

Call for Papers

Scandalogy 5

Scandals in Times of Crises, Conflicts, and Conspiracies

This call for papers invites submissions for the 5th International Conference in Scandalogy. Scandalogy is an initiative that conducts interdisciplinary research in scandals, media, and society. The research initiative hosts regular conferences and maintains a network of international scholars from the broader academic field, such as political communication, journalism studies, public relations, digital communication research, and cultural studies. [For more information about Scandalogy, please visit our website.](#)

In recent years a multitude of political scandals is coming to public attention across the world, involving all kinds of nepotism, sexual harassment, coercion, and abuses of power. As pointed out by many scholars (see recent collections e.g., Tumber & Waisbord, 2019; Haller, Michael & Seeber, 2022), a reason for this is the overall transformations of media and journalism in the digital age. However, aside from transformations of media and journalism, there are larger socio-political trends that produce a hotbed for scandalization.

First, it is not an exaggeration that we live in times of crises that disrupt and dictate the state of affairs on the national and global stage while destabilizing the social and political orders of modern societies (e.g., Rydstrom et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the interrelationship between scandal and crisis moves into focus. Crises proliferate scandals. On the one hand because a crisis puts pressure on organizations and institutions for an immediate corrective reaction that may result in legal or moral transgressions. On the other hand, a crisis challenges institutions and organizations to find adequate solutions which are under intense scrutiny of the public. As a case in point, the Covid-19 pandemic offers numerous examples, e.g., dubious ways of buying clinical masks by state agents, allocating public funds for third-party tracking apps, or restricting civil liberties criticized by parts of the public. Coombs, Holladay and Tachkova (2018) have coined the term “scansis” to emphasize the co-occurrence of the two phenomena in which organizations or institutions can or should communicate to manage scandals and mitigate crises. Considering this common core of scandals and crises, Johanssen & Visgo (2020) point out that scandal has a societal perspective while crisis can also be approached from an organizational perspective. In this view, scandals are a mechanism for how the public seeks and mediates information in times of crisis. Scandals may also function as a form of crisis response that gives resilience to social systems in the future.

Second, one can argue that crises accentuate social conflicts. Such conflicts are increasingly demarcated along ideological and partisan lines. In this regard, scandal can be a means of driving conflicts. This is because scandalization offers strategic communicative instruments to e.g., sharply distinguish one's own political camp from others and help to rally political supporters against ideological opponents. In this context, journalists may operate as agents of conflict who use “instrumental actualization” (Kepplinger, 2011) or other instruments, like framing (Entman, 1993), to report on politicians or non-governmental actors from different political factions by emphasizing

even minor or irrelevant misconduct that happened in the past to damage their character, attempting to influence public opinion. Partisan media, such as FOX News in the United States, are contributing to this climate of conflict as much as hyper-partisan alternative media ecosystems do (Holt et al., 2019). Studies have shown that reactions to scandals and attitudes towards those who are scandalized are, amongst other factors, conditioned by partisan identity. Psychological mechanisms of selective exposure and selective perception may explain this phenomenon (Walter & Redlawsk, 2019; von Sikorski, Heiss & Matthes 2020).

Third, as society is polarized on controversial political issues, we can observe how conspiracy theories become more salient in public discourse. While the interrelation between crisis, conflict, and scandal is well established, it appears relevant to ask what role scandals play in the proliferation of conspiracy narratives. Research shows that beliefs in conspiracy theories about controversial issues are often strongly influenced by people's existing beliefs and attitudes (Stempel et al., 2007; Carey et al., 2016). Attitudes of skepticism towards institutions and the political system increase the likelihood to believe conspiracy narratives. While conspiracy theory is distinguishable from scandal by its lack of basis in any sort of factual reality, both phenomena assume at their core that morally or legally transgressive acts occurred which are being concealed from the public instead of being exposed and condemned in media reporting. In most cases, conspiracy believers 'scandalize' elites and accuse them of hiding 'the truth' from the public, which is similar to classical theoretical concepts of scandals: According to Thompson (2000), political scandals appear because of a transformation of visibility, i.e., previously secret actions are revealed. This means that conspiracy supporters may see themselves as 'revealers' of scandalous behavior. In this regard, conspiracy narratives can play on mechanisms of scandalization, like instrumentalizing emotional outrage and character attacks (e.g., Samoilenko et al., 2020). As a strategy this is increasingly viable in the logics of growing alternative media ecosystems (Holt et al., 2019).

With this interdisciplinary scope, the organizers call for proposals in all subfields of communication studies, political communication research as well as related disciplines in the field of the humanities and invite conceptual, empirical, and methodological proposals reflecting on scandals and the role which media and/or communication plays therein. The conference encourages submissions of both empirically and theoretically focused work from advanced scholars as well as graduate students or doctoral candidates.

Proposals may focus on – but are not limited to – such topics as:

- the role of scandals and crises in modern post-industrial societies as an instrument for societal change (e.g., Hondrich, 2002)
- dissemination of rumors and conspiracies online; audience-induced conflicts and scandalization that instrumentalize emotional outrage in participatory digital publics (e.g., Burkhardt, 2018)
- scandalization and reputation management in hybrid media systems (e.g., Samoilenko et al., 2020)
- conspiracy narratives, scandalization and its effects on political attitudes in alternative media ecosystems (e.g., Holt et al., 2019; von Sikorski, Heiss & Matthes 2020)
- scandalization, conflict, and tabloidization as results of changing logics of media production and cycles of attention management (e.g., Boukes, Otto & Glogger, 2017)
- historical perspectives on conspiracy narratives and potential scandalization (e.g., Knight, 1995; Butter & Knight, 2019)

In this context, topics that are more general can still be relevant to the theme of this conference, e.g.:

- scandal management and crisis communication
- cross-national or cross-cultural studies on dissemination of conspiracy narratives
- political campaigning in a climate of political and/or journalistic conflict and the instrumentalization of scandals
- media effects studies in the context of polarization/partisanship and the use of new media
- challenges to professional norms of objectivity in journalism and their ethical dilemmas

Hosts

The conference is hosted by Otto Friedrich University Bamberg (Dr. Hendrik Michael) and the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol (Prof. (FH) Dr. André Haller). [For more information visit our conference website.](#)

Organization: Papers & panels

The conference will feature both presentations of individual research papers, and thematic panels. Paper submissions will be grouped in sessions of 3-4 papers by the conference program chair. A limited number of slots will be available for coherent panels where one topic is addressed in 3-4 presentations, followed by responses. Preference will be given to panels with presenters from diverse backgrounds and affiliations.

Submission Guidelines

For individual research papers: Please send an MS Word (.doc, .docx) file including (a) the title of your paper and an abstract of no more than 400 words, and (b), on a separate page, the names and affiliations of the authors.

For panel submissions: Please send an MS Word (doc., docx) file including (a) a rationale of no more than 300 word; (b) summaries for all the presentations in the panel (no more than 150 words for each summary); and (c) the names and affiliations of the chair, presenters, and respondents.

All submissions will be evaluated on relevance and originality, clarity of research purpose, grounding of theoretical and methodological approach, focus, and organization. Only one proposal per first author can be accepted. A publication of selected articles is planned.

Please send all submissions to scandalogy.kowi@uni-bamberg.de

Deadline for submissions: **November 15, 2023**

Date of notification: **December 1, 2023**