too negative. Although some proponents of this approach like Kepplinger [7] point to the positive effects of scandals, they are predominantly considered to be a media instrument of power. Journalists decry grievances, when they are advantageous for them, and not, if those would be beneficial for the elimination of societal problems.

A blind spot of the approach is that even though its proponents shed light on the relation between media and the public, they neglect the relationship between specific agents within the same group, for example between politicians and the media in a political scandal. Those agents from the same field play the crucial role in the following approach.

Strategic constructivism

The strategic constructivist approach [32,45-48], initially introduced in 2009 by Nyhan, mainly comes from the United States. The theoretical assumptions of those approaches, which predominantly deal with political scandals, are both demonstrated with regard to their original political meaning and transferred to an abstract level in order to make the approach useful for further types of scandals. This approach focuses on how agents from the same field (not the media) react to scandalous facts, meaning that in case of a political scandal, politicians must define the behavior as scandalous, while in case of economic scandal that is also true for the agents of the economic system. Nyhan [46] correspondingly regards scandal as "a socially constructed perception of misbehavior which opposition elites help create" (p. iv). He calls opposition politicians key players, and considers system elites assessing behavior as deviant to be the main reason for the start of a scandal.

"From such a perspective, the key indicator of whether a scandal has occurred, or not, is the fact that elites recognize it as such at the time" [46]. Entman [45] develops in his study a so-called "scandal cascade" that explains why some scandals emerge, while others fail to appear. He also regards negative assessment by other political parties, i.e., agents of the same field, as the prime cause for the start of a scandal. Negative assessment primarily takes place, when those agents from within the same group are able to define the state of affairs as dangerous for the general public interest [45]. However, the agents of the same group will prompt the scandal only if they benefit from it [46,48]. Insofar as the scandal functions as a means to carry out power struggles, by means of concentrated discourse and the consequent common orientation towards a specific goal, e.g., resignation of the perpetrator of the scandal, new courses of action emerge in the strategic field of power, which the respective opponents in the same system use. In doing so, only people of an elevated social status are scandalized, as they are better placed to carry political intentions through and as these people are exclusively equipped with the necessary authority in the struggle for power [46,48]. Thereby, the actual interest of the system agents goes beyond the mere scandal. The public demotion of a person should therefore be regarded as a way to maintain, to extend, and to limit power. Following this logic, the scale of scandal is associated with the abilities of the system agents to label the behavior as negative, dangerous, and deviant. Moreover, the stronger the confrontation between opposition and government, the more the former will promote and impel the scandal [47]. In other words: The stronger the hostility between the different parties of system elites are, the larger the scale of the scandal will be. This approach traces the increase of scandals back to the struggle for power between the agents of a system, to increasing non-transparency, and to the decrease of tolerance and acceptance towards malefactors in public opinion [32]. Scandals are regarded as positive and negative: Positive with regard to scandals functioning as control, norm reinforcement, and mobilization [48]; negative with regard to the stigmatization function of scandals, to the amount of accusations beyond the control of the person at the center of the scandal, which often leads to the total demotion of a person, and with regard to the consequences for third parties, e.g., for family members or members of the same system [32,48].

The strength of this approach consists in the interpretation of the scandal through the lens of the respective area in which it occurs. In contrast to society-oriented moralists, the media-oriented constructivists can explain why not every violation of a norm leads to a scandal. What appears to be scandalous in the political sector can be regarded as morally legitimate in the economic sector. The approach presents a comprehensive framework by putting emphasis on positive as well as negative aspects of a scandal. Moreover, the approach draws a realistic picture of the scandal by depicting it as an instrument of power – not only in the hands of the media, but also in the hands of the system elites. The main point of criticism has been already handled by Nyhan [47] in his latest study. Certainly, the interpretation by agents from the same system is essential to the understanding of the scandal, which is why media coverage refers to them. However, the media are equally essential in that process, as there can be no publicity as a prerequisite for scandals, if journalists do not provide audiences to these interpretations. Hence, there is a symbiotic relationship between media and members of a system. Correspondingly, Nyhan [47] also now regards the scandal as a "coproduction" of media and opposition politicians. The new view should not be overlooked, however, in line with Nyhan [46] the previous considerations should be assigned to the strategic constructivist approach. This enables us to characterize the basic ideas of the approach and to sharply distinguish it from the media-oriented constructivists.

Generally, all the approaches described above tend to have no differentiated conception of 'the media'. They are often treated as a "one size fits all", ignoring the specifics of the different types of media. Given the increased significance of online media, which are characterized by speed, large storage capacity, and potentially highly active users, one may ask how those distribution channels affect the phenomenon of scandal.

Internet-oriented relativism

The latest development in the research on scandal has originated in the past four years. Consequently, the number of representatives is still quite small [28,49]. However, this probably increasingly growing group shall be described as "internet-oriented relativists", because they mainly focus on the effects of scandal caused by web 2.0, thereby modifying many assumptions that have been the scientific consensus until this point. This concept focuses on the loss of control and the corrosion of context caused by the internet. Because of the digitalization, data can be permanently received, commented on, combined and brought into a new set of associations by an uncontrolled number of people [49]. This leads to an "informational insecurity" because nobody can ever be sure who knows what about another person [49]. The corrosion of context is considered a meta-pattern of the loss of control, meaning that the former context, in which the statement or the action was executed, gets displaced and changed in the process [49]. This finally makes a situation a scandal, because statements that were originally thoughtlessly expressed and afterwards separated from their regional and temporal context are presented to a public, that had not been considered at the time of expression, and for whom the matter of fact is alarming.

In times of the internet, scandal can happen to anyone, regardless of whether this person is famous or an ordinary citizen. As much as anybody can become the victim of a scandal, everybody can turn into the creator of a scandal, for example bloggers and actors in the social web. There is no longer a gatekeeper, who generates attention for a potentially scandalous matter [49]. The key player in the process of scandal is the public, as it does not only form the public sphere that is constitutive for a scandal but is also able to initiate the scandal itself. Thus the unleashed scandal is no longer a distant event but rather implemented in everybody's immediate sphere of life [49]. If a scandal erupts or not, does not depend on the social relevance of the topic, but on the interest that can be stirred by it (ibid: 24). An example is the so-called "dog poop affair", in which a girl was ostracized for a mundane incident [28]. She refused to clean her dog's feces from the floor in the subway. An observer took a picture, posted it on a blog. A few days later, the girl's name, revealed by a blog user, was well-known and public outrage erupted. If that is the case, then the dynamics of scandal are set in motion. The scale of outrage therefore depends on the interest of the public and the viral distribution through it. The main function of an affair is to visualize the radical democratization concerning the practice of revelation and scandalization through the media [49]. As one is able to scandalize and can be scandalized, a democratic process evolves from which no one is excluded. This extended spectrum of offenders and victims, the widening of topics now including the mundane and irrelevant, new recording devices like smart-phones and digital cameras as well as the multimedia platforms Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube lead to an increase in the quantity of scandals [28,49]. The scandal of Abu Ghraib, for example, was enabled by photos of the abused prisoners taken by American soldiers [49]. Scandal itself is mainly seen as negative. The same is true for research on scandal, as it replicates the abuse of a norm under the hypocritical

mantle of righteousness, exposure and science [49]. From a normative perspective, it seems problematic that in the digital age any ordinary citizen can easily become the victim of a scandal and cannot really influence the course of events due to the lack of media competence and experience.

The strength of this approach is the distinction of the term 'media' into new and traditional media and the strong focus on the web 2.0. However, it seems problematic that even though the representatives of this concept indeed differentiate the term 'media', they neglect to discuss the relations between those two types of media: When do the traditional media adopt topics from the social media? Can the traditional media remain uninfluenced by movements in the social media and if so, when and how? How does the causality work? Does the journalist adopt scandalous topics from bloggers, or do bloggers write about a topic that they garner from the traditional media? Furthermore, the question remains whether social media like Facebook are able to arouse the public attention that constitutes a scandal if it is not combined with reporting from the traditional media that generally reaches a large number of people [6]? Thus, can we already speak of scandal if it only provokes outrage within one part of the public sphere, in this case the online public, and not the media public as a whole? A specific definition of scandal for this approach and the exploration of the relation between traditional and new media will be useful in the future. Certainly, the evaluation of scandal is rather critical and there is a lack of empirical data. Nevertheless this new approach should get attention as it is indeed the first approach that puts the new (online) media into play as an agent sui generis.

Results

To summarize our findings, in the research on scandal four approaches can be systematically explored with the instrument of analysis presented here: The representative groups of those approaches can be divided into the following: "society-oriented moralism", "media-oriented constructivism", "strategic constructivism", and "internet-oriented relativism". The first two schools of thought are the most established, whereas the latter two mainly developed in the last five to ten years, whereby the relativistic perspective is the latest. As shown, these approaches differ quite considerably in their distinctive features, especially concerning the question regarding the key player in the process of a scandal. The sphere of influence ranges from the person at the center of the scandal (society-oriented moralists), the media (media-oriented constructivists), and representatives of the same social group (strategic constructivists) to the (online) public in the new media (internet-oriented relativists). Table 1 demonstrates the four approaches on the basis of their distinctive features, clarifying the fundamental differences.

Despite all the differences, the approaches agree in two areas. First, scandal is functional for different agents. Be it for society in the recollection of the normative consensus, be it for the media in politically and economically motivated self-staging as the whistleblower, be it for the systemic dependent in the fight for influence, or be it for the public in its desire for the voyeuristic satisfaction of needs.

Second, all concepts acknowledge the public as a constituent of the scandal. Without public outrage there will be no scandal, even if the media or representatives of the same field try to label a topic scandalous or even if the norm abuse might be objectively severe. Unclear is though, how the public must be predisposed in order to diagnose a scandal.

		Internet-oriented relativism	Strategic constructivism	Media-oriented constructivism	Society-oriented moralism
	Understanding of scandal	Voyeuristic phenomenon	Strategic phenomenon	Media designed phenomenon	Societal phenomenon
	Main focus of the concept	Loss of control, violation of context	Reaction of agents from the same field, scandal as a strategic power field	Process of scandal, reactions of the media system	Society
	Reasons for the increase of scandals	New social media, widened field of victims and issues	Increasing fight for influence between elites of a system	Investigative journalism, media concurrence, sensationalism	Polarized society, increasing value conflicts
	Reasons for the onset of a scandal	Interestingness (not relevance)	Interpretation by agents from the same field	Construction by the media	Abuse of norms
	Scale of a scandal	Virality/attention with the public	According to the interpretation of elites in the same system	According to the ability of the media to design a scandal	According to the abuse of norms, the underlying value conflict
	Publicity of the person being scandalized	Well-known and unknown	Well-known	Well-known	Well-known
Reasons for scandals	Key role in the process of scandal	(Part of) the public	Opponent in the same system	Media	Scandalized
Process of scandals	Main function of a scandal	Indicator for the democratization in the process of revelation	Instrument of power	Instrument of power	Instrument of control for the society
Evaluation and function of scandals	Evaluation of scandals	Almost solely negative	Both negative and positive	Mainly negative	Mainly positive

Table 1: Systematic overview of the research on scandal (own illustration).

Concerning the methodological approaches there are no mentionable differences. For example all approaches use empirical methods like quantitative and qualitative content analysis as well as interviews with people who were involved in the scandal.

On the one hand, identification and description of those approaches should lead to transparency and direction in the already quite developed research field on scandal. On the other hand, it should contribute to critical reflection on the limitations each approach has, and make the representatives of a specific approach aware of the alternative viewpoints other concepts display. In that case, the following questions might arise: Are the media really defining a scandal or do they just mirror the public outrage caused by the abuse of norms? Is it really the individualization and polarization of the society that leads to an increase in scandals, or is it not likewise caused by changes in the media system? Does the conversion of a matter into a scandal function as an instrument of control, and does it aide in the agreement of norms or does it mainly satisfy voyeuristic needs? By identifying these approaches, it is now also possible to bring them together to get a more holistic view on the scandal. This should be illustrated by the example of the key player in the process of scandal, as the approaches differ the most in this regard. In order to investigate the causes of a scandal comprehensively, each approach should be taken into account:

To use the view of the "society-oriented moralists", it is important to explore the behavior of the person who is subject of the scandal and to refer to the norms the person might have violated. Empirically, this can be explored by interviewing the scandalized person and further actors who define norms.

From the "strategic constructivist" perspective it is also important to investigate the agents of the same field with regard to their interests and relations to the media, which should show in how far they initiated a scandal.

To see, if the media really construct scandals as the "media-oriented constructivist" proclaim, a content analysis of the media should be conducted. By doing this, one can see the discrepancy between a) what the person who is subject of a scandal and agents from the same field told the media and b) how it was spun and reported. This can be accompanied by a survey of journalists in order to detect their motivation to initiate a scandal.

To meet the perspective of the "internet-oriented relativists", it should be taken into account as well in how far the new and the traditional media might have affected each other. This can be done by content analysis.

All these approaches should not demand the claim of absoluteness, as this runs the risk of losing the nuanced perspective on the complex phenomenon of scandal. This overview endeavors to enhance that perspective and to lead to a more sophisticated discussion going forward by contributing to a more nuanced perception of the phenomenon of scandal, a broader knowledge of the existing research approaches, and an enhanced use of method or combination of methods in the analysis of scandal. It should be mentioned that there is a smaller group of studies like Burkhardt [30] or Thompson [4] that do not perfectly fit into one approach, because they have elements of multiple approaches. However, this is a problem of almost all typologies and does not vitiate its functions. In summary: Problems are neither entirely black nor white – they are always a nuance of grey. This article is an attempt to better understand all the various shades of gray within the research on scandal.

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