Scandal frames (Political News)

AUTHOR
Maximilian Eder

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION
Content alignment of journalistic reporting about scandals in the news or social media can be analyzed by identifying frames, a process by which they are derived from the material about a particular issue (inductive frame analysis) or using a set of re-occurring frames, which has been identified and operationalized in previous studies.

This research overview will describe a catalog of frames measured in news coverage and journalistic Twitter communication of various scandals in different countries (e.g., Berti, 2019, Eder, 2023, Maier et al., 2019).

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION
Political scandals have become an everyday phenomenon in news media. They also play a significant role when analyzing journalistic news and public communication processes as they reveal specific narrative patterns. Media content analyses investigate how journalists present information about evident or uncertain misbehavior by political actors and other elites. At the same time, there is still no consensus on a definition.

One of the most comprehensive definitions so far—which integrates actor-centered definitions, approaches that define political scandals through a social framework, and approaches that reject a limitation to the political-administrative sphere—comes from von Sikorski (2018), who defines such scandals as follows:

“Political scandals refer to real or conjectured norm transgressions of political actors or institutions. A particular norm transgression may occur in the context of political processes or in a politician’s private life and may or may not have legal consequences (e.g., official investigation by the office of the district attorney). [...] News coverage about an alleged norm transgression must be framed as scandalous (scandal frame), and the scandalous behavior has to be unambiguously condemned” (pp. 136–137). Political scandals can be described as the result of journalists publishing information about misconduct and especially (financial) corruption of political actors. Therefore, “the analysis of the reasons for scandals usually overlaps with analyses of corruption” (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, p. 1032), making (journalistic) content about corruption of political actors also relevant for framing research.

Likewise, there is no gold standard for measuring (scandal) frames. Five different, not mutually exclusive, methodological approaches have emerged in the past decades (Matthes & Kohring, 2008), while the framing of political scandals has been mainly researched with the following two measurements:

First, in the sense of Entman (1993), frames can be measured by different frame elements: particular problem definition, causal interpretation, treatment recommendation, and moral evaluation. Accordingly, a frame is present if more than one of the elements is present in the analyzed content. At the same time, not all (partial) elements need to be present (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Second, frames can be measured holistically, where thematic and episodic frames are used to identify patterns (de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012). In particular, the categorization of thematic frames
by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) has been proven reliable across different issues.

REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION
The framing of (political) scandals can be analyzed in various content, such as news articles, video, audio, and postings on (digital) platforms. At the same time, there is no consensus on the standardized measurement of frames. Moreover, the analysis of frames on political scandals has not been combined with other methods but rather relied on qualitative content analysis (see Eder, pp. 176–178), while the „issue-sensitivity makes analyses drawing on issue-specific frames difficult to generalize, compare and use as empirical evidence for theory building“ (de Vreese & Lecheler, 2012, p. 295).

EXAMPLE STUDIES
Berti (2019); Eder (2023); Maier et al. (2019)

INFORMATION ON BERTI, 2019
Author: Carlo Berti
Research question: How can different levels of corruption determine media representations of two corruption scandals in New Zealand and Italy? The author asked (a) how corruption is framed in the news media, (b) if there are relevant differences or similarities between those two countries, and (c) which different aspects of corruption and anti-corruption the identified frames make salient, unimportant, or invisible.

Object of analysis: The first part of the study was based on a selected sample of news articles from four Italian and three New Zealand newspapers on the “Field scandal” and the “Expo scandal” (N = 220 articles; 134 for Italy, 86 for New Zealand). In the second part of the study, findings were integrated through a qualitative framing analysis of the print media coverage of the Corruption Perception Index in the two countries (N = 37 articles; 18 for Italy, 19 for New Zealand) over a period of twenty years (1996–2016).

Time frame of analysis: Italy: May 8, 2014 to May 21, 2014 and November 28 to December 11, 2014; New Zealand: July 18, 2006 to September 10, 2006 and August 5 to August 18, 2009

INFO ABOUT VARIABLES
Variables:
“The first frame, ‘systemic corruption’, is characterized by the use of a single case to draw generalizations on the high levels of corruption in the country. [...] The second frame, ‘corruption as individual crime’, has a stronger focus on individual responsibilities of corrupt actors, juxtaposed with the integrity attributed to Parliament and/or society.” (p. 1586)

Level of analysis: news article
Variables and values:
• frame function – problem definition: Corruption as emergency, disaster, epidemic, environment, war (widespread problem); corruption as exception or integrity of the system (isolated case)
• frame function – causes: References to individuals accused of corruption (rotten apple(s); references to corruption networks, institutions, corrupt politics, political connivance (corrupt political system); references to a corrupt society or genetic corruption (corrupt society)
• frame function – moral judgment: Individual responsibilities or breach of trust (negative/Individuals); immoral institutions, politics, parties; connivance or whitewash (negative/politics and institutions); immoral society or genetic corruption (Negative/society)
• frame function – solutions: Investigations, trials, arrests, convictions, expulsions (law enforcement/political punishment); reforms or introduction of ethical codes (reform); special laws, task forces (emergency measures); impossibility of efficient anti-corruption, references to previous failures (fatalism)

Reliability: “Intercoder reliability (two independent coders, 26 randomly selected units of analysis) resulted in percent agreements of at least 0.8 and Cohen's Kappa of at least 0.6 for each category. Pilot tests were used to refine the coding manual.” (p. 1585)

Codebook: available upon request

INFORMATION ON EDER, 2023
Author: Maximilian Eder
Research question: How do German and Austrian political journalists use media frames on Twitter to report on political scandals? The author asked (a) which frames political journalists use and (b) whether there are relevant differences or similarities between journalists from those two countries.

Object of analysis: The study was based on a selection of 885 tweets (497 for Germany; 388 for
Austria) from 149 political journalists (87 from Germany; 62 from Austria) working for print media with the most significant political relevance and national reach in Germany and Austria ($N = 18$).

**Time frame of analysis:** May 17, 2019 to June 3, 2019

### INFO ABOUT VARIABLES

**Variables:**
Variables were derived from two previous studies on framing in the context of political scandalization (Berti, 2019; Maier et al., 2019) and were applied to the Twitter communication by political journalists. The established framing typology of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) was also used.

**Level of analysis:** tweets

**Variables and values:**
- **corruption frame:** References to individuals accused of corruption (corruption as personal misbehavior); references to corrupt networks, institutions, or politics (corruption as systemic misbehavior)
- **attack/defense frame:** References to violation of norms, condemnation from others (attack of the issue); references to no violation of norms, support from others (defense of the issue)
- **general frame:** References to responsibility for issue (attribution of responsibility); references to human example, personal vignette (human interest); references to disagreement between parties, individuals, groups, and countries (conflict); references to moral messages, how to behave (morality); references to financial losses or gains, costs or expense (economics)

**Reliability:** Overall reliability was calculated according to Holsti and Krippendorff’s $\alpha$ for a random sample of 90 tweets (10 percent of the total sample). The following satisfactory results were obtained: .97 ($r_H$) and .74 $r_a$ (intercoder reliability test); .93 ($r_H$) and .75 ($r_a$) (intracoder reliability test). Reliability values for individual variables range from .95 to .99 ($r_H$) and .69 to .83 ($r_a$) (intercoder reliability test); .91 to .96 ($r_H$) and .66 to .75 ($r_a$) (intracoder reliability test). Such values among the threshold defined by Krippendorff (2004, p. 429) are the result of a “one-sided distribution” (Riffe et al., 2019, p. 128). Further values can be obtained from the appendix.

**Codebook:** in the appendix (in German)
tion from office, personal punishment, defamation, a complete solving, an apology, constitution of committees, structural actions (defense frame).

**Reliability:** “Intercoder reliability (Holsti 1969, 140) was calculated for a random sample of 10 percent of the total sample. Reliability for the indicators of the elements of the attack and the defense frame ranges from 0.80 to 0.88.” (p. 112)

**Codebook:** n.a.

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**REFERENCES**


