Political Scandal

POWER AND VISIBILITY IN THE MEDIA AGE

John B. Thompson

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JOHN B. THOMPSON

Polity

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Contents

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Preface

In a long-running saga that veered at times into farce, Bill Clinton reminded us that scandal has become an occupational hazard of life in the public domain. Who would have imagined that, as the twentieth century drew to a close, the fate of the President of the most powerful nation in the world could be seriously thought by some to depend on whether a stain on a young woman's cocktail dress bore the traces of the President's semen? Despite the huge resources that are poured into government PR organizations today, and despite the fact that politicians and other public figures know very well that their activities will be subjected to intense media scrutiny, scandal has lost none of its capacity to disrupt the flow of events, to derail the most well-constructed plans and, from time to time, to destroy the reputations and careers of the individuals engulfed by it. Like some obstreperous child who refuses to play by the rules, scandal is an ever-present threat to those who have staked their careers on gaining power and achieving success in the games of public life.

Why have scandals acquired such salience in the public life of modern societies? Are they merely an expression of a general decline in moral standards, a weakening of our commitment to the moral codes which – or so it might seem – governed people's behaviour in the past? Or perhaps the profusion of scandals in recent years has more to do with the unscrupulous activities of journalists and others who make their living in the media and off the media, and who have found that disclosing the private lives of public figures can be a rich source of profit. Undoubtedly scandal pays, and those who have most

to gain by fuelling scandal in the public domain have little reason to refrain from cashing in when the opportunity presents itself.

But we would misunderstand the nature of scandal and its consequences for social and political life if we interpreted it solely as an expression of moral decline or as a product of unscrupulous journalism. As I shall try to show in the following pages, the salience of scandals today is linked to a broader set of transformations which have shaped the modern world and which have, among other things, altered the very nature of public life. Thanks to the development of communication media, politicians and other public figures are much more visible today than they were in the past; today it is much more difficult for them to throw a veil of secrecy around activities or events which they would prefer to keep out of the public eye. The rise of scandal as a significant feature of public life is symptomatic of this broader transformation in the nature and extent of visibility which has characterized the development of modern societies. This is not to say that all scandals are shaped by the new forms of visibility which characterize modern societies: on the contrary, scandal is a pervasive and ordinary feature of social life, and conversations are commonly spiced with the little scandals of everyday life. But scandal would not have acquired the salience it has in the public domain today, and would not be such a critical factor in determining the course of political events and the fate of politicians and other public figures, were it not for the fact that scandal has become interwoven with the transformations which have shaped the modern world.

This book is a contribution to the understanding of scandal and its consequences for social and political life. It is not intended to be a general survey of the many scandals which pepper the history of modern societies, nor is it meant to be an in-depth account of the circumstances surrounding the most recent exemplifications of the genre; my concerns are more analytical than descriptive, more thematic than encyclopaedic, and my interest in the phenomenon of political scandal arose long before the forty-second President of the United States found himself in deep water with a White House intern. This book was not written as a moralizing complaint about the culture of political scandal which seems to have grown up around us, nor was it conceived as a polemical attack against those who have sought to turn scandalmongering into a way of life; I shall not sidestep the moral and practical issues raised by political scandal, but I shall try to avoid a sweeping and vituperative approach. My principal aim in this book is to develop an analytical account of political scandal and to outline a social theory of its conditions and conse-

quences. If I take scandal more seriously than some might deem appropriate, this is because I believe that, beyond all the hype, scandal is an important social phenomenon which can have serious consequences, both for the lives and careers of the individuals involved in them and for the institutions of which those individuals are part. And I shall try to show that the significance of scandal is rooted in the characteristics of a world where visibility has been transformed by the media and where power and reputation go hand in hand. Scandal matters because, in our modern mediated world, it touches on real sources of power.

J. B. T., Cambridge, January 2000

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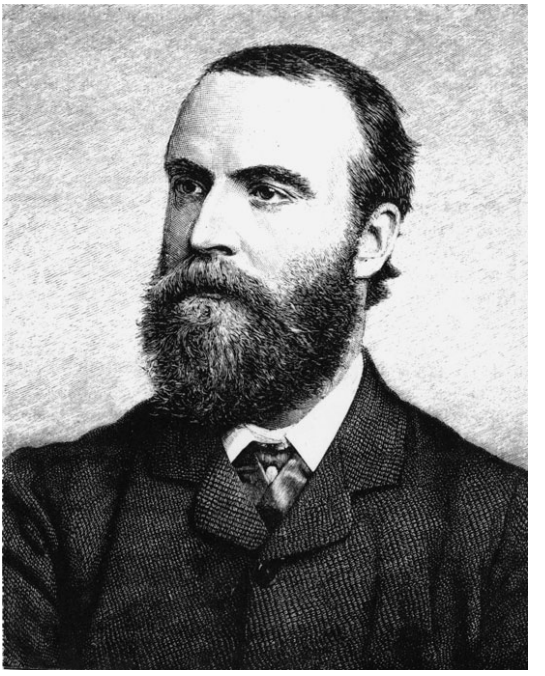
Introduction

'Domestic treachery, systematic and long-continued deception, the whole squalid apparatus of letters written with the intent of misleading, houses taken under false names, disguises and aliases, secret visits, and sudden flights make up a story of dull and ignoble infidelity . . . The popular standard of morality may not be too exalted, but even the least prudish draw the line for public men above the level of a scandalous exposure like this, and cynically observe that, when the man of loose life is found out he must take the consequences.'[1] Such was the judgement of *The Times* commenting more than a century ago on the well publicized affair of Mr Charles Parnell and Mrs Katharine O'Shea, an affair which eventually culminated in a successful divorce action brought by Captain William O'Shea on grounds of adultery. The affair might have generated relatively little interest in the press had it not been for the fact that Mr Parnell was a prominent political figure at the time. Heralded as the 'uncrowned King of Ireland', Parnell was the Member of Parliament (MP) for Cork and the charismatic leader of the Irish parliamentary party at Westminster; he was also a fervent advocate of Irish home rule, a cause to which Gladstone's Liberal Party had lent its support but which the Tories, among others, opposed. It was in this sensitive political context, where Parnell was a key power-broker at Westminster and a pivotal figure in the complex negotiations concerning the future of Anglo-Irish relations, that the affair with Katharine O'Shea suddenly burst into public view.

Charles Parnell had met Katharine O'Shea in the summer of 1880,

shortly after Captain O'Shea had been elected as MP for County Clare. Captain O'Shea spent much time abroad on business, while Mrs O'Shea lived with their three children at their home, Wonersh Lodge, near Eltham in Kent. In the early 1880s Parnell became a regular visitor at Wonersh Lodge, where he frequently stayed overnight; rumours began to circulate about a possible affair, but speculation was curtailed by firm and repeated denials. Between 1882 and 1884 Mrs O'Shea gave birth to three daughters which Captain O'Shea apparently believed to be his own, but which were almost certainly fathered by Parnell. In May 1886 the suspicions of an affair were fuelled by the public disclosure of the fact that Parnell was effectively residing at Wonersh Lodge. Under the headline 'Mr. Parnell's suburban retreat', the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported rather discreetly (it was a small article on an inside page) that the MP for Cork had been involved in a collision with a market gardener's cart shortly after midnight on a Friday evening. 'During the sitting of parliament', the *Gazette* continued, 'the hon. Member for Cork usually takes up his residence at Eltham, a suburban village in the south-east of London.'[2] Discretion notwithstanding, the implications of this paragraph were perfectly clear. The article caught the attention of Captain O'Shea who, angered and no doubt embarrassed by this public comment, fired off a letter to his wife, demanding an explanation. She responded by feigning ignorance ('I have not the slightest idea what it means, unless, indeed, it is meant to get a rise out of you'), but by now their relationship was on a downward spiral. In 1889 Mrs O'Shea sold Wonersh Lodge and moved to Brighton, where she rented a house with Parnell. Captain O'Shea became increasingly estranged from his wife and on 24 December 1889 he filed for divorce, naming Charles Parnell as co-respondent.

When the trial opened on 15 November 1890, it was the focus of intense interest and was widely reported in the press. Parnell flatly denied the charge of adultery. Mrs O'Shea similarly denied the charge and filed a counter-petition, alleging that her husband had been guilty of cruelty and neglect and that he himself had committed adultery (including adultery with her sister, Mrs Anna Steele); she also alleged that he had connived in her own adultery, a claim which was curiously inconsistent with her denial that she had been unfaithful. But neither Mrs O'Shea nor Parnell turned up to defend the action. Captain O'Shea's counsel, on the other hand, produced a string of letters and called witnesses – including former servants whose testimonies were reported in detail in the press – which seemed to establish a pattern of infidelity and deceit that had



1 Charles Stewart Parnell

2 Katharine O'Shea

lasted for several years. One witness, a certain Caroline Pethers who described herself as 'a professed cook', described an occasion towards the end of 1883 when Captain O'Shea had arrived unexpectedly at the door of a house in Brighton which was being rented by the O'Sheas.[3] Parnell was upstairs in the drawing room with Mrs O'Shea when the Captain arrived, but ten minutes later Parnell appeared at the front door and rang the bell, requesting to see Captain O'Shea. When asked how Mr Parnell could have managed to appear at the front door so soon after being in the upstairs drawing room, the cook explained that there were two rope fire-escapes from the window which enabled him to exit unnoticed – an observation which caused a minor sensation and gave rise to much scathing criticism in the press.

As expected, the jury found in favour of the plaintiff and granted the divorce. In the days and weeks following the trial, the press was filled with speculation about Parnell's political future. His political opponents called for his resignation and some of his erstwhile allies – including Gladstone, who feared that the divorce case would unsettle the alliance between the Irish parliamentary party and the Liberals and jeopardize the cause of home rule – urged him to retire at least temporarily from public life. Parnell's critics claimed that he no longer had the moral authority to lead a party, that he could no longer be trusted and that he had lost the respect of honourable men. Parnell refused to stand down and launched a counter-attack, issuing a manifesto which, among other things, denounced Gladstone for trying to influence the Irish parliamentary party in its choice of leader. But the tide was turning against Parnell; the alliance with the Liberals was collapsing and his position as leader of the Irish parliamentary party was becoming increasingly precarious. In December 1890, after lengthy and heated debates, the party split into two factions, one supporting Parnell and the other opposed to him. In the following months Parnell took the struggle to Ireland, where he campaigned in several by-elections, often amid angry and raucous scenes. But by now the Catholic hierarchy was also speaking out against Parnell, which greatly weakened his position in the countryside, and in each case the by-election was lost to the anti-Parnellite candidate. In June 1891 Parnell married Katharine O'Shea, but their marriage was not to last for long. Addressing a crowd in the rain in County Galway in late September 1891, Parnell caught a severe chill and died of rheumatic fever several days later, at the age of forty-five.[4]

This sorry tale of a lofty career undone by scandal has, at the end

of the twentieth century, a wearisomely familiar ring. John Profumo, Jeremy Thorpe, Cecil Parkinson, Richard Nixon, Edward Kennedy, Gary Hart, Bill Clinton: these are but a few of the more recent names in a long list of public figures, many now forgotten, whose lives and careers have been indelibly marked by the scandals that unfolded around them. In our post-Profumo, post-Watergate age, we could be forgiven for thinking that political scandals are a curiosity of the late twentieth century, but the most cursory glance at the long and ignoble history of scandal would quickly dispel this impression. It could be said with some justification that, in the late twentieth century, scandal has assumed a significance in public life which outweighs the significance it had for previous generations, for reasons we shall try to understand. But scandal was not our invention.

Despite the long history of scandal and the profusion of scandalous disclosures of various kinds in the public domain today, there is a dearth of serious scholarly literature on the subject. There are various anthologies which offer informative but rather light-hearted tours of a terrain strewn with the damaged reputations of politicians and other public figures;[5] and there are numerous books and articles, written both by journalists and by participants who have varying degrees of insider knowledge, which retell the stories of particular scandals from different points of view. However, there are relatively few studies which seek to examine, in a more analytical fashion, the nature of scandals and the social conditions which shape their emergence, development and consequences.[6] Why this neglect?

No doubt scandal is viewed by many academic commentators as a subject too frivolous to warrant serious scholarly attention. Scandal should be left to the tabloid journalists and the gossip columnists; a subject so trivial – or so they might claim – does not deserve the attention of serious scholars. Others may be less dismissive, but feel nonetheless that to study scandal is to become preoccupied with the inessential. Scandal is the froth of social and political life, whipped up by unscrupulous journalists and media organizations who know how to use the sexual indiscretions of the powerful to make a quick buck. Worse still, it is a froth that obscures what really matters in social and political life, diverting public attention away from issues of real importance: unemployment, poverty, famine and civil wars in distant places are hardly mentioned in the daily press, while the sexual antics of a junior minister make front-page news.

This suspicion of scandal is understandable, but if we wish to make sense of the prominence that scandals have come to assume in the public life of modern societies then we must put these prejudge-

ments aside. We must analyse scandal as a social phenomenon in its own right and try to understand its distinctive characteristics, without allowing our view of this phenomenon to be predetermined by a belief in its insignificance or by a sense of despair about the quality of public debate. The study of scandal may raise important questions concerning the role of the media in shaping public debate – for example, questions concerning the interests and priorities of journalists and media organizations, or concerning the legitimate scope for the journalistic investigation of the private lives of individuals who are in the public eye. But to refuse to take the phenomenon of scandal seriously on the grounds that it is a distraction from the issues that really matter (and one, moreover, whose effects on public debate can only be baneful) would be very short-sighted indeed.

In this book I shall take a different view. Rather than treating scandal as a topic too frivolous for the serious scholar or too inconsequential for the serious analyst of current affairs, I shall regard the prominence of scandal in the public life of modern societies as an issue of some significance – a puzzling issue which demands more analysis and exploration than one might at first think, and a revealing issue in terms of what it tells us about the kind of world in which we live today. I shall try to show that, if we want to understand the rise of political scandal and its prevalence today, then we must view it in relation to some of the broad social transformations which have shaped the modern world. We can understand the current prevalence of scandal only if we see that this phenomenon, which might seem so ephemeral and superficial to the impatient observer, is rooted in a series of developments which have a long history and which have had a deep and enduring impact on social and political life. Foremost among these developments is the changing nature of communication media, which have transformed the nature of visibility and altered the relations between public and private life. Scandal has become such a prominent feature of public life in modern societies primarily because the individuals who walk on the public stage are much more visible than they ever were in the past, and because their capacity to draw a line between their public persona and their private life is much more limited. In this modern age of mediated visibility, scandal is a risk that constantly threatens to engulf individuals whose lives have become the focus of public attention.

But political scandal also tells us something about the nature of power and its fragility, about the ways in which power is exercised in our societies, about the kinds of resources on which it is based and

about the speed and the suddenness with which it can be lost. Political scandals can be, and often are, terrible personal tragedies for the individuals who are caught up in them; their lives may be thrown into chaos and their careers may be disrupted or even destroyed. But political scandals are not only personal tragedies: they are also social struggles which are fought out in the symbolic realm, in the to and fro of claims and counter-claims, of revelations, allegations and denials. They are struggles which have their own protagonists, each pursuing their own strategies in an unfolding sequence of events which often outpace the individuals involved and which, thanks to the media, are made available on a public stage for countless others to watch or listen to or read about. And they are struggles in which part of what is at stake are the very resources upon which power to some extent depends. Those who hold or aspire to positions of political power know very well that scandal is dangerous, that it can thwart their plans and bring their careers to an abrupt end. But scandal can also undermine their capacity to command the respect and support of others and it can have a deeply corrosive impact on the forms of social trust which underpin cooperative social relations.

In this book I shall try to develop an account of political scandal which, while attending to the specificity of particular cases and cultures, brings out the broader social and political significance of this phenomenon. I shall try to analyse the characteristics of political scandal with some degree of precision, to develop a framework for studying political scandal and to outline a social theory of scandal and its consequences. I shall also try to retrace the historical rise of political scandal, to examine the development of political scandals in different social and national contexts and to explain why political scandal has come to assume such significance in our societies today. The reader will find many specific scandals discussed in this volume, from Parnell to Profumo, from Watergate to Whitewater to the Clinton–Lewinsky affair. But this book is not a compendium of political scandals, nor does it seek to be comprehensive in its scope and coverage. My aim is to offer a systematic analysis of the phenomenon of political scandal, to relate this phenomenon to broader features of modern societies and to reflect on its implications for the nature and the quality of our public life. I shall draw on a wide range of materials, including newspaper articles and televised broadcasts, the reports of special commissions and committees of inquiry, the biographies and autobiographies of individuals whose lives were affected by scandal and the writings of journalists, political commentators, historians and other chroniclers of the past. I shall try to

bring some order and clarity of thought to what is a very complex and muddy domain, to develop new ways of thinking about a phenomenon with which we are all very familiar but about which we understand very little, and to help us to see why political scandal has become, despite the efforts of our governments and their increasingly numerous spin doctors, a pervasive and ineluctable feature of our public life.

The first three chapters are concerned with the nature of scandal and its relation to the media. I begin by analysing the concept of scandal and differentiating it from related concepts, such as gossip, rumour and corruption (chapter 1). I then attempt to reconstruct the historical rise of scandal as a mediated event (chapter 2). I try to show that, while the word 'scandal' and its cognates were frequently used in pamphlets and other printed materials from the sixteenth century on, it was only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that a distinctive type of scandal event – what I call 'mediated scandal' – began to emerge. This development was linked to certain broader social transformations, including the changing economic bases of the media industries and the rise of journalism as a profession. In chapter 3, I focus on this distinctive type of event, mediated scandal, and analyse its principal characteristics.

This conceptual and historical analysis provides the basis upon which I begin, in chapter 4, to examine in detail the phenomenon of political scandal. I develop an account of power and of the political field which enables us to understand why scandal matters in politics, and why the consequences of scandal can be so devastating for those who hold or aspire to positions of political power. I also try to explain why political scandals have become increasingly prevalent in countries such as Britain and the United States in recent decades. I argue that the growing prevalence of political scandal is linked to certain changes in the media and in the culture and practice of journalism, but it is also linked to certain broad changes in the social context of politics. The social transformations of the postwar period have gradually weakened the 'ideological politics' of the traditional class-based parties, with their strongly opposed belief systems and their sharp contrasts between left and right, and have created the conditions for a growing emphasis on what I shall call the 'politics of trust'. With the weakening of the forms of reassurance once provided by the long-standing social affiliations of political parties, many people look increasingly to the credibility and trustworthiness of political leaders or aspiring leaders, to their character (or lack of it), as a means of assessing their suitability or otherwise for office. And in

these circumstances, scandal assumes a newly potent and self-reinforcing role as a 'credibility test'.

In chapters 5, 6 and 7, I develop an analytical framework for studying political scandal and put it to work in reconstructing the development of political scandals in Britain and the United States. I distinguish between three basic types of political scandal – sex scandals, financial scandals and what I call 'power scandals' – and devote a chapter to each. Guided by this analytical framework and by the account of scandal developed in earlier chapters, I look back at some of the earlier scandals, like the Marconi affair in Britain and the Teapot Dome scandal in the United States, which were significant in their time but which have now largely faded from the collective memory; I examine some of the great scandals of more recent decades, such as Profumo and Watergate, which have helped to shape the political cultures of our time; and I analyse some of the scandals which have dominated the headlines in recent years, like the cash-for-questions scandal in Britain and the various scandals which have dogged the Presidency of Bill Clinton. While attending to the very specific and often labyrinthine details of these events, I also try to show that they generally display the characteristics of scandals as mediated events and that they form part of distinctive political cultures of scandal.

In the final chapter I stand back from the detail and offer a more reflective view on political scandal and its consequences for social and political life. I consider various theories of scandal – some drawn from the relatively limited literature on the topic, others invented as more-or-less plausible possibilities – and I try to show why they won't suffice. I then develop an alternative account – what I call simply a social theory of scandal – which treats scandals as struggles for symbolic power and which highlights the connections between scandal, reputation and trust. In the conclusion I address some questions of a more normative kind about how we should assess the contribution that scandals have made, and are likely to make, to the quality of our public life.

I should add one important qualification. Most of my examples will be drawn from the Anglo-American world – and, for the most part, from the relatively recent political history of Britain and the United States. However, this restriction is not meant to imply that scandal is a recent phenomenon (it isn't), that all scandals are political (they aren't), or that Anglo-Saxons have a peculiar propensity for scandal (they don't). One of the striking things about scandal is its omnipresence: from Japan to Brazil, from Italy to Argentina,

scandal is a phenomenon that features prominently in the public domain. Of course, different national cultures of scandal have different characteristics; sex scandals typically play a much less significant role in French or Italian political life than they do in Britain, for example, while political scandals in France and Italy have been concerned primarily with corruption and the abuse of power.[7] But there are relatively few countries where scandal in some form has not become a significant feature of contemporary political life. So the fact that my examples are drawn primarily from the Anglo-American world should not be construed as a comment on the political geography of scandal. And if my account of scandal and its consequences is sound, then it should help us to understand not only the scandals which have occurred in the Anglo-American world, but also those which have loomed large in the public domain elsewhere.

1

What is Scandal?

Today we take the notion of scandal for granted. 'Scandal' is a word that appears frequently in the press and slips effortlessly from the lips, and yet, like many of the words we use, its origins are obscure and its meaning is hard to pin down. How many of the journalists who are so quick to proclaim a scandal could, if asked, provide a definition of 'scandal' or delineate the characteristics of the phenomenon whose existence they are claiming to unveil? How many of the readers or viewers who are bombarded with an incessant flow of scandalous revelations could, if asked, explain what makes an event a 'scandal', or what distinguishes revelations which are 'scandalous' from those which are not?

In fact, the concept of scandal is much more complicated than it might at first seem. This is a concept with a long and complex history, in the course of which some connotations have been preserved and others discarded. It is a concept which conveys much more than it clearly articulates and which, when one begins to unravel the layers of meaning, reveals some unusual traits. In this chapter I shall retrace this history and begin to analyse some of the characteristics of this much used but seldom studied notion.

The Concept of Scandal

The word 'scandal' and its cognates became increasingly common in European languages from the sixteenth century on, but the word has

a much longer history which can be traced back to Greek, Latin and early Judaeo-Christian thought. In terms of its etymological origins, the word probably derives from the Indo-Germanic root *skand-*, meaning to spring or leap. Early Greek derivatives, such as the word *skandalon*, were used in a figurative way to signify a trap, an obstacle or a 'cause of moral stumbling'.[1] The word was first used in a religious context in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. The idea of a trap or an obstacle was an integral feature of the theological vision of the Old Testament. It helped to explain how a people indissolubly linked to God, to *Yahweh*, could nonetheless begin to doubt Him and to lose their way: such doubt stemmed from an obstacle, a stumbling block placed along the path, which was intended to test people and to see how they would react.[2] This idea was expressed in the Septuagint by the word *skandalon*.

The notion of a trap or obstacle became part of Judaism and of early Christian thought, but it was gradually prised apart from the idea of a test of faith. Christian theology placed more emphasis on individual culpability; if individuals stumble and lose their way, if they commit sinful acts, this may stem from their own inner weakness and fallibility. Moreover, with the development of the Latin word *scandalum* and its diffusion into Romance languages, the religious connotation was gradually attenuated and supplemented by other senses. Hence the word *escandre* in Old French (eleventh century); this was derived from *scandalum* and meant both 'scandal' and 'calumny'. Hence also the Old French word *esclandre*, from which the English word *slander* was derived.

The word 'scandal' first appeared in English in the sixteenth century. Similar words appeared in other Romance languages at roughly the same time (in Spanish, *escándalo*; Portuguese, *escandalo*; Italian, *scandalo*). 'Scandal' was derived from Latin, and probably from the French word *scandale*, which had been introduced to convey the strict sense of the ecclesiastical Latin term *scandalum*, as distinct from the senses that had been developed by *esclandre*. The early uses of 'scandal' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, broadly speaking, of two main types.[3] First, 'scandal' and its cognates were used in religious contexts to refer (Ia) to the conduct of a religious person which brought discredit to religion, or (Ib) to something that hindered religious faith or belief (as in Francis Bacon's phrase of 1625, 'Heresies and Schismes, are of all others, the greatest scandals'). The latter usage (Ib) retained the sense, derived from the original Greek, of scandal as a moral lapse or stumbling block.

The second type of usage was more secular in character and had

to do with (IIa) actions or utterances which were scurrilous or defamatory, (IIb) actions, events or circumstances that were grossly discreditable, or (IIc) conduct which offended moral sentiments or the sense of decency. The use of 'scandal' to refer to actions and utterances which were defamatory attests to the fact that, in terms of their etymological origins, 'scandal' and 'slander' were very close. Both words were used to refer to damaging or defamatory imputations, but they differed in one important respect: the use of 'scandal' did not necessarily imply, whereas the use of 'slander' did, that the imputations made were false.

In using 'scandal' to refer to grossly discreditable actions, events or circumstances (IIb), or conduct which offended moral sentiments or the sense of decency (IIc), the word acquired an additional and important connotation. In its religious uses, 'scandal' involved a relation between an individual or individuals (believers or waverers) and a religious doctrine or system of belief. In the use of 'scandal' to refer to damaging or defamatory imputations, the word implied a relation between individuals (the individual whose words defamed another, and the individual who was defamed). But when 'scandal' was used to describe grossly discreditable actions, events or circumstances, or to describe conduct which offended moral sentiments or the sense of decency, a different kind of relation was implied – a relation between, on the one hand, an individual or humanly created event or circumstance and, on the other hand, a social collectivity whose moral sentiments were offended.[4] Scandal thus involved a transgression of moral codes which could be, but did not have to be, religious in character, and with reference to which the action or event was denounced.

It is the latter presuppositions which underlie the most common uses of the word 'scandal' today. While the word continues to have some use as a specialized religious term,[5] 'scandal' is used today primarily to describe a broader form of moral transgression, one which is no longer linked specifically to religious codes. What is a scandal in this modern sense of the term? As a working definition, we could say that *'scandal' refers to actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response*. To be more precise, I shall suggest that, in its current usage, 'scandal' refers primarily to actions, events or circumstances which have the following characteristics:

1 their occurrence or existence involves the transgression of certain values, norms or moral codes;

2 their occurrence or existence involves an element of secrecy or concealment, but they are known or strongly believed to exist by individuals other than those directly involved (I shall refer to these individuals as 'non-participants');
3 some non-participants disapprove of the actions or events and may be offended by the transgression;
4 some non-participants express their disapproval by publicly denouncing the actions or events;
5 the disclosure and condemnation of the actions or events may damage the reputation of the individuals responsible for them (although this is not always or necessarily the case, as we shall see).

Let us briefly examine each of these characteristics in turn.

(1) The most obvious aspect of scandal is that it involves actions or events which transgress or contravene certain values, norms or moral codes. Some form of transgression is a necessary condition of scandal: there would be no scandal without it. But the nature of the transgression is also important: not all transgressions are scandalous (or even potentially so). Some transgressions may be too minor to constitute a scandal, while others may be too serious. It is doubtful, for example, whether a minor traffic offence (such as a parking ticket) would form the basis for a scandal (although one could imagine circumstances in which a minor offence of this kind was part of the unfolding plot of a scandal); on the other hand, we would hesitate to describe an act of large-scale genocide, such as that involved in the Holocaust or in the massacre carried out by the Khmer Rouge, as a 'scandal', since the scale and the horror of these calamities are far in excess of the kind of offence we normally associate with this term. In the first case, 'scandal' seems too strong a word to use, in the second case it seems too weak. As Anthony King rightly remarks, 'scandals occupy a sort of middle ground of impropriety':[6] they involve transgressions which are sufficiently serious to elicit the disapproval of others but which fall short of the most heinous crimes. There is, of course, a good deal of greyness here; the kinds of transgressions that could be regarded as scandalous behaviour shade into trivial misconduct at one extreme and serious crime at the other. But it is part of the concept of scandal that it occupies this middle zone of moral impropriety and that the boundaries of this zone are ill-defined.

While scandal necessarily involves some form of transgression, it