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DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF POLITICAL SCANDALS

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ДИСКУРСИВНІ СТРАТЕГІЇ У МЕДІЙНИХ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЯХ ПОЛІТИЧНИХ СКАНДАЛІВ

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***Анотація.** У статті проаналізовано дискурсивні стратегії та тактики, які використовуються учасниками політичних скандалів у сучасному медіапросторі. Розглянуто визначення поняття «скандал» та окреслено його функціонування у межах моделі стратегічної взаємодії. Особливу увагу приділено таким стратегічним прийомам, як делегітимізація, мінімізація, контратака та ідентифікаційне фреймування. Досліджено, як політичні актори інтерпретують звинувачення й формують альтернативні наративи, а також яким чином медіа беруть участь у конструюванні скандального дискурсу. Матеріалом дослідження слугують офіційні заяви, інтерв'ю та публікації в соціальних мережах, що стосуються чотирьох резонансних політичних скандалів у США (2020–2024).*

Методологічну основу становить вибірка медіа матеріалів та дискурс-аналіз, що дозволили виокремити характерні комунікативні «ходи» учасників скандалу. У процесі аналізу особлива увага зосереджена на тому, як риторичні конструкції формують суспільне сприйняття порушень та як медійні інтерпретації впливають на динаміку розвитку скандалу. Результати свідчать, що політичні скандали постають не як лінійні події, а як послідовність взаємопов'язаних стратегічних дій, у межах яких кожне висловлювання є реакцією на попередню інформацію. Делегітимізація найбільш виразно проявляється у відповідях Дональда Трампа, тоді як випадок Джорджа Сантоса демонструє поступовий перехід від прямого заперечення до мінімізації. Стратегії контратаки простежуються у риторичці Метта Гейтца. Отже, дослідження демонструє, що скандальний дискурс формується у постійному русі, де учасники не лише реагують на звинувачення, а й активно конструюють власні інтерпретації події. Це дозволяє зрозуміти політичний скандал як процес, що розгортається на межі між індивідуальними висловлюваннями та медійними практиками, і потребує подальшого аналізу у контексті цифрової комунікації.

***Ключові слова:** політичний скандал, дискурсивні практики, риторичні тактики, медійне висвітлення, публічний дискурс.*

***Annotation.** The article examines the discursive strategies and tactics employed by participants in political scandals within the contemporary media environment. It outlines the definition of “scandal” and considers its functioning through the lens of a strategic interaction model. Particular attention is paid to such strategic techniques as delegitimization, minimisation, counterattack, and identity-based framing. The study investigates how political actors interpret*

allegations and construct alternative narratives, as well as how the media participate in shaping scandal-related discourse.

The material of the research includes official statements, interviews, and social media posts related to four high-profile political scandals in the United States (2020–2024). The methodological basis consists of purposive sampling of media materials and discourse analysis, which made it possible to identify typical communicative “moves” used by the actors involved. Special focus is placed on how rhetorical constructions shape public perceptions of wrongdoing and how media interpretations influence the dynamics of scandal development.

The findings indicate that political scandals do not unfold as linear events but rather as a sequence of interrelated strategic actions, where each utterance functions as a response to previous informational stimuli. Delegitimization is most clearly manifested in Donald Trump’s reactions, whereas the case of George Santos demonstrates a gradual shift from outright denial to minimisation. Counterattacking strategies appear in Matt Gaetz’s rhetoric. Overall, the study demonstrates that scandal discourse emerges as a dynamic process in which actors not only respond to allegations but also actively construct their own interpretations of events. This approach allows us to interpret political scandals as processes unfolding at the intersection of individuals’ statements and media practices and requires further investigation in the context of digital communication.

Key words: *political scandal, discursive practices, rhetorical tactics, media coverage, public discourse.*

Introduction. In today's media landscape, political scandals are one of the most influential forms of public communication. The rapid development of digital platforms and the growing role of social networks mean that scandalous events not only quickly gain widespread publicity but also turn into dynamic communicative processes. The media, politicians, and the audience simultaneously produce, disseminate, and interpret scandalous messages, forming multi-level discursive practices.

In this context, it is particularly important how the interpretation of a scandal is formed in the public sphere and what rhetorical means actors use to define their own position. In this regard, the question of how meanings are produced in the public sphere and what rhetorical tools the participants in the scandal use to construct their own position deserves special attention. Scandal is not only a violation, but also a process of its interpretation. Analysis of these strategies provides a deeper understanding of how political actors shape their public reputation, shift the focus of attention, and delegitimize their opponents.

Problem Statement. Despite a significant number of studies devoted to political scandals, questions about the strategic nature of the discursive actions performed by key participants in the scandal remain insufficiently studied. Most traditional models describe a scandal as a sequence of stages from violation to public reaction, but the modern media landscape demonstrates other models. Scandals are increasingly unfolding as nonlinear, interactive communicative processes in which actors constantly adapt their rhetoric.

This creates a need to study political scandal not as a static event, but as a space for strategic interaction. That is why it is important to analyse rhetorical tactics such as delegitimization, minimisation, role inversion, counterattacks, or appeals to identity. Studying these strategies allows us not only to describe the linguistic features of communication, but also to understand the mechanisms of shaping public perception of scandal.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the general methodological basis for this study. In Fairclough’s (2003) view, texts are processes of “texturing”: social actors use available discursive resources to construct interpretations of events. His idea of interdiscursivity is especially relevant for political scandals. Scandal statements often combine defensive arguments, identity appeals, and

elements of counterattack. CDA helps describe how these mixed forms are organized and what kinds of political or media relations they imply.

Analysis of recent research and publications. According to Thompson (2000), the concept of scandal can be defined as “actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response” (p. 13). This definition emphasizes that violations become scandals because of their disclosure and the backlash they provoke, rather than the actions themselves. Even though these results are not identical to Thompson's original model, which outlines several stages of the scandal process (including violation, concealment, disclosure, and public reaction), in subsequent secondary formulations, his model is often condensed into a triadic structure: violation – disclosure – reaction.

This framework treats scandal discourse as part of broader social practices. Fairclough (2003) argues that social events, including scandals, involve various social elements in which semiosis plays a key role. Therefore, linguistic analysis should be performed on how texts position actors, negotiate power and construct identities. In this article, scandal narratives are examined at the intersection of political communication and media coverage. This allows us to show how discourse participates in redefining political conflicts.

Recent theoretical developments have formalized scandalous dynamics through rational interaction models. Dziuda and Howell (2021) present strategic games between parties as a theoretical model. According to their results, political polarization has the potential to even encourage politicians to commit more misconduct with corresponding political consequences. They show that the outcomes of scandals also depend on strategic competence. The severity of the violation is not the only factor; if actors can navigate the dynamics of information disclosure, this changes the audience's perception of the scandal and its media coverage.

As Brenton (2019) notes, scandals raise moral, legal, or ethical issues. Moral and ethical codes are contradictory, so different violators may face different consequences. In the political world, scandals are based on violations that tarnish public office or social position. As Zulli (2020:3) emphasises, “what digital technology makes more visible is how various actors [...] understand and construct political morality and behaviour.” Thus, numerous voices can contribute to an environment that increases discursive interactivity in ongoing political scandals. The media not only provide information to the public but also prompt them to comment and participate in shaping the scandalous narrative.

The media can influence public opinion on political issues through two mechanisms: agenda setting and framing. Agenda setting influences what people consider important. If the media discusses the same topic, society will identify it as one of the main issues. Framing consists of “interpretive packages” that journalists use to convey social issues to the public. This can include how the media covers the definition of social issues, the causes, and moral judgments. Furthermore, a crucial consideration is whether the story is framed around a single individual, encouraging the attribution of individual responsibility, or based on broader structures and trends (Gollust, Nelson, Crane, Murad, & Tait, 2022).

Social networks have become a platform that allows people to share their opinions and disseminate information to a wide audience. Thus, it turned ordinary users from passive observers into active participants in the scandal. Previous studies indicate that influential social media users are more likely to write about scandals related to values (e.g., moral, or ethical violations). Such posts receive more shares than posts about scandals related to efficiency or professional performance (Soltani et al., 2023). Ma, Zhang, and Chen (2023) also emphasize emotionality and moral positioning as key drivers in their research on the spread of scandals on social media.

The concept of “cancel culture,” which is often discussed in the media due to its prevalence on social media, influences the formation and dynamics of scandals. The culture of cancellation demonstrates how the rapid dissemination of content prompts immediate and extensive public responses to actions that are considered problematic. In many cases, this provides additional opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups to express their views. At the same time, this phenomenon emphasizes the lack of meaningful discussion and evidence-based assessments of events and behaviours that are the subject of public criticism (Ng, 2023).

The aim of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of discursive strategies and tactics. The article examines various groups of participants in political scandals and how they act at key stages from the moment the allegations are made public to the public reaction. This approach makes it possible to view a scandal not as a linear process, but as a complex communicative space. This space combines the actions of various actors, media interpretations, and information triggers, which together determine the course and outcome of the scandal.

Research Result. An analysis of four high-profile political scandals in the United States (2020–2024) shows that communication about scandals unfolds not as a fixed sequence of events, but as a dynamic interaction of strategic steps taken by political actors, media institutions, and the public.

The study is based on a corpus of discursive events, official press releases, and social media posts (particularly from X/Twitter and Truth Social). Taken together, these sources allow us to trace the multi-layered processes that shape the communication of political scandals. The study covers four high-profile political scandals in the United States between 2020 and 2024, selected for their widespread public resonance and intense coverage.

The methods applied in this research are as follows:

- Purposeful sampling was used to select political scandals that had a high public resonance.
- CDA was used to identify and group strategic moves in scandal communication (denial, evasion, counterattack). Following Fairclough’s (2003) approach, the analysis focused on interdiscursive features. To examine the discursive models used by political actors, the texts were approached as dynamic processes.

We analysed key communicative instances that reflect the non-linear development of these scandals:

The corpus includes official responses to legal charges issued by Donald Trump following the Manhattan indictment. This data serves to analyse procedurally oriented defence. The key material for analysis is the statement released on 30 March 2023 after the charges were brought in Manhattan, as reported by CNN (Smith, 2023) which states:

"This is political persecution and election interference at the highest level in history" (Trump, 2023).

This lexical construction demonstrates the use of delegitimization, where the accused attempts to shift attention away from the actual charges to the alleged political motives of the investigation. During our analysis, we also noted recurring rhetorical formulas from the 2023 speeches, in particular:

"They're not coming after me. They're coming after YOU. I'm just standing in their way" (Trump, 2023).

This example is important for understanding how role reversal is formed when the accused portrays himself and his audience as victims of persecution.

During our research, we also paid attention to how George Santos' rhetoric changed in different media outlets. The material shows that his communication strategy gradually shifted from

denial to minimising guilt. For comparison, two statements made at the end of December 2022 were analysed. In an interview with Fox News on 27 December 2022, the politician used a direct form of denial, stating:

"I am not a fraud. I am not a fake" (Fox News, 27 December 2022).

However, in an exclusive interview with *The New York Post* on 26 December 2022, he reinterpreted the same actions as

"My sins here are embellishing my résumé... I'm sorry" (New York Post, 26 December 2022).

This comparison made it possible to determine how political actors change their strategy in response to the emergence of irrefutable evidence.

The example of Gaetz's reactions to the investigation into sex trafficking demonstrate an attempt to form an offensive rhetorical frame: the politician describes the accusations as a 'blackmail scheme,' emphasising the allegedly unlawful actions of the investigating authorities. In his statements, the politician consistently presented himself not as a figure in the case, but as a victim of an "organized criminal extortion scheme," emphasizing that the charges against him were completely fabricated. This wording allows the situation to be interpreted as a targeted attack by unspecified "malicious actors" and the investigation process itself as biased and politically motivated. This strategy changes the initial structure of interaction: instead of responding to factual statements, he focuses on the moral incompetence of the accusers and thus creates a competing narrative in which the truthfulness of the accusations becomes less important than the presumed motives for bringing them forward.

A similar logic of role inversion can be seen in the rhetorical practices employed by Andrew Cuomo in response to allegations of sexual harassment. The formulation "I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable" facilitates a reading of the situation as accidental rather than deliberate. In his March 2021 statement, Cuomo stated: "I now understand that I acted in a way that made people feel uncomfortable. It was unintentional and I truly and deeply apologize for it" (Cuomo, 2021). In subsequent statements, against the backdrop of growing political pressure and the publication of the New York State Attorney General's report, his rhetoric presents calls for his resignation as contrary to democratic procedures. Thus, Cuomo's strategy combines elements of an apology that does not imply admission of guilt with rhetorical constructions that shift the focus of attention to the alleged illegitimacy of public criticism.

Similar features of identification framing can be seen in Robert Menendez's public response to corruption allegations in September 2023. In his statement, the politician emphasises his Cuban heritage and long-standing support for the Latin American community. *"For years, forces behind the scenes have repeatedly attempted to silence my voice and dig my political grave"* (Menendez, 2023). This allows him to present the situation not as an isolated legal episode, but as a manifestation of broader prejudice against representatives of ethnic minorities. Thus, the accusations take on not only a legal interpretation, but also a socio-political one, shifting the focus from material evidence to the issue of discrimination.

A summary of the analysed materials allows us to view the political scandal not as a fixed event, but as a dynamic sequence of mutual communicative steps between the prosecution (the media and prosecutorial structures) and the figures involved in the scandal. This approach demonstrates that the scandal forms a space for strategic interaction, within which each statement becomes a response to the previous information impulse, and the communication itself takes on a procedural and interactive character.

Conclusions and Perspectives for Further Research. The generalization of the analysis allows us to conclude that political scandals function not as linear communicative events, but as active

strategic interactions in which actors constantly change their discursive tactics. The identified strategies of delegitimization, minimization, role inversion, and counterattack demonstrate that the rhetoric of political figures is aimed not only at explaining or refuting accusations, but also at redefining the very structure of public communication.

The study showed that discursive strategies are not isolated elements. They form an interdependent system of communicative steps that influence the trajectory of a scandal. Thus, attention to rhetorical practices allows us to view political scandal not only as a social phenomenon but as a specific form of strategic communication in which there is a constant struggle to define legitimacy.

Prospects for further research are linked to several areas. First, it would be useful to expand the body of material by including scandals from other political systems, which would allow for a comparison of strategies in different cultural and media contexts. Second, digital platforms as a medium for the production and dissemination of scandalous narratives require further attention, in particular research into the role of algorithmic mechanisms in the visibility of certain interpretations. Third, an analysis of how audiences participate in the transformation of scandal by creating their own rhetorical positions through comments and reposts.

The results of the work open opportunities for further interdisciplinary study of political scandals as a multidimensional discursive phenomenon that combines media dynamics and social interaction.

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