

Powerful and Powerless: Psychological Reactions of Norwegian Politicians Exposed in Media Scandals

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Fourteen Norwegian politicians, subject to scandalizing media exposure, were interviewed about their experiences, reactions, and ways of coping. The participants expressed deep feelings of injustice and powerlessness related to the proportion of the coverage, the journalistic practices, and the use of anonymous statements. Most significant were the extent of the exposure, attacks on personal and moral attributes, harmful effects on significant others, and betrayal by political colleagues. It was difficult to publicize their own version of the story or correct dubious facts. They experienced stress both in direct encounters with media and related to the reactions of their family members, friends, and colleagues. Long-term effects were loss of trust in others and avoidance of public exposure. Media coping strategies included approaching personal media contacts, counterattacks, and keeping a low profile. Emotional coping strategies involved conducting business as usual and self-control instructions.

Keywords: political scandals, mediated scandals, media effects, media exposure, stress, coping strategies

Despite increasing interest in the scientific exploration of mediated scandals, few studies have investigated the psychological effects on the targeted individuals and families at the center of negative press reports.

Kepplinger (2007, 2016) introduced the term *reciprocal effect*, referring to the ways in which subjects of media stories are influenced by the coverage both *directly*, through encounters with journalists and news reports, and *indirectly*, through interaction with people in their environment. Through a so-called looking-glass process, the exposed individuals form ideas about other people's attitudes toward them, often based on the content of the media coverage and perceived changes in others' behavior. In a

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review of four surveys involving more than 1,900 German politicians, leaders, judges, and lawyers, Kepplinger found that negative media exposure affected the participants' emotions, thoughts, and behavior. High levels of anger and feelings of helplessness toward the media were common among both experienced and inexperienced individuals.

A Norwegian study of professional footballers (soccer players) revealed that critical media reports and continuous scrutiny by the press were significant sources of stress, potentially affecting both self-confidence and performance (Hofseth, 2016). This challenges a common assumption that experienced actors in the public eye are less susceptible to the effects of negative media exposure and scandals. To paraphrase Kepplinger (2016), this idea is wrong; they react just like everyone else.

Transactional models of stress emphasize the ongoing interaction between the person and the environment. The individual's appraisal of potential threats in a situation and lack of ability to cope effectively are strongly associated with high levels of stress (Folkman, 2013). Extensive psychological research reveals a strong relationship between perceived lack of control, stress, and negative health symptoms over time (Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002). Walker (2001) differentiated between the experiences of unpredictability and uncertainty, typically accompanied by symptoms of anxiety and worry about future threats, and the experience of total loss of control or helplessness, associated with depression. Studies have demonstrated that subjects of major media scandals experience strong feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness in relation to the media (Hammarlin, 2015; Kepplinger, 2016; Kepplinger & Glaab, 2007).

In traumatic events, the potential threat of the situation is perceived as immediate and overwhelming, resulting in feelings of acute lack of control and helplessness (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 2012). Psychological trauma is characterized by the loss of basic existential values such as integrity, self-worth, and safety (Weisaeth, 1993). Drawing on his clinical experience, Swiss psychiatrist Mario Gmür (Gmür, 2002) argued that massive media exposure is a potentially traumatic event. He proposed using the term *media victim syndrome* to describe the distinctive psychiatric symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and avoidance observed in patients who had been exposed in a media scandal. It is suggested that this syndrome should be included as a subgroup of the psychiatric diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bonanno, 2004; Christensen, Waldahl, & Weisaeth, 2007).

The outcome of a stressful event depends on the individual's use of adaptive coping strategies (Lazarus, 2006). Lazarus (1993) differentiated between so-called *problem-solving strategies*, aimed at changing stressful aspects of the situation, and *emotion-focused strategies*, which regulate thoughts, feelings, and mental state. Park and Folkman (1997) later added a third category, *meaning-focused strategies*, referring to the effort of making new sense of the situation.

Research Questions

Whereas previous research on the targets of mediated scandals has focused primarily on how media affects individual and corporate decision-making processes and policies, this article aims to extend the understanding of psychological mechanisms underlying experienced stress and potential health risks

for scandalized individuals and their families. We examine the long-term effects of mediated scandals that have not been previously scientifically documented. We investigate four research questions by analyzing similarities and differences within the sample and between the politicians and others (i.e., leaders, health personnel, athletes) included in our general study of media effects (Karlsen & Duckert, 2017).

RQ1: How did journalistic investigative methods and specific media reports affect experienced politicians and their families?

RQ2: What were the politicians' psychological reactions during the acute phase of a scandal?

RQ3: What were the politicians' coping strategies?

RQ4: What were the long-term consequences of these mediated scandals on the individuals and their families?

Methods

Our research approach was qualitative and explorative, based on in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) with politicians who experienced negative treatment by the Norwegian media. Our aim was to assess their subjective experiences of psychological strain and their coping strategies. To remain close to the individuals' own experiences and stories, we did not interview journalists or include other media perspectives in our analyses, nor did we evaluate the correctness or fairness of the media coverage.

Participants

The politicians were part of a larger group of individuals recruited during 2004–2015. The inclusion criteria were that the individuals were the primary target of a critical media report that was (a) related to their work or profession, (b) resulted in a minimum of 10 negative stories, and (c) that lasted for a minimum of one week. The exclusion criterion was that the participants were not convicted of a crime related to the story at the time of the first interview. We contacted persons matching these criteria by letter and telephone. More than 80% of the contacted individuals consented to participate in the study.

This article analyzes a subgroup of 14 Norwegian politicians (eight female and six male, 45–65 years old). The participants, who were mostly representatives of Parliament, were all experienced politicians and were trained in media strategies as part of their professional role.

The content of the media accusations varied from professional critiques to serious misconduct or criminal acts. Ten of the cases met the criteria of a mediated scandal according to the definition outlined by Allern and Pollack (2012).

Procedures

The participants were interviewed by means of a semistructured interview guide. The initial questions were open and followed up by more specific questioning about the participants' thoughts, feelings, and ways of coping with the various aspects of the media interaction. The duration of the interviews was approximately two hours. They were tape recorded and later transcribed and analyzed.

We conducted most of the interviews within a year after the mediated scandal had taken place. In order to also investigate the media effects over time, three of the participants were interviewed twice; first, immediately after the scandal broke, and then five years later.

Analysis

The interviews were analyzed according to the protocol for consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). A research group was organized during the time of data collection, and all the members conducted individual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) before meeting for consensual discussions of the qualitative categories. Later, new cross-analyses of the data were conducted, with reference to the scandals, comparing the politicians' responses to the responses of other participants provided in our general study of media effects (Karlsen & Duckert, 2017). This general sample included 43 individuals (leaders, health personnel, artists, and athletes) recruited using the same criteria as the 14 politicians.

Ethical Issues

All participants received information about the project and procedures, and about the option of withdrawing from the study at any time. They all signed a written consent form. The study was approved by the regional ethics committee. Originally, we anonymized all cases and statements to ensure confidentiality. During the process of publishing, four of the politicians agreed to be named, allowing for discussions that were more detailed. These participants have read and approved their contributions before publication.

Results

The politicians in our study were all experienced media figures and most had received both positive and negative public attention for many years. Their initial reflections on the media were characterized by a clear understanding of the reciprocal dependence between politicians and the media. Several participants at times even struggled to be as visible in the press as they would have wanted.

Stressful Media Exposure

The participants' dominant position was that politicians should accept being scrutinized and criticized by the press. Nevertheless, all described episodes of immense stress related to journalists, offensive media reports and interactions with other people during the periods of negative publicity. Faced

with scandalizing media exposure, their emotions were often strong, and their psychological responses were characterized by symptoms of stress, such as unrest, anxiety, bodily pain, and sleep disturbances. We asked all participants to rate their experience of stress during the period of negative media exposure (0 indicated no psychological strain, 10 the highest level of strain). The majority of the participants rated their levels of psychological strain between 8 and 10. Several characterized the situation as a deep crisis and the worst period of their life, and indicated feelings of trauma related to the exposure.

However, some participants indicated lower levels of stress, stating that the media coverage did not bother them much. "I had more important worries than the media," one said, referring to internal conflicts in the political party and his potential loss of career.

Acute Reactions

Trygve G. Nordby is a well-known Norwegian bureaucrat with long-term experience of being in the public eye. In early winter 2006, he had just begun his new position as secretary general of the Norwegian Red Cross when he found himself at the center of a political scandal related to his prior position as head of the Directorate of Immigration. Nordby was accused of giving permanent residence permits to 183 Iraq Kurds, contrary to the ministers' will.

VG, the largest popular tabloid in Norway, began collecting statements about the case from politicians, lawyers, and Nordby's colleagues. They released a series of media reports about Nordby's leadership style and decisions. He was accused of disloyalty toward his political leaders and was reported to the police by the right-wing Progress Party (FrP) for disobeying Parliament. The government ordered an inquiry into the case and into Nordby's role in particular. The inquiry report concluded with harsh criticism. Nordby felt overwhelmed and "publically raped" by the media criticism of his leadership and integrity:

It [the media exposure] hammered over me so heavily. It was the front pages, the commentaries, caricature drawings. At the same time, I had just started a new job, the employees had only just met me—and then there were 80 days of daily press entries, every day for 80 days. It got to my bones.

His acute reactions were characterized by strong feelings of anger, anxiety, and lack of control: "I felt deeply dishonored, and I hear myself using the same words as rape victims: I have experienced deep violation of myself, of my honor, and of my private life."

Attacks on Personal Integrity

All participants made a distinction between professional criticism and media exposure attacking personal traits and values. When the media scrutiny turned from political to personal matters, the exposure became harder to handle. A female participant and former Minister, with extensive experience of media criticism, outlined this distinction:

I never had a problem with harsh criticism for a political position. This I think is fair, and if you can't handle that as a politician, you need to find another job. However, what affected me were the stories attacking my integrity, my honor, and my human values.

Which media portrayals the participants experienced as most offending varied, depending on which traits or virtues they most strongly identified with. The psychological pain was associated with the severity of the accusations, but also with the perceived discrepancy between the stories and their sense of self or personal values. For example, one participant experienced being characterized as "immoral" as traumatic; another was especially hurt by being portrayed as "stingy," because this was, in the participant's words, "so contrary to the truth. Stinginess is one of the worst things I know. I can't stand stingy or demanding people."

In the acute phase, fear, sadness, anger, and feelings of injustice were typical reactions. One of the participants was accused of sexual assault and was forced to temporarily leave a central position in his political party during the scandal. Looking back on the first days of the scandal, he remembered: "I cried a lot—in the early phase but also later, when the scandal caught up with me."

Symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbance, and loss of energy were common among the most severely scandalized participants. One woman, the former mayor of a Norwegian city, was accused of embezzlement. She described her immediate reaction when the scandal broke: "I was just numb, paralyzed. It hits you right in the stomach. You become despaired and angry. [It felt] unjust."

Powerlessness

Closely linked to the experience of stress and negative emotions such as anxiety and anger, were the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that transpired during interactions with the media. Especially painful for the participants was the loss of control over how their stories were told.

Based on our analyses, we identified four stages of interaction with the media where stress, negative emotions, and lack of control were likely to occur: (a) direct encounters with journalists, (b) waiting for publication, (c) facing the specific media reports, and (d) encounters with other people in the community.

During *direct encounters with journalists*, the participants often felt uncertain and distrustful. What were the real intentions and aims of the questions the journalists asked? Often, the questions presumed an acceptance of already established, often controversial, or oversimplified premises. One participant stated: "You never really get the chance to explain how things really are. The journalists aren't interested in the actual facts at all."

Furthermore, they never knew when the phone would ring, or where the press might turn up. A long-term member of Parliament was exposed in the national media after making undue attempts at influencing bureaucratic decisions. When caught off-guard by a journalist, she reacted with fear and anger:

"VG just came into my office and demanded my answer. I was not prepared, felt invaded, and probably acted as if I was hiding something. Afterwards I started worrying. How will they use this?"

The latter part of her statement illustrates the next stage of media stress: *waiting for publication*. Knowing from experience that the media carefully construct their headlines, angles, and release of information, the participants typically worried about how they would be portrayed in the actual story.

When *facing the specific media reports*, participants often felt they were confronted with overly negative storytelling and selective use of pictures and headlines. Key emotions following such publications were anger, sadness and powerlessness. Again, oversimplification of facts and erroneous personal portraits were described as most difficult to accept and handle. The former mayor accused of embezzlement stated: "When they write that I have violated financial acts, it harms my integrity. I haven't violated any financial acts, and when the journalist knows this but still writes his story, I feel exploited."

In the final stage, when *encountering other people in the community* in the wake of critical media reports, several participants described unpleasant experiences. Being recognized in public in the context of an ongoing scandal, noticing people looking at them, whispering their name, was painful. Although only a minority of participants reported explicit feelings of shame, several described an impulse to shrink or avoid public spaces. One participant, accused of misuse of public funding, gave this statement:

I went into a store to buy a newspaper. It was 20 other people there. When I entered, they all became quiet. On the front page of the newspaper was a huge picture of me under the headline: "Used 10.000 of your tax money." It was terrible. I was extremely uncomfortable. A total disaster.

In 2001, the current Norwegian Oil and Energy Minister, Terje Søviknes, then 32, was involved in a massive mediated scandal that revealed his sexual interactions with a 16-year-old member of the youth party. For weeks, the media broadcast the story that Søviknes, at the time deputy president of the right wing party, FrP had served the young girl alcohol and later seduced her at a party congress. He was accused of sexual harassment and of exploiting his position. Consequently, he resigned from all national political positions:

In the first weeks, when I was suspended, I was very frustrated because I could not get my message across in media reports. I was desperate and felt very powerless. The media tried to divide my lawyer and me. There was a front page in Dagbladet¹ stating that I was considering litigation against the girl, [which was] totally out of touch with reality.

Later, the media focused on how Søviknes handled the scandal and the girl involved:

¹ Dagbladet is a popular tabloid newspaper.

The front pages of the newspapers claimed that I was trying to force her into silence. Members of Parliament, political opponents, and various commentators in public said they "strongly condemned that Søviknes was behaving in this way." I was at home with no control and no chance of correcting the situation. This feeling of helplessness was my strongest feeling.

Overwhelming Intensity

The intensity of the exposure contributed to the participants' stress levels. The extent of the coverage and the frequency of the interactions with the press certainly affected Søviknes:

It was the massive number of stories concentrated over a few weeks. It was on the front pages of every newspaper. Going to the store for daily groceries was a huge strain. I came to the tills with the newspaper shelves, and there I see front-page, front-page, front-page. In every newspaper, I was the top story, even when the contents were already known. We (Søviknes and his wife) couldn't even move freely. Journalists surrounded the house for several days.

Trygve G. Nordby was also overwhelmed by the intensity of the media coverage:

Monday, March 22nd 2006 I had 44 conversations with the media in one day. Just being exposed to that experience! The media pressure was a massive stressor, so I had a huge need to withdraw in order to recover. However, the media wouldn't let me; they never accepted a "no." TV2² put a camera in front of my house, during the worst period, for 48 consecutive hours. They put cameras in front of the Red Cross office So I couldn't pass the windows, couldn't leave the building, couldn't do anything, without being involuntarily exposed.

Impact on Significant Others

Manuela Ramin-Osmundsen became famous overnight in 2007 when she was appointed child and family minister. As the first Norwegian minister with an immigrant background, and a new name in politics, she immediately became a person of interest for the media. After only four months in office, she was harshly criticized for her appointment of a new children's ombudsman. Initially, she was accused of incapacity (wrongfully, the government lawyer later concluded). However, the focus of the media scandal soon moved to the way she responded to the media's revelations about her prior relationship to the new ombudsman. They accused her of lying to the media and to the prime minister. The media coverage was massive, with more than 2,000 articles published over a period of only seven days, culminating in her resignation.

Asked what hurt her the most about the media exposure, she immediately responded, "Being pervasively portrayed as a liar." One day, her daughter asked whether what the newspapers wrote was

² TV2 is a Norwegian television broadcaster.

true. "‘Mummy, are you a liar?’ It felt like totally losing my authority as a parent. The media said that I was a crook, and others used this against my daughter. It was a terrible feeling."

Several of the participants described their spouses, children, parents, and close friends as their primary source of support during the scandal. However, these individuals also caused them to worry. At times, the strain on their closest relatives was greater than on themselves. After all, these individuals had not chosen a career that placed them in front of cameras and journalists, they did not have professional teams of advisors, and they had no control over the media. The participants were particularly concerned about the harm done to young, vulnerable children. Ramin-Osmundsen stated:

It was a show on YouTube mimicking me. This was extremely painful for a teenager with only one wish, namely to be similar to everyone else, cool and invisible. Then she had a mom being portrayed as a liar. She had no one to talk to about it. She couldn't handle it.

For some, family members were directly involved in the media story, which caused significant stress and powerlessness. The mayor accused of embezzlement remarked: "When they write about you as a person, and you get your family situation exposed as well, it is extremely painful."

Kristin Krohn Devold was the Norwegian minister of defense at the time of her participation in the study and had experienced several episodes of harsh media criticism during her political career. She revealed that she continuously evaluated her family's reactions to negative media reports. One incident significantly affected her whole family:

I knew I couldn't do anything. I could not process their feelings; I could process my own but not theirs. They just had a terrible time, and I knew it was going to last for awhile. . . . This situation made me angry, and I still am.

She developed various strategies to help her children cope: "I have instructed my children not to believe most of what is printed in the media. Remember that the journalists and the ones giving statements about me always have agendas."

Behind the Scenes—Betrayal and Distrust

Leaks to the press, with information intended to harm opponents, have become an important part of modern politics. The media rely on these sources to reveal immoral or even illegal conditions. Furthermore, in the later stages of a scandal, the media continue to invite critical voices to evaluate and comment on the presented infringements (Allern & Pollack, 2012).

Our participants were strongly aware of the political games behind the scenes. For some, the experience of being publically betrayed by politicians in their own party was the most hurtful and difficult part of the scandal.

A female participant, with extensive experience as a member of Parliament and two periods as a minister, was repeatedly and personally criticized over several years. Although not involved in a particular scandal, she was regarded as controversial and felt she was disliked by many. The lack of support from party fellows significantly increased her painful emotions related to the negative media exposure:

The toughest part was that even if I handled the case in the way the party had decided, I still received public criticism from our own regional representatives, without them ever discussing it with me. Four went against me in the press, and two said nothing. This was a huge source of distress. They were so influenced by the picture already painted by the press that they went against me.

A frequent consequence of being betrayed—especially by fellow party members or colleagues—was a loss of trust in people, which resulted in increased cynicism.

Moderate Stress

Some participants found it easier to cope with the negative publicity. Krohn Devold had entered the political scene several years before becoming minister of defense, first as a political advisor and later as an elected member of Parliament. In general, she did not give much significance to what the press or political opponents thought of her, but attacks on her personal values were more stressful: "Every politician needs conflicts. That has to do with being visible. However, you need to make sure you get the right conflicts. What you don't want are personal conflicts with the potential of harming your integrity."

In her early years as a politician, leading the justice committee at Parliament, Krohn Devold was portrayed as naïve and incompetent:

I was characterized as a lightweight, not reflective, not analytic enough, not intelligent. However, I have always been excellent at school, and had top grades. Being portrayed as unintelligent or somewhat simple-minded damaged my integrity and made me react strongly.

She later learned to cope with personal attention from the press, separating her professional role from her private: "I have learned that my [political] opponents use personal characterizations like these deliberately, to harm me. So now, I feel less affected by it."

Although the participants who experienced less invasive media interactions often described feeling powerless in the face of incorrect press reports, they seemed to accept them more easily. The following statement from Krohn Devold was characteristic:

You can never fully control or correct what is wrong. You can try to disavow it, but you know this will appear at the bottom of page 46, right? In addition, by the time the disavowal is published, the inadequate information has already been established as a fact. That's just how it is. You can't waste time on that.

Long-Term Effects

When we interviewed Nordby five years after the media scandal, he was no longer severely inhibited by psychological symptoms or worries. However, he still felt damaged by the scandal, noting: "I still think life before and after these events is very different, even after so many years." He mentioned two persisting losses: the ability to feel joy and excitement, and the ability to fully trust other people. "I find this very sad and strange."

Nordby's story was similar to the long-term experiences of many of the participants. On the surface, things were fine. However, being reminded about the scandal triggered painful memories. This often occurred when they felt unwanted at certain meetings, were denied employment with reference to the scandal, or were labeled as controversial when reappearing in the news.

Nordby described his confrontation with a journalist who, five years after the incident, provided incorrect information during a live radio show:

When introducing me he said I had resigned from the directorate because of disloyalty. Thus, I had to start the interview by correcting him. I never had to resign. Obviously, this affects my self-confidence. Is this what people still think of me? Here I am, apparently respected for who I am today, but then the case is still popping up portraying me as disloyal, and for me this is one of the most harmful things. It affects my integrity.

Several participants offered similar accounts and underlined the need for caution when interacting with the press. The female minister who lacked support from fellow party members and felt disliked by the public, gradually became more reserved toward the press: "My open attitude towards journalists is no longer there. I need to weigh my words very carefully. I always ask myself, what will they now make out of what I have said?"

The Importance of the Workplace

Seven of the politicians in our sample had to resign or withdraw from their positions. Being involuntarily out of work seemed strongly associated with their levels of stress and also changed the context for coping with the negative media exposure. The resignation didn't merely harm their political ambitions and personal economy; it also implied loss of daily routines, support systems, and advisors, as well as a person's identity and purpose.

Ramin-Osmundsen was out of work for almost a year after the scandal. This she regarded as a major source of stress, closely related to the negative portrayal of her in the media: "I experienced a massive public stigma, which made it difficult for many employers to hire me," she said. "This has probably been the worst strain."

Coping With the Media Scandal

The politicians in our sample were experienced and competent media subjects and had entered the public scene by their own choice. They had access to professional networks of strategic and media advisors. As such, they were able to employ a wide range of strategies to reduce distress from negative media exposure. However, faced with the loss of control caused by an evolving person-focused scandal, they also needed to address their own reactions and feelings.

All participants described a process of evaluating different strategies that would allow them to obtain the upper hand and influence the public story.

Using Personal Relationships

Many of the politicians had developed good relationships with certain journalists. Faced with damaging media exposure, several made direct contact with reporters they trusted while providing few or no comments to others.

For example, Søviknes contacted a select group of journalists to offer his own version of what had occurred. He even asked a few for their views on the matter:

Some journalists whom I trusted became valued conversation partners. The best therapy for me was probably to talk with some of the journalists who had time to go behind the surface and discuss the actual events and how they occurred. However, it was hard to differentiate between the ones to trust and the ones not to.

Søviknes quickly learned that going off the record with journalists was a risky strategy. Some newspapers broke this rule of confidence and took advantage of the opportunity for a new headline based on the information he had shared in confidence: "I was probably too open with too many journalists. I should have focused on the ones I knew I could trust."

Other participants described similar dilemmas in their relationships with the press. Some tried to keep a low profile, hoping the media soon would lose interest in the case, whereas others found it better to face the journalists directly, providing their own version of the story to prevent further speculation. Nordby chose the latter, saying: "If you start rejecting phone calls, this becomes an issue itself. So to maintain at least some control, I decided to answer every phone call myself."

Selecting Media Platforms

Another way to establish control of relationships with the media was to choose the right media platforms. Most of the politicians stated that they preferred live broadcasts because they minimize the risk of unfortunate editing.

A long-term member of Parliament and leader of a political party often found himself frustrated by his lack of power over the media's editing practices. Live broadcasts, however, allowed him to feel in control: "Going live is always a pleasure. Then you are the boss, even if you are restricted by shortness of time. In a recorded interview, they cut away the important parts and leave you with just nonsense."

Another common strategy involved writing direct responses to the media reports, which allowed the politicians to voice their statements without being interrupted by journalists or adversaries, thus increasing their control. However, because the newspapers chose when and how to publish a response, this strategy often still ended up less effective than intended.

Planning Counterattacks

The participants spent a significant amount of time planning their counterattacks and working on their statements. Although often the platform of choice, live broadcasts were especially important to prepare for because one could otherwise easily appear in an unfavorable light. A former government minister with a vast amount of experience was often criticized but never felt attacked by the media. Still active in public debates, she stated, "The more experienced I become, the more I prepare for live broadcasts. You can never prepare enough for all eventualities. You must be prepared for the worst in order not to be caught off-guard."

Nordby described how he equipped himself for the thunderstorm of journalistic questioning by writing down his statements before meeting the press:

When it all exploded, I wrote down 10 lines, and in all 44 conversations with journalists that day I repeated the same sentences. All the TV channels were there, all the radio stations, everyone. I said the same thing repeatedly, in order not to start doubting or second-guessing what I had actually said. They would have chewed me up otherwise.

The participants with access to professional media advisors made active use of such resources; they viewed this as useful in preparing for and coping with media reports. Several also sought advice from professionals outside the party, often lawyers, media experts, or competent advisors in their network.

Confronting the Media

Several of the politicians tried to confront journalists or editors after they had published scandalous or hurtful stories. After an unauthorized news report involving members of her family, Krohn Devold wrote directly to the paper's editor: "I told him exactly what the consequences of the story were for my family, how painful it was. I personally delivered it to him."

Unfortunately, such strategies rarely did more than serve the emotional function of getting something off their chests; a change in media behavior rarely followed such confrontations. Krohn Devold remembered the editor's response to her letter: "He just gave me a gibberish answer; something about letting the responsible people read the letter or something. To me this showed a lack of responsibility."

In a successful attempt to influence his story, Nordby personally reached out to three different news departments (NRK, *Aftenposten*, *Dagsavisen*) and offered them each an interview on the condition that his story would be the headline on the evening news at NRK and on the front page of *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen*. He openly informed the different media about each other. After some negotiation, they all agreed, giving Nordby the impression of a certain amount of control over his story.

Keeping a Low Profile

A fundamentally different strategy was to keep a low profile, temporarily avoiding the public eye, not responding to journalists, or giving limited comments. Although for some this was a strategic choice (hoping the case would simply disappear), the most severely scandalized participants relied on this coping mechanism to reduce the emotional pressure during the acute phase.

For Søviknes, this strategy was crucial in order to regain oversight and control: "When you're in a crisis with the media chasing you, you need to get some space, to pull back and reflect in order to approach the situation rationally."

The mayor accused of embezzlement felt the need to escape during the acute phase of the scandal, after days of intense media exposure: "I just pulled down the curtains and didn't answer the telephones. I just needed some calm and to keep the world out for just a little while."

Emotional Coping Strategies

All the participants described strategies aimed at regulating their own thoughts or feelings. For the most severely scandalized participants, these strategies were especially important.

Business as Usual

Maintaining structure was a crucial element of the participants' coping efforts. For some, this involved going to work and focusing on tasks other than the media story. However, for the most heavily targeted participants, the media challenges absorbed most of their time and energy during the acute phase. Because many had to resign or take a leave of absence, business as usual became difficult.

During the first two weeks of his scandal, Søviknes resigned from central positions in the party and took a break from his job as the mayor of Os, a small Norwegian municipality. He underlined the importance of getting back on track as soon as possible:

I went back to work as quickly as I could, I was only out for 14 days, I think. This forced me back into my daily routine, and as a mayor, you meet many people both alone and in groups. In the beginning, I felt insecure but as it turned out, I met a lot of understanding and support.

Other participants established new routines during the acute phase of the scandal. Physical exercise, such as walking or running, was common. For Ramin-Osmundsen, morning runs allowed her to maintain her health, gave her space to think clearly, and provided a reason to get out into the world. Nordby busied himself with a boat project for the duration of his media scandal. This served as a form of meditation, helping him to escape his concerns about the case and clear his mind.

Mental Strategies

Alongside such behavioral strategies, the participants also engaged in mental strategies to help them manage the media attention. For some, the process of planning counterattacks as outlined earlier also served as an emotional strategy, helping them to organize thoughts and feelings. Krohn Devold practiced what she called "structured thinking":

I use my travels to think, car trips, flights. I never watch a movie even if the flight is 8 hours long. I think and write it down in my notebook. Every 14 days I drive to my cabin. For the duration of the car travel, I say very little, I just go through the last two weeks in my mind. Then, during the weekend, I relax with my family. On my way back, I start zooming in to the week ahead.

A related strategy was to reflect on the role of the media in society and to reframe the situation in a wider context. This included reminding themselves that journalists were not after them personally and that people tend to forget yesterday's news quickly. For Ramin-Osmundsen, such reflections were crucial in order to minimize the impact of the scandal:

These were only seven days of my life. As a minister, I had four good months and one horrible week. I don't spend much time thinking about this anymore. I have realized that I can choose to let this define me or not, and I will not. Being bitter will not be of any help.

Discussion

In relation to RQ1, our findings suggest that even experienced politicians are susceptible to overwhelming psychological stress when exposed in mediated scandals.

Compared with the population analyzed in our general study of media effects (Karlsen & Duckert, 2017), the politicians had given more thought to entering the public scene and had a clearer understanding of the role of media in society. They actively used the press to advance their political positions and were aware that public criticism was a part of their work as politicians.

Nevertheless, when mediated scandals attacked their integrity or their personal lives rather than their political opinions, their stress levels, negative emotions, and symptoms of ill health were similar to the population previously studied. This is in line with extant literature demonstrating that previous media experience offers only limited protection against psychological distress following scandalizing media exposure (Kepplinger, 2016).

The sources of stress and possible illness for the individual at the center of a media scandal often appear to stem from their feelings of powerlessness or lack of control. In accordance with previous studies (Kepplinger, 2016), even participants who admitted to (at least some of) the facts exposed in the scandal experienced feelings of great injustice and powerlessness regarding the presented media stories. These were often related to journalistic methods and editing practices, such as the use of oversimplified headlines or anonymous statements. The participants found it difficult to tell their own version of the story or to correct established facts during the course of the exposure, even when these facts were dubious. This lack of control over media storytelling and editing became especially stressful when the story highlighted their personal abilities, morality, or traits. The concept of direct and indirect media effects (Kepplinger, 2007) was also relevant in the current study, as the participants experienced stress related to direct encounters with journalists and published press reports, but also to the reactions of family members, friends, colleagues, and other members of the community.

In relation to RQ2, our conclusion is that several of the scandalized politicians experienced overwhelming stress during the acute phase of the scandal. They described their relationship with the media in terms associated with trauma, such as "assault," "rape," and "invasion." They presented intense negative feelings of worry, sadness, and anger and experienced anxiety, sleep disturbances, and loss of energy.

Characteristic for the scandalized politicians were negative reactions related to the political game played outside the public eye. They spoke about betrayal by colleagues or party fellows, who either fueled the scandal with leaks and critical statements or failed to support them publicly. This finding was distinct for the politicians compared with the other groups discussed in our recent study of media effects (Karlsen & Duckert, 2017).

Concerning RQ3, the answer can be related to terms of transactional theories of stress and coping (Lazarus, 1993, 2006; Park & Folkman, 1997). Our participants described problem-focused coping strategies, in which they made active attempts to influence the media coverage; emotion-focused coping strategies, aimed at regulating their thoughts and feelings; and meaning-focused strategies, which allowed space to reflect on the stressful media coverage and their own public role. Compared with the other groups in our general media effects study, the scandalized politicians used more elaborate media strategies and more often directly confronted journalists and editors after damaging stories. Furthermore, they often had access to a large support network of strategic and media advisors, as well as lawyers. However, those who were suspended, fired, or who lost or changed their position for other reasons typically also lost this network. Being on their own made coping with the press much more difficult and, for some participants, overwhelming. This finding underlines the importance of the "final act" of a scandal, namely the resignation, and at the same time, it raises the awareness of media exposure as a potential psychological trauma under certain conditions.

RQ4 was an invitation to reflect on how the media storm had influenced their lives in the years thereafter. When interviewed more than five years after the scandal, most politicians and their families were back to their normal lives. No divorces or permanent relationship breaks were reported. However, when asked to recall the media scandal, strong negative feelings surfaced, suggesting an intrusive quality

of their emotional memories. Moreover, several participants described avoidance behaviors, either of the media in general or of situations that might trigger memories of the scandal. For some, criticism or betrayal from friends inflicted deep psychological wounds, resulting in general distrust of people even five years later. These findings demonstrate the potential traumatic impact of mediated scandals on the individuals at their center.

However, the majority of the participants, including highly targeted ones, presented only minor symptoms of PTSD. The complexity of the various experiences, reactions, and coping strategies indicates there is no clear-cut psychological trauma or "syndrome" resulting from media effects on the individual. Consequently, the theoretical concept of a "media victim syndrome" (Gmür, 2002) was not supported by our findings, at least not in a population of politicians who actively sought public attention and used the media strategically to convey their political views. It should be noted that Gmür based his theory on observations of a clinical sample, which may explain the differing displays of psychiatric symptoms.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The lack of quantitative data obtained by validated inventories of the participants' psychological status and symptoms prevents definite conclusions about the mental health risks associated with political scandals. Moreover, the qualitative method does not allow for analysis of casual directions or of the effect of different sources of stress during the course of a scandal (e.g., loss of work, personal conflicts, media exposure). Finally, our study lacks data on the potential moderating role of social media on stress, perceived control, and coping with mediated scandals.

Conclusions

This study underlines the need for the media to be cautious and accurate when covering political scandals, particularly when politicians' traits, abilities, or private lives are criticized, and their personal integrity is at stake. The media should exercise special restraint when a politician is forced to resign and thus loses his or her support network. Politicians' psychological reactions in such cases are similar to those of the general population, including strong negative emotions, powerlessness, and symptoms of stress such as anxiety, sleep disturbances, and loss of energy. For some, these experiences become overwhelming and potentially traumatic, leaving long-lasting psychological wounds. In other words, politicians are more human than many people choose to believe. Future research is needed on the use of social media in political communication and in coping with mediated scandals, as well as objective measurement of the health risks associated with political scandals.

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