

Japanese scandals and their production

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Abstract

This treatise conflates cultural sociology, media theory, and Japanese philology in order to better understand the way media scandals are produced in contemporary Japan. In cultural sociology, scandal is understood as a social performance between ritual and strategy. In my previous research I focused on the ritual aspect, analyzing Japanese scandals as dramatic public performances of confession, exclusion, and reintegration. In this treatise, I focus on the strategy aspect, approaching scandals as symbolic products of media routines and journalistic practices. The former part of this treatise examines how the actor-network of power circles co-defines the way scandals emerge and unfold in Japan. The latter part focuses on the role of Japanese media organizations in the process of transforming leaks into scandals.

Keywords

Japanese journalism, Japanese media, scandal, transgression

Introduction

At the institutional level, media organizations worldwide play a crucial role with their professional activities and specific working rhythms (Thompson, 2000), while media scandals are shaped through various interactions within the journalistic field (Bourdieu, 1999). At the societal level, Japanese scandals arise from interactions between elite power circles: the top politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, the prosecutors, advertisers, talent agencies, crime syndicates, and finally the mass media as the fourth estate of the power-triangle. The mainstream media are represented by the “inside-media” (dailies, TV broadcast, news agencies), while the “outside-media” (weeklies, local papers,

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foreign press) are located on the periphery of Japanese mediascape. In this actor-network of symbolic power (Latour, 2005), scandal is a composite product of interaction among the power circles. In the following pages I focus on the Japanese power circles because the way they block, deflect, and promote scandal is indicative of broader power relations and dynamics at play (e.g. Nyhan, 2015). Equally importantly, this actor-network becomes decisive in soft-pedaling scandals, or fueling the hype.

Mediopolitical background

Japan is a culturally homogeneous, communal society with tight social networks based on mutual trust and deference to authority. The responsibility and uniformity of the Japanese media is then linked to the preservation of (Confucian) social harmony and respect for leadership. The strongest Japanese political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been providing this leadership almost continuously since 1955. The dominance of LDP is underpinned by a complex network of political, bureaucratic, and commercial institutions, which shapes the media in a way that controls Japanese politics and discourages critical thinking.

Japanese mainstream mediascape consists of 5 largest and most influential national newspapers (*Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, and *Sankei*), 1 public TV broadcaster (NHK), 5 main commercial TV stations, and over 100 weekly magazines (*shūkanshi*). The dailies represent powerful media oligopolies: they own one commercial TV station, many local TV stations, radio stations, and other non-media subjects.

In terms of mediopolitical relations, especially significant are the close ties between the ruling party (LDP) and the biggest daily (*Yomiuri*). This daily promotes a conservative worldview, in which there is a powerful leader (LDP) who offers protection and security. A similar political stance is taken by the noncommercial public television NHK, which provides balanced coverage but does not offer opinion or analysis. Besides, Japanese government occasionally pressures NHK to modify programs that are “politically biased” (i.e. anti-LDP).

Japanese mainstream media gravitate toward their role as a silent partner of power. It is their natural inclination to select only “safe” issues that support objectives of the establishment while distracting attention from deeper structural problems. They do so by officially censoring and restricting the information flow, which results in a uniform, standardized news coverage. If a power scandal emerges, the mainstream media are either forced to take it up, or they hush it up in order to maintain their image of impartiality and public trust. In other words, the mainstream media do not cover, but rather cover up scandals.

On the one hand, the mainstream media avoid investigative journalism because they need to appeal to a wide group of conservative readers and advertisers. On the other hand, scandal reporting is determined by the structure of the relationship between Japanese newspapers and their political sources. This relationship is embodied in the “reporters’ club” system (*kisha kurabu*), which offers access to political sources but has only limited membership and imposes sanctions in case of violating the in-group norms. Moreover, Japanese club reporters often collude with their political sources. There exists an understanding of mutual empathy, which impedes the *kisha* journalist from

conducting any investigative reporting on his/her source. Besides, if a club member leaks a scoop individually, it might lead to his exclusion from the club. Consequently, the *kisha* system is often criticized for being just a PR office of Japanese authorities.

Japan has over 100 weekly magazines (*shūkanshi*), with the largest ones (*Shūkan Shinchō* and *Shūkan Bunshun*) selling up to half million copies. Over 90% of these magazines are bought at the newsstand, so their existence is largely based on their controversial and scandalous appeal. They are free to indulge in speculative investigations, because they do not belong to the restrictive *kisha* system. Being unbound by the *kisha* rules, the weeklies keep the privilege of a relatively unrestrained reporting, which, however, nourishes cynicism and political withdrawal.

The weeklies are criticized for being animated by political sleaze and corporate greed. They are said to lack editorial ethics and are responsible for many invasions of privacy. Nonetheless, in scandal reporting, it is precisely the weeklies who stress their role as “democracy watchdog” in Japan, while the mainstream media often fail to live up to this role.

The power circles

The diagram below (Figure 1.) illustrates how are Japanese power circles represented in the scandal process (each power circle is described below). The inside-media are located in the “sacred” center of the actor-network, from which they are supposed to monitor other power circles. During scandals, however, the inside-media function rather as a PR tool for the power circles, while it is the outside-media that attack the circles by exposing their corruption. The prosecutors struggle to criminalize the corruption, while the advertising and talent agencies attempt to manipulate the media in order to protect their

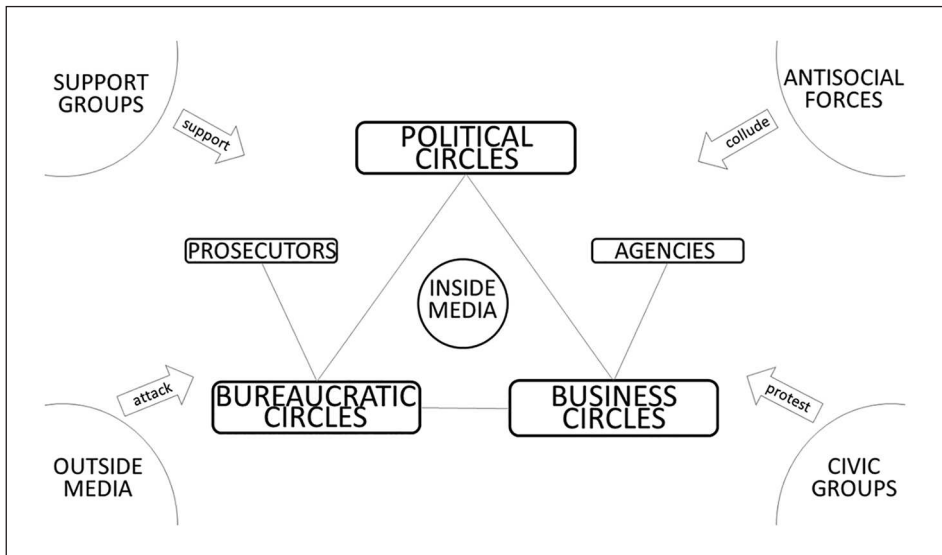


Figure 1. The power-network behind Japanese scandals.

clients. The loyal support groups stand firmly by their corrupted politicians, while the civic groups and other independent subjects (lawyers, freelancers) protest against corruption. The antisocial forces collude with the power triangle while putting pressure on the media in case of negative coverage.

Let me now focus on each power circle. The most distinct protagonists of power interest in Japan are represented by the **political circles** (*seiji*). They include cabinet ministers, members of the Diet, the strongest factions of the ruling party, and other key decision-makers. Generally, political corruption is a malfunction of the system which is grounded in misuse of public authority for private gain. Nonetheless, Japanese political corruption becomes more a question of competitive pressures and less of personal benefit. Besides, the law often does not allow Japanese prosecutors to approach political corruption as a specifically indictable offense (Johnson, 1997). In Japan, it is mostly the conservative politicians, cabinet members, and faction leaders who get involved in scandal (Nyblade and Reed, 2008). Political corruption includes abusing donation funds (e.g. the 2014 Obuchi Yūko scandal), accepting bribes from companies (e.g. the 2016 Amari Akira scandal, see below) or from Japanese crime syndicates (e.g. the 2015 Hakubun Shimamura scandal), failing to pay pension premiums (e.g. the 2004 scandals of Kan Naoto and Fukuda Yasuo), and cronyism (e.g. the 2017 Moritomo Gakuen scandal of PM Abe Shinzō).

The main decisions for the society are formally made by the **bureaucratic circles** (*kanryō*) that are represented by elite bureaucrats, chiefs of civil service personnel, the PM's office, and the prosecutor's office as an autonomous institution within the Ministry of Justice (see below). Generally, bureaucratic corruption lies in perverting the course of the administrative process. Japanese bureaucracy is endemic of corruption because the regulatory and distributive authority is vested in ministries and open to direct political interference (e.g. George Mulgan, 2010). Japanese bureaucrats were involved in the biggest postwar scandals, including the Lockheed scandal (1976), in which PM Tanaka Kakuei accepted bribes from the Lockheed Corporation, and the Recruit scandal (1988), in which many bureaucrats and politicians were involved in receiving shares from the Recruit Company in return for political favors. Since the 1990s, bureaucratic scandals became frequent in industries such as aviation, oil, energy, and defense (Blechinger, 1998). On the individual level, bureaucrats get occasionally exposed for entertaining higher bureaucrats at taxpayers' expenses (*kankan settai*) or accepting entertainment in exchange for favors (*zōtō settai*). On the institutional level, the Ministry of Education and Labor was involved in stock transactions related to Recruit; the Ministry of Finance was systematically ignoring corruptive practices of big Japanese banks, and the Ministry of International Trade and Industry was hiding more than one half of corporate wrongdoing (e.g. Amyx, 2003; Kerbo and Inoue, 1990). Finally, the financial sector employs retired bureaucrats via the established practice of "landing from heaven" (*amakudari*), where former senior officials join organizations that were under their jurisdiction before retirement. This collusion contributes to a corruptive environment from which scandals are likely to emerge.

Japanese **business circles** (*zaikai*) are represented by the most powerful Japanese corporations, along with Japan's Federation of Economic Organization (Keidanren). While shielding the top executives and major Japanese corporations, Keidanren often acts as a go-between for political funding, channeling the funds, and securing the power

triangle (Kerbo and Inoue, 1990; Leggett, 1995). Japanese business circles are characterized by strong, long-term links between banks and corporations while practicing cross-shareholding (*keiretsu*). In this network, the tight-knit industries are shielded from outside oversight by regulators who collude with companies instead of protecting the consumers (e.g. Fackler, 2008). The reputation of the business circles suffers the most by the consumer-affecting scandals (e.g. the 2000 Mitsubishi safety/cover-up scandal). Almost all Japanese corporations have a close relationship with one of the main banks (which in turn becomes a major shareholder in the corporation), while these banks get occasionally exposed for extending loans to the crime syndicate (e.g. the 2013 Mizuho scandal).

The key players within the judiciary bureaucracy are the **public prosecutors** (*kensatsukan*). The prosecutor's office is an autonomous institution within the Ministry of Justice and is responsible for conducting investigations and presenting cases in a criminal court. On the one hand, Japanese prosecutors are conceived of as "ambassadors of justice" (*seigi no shisha*) who surveil the authorities (*kenryoku kanshi*). On the other, they are accused of "letting the wicked sleep" (Johnson, 1997) and criticized for conspiring with/against politicians, leaking sensitive information, tampering evidence, or neglecting organized crime (e.g. Johnson, 2002; West, 2006). Japanese prosecutors have the power to investigate any offense (including bribery and white-collar crime) and decide if they institute prosecution. In the past, the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office (*Tokusōbu*) brought down a cabinet in the scandals of Siemens, Teijin, and Showa Denko, while Japanese prosecutors triggered the biggest postwar scandals including Lockheed, Recruit, and the Sagawa Kyubin scandal (1992), in which a trucking company bribed more than 100 politicians in return for political favors. Nonetheless, only a few major politicians have been charged with serious crimes since 1954, while the prosecutors seldom indict more than one or two politicians per scandal (Johnson, 1997). At any rate, as soon as the prosecution starts an official investigation, the media can immediately ignite the moral outrage. The media usually receive information from the prosecutor's office, but the prosecutors can also pick up a scoop from the press (Johnson, 1997; Murphy, 2014). The prosecutors can also leak sensitive information simply in order to garner public support for their case (West, 2006).

Japanese **advertising agencies** (*kōkoku gaisha*) control the revenue of Japanese media networks through advertising, while the media are huge recipients of advertising fees coming via the agencies. Most important is the Dentsu Corporation, whose market position and political connections make the company "untouchable" in Japan (e.g. Honma, 2012). Apart from controlling the mainstream media, Dentsu has long-standing commercial links to associated industries, as well as links to the world of high politics (e.g. Dentsu handles the account of the Abe's LDP). Dentsu and Hakuodo handle up to seventy percent of all ad spending in Japan, and owing to their access to delicate information within the power network, they can hush up corruption and manipulate scandals. If scandal involves their client, the agencies contact the news outlets and pressure them to "consider" how it will be covered (Honma, 2012). Occasionally, Dentsu itself becomes involved in scandal. Apart from the frequent cases of death from overwork (*karōshi*), the corporation admitted in the past to overbilling and cheating clients (e.g. *Asahi Shimbun*, September 24, 2016).

Equally important among the power circles are the so-called **talent agencies** (*jimusho*) that operate on the entertainment market (*geinōkai*) and are spearheaded by Johnny's, Yoshimoto Kōgyō, and Up front. These agencies specialize primarily in “manufacturing” Japanese idols, but they simultaneously wield enormous power with which they dominate other social institutions (Marx, 2012). Same as the advertisers, these agencies are untouchable for the TV stations in terms of negative coverage. If a celebrity scandal points at some of their idols, the agencies attempt to control the gossip, eliminate leaks, and minimize negative exposure. While monopolizing public broadcast, talent agencies can change the content of television programs and influence the way scandal is treated. They protect themselves and the clients by suppressing defamatory leaks and threatening the journalists to restrict their first-hand access to Japanese showbiz, or they simply sue the tabloids for defamation. Finally, the most powerful talent agencies are occasionally often exposed as “clients” of organized crime. For instance, in 2019, the agency Yoshimoto Kōgyō suspended 11 of its comedians for attending a party hosted by the crime syndicate.

The **antisocial forces** (*hanshakaiteki seiryoku*) is a media euphemism for the Japanese crime syndicate (*yakuza*). This syndicate can be viewed as the “fifth estate” in the Japanese power system (represented by the ruling party, the key ministries, big business, and the media as the “fourth estate”). Apart from their usual “antisocial” activities (extortion, drugs, prostitution), the *yakuza* has since the end of WWII effectively penetrated the world of economics and politics (Hill, 2006; Messersmith, 2003) while colluding with big banks, state bureaucrats, and top entertainers (Adelstein, 2015; Manzenreiter, 2014; Marx, 2012). Many scandals in postwar Japan have been directly linked to the crime syndicate. For instance, the Recruit scandal (1988) revealed that PM Takeshita Noboru and Kanemaru Shin were in contact with the *yakuza*; former PM Mori has been linked to the *yakuza* on multiple occasions, and even PM Abe has been accused of having used the *yakuza* to further his own ends when convenient (Adelstein, 2019). The contemporary *yakuza* gets most involved in scandals associated with finances and the real estate industry, where Japanese companies, including internationally operating giants, keep close contacts with the underworld. Another example of the *yakuza* mingling with the corporate world is the practice of corporate blackmailing (*sōkaiya*). The term translates literally as “general meeting specialists,” but it refers to *yakuza* “protecting” corporations that need to hide scandals. A *sōkaiya* scandal usually emerges when a company is found paying large amounts of money to persons blackmailing the management during the shareholder meetings. The *yakuza* extorts millions from companies by promising to stay away from the meetings and not ask embarrassing questions. In the past, the *sōkaiya* scheme was registered among the biggest Japanese companies, including Mitsubishi, Toshiba, Hitachi, or JAL (e.g. Rothacher, 2003).

Usually, the power triangle (*sei-kan-zai*) does not incorporate the **mass media** (*masu-komi*). Nevertheless, they must be included because they wield a social monopoly on covering the power-triangle, while the triangle needs the media as its PR tool. The Japanese media are not the holders of power, but they constitute the network where power is decided. They perform “political rituals” in concert with other social and political institutions (Elliott, 1982). The inside-media are represented by the “big five” dailies, the main news agencies, the commercial TV broadcast, and the public TV broadcaster

NHK. The outside-media include weeklies, monthlies, local press, foreign press, and online communities (see below). Firstly, it is the economic structures and ownership patterns of the mass media that impact every scandal reporting. The dailies (*Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, and *Sankei*) represents a powerful media oligopoly that controls commercial and local TV stations, radio stations, and other non-media subjects. They make up for an “information cartel” (Freeman, 2000), which is based on the model of business grouping (*keiretsu*): controversial but legal affiliation of complementary firms that takes place in an oligopolistic framework. Secondly, scandal production depends on the relationship between the media and their sources. The structure of this relationship is embodied in the reporters’ club (*kisha kurabu*) which is administered by the Japanese Newspaper Association (Nihon Shimbun Kyōkai). Importantly for scandals, the *kisha* journalists follow strict rules of conduct and self-restraint (*jishuku*). For instance, the “blackboard agreement” (*kokuban kyōtei*) puts the timing of each scoop under control, while political interviews are anticipated by sending the questions in advance (*burasagari*). Leaking gossip on one’s own authority leads to expelling the journalist from the *kisha* club (Asano, 2004; Uesugi, 2012). Finally, it is the media themselves who occasionally become exposed as corrupted. The occasional “scandal of the source” (*yarase*) is usually based on plagiarizing news reports and making false accusations.

Needless to say, **the public** is not a power circle as such. However, it holds a certain symbolic power in a way it can influence scandal development. Within the fragmented Japanese public, we can locate the “support groups” (loyal voters, provincial supporters, local farmers), who ignore the corruption of the political circles because they are more concerned with practical ends than moral means (Gordon, 1993; Kyogoku, 1987). On the contrary, the “civic groups” are likely to protest publicly against social controversies (they include NGOs, victim support networks, citizen watchdog groups, consumer groups, and independent lawyers). Unfortunately, their collusion with other power circles is marginal, while civic groups usually lack the potential to scandalize the public via a serious civic issue (Ogawa, 2009). They can exert additional pressure which can result in a defamation suit, but the chance of success is low (Asano, 2004; West, 2006). Scandals are indeed “monologic” events because the tide of information does not require a response by the public (e.g. Adut, 2008). However, the Japanese public demonstrated on multiple occasions that a loud response to scandal can alter its course. The civic strategies of expressing discontent include “flaming” scandals online (*netto enjō*), in which anonymous users flame internet debates by posting discrediting exposures on bulletin boards, chat rooms or blogs. Other strategies include sending angry letters to the media, refusing to pay television fees, and organizing rallies and hunger strikes in order to put pressure on the prosecutors.

The outside-media

As indicated above, scandals are primarily kept private by the inside-media. Big Japanese dailies rarely confront political controversies, and even if they do, they expose them within their ritualized frame. The initial impulse for triggering scandal usually comes from the outside-media: weeklies, monthlies, photo-tabloids, sports papers, local newspapers, foreign media, and online platforms.

Being guided by the rule of interest in everything (Hara, 1997), weeklies (*shūkanshi*) are the main instigators of scandal in Japan. They came to represent an influential news format which ranges from celebrity news to high-quality journalism, and from serious speculation to unsubstantiated libel. Importantly, the tabloids are free to indulge in speculative journalism because they do not belong to the restrictive *kisha* system. Since the *kisha* journalists cover the accurate, “official” reality in a strikingly homogeneous way, many Japanese readers turn to tabloids for an alternative. Apart from the conservative weekly tabloids that are owned by one of the big dailies (e.g. *Sunday Mainichi* or *Shūkan Asahi*), the main scandal instigators are the weeklies owned by large publishing houses: *Shūkan Bunshun* (publisher: Bungei Shunjū), *Shūkan Shinchō* (Shinchōsha), and *Shūkan Gendai* (Kōdansha).

Apart from the weeklies, some major scandals were in the past triggered by freelance reporters (e.g. the 1974 Tanaka Kakuei scandal), the foreign press (e.g. the 1976 Lockheed scandal), local papers (e.g. the 1988 Recruit scandal), and the online communities (e.g. the 2015 Olympic logo scandal).

What follows is a handful of examples of the “bottom-up” mediation, in which a transgression is leaked via the outside-media, thereby pushing the inside-media to transform the leak into a full-blown scandal. As the examples show, we can register the bottom-up logic in all historically significant scandals.

- **Lockheed scandal (1976):** PM Tanaka Kakuei accepted bribes from the Lockheed Corporation in return for having Japan’s All Nippon Airways purchase the Tristar model of a passenger plane. The *kisha* reporters did not pursue the case although they knew about it (Sato, 1994). The leak came from the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and was released by the *Los Angeles Times*. Only then did the Japanese media publish the whole story.
- **Recruit scandal (1988):** PM Takeshita Noboru and other Diet members and business leaders were involved in receiving shares from the Recruit Company in return for political favors. The exposure was obstructed because many journalists had also taken bribes, including the president of *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*. The Kawasaki local branch of *Asahi Shimbun* discovered the corruption but the branch impeded its own reporters’ investigation (Nester, 1990). The newspaper’s affiliate weekly, *Asahi Journal* finally picked the story, while the communist newspaper *Akahata* published a list of original share recipients. Only then did the inside-media start covering the case.
- **Uno Sōsuke scandal (1989):** PM Uno had an extramarital affair with a geisha. She contacted the daily *Mainichi Shimbun* to provide them with a scoop, but the daily only forwarded the scoop to its sister magazine *Sunday Mainichi*. Two days later, the *Washington Post* reprinted the article, and the Japanese socialists used the article during Diet interpellations to attack the PM. Only then did the inside-media produce a scandal, which made Uno resign his post.
- **Sagawa Kyūbin scandal (1992):** The trucking company Sagawa bribed more than 100 politicians in return for political favors. The details, including a list of bribed politicians, were known to *kisha* reporters but stayed unpublished for many months.

The scandal was triggered by *Shūkan Shinchō*, and the inside-media started publishing the story only after the prosecutor's office had issued warrant arrests.

- **Amari Akira scandal (2016):** The minister of State for Economic Revitalization was accused of accepting money from a construction company in exchange for political favors. The accusation was initially published by the weekly *Shūkan Bunshun*, which made Amari resign his post.

As these cases indicate, the majority of Japanese large-scale scandals was initially exposed by the outside-media, and only then covered by the inside-media. Unbound by the *kisha* rules, the outside-media can go deep in investigation and magnify transgressions out of proportion. However, this can backfire, since it is dangerous to scandalize too far and to overstep the values of the target group (cf. Gluckman, 1963). The legal action comes with the territory: in case of defamation, publishers are occasionally brought to court and penalized. Damages are on a slight increase, but they are rather nominal, reaching up to 1 million yen per case (Asano, 2004). Thus, it usually pays off to run the risk and produce scandals based on unsubstantiated rumor.

Producing scandals

In this section I look at the way Japanese scandals are hardwired into the news production process. I will look at how scandals are “played out in the media” with their distinctive working routines (Thompson, 2000), and approach media scandal as a product of journalistic rituals (Tuchman, 1972). Like any other news, media scandals are shaped by organizational news values, the media's understanding of social responsibility, and by the market forces (e.g. McQuail, 2010). The new values are expressed by journalistic rituals that predetermine meaning before any text is generated (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). On the one hand, scandals fit the standard news values of elite-centered “bad news” and sensationalism, while on the other, the audiences welcome bad news, conflict, drama, and deviation from norms (Tumber and Waisbord, 2019). The social responsibility of the media lies in providing accountability through investigation and exposure (cf. the watchdog model), but scandal reporting in Japan and elsewhere has become largely commercially driven and susceptible to political pressures.

Gatekeeping is a process by which the potential news messages are assorted, shaped, and only then transmitted by the news media (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). Media scandals occupy a peculiar sort of gatekeeping. The basic communication model (sender-message-receiver) is insufficient since it does not highlight the importance of multiple codes and various actors, both media and non-media. Scandals are in principle produced by five interrelated groups of actors:

1. **Promoters** (insiders, whistleblowers, netizens): They identify and promote transgressive occurrences as newsworthy. The promotion can take a shape of administrative spin, PR activity, or internal whistleblowing
2. **Assemblers** (newsmen, editors, networks): They transform newsworthy occurrences into media events. They include low-level newspeople (reporters, editors, writers) and high-level executives (publishers, media presidents)

3. **Performers** (transgressors): They dramatize scandal by individual confessions and public performances. The apology rituals are scripted and conducted in order to cater to the assemblers' needs
4. **Influencers** (prosecutors, agencies, pundits): They criminalize or minimize transgressions. The talent/advertising agencies protect clients by manipulating scandals, while the media pundits provide the public with their "expert truth"
5. **Receivers** (audiences, readers, viewers): They decode and interpret the meanings of promoted and assembled scandals. They send feedback to the promoters by expressing moral indignation.

I will now focus more closely on the way how leaks are promoted and processed by the media, giving shape to a full-blown scandal. I examine the role of media institutions, newspeople, and whistleblowers throughout the gatekeeping process. I highlight the production logic of Japanese scandal by following a three-act structure, consisting of Leak Processing, Scandal Proper, and Climax and Fadeout.

Leak processing

Every scandal opens with a latency stage, during which a transgression is an open secret to a select few, but it is not yet in the public domain. In other words, the scandal is always already there, waiting to "show itself" (Gamson, 2001). Scandals are however no epiphanies – they are almost always given and never simply born, being produced by people with agendas and motivations of their own. Some leaks may appear to be based on mere coincidence, but my data indicates that the primary motivation for leaking a scoop usually derives from these "3Cs":

1. **Cash:** The disclosure is profit-motivated. Some whistleblowers and insider-journalists are motivated by financial benefits and leak a scoop in a material form while usually hiding their identity.
2. **Conspiracy:** The disclosure is politically motivated. It is a product of secretive plots by political enemies and other parties. For instance, a leak is sent to the oppositional politicians or prosecutors at the opportune time to embarrass the targeted politician.
3. **Confession:** The disclosure is morally motivated. It is an unforced confession (to the media) based on one's moral reflection. The motivation of such confession can range from public good-oriented to purely idealistic (see Figure 2.).

Some leaks are unreliable, based on bad tips, or they are not strong enough to give rise to criminal and moral charges. Other leaks cannot constitute a proper scandal, because (1) they do not reach the necessary threshold of public attention, (2) no scandal promoter would lead the "moral crusade," or (3) the solution was in the meantime internally reached at the level of elites.

In order to unleash a large-scale scandal, a certain violation of the norm at an elite level must be leaked to the media that authorize it for publishing. The initial exposure, however, is not controlled by the inside-media. It is usually realized via whistleblowing,

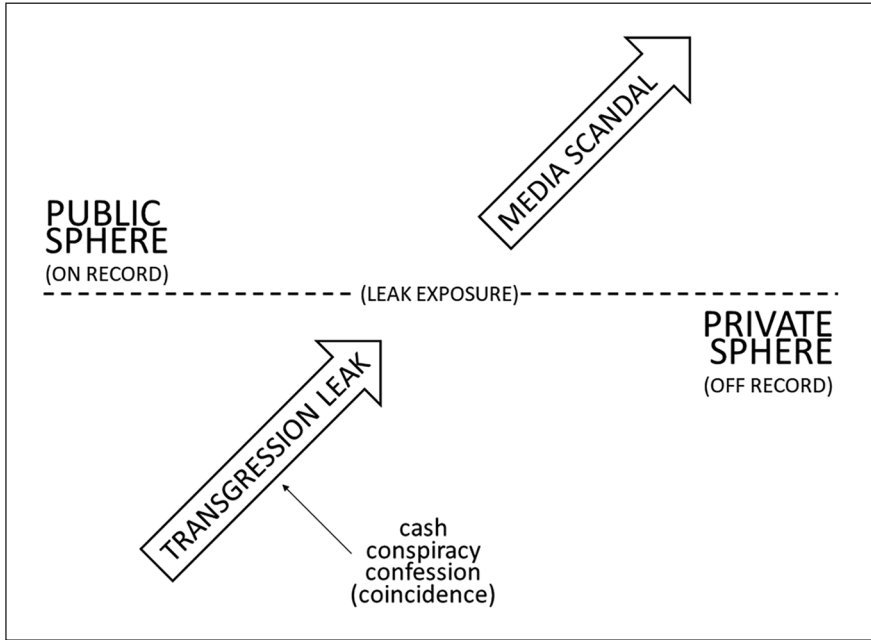


Figure 2. Leak processing.

that is, an insider revealing information about some hidden secret (e.g. Liebes and Blum-Kulka, 2004). Japanese whistleblowers include company insiders, anonymous reporters, corporate auditors, and the victims of corruption. The corruption investigation often starts with a fishy magazine story by an investigative reporter, and if this is picked by the prosecutors, a proper media scandal can emerge. Some leaks come from the *kisha* journalists themselves, who either write under their pen name, or they at least sell a tip for scandal (e.g. West, 2006).

In Japan, many power-related leaks reach the prosecutorial office as anonymous tips (Hasegawa, 2000), while the law-breaking scandals are leaked to the reporters directly by the police (Asano, 2004). Other leaks come from within the political circles, where insiders and anonyms send scandal evidence to oppositional politicians. These leaks can serve as an effective tool for attacking opponents during the Budget Committee meeting (Yosan Iinkai), which is attended by all ministers and broadcast live.

The most reliable leaks come in a fixed form: audio/videotapes, phone call transcripts, seized account books, or photographs of celebrities in “unflattering” scenarios (*nyan-nyan shashin*). Some sensitive documents are falsified or lost, while other “mysterious documents” (*kaibunsho*) surface as-if serendipitously. This can be attributed to Japanese invisible politics (Taniguchi, 2007) or the bureaucrats’ covert call for responsibility (Miyamoto, 1996). Once these leaks get reprinted in the tabloids, they can generate up to three unique scandal articles per month (West, 2006).

As of late, Japanese social media came to play an important role in leaking scandals to the public while setting the agenda for the mass media. Owing to the anonymity which

the internet affords, Japanese online communities effectively “flame” online debates (*netto enjō*) by exposing corruption on bulletin boards (e.g. Channel 2), weblogs (e.g. Netgeek), video platforms (e.g. Nico Nico), and e-journals (e.g. BuzzFeed). So far, the online communities were especially effective in uncovering plagiarism and data fabrication (e.g. the 2015 Olympic logo scandal).

During the latency stage, the inside-media are likely to ignore a scoop, even though it already appeared in the tabloids. This is partly due to the restrictions of the *kisha* system, with mainstream reporters being discouraged to conduct any investigative reporting – allegedly because it is expensive and can lead to legal action (Asano, 2004; Uesugi, 2012). Besides, the national broadcaster NHK is pressured by the establishment which can de facto revoke its broadcasting license.

While parting ways with the inside-media, the weeklies pick a scoop and start the investigation. Some magazines decide to sell their scoops to other domestic media, or they forward them to the foreign media. The risk lies in the accuracy of the tips from whistleblowers, and the correct estimation of profit versus damages. Even the tabloids exercise self-censorship, especially over those scandals that might adversely affect the big clients of Dentsu. Covering pre-arrest reports is also exceptional since it may become heavily criticized if the accusation turns out to be wrong. If a scoop is not based on official prosecution, there is always a risk that the media will be sued.

Scandal proper

During this stage, the inside media finally proceed to cover the scoop, transforming leaked information into a full-blown scandal. To borrow from Luhmann (2000), the media system is now pushed to transform irritation into information. These are the main incentives for the inside-media to start covering a scandal:

- **Official investigation:** Scandal starts with legal proceedings. Transgression becomes a subject of the substantiated indictment. The prosecutors open the investigation while the officials make raids and arrests.
- **Tabloid pressure:** Scandal starts with the weeklies exposing a transgression. If the moral indignation grows out of proportion, the inside-media are likely to reflect on it and cover the case as well.
- **Foreign pressure:** Official domestic investigation is propelled by international investigations and exposed by the foreign media. Japanese authorities have no choice but to pursue criminal cases that became under foreign scrutiny.
- **Public backlash:** The moral indignation of the public reaches levels that the media cannot ignore anymore. This is especially the case when the negative feedback takes the form of a public protest.

Once picked by the mainstream journalists, the leak is reduced into an understandable media event. The inside-media abandon their see-no-evil approach and turn into self-appointed “public avengers” that are endowed with the authority to pry and prosecute

(e.g. Asano, 2004; Morikawa, 1992). While outperforming the police, the media assign their beat reporters to produce an ever-escalating daily diet of speculation, blowing up small transgressions while ignoring much greater ones.

In their dry, factual explanations, the dailies report uniformly what is “real” and accurate about the scandal. They usually put scandals on the society page (*shakaimen*), because scandals are handled by the social affairs section (*shakaibu*) and not by the political section (*seijibu*). The political section usually keeps corruption off the front page – either because their reporters are too close to the sources, or because the scoop is anti-LDP oriented (Farley, 1996; Krauss, 2000). Nonetheless, business eventually prevails over politics, and when scandal grows out of proportion, even the dailies start running gigantic front-page articles on the scoop. The social affairs section is the largest in size and controls the hierarchy of the news organization. Their reporters are friends with the police (Asano, 2001; Uesugi, 2012) and their lack of political knowledge shifts their focus to public apologies and degradations (Freeman, 1996; Legewie, 2010).

Differing from the dailies, the weeklies grab attention by focusing on what is dramatic and spectacular. After the first revelation surfaces, the new ones are quickly made, while the weeklies – most notably *Shūkan Bunshun* and *Shūkan Shinchō* – try to out-scoop one another. The weeklies do not release all gathered material at once, but they publish scandal fragments in a slow drip-drip process, where the initial exposure (*dai-ichidan*) is usually followed by a more powerful one (*dai-nidan*).

Once scandal appears in the press, a full TV coverage catches on, reaching up to millions of more viewers. As of late, the weeklies break a scandal on the internet before it publishes it in print, which enables the TV broadcast to catch up immediately (Brasor, 2017). The in-studio TV commentators introduce new scandals by pointing to their prominence in the press, while the media pundits give their quasi-academic comments during the TV “wideshows” (*waidoshō*). Being watched mainly by women, these shows run on weekdays on major private TV networks, and they often monopolize attention through scandal, gossip, and crime.

The TV broadcast is essential for scandal because it invites national awareness and public participation with all its subtleties. Live broadcast (*namachūkei*) finds its particular domain in tearful press conferences, celebrities being taken into/out of custody, and in the prosecutorial raids that are anticipated by the media. Nonetheless, reporting restrictions come with the territory. For instance, the TV networks almost exclusively cover celebrity scandals, but if a major celebrity is involved, the networks are careful not to offend the talent agencies (*jimusho*) and the advertisers (Dentsu).

Climax and fadeout

The scandal climax usually comes in a form of an apologetic press conference (*shazai kaiken*). Generally, press conferences are used to announce a piece of sensitive information before it leaks somewhere else, or to officially denounce a transgression while symbolically separating from the transgressor. In the latter case, the media cover uniformly and in a surgical detail the confessional performance, hyping the scandal to its climax by paying all attention to the moment of apology. Once televised, the

confessional performance is turned into an orchestrated pseudo-event with a high degree of spectacularity (see Pruša 2012).

The televised climax is abundant in “emotive moralizing” (cf. Matsumoto, 1996; Sugimoto, 2010). Japanese common sense has it that public expression of emotions is not favorable, but scandals reverse this sentiment. Demonstrating a breakdown of one’s emotional and physical control over the body (lacrimation, sweating, blushing) is appropriate in Japanese scandals. The ritual represents suffering in meaningful ways (Handelman, 2004), while the emotional appeal of shaming (or the Aristotelian *pathos*) directly calls upon the audiences’ feelings. What is desired is an emotional display of atonement which would provide the offended side with observable evidence (e.g. the media record the tears shed during one’s apology).

Emotive moralizing is the domain of Japanese TV stations, who discuss tirelessly to what extent did the apology prove to us that it “spoke from the heart,” and to what extent it served only as a rhetoric stratagem to alleviate public backlash. The weeklies go so far as to use colorful pie charts to illustrate the overall quality of the apologetic performance. These charts are determined by factors such as the gravity of transgression (*jiken no ōkisa*), the impact of the press conference (*kaiken no impakuto*), and the depth of one’s bows (*ojigi no fukasa*).

The closing part of the degradation ceremony lies in assessing damages and imposing sanctions. Here, scandals are processed on two levels. On the legal level, transgressions are based on failing one’s legal responsibility (*hōteki sekinin*) and result in material sanctions (detention and fines). On the symbolic level, transgressions are related to moral responsibilities (*dōgiteki sekinin*) and lead to symbolic sanctions (loss of face, position, status). The former is executed directly by the state through the courts, while the latter is executed by the community through the shaming process (Braithwaite, 1989). In Japan, where managing social order includes damaging one’s reputation (Haley 1982), symbolic sanctions are more devastating than legal punishment.

Once confessions are concluded, scandals slowly run out of steam and media attention evaporates. To borrow from Nyhan (2015), scandal fever gives way to scandal fatigue. The media exit the event and convert back to routine journalism. Old conflicts loom large again in the news since the scandal coverage overshadowed larger political and economic issues. In the meantime, the transgressors struggle to re-consolidate their “delegated trustworthiness” which they lost due to the scandal (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). Ideally, the public trust is restored after scandal, re-confirming political leaders as legitimate representatives (Brenton, 2012). Scandals are integrated into the social order, while the temporary state of social effervescence is suspended by readjusting to the routine of everydayness. The public repositions itself to the profane level of social reality, quickly forgetting the short-lived emotions during the scandal hype. Large-scale scandals enter the collective memory, becoming a retrospective source for books, documentaries, and films.

Scandal consequences

One feature shared by the majority of Japanese scandals lies in their insignificant social impact. Here, I lean toward the no-consequence theory, where scandals are approached as non-transformative media events (e.g. Thompson, 2000). Japanese scandals may have

a certain impact on the individuals involved, but they have no real impact on processes that shape social and political life (see Pruša 2019).

There are multiple ways to explain this phenomenon. One explanation lies in the high level of political apathy in contemporary Japan. Japanese are generally rather skeptical toward democracy as a dynamic, process-oriented system (e.g. Yamamoto, 2010), which is reflected in low levels of trust and confidence in government, and in the prevailing belief that Japanese politics is inherently corrupt. Many Japanese feel weak in the face of arrogance implied by the elites' corrupt dealings.

Another explanation relates to the reluctance of LDP to fight corruption. Indeed, some post-scandal reforms did work (Carlson and Reed, 2018), however, the majority of measures implemented by the government since 1990s were not successful in reducing corruption scandals (e.g. George Mulgan, 2010; Stockwin, 2008). Governmental revisions of corruption-related laws imposed only few effective controls on the money flow, while politicians quickly adapted to new regulations, found new loopholes and sidestepped legal liabilities (e.g. Iwai, 2015). In this political system, the majority of corrupted politicians is nearly always re-elected, which only deepens public apathy and political skepticism. Under these circumstances, scandals will naturally endure as "empty" public rituals that have little force to transform the structural corruption of the ossified LDP. At any rate, it is not only the media who stand behind the low impact of scandals. Equally important is the fossilization of single-party power and a politically apathetic populace.

Conclusion

This article applied an interdisciplinary lens in order to illuminate how are Japanese scandals shaped by the media against the backdrop of corruption and collusion of power. Throughout the production stages of Leak Processing, Scandal Proper, and Climax and Fadeout, it is the scandal promoters (whistleblowers), assemblers (journalists), influencers (agencies), and the agents of social control (prosecutors, police) that have all their share in producing scandals. During each stage, there are multiple sets of forces facilitating or obstructing the leak flow. The promoters forward compromising leak to the police, prosecutors, and the outside-media, whereas the involved power circles attempt to minimize negative media coverage. The inside-media usually ignore the tabloids' revelations while discouraging investigative journalism. Nonetheless, as the public indignation grows, the inside-media eventually start covering the case as well, giving shape to a full-blown scandal (see Figure 3).

If pushed by circumstances, Japanese media do *illuminate* corruption, but they do not help to *eliminate* its causes. They produce scandals as popular media commodities, but in terms of social impact, Japanese scandals are regressive media rituals that have little power to prevent future corruption. Indeed, scandals create a media frenzy for a limited period of time, but by doing so, they actually highlight the media's fundamental failure to bring about reform through scandal mediation. In this frenzy, the transgressor is often made to serve as a scapegoat for various strategic interests in the symbolic process that regenerates the reality principle in distress and masks the very core of the scandalous system.

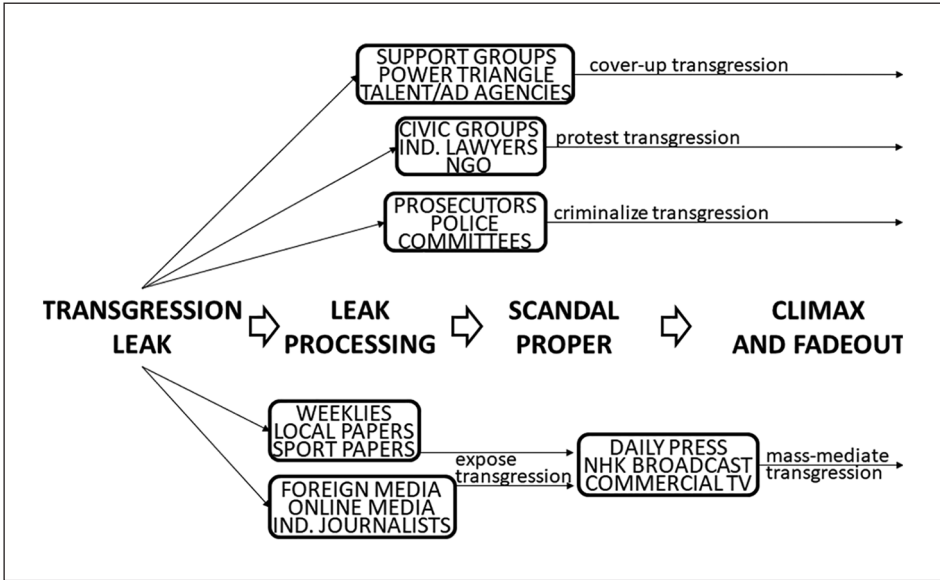


Figure 3. The production flow of Japanese scandal.

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