

Importance of political scandals to the newspapers media essay



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The aims of this research are focused on assessing the importance of political scandals to the newspapers, on the role that the press assumes and how it is influenced by the fact that newspapers are supportive of political parties and on general trends that may be found in the coverage of political scandals by the quality press.

The methodology used involves a comparative research that places side by side the study of three different scandals. Comparing the conclusions taken from the three cases studied this research aims to find general trends that are transversal to the newspapers while covering political scandals, but also to generalize the results to the British quality press.

The reason to choose as object of the study newspapers instead of other media is related with the fact that in the United Kingdom the press is openly supportive of political parties, in contrast to what happens in television and radio broadcasters that are said to be independent. By studying newspapers it is possible to take an in-depth look at the conflict of interests of supporting a party, reporting the events to the readers and manager to report the situation keeping or increasing the profits of the newspaper. The relationship stated before influences the coverage produced by newspapers and the level of impartiality and independence that must be expected from them.

The present dissertation will also take a look at the quality press instead of analysing the tabloid newspapers. While the tabloid press is often more connected with infotainment rather than "serious" news reporting, they are likely to have more scandals. Notwithstanding the fact that they report more scandals does not mean that they report it better, nor people who buy these

newspapers expect it to be “serious”. In opposition to this reality there is the quality press. Even if openly supportive of political parties, the quality press is expected to give more “serious” news (Niblock, 1996: 23; Conboy, 2005: 12). People who buy these newspapers expect to be informed about issues related with international and political affairs.

The reason why the Guardian, the Independent and the Daily Telegraph (including the Sunday versions) were chosen to be analysed is that they allow the coverage of the entire political spectrum. Analysing one newspaper would not be enough to generalize or to find trends that could be transversal to the quality press. However an analysis that includes the whole political spectrum in a system that is effectively bipartisan allows a more detailed comparison. In this context, one can expect that the Guardian will provide a Liberal/Labour vision of the facts, the Telegraph is expected to present a Conservative vision, and the Independent is expected to give an independent vision – since the newspapers claims to be free from editorial connections since its beginning.

The articles analysed are from the following dates: Cash for influence – 25/01/2009 to 31/01/2009; Expenses Scandal – 8/05/2009 to 15/05/2009; and finally Lord Ashcroft tax status – 01/03/2010 to 07-03-2010. The criteria by which the articles were chosen to be analysed was if there was in them references to the scandal. The access to the newspapers was guarantee through the online archives present in the newspapers websites. In total 400 articles were analysed.

Scandals

The first story to be study is known as “ Cash for Influence” and it is a scandal concerning four Labour Party life peers who were supposedly accepting money in order to help to make amendments to legislation. The peers involved were Lord Moonie, Lord Snape, Lord Truscott and Lord Taylor. The four Labour members were accused of breaking two principles of the Code of Conduct for the House of Lords. The story was first published in the Sunday Times on the 25th of January of 2009, when staff from the newspaper approached the four peers pretending to be lobbyists from an unnamed company. The peers told them that for the right amount of money they could help them introducing some changes to the legislation.

The second story is about the British Parliamentary expenses scandal that was revealed by the Telegraph after a leak. The story broke on May 2009 and it involved the revelation of the expenses claimed by the Members of Parliament. The scandal received a lot of attention as it was shown that MPs were abusing the system of allowances and expenses related with their duty in the House of Commons.

The last case to be studied involves Mr. Ashcroft and his tax status. The controversy around Lord Ashcroft is not recent, but in 2010 Ashcroft decided to come public with his tax status. The controversy aroused not from the legal wrongdoing but due to the fact that it was thought that the Conservative Party deputy chairman had agree to become resident in the UK for tax purposed when he was recommended for a peerage in 2000.

The three stories involve financial transgressions/ controversies. The same logic that decided the newspapers to be analysed was also used in the selection of scandals. In the coverage of scandals: one of them is associated with peers from the Labour party, other is associated with people connected with the conservative party and the expenses scandals involve MPs from all the parties that are represented in the House of Commons. The scandals are all very recent and that, I hope, will provide an up to date perspective of the coverage of political scandals.

Content Analysis

The first decision that was to be made was considering the approach that should be used to answer the research questions. After looking at some studies concerning media studies produced before such as the works produced by Gans, 1979; Fishman, 1980; and Canel and Sanders, 2006; It was decided that an ideal approach to the study would be combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques. This is so because the questions involve a different type of answers but also because by combining different approaches the work will follow a principle of triangulation presenting greater validity. Triangulation is:

“... the traditional view that quantitative and qualitative research might be combined to triangulate findings in order that they may be mutually corroborated” (Bryman, 2006: 608).

For the combination of different approaches it would be used first Content Analysis of the articles published by newspapers related with the scandals and interviews with journalists from the three newspapers that are study

here. However the journalists were not very accessible and many did not show availability to be interviewed. Due to this fact, the interviews were dropped from this project.

The main technique to be used will be Content Analysis as it allows a, comparative analysis of the coverage of the scandals. Using this method it is possible to study the prominence and the importance that the stories may assume to the newspapers (Hansen et al., 1998: 95). The comparative approach also allows the identification of the trends and changes in the position adopted by newspapers during the coverage of the stories.

These questions are similar to those that this dissertation has to deal with in order to answer the research questions. Other advantage of Content Analysis is that it produces, if well-conducted, data that is less likely to suffer from subjective selectiveness and idiosyncrasies as it is a transparent and systematic technique of analysis (Hansen et al., 1998: 94; Bryman, 2006: 289).

The difficulties that are inherent to the Content Analysis are related with the fact that the categories and units of analysis may demand some interpretation from the coders (Bryman, 2006: 291). This can result in some disputes over the interpretation when the study is replicated. However, as these limitations were taken into account the codebook was design in order to guarantee its consistency and reliability.

While coding the Content Analysis the first seven categories - the newspaper where the article was present, the story covered, the date, the headline, the article length, the reporter and position and the genre of the article - are <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-political-scandals-to-the-newspapers-media-essay/>

basic information related with the characteristics of the articles. However this basic information will provide answers to questions related with: the scandal that received most attention, the newspapers that wrote more about the scandals, the newspaper that included more articles concerning these stories, the moment where the interest in the stories peaked and when it began to decrease, the nature of the genres that are more prominent in the coverage. The analysis of the position of the journalists is also very important because it can show the importance that the article assumes for the newspaper. If a story is considered very important then it is more likely to have an experienced and high-positioned journalist in the newspaper hierarchy writing the article. Possibly these variables are expected to provide data to analyse general trends and the importance that the stories assumed for the newspapers.

The exclusive content claim is a category that aims to give indications about the role of the newspapers while covering the stories. If newspapers are releasing information that they claim to have exclusive content, it is assumed that they are investing time and money on the story.

The scandal category is used to evaluate the coverage of the stories. It is expected to give a perspective on whether or not the stories were defined as scandals. It can also be a point to analyse potential changes related with the editorial choices of the newspaper.

The position of the articles towards the people involved and towards the acts committed by those is also coded. As the scandals are disclosed, the newspapers tend to assume positions towards it. This point is interesting to

understand the reactions of the newspapers to the stories and if they are transversal or if they tend to change as more is known about the scandal.

The variables involving the name of the party in the headline or lead are present to provide data to study if the connection between the party and the actors of the scandals is considered important to the newspapers. It is expected to indicate if newspapers are likely to identify more often, in these two parts of the articles, the name of the party they do not support rather than the party they support. This category is also expected to give information about the importance of the party identification for the newspaper when covering political scandals. The access to newspapers by the political parties is also coded by looking at the different stances that are present in the articles. This information is provided by the category concerning the inclusion of different political stances in the articles. The identification of the party that is less heard is also important to test the capacity of the parties to access the different newspapers.

The number of people quoted is also a focus of this study. The number of persons coded is assumed as one indicator of the time that was spent with the article. However to better evaluate the role of the quotes used they are counted in three different categories: the number of sources that assume neutral, accusative or sympathetic positions towards the people involved in the scandals. It is believed that by doing this it is possible to test the bias of the quotes used towards the story.

The victims of the scandals identified by the journalists in the articles are counted as well. This provides information about how the consequences of

the scandal are perspective by the newspaper. This information is expected to offers information if scandals are seen as a morality tale or if there is space for the “ political game” perspective. In continuation to the analysis paid to the political parties, it is tested if the coverage has presented the idea of elections and the consequences that the scandal may have for the outcome of the polls. This is done by the inclusion of a category that counts if the article mentions the elections.

In order to understand the role of the press during the scandals, and the positions adopted by the newspapers – and it was not possible to interview the people involved in the coverage of the scandals – the editorials will be more profoundly analysed than the other articles. The profound analysis is applied to these articles because in the United Kingdom this genre is assumed to be the place where the opinion of the newspapers is exhibit (Canel and Sanders, 2006: 10).

The extra variables that are coded in the analysis of the leading articles are six. Two variables are named praises and criticisms and they will record who is being attacked and protected by the newspapers. Are newspapers more comfortable attacking newspapers they do not support? Or can it be said that they will attack whoever is involved in a scandal in the same way? While attacking the people involved from one party, are newspapers softer with the party they support?

The other four categories coded are concerned with the role assumed by the quality press. Right to information is a category that aims to measure the posture of newspapers towards its readers and the information it provides

them. How often do newspapers look for legitimacy by claiming that they are providing information that is of the public interest? As for the solidarity and we vs. them categories, these target to analyse if the quality press tries to establish a close relation with its readers or if it tries to assume a more isolated position of a neutral vigilant.

Lastly, the role of the papers towards the political system is tested in the claims for reform done by newspapers. Do we have newspapers that are very active claiming for politicians to be changed, or is the quality press passive? The claim for reform category is probably expected to give an answer to those questions.

The biggest limitations to this research are related with the second technique of research used and the access to newspapers. The fact that the journalists that were covering the stories were not interviewed omits one set of accounts of the events in question.

The access to newspapers also imposes limitations to the study. While accessing to online editions variables such as pictures, front-cover and size of the article in relation with the format of the page of the newspaper are not available. In excluding such variables information that may be relevant for the research is not included.

The similar nature of the scandals may also be question, as Lord Ashcroft in opposition to what happen to the peers of the Labour Party did not perform any act that was illegal. The fact that this scandal was closer to the general elections can influence the coverage that it received. Contrary to the other

scandals, Lord Ashcroft's controversy was rumoured before, and so this <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-political-scandals-to-the-newspapers-media-essay/>

scandals when noticed may have lost the impact that the other cases attached.