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**Риторичні та стилістичні характеристики медіарепрезентацій політичних
скандалів**

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**Rhetorical and Stylistic Characteristics of Media Representations of Political
Scandals**

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***Abstract.** This article examines the rhetorical-stylistic features of media representations of political scandals in contemporary public discourse. A scandal is interpreted as the result of a discursive construction shaped by media framing, rather than as a purely factual violation. The study pays particular attention to lexical choice, evaluative language and narrative structures as key mechanisms that shape the interpretation of political events in public discourse. The study employs critical discourse analysis as its methodological framework. CDA is understood as an approach that examines linguistic structures in relation to power relations and ideological processes. This perspective makes it possible to analyse how meanings are constructed in media discourse and to identify key linguistic and rhetorical patterns in the representation of political scandals.*

The analysis suggests that, in the cases examined, media coverage functions not as a neutral reflection of events but as a site where their interpretation is actively shaped through framing mechanisms and stylistic choices. Instead of merely describing events, they frequently use emotionally charged expressions to convey outrage,

betrayal or moral indignation. It is shown that different media narratives may emphasise either legal responsibility or political motivation, thereby producing competing interpretations of the same event. The findings also suggest that shifts in framing across different media outlets may alter the perceived severity and significance of the scandal over time. Political scandals can therefore be seen as dynamic discursive processes in which meaning is continuously negotiated in contemporary society. This, in turn, raises the need for further research into the linguistic mechanisms of media framing in digital communication, particularly in relation to the role of audience interaction and the circulation of interpretations across platforms. At the same time, the analysis shows that the interaction between media discourse and audience engagement further intensifies the circulation and reinterpretation of scandal narratives in the digital environment.

Keywords: *political scandal; media discourse; framing; critical discourse analysis; media representation.*

Анотація. *У статті розглядаються риторико-стилістичні особливості медіарепрезентацій політичних скандалів у сучасному публічному дискурсі. Скандал інтерпретується як результат дискурсивної конструкції, сформованої через медіафреймінг, а не як суто фактичне порушення. У дослідженні особливу увагу приділено лексичному вибору, оціночній мові та наративним структурам як ключовим механізмам, що формують інтерпретацію політичних подій у публічному дискурсі. Методологічною основою дослідження є критичний дискурс-аналіз. Критичний дискурс-аналіз розглядається як підхід, що досліджує мовні структури у зв'язку з владними відносинами та ідеологічними процесами. Така перспектива дає змогу проаналізувати, як формуються значення у медіадискурсі, та виявити ключові лінгвістичні й риторичні моделі у репрезентації політичних скандалів.*

Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що медіависвітлення не лише відображає події, а й активно формує їх інтерпретацію через механізми фреймінгу та стилістичні засоби. Аналіз демонструє, що оціночна лексика, емоційно забарвлена мова та наративна організація сприяють конструюванню

скандалу як значущого публічного явища. Показано, що різні медіанаративи можуть акцентувати увагу або на юридичній відповідальності, або на політичній мотивації, тим самим продукуючи конкуруючі інтерпретації однієї й тієї самої події. Результати також свідчать, що зміни у фреймінгу в різних медіа можуть впливати на сприйняття серйозності та значущості скандалу з плином часу. Політичні скандали, таким чином, можуть розглядатися як динамічні дискурсивні процеси, у межах яких значення постійно конструюється та переосмислюється в сучасному суспільстві. У свою чергу, це зумовлює потребу у подальших дослідженнях лінгвістичних механізмів медіафреймінгу в умовах цифрової комунікації, зокрема щодо ролі взаємодії аудиторії та циркуляції інтерпретацій на різних платформах. Водночас аналіз показує, що взаємодія медіадискурсу та залученості аудиторії додатково інтенсифікує циркуляцію та переінтерпретацію наративів скандалу в цифровому середовищі.

Ключові слова: політичний скандал; медійний дискурс; фреймінг; критичний дискурс-аналіз; медійна репрезентація.

Political scandals appear regularly in news coverage. Reports about corruption, misuse of public office or controversial statements often become the centre of media attention. When such situations occur, journalists do not simply describe what happened. The way events are named, explained and evaluated also shapes how audiences understand them.

Many scholars argue that a scandal should not be treated only as a factual violation that becomes public. The interpretation of the event is equally important. Horn (2024) writes that *"a scandal is not simply an event, but a mediated construction shaped by journalistic framing."* The media environment is characterised by rapid information flow and competition for public attention. In such conditions, rhetorical and stylistic strategies become increasingly important. Narrative patterns, word choice and headlines frequently shape the interpretation of events before the public has had a chance to read the full report and form their own opinions based upon what they read.

Statements by politicians, reactions from journalists and comments from audiences interact with each other and gradually form a common narrative about the

event. Åkerlund (2025) describes scandal as something that is "*co-constructed through communicative interaction between political actors, journalists, and audiences.*" This perspective shifts attention from the event itself to the discursive processes through which the event becomes publicly meaningful.

For this reason, analysing media language is essential for understanding how scandals are represented. Media texts rely on stylistic and rhetorical choices when describing political actors, accusations and responses. These choices affect how responsibility is assigned and how the situation is interpreted by the public.

Problem Statement. Although political scandals have been widely studied in political communication research, their linguistic representation in media discourse remains a subject of inquiry. Traditional models describe scandal as a sequence of events (Thompson, 2000): an offence occurs, information about it becomes public, and the public reacts with criticism, discussion and outrage. While this model captures the basic phases of scandal development, it places the analytical emphasis on the factual side of the violation and treats media coverage primarily as a channel of transmission. The present study departs from this view by treating media discourse as a constitutive rather than a reflective component of scandal.

Studies of media coverage indicate that scandals rarely unfold straightforwardly. The same political situation may be framed differently depending on the media outlet or the speaker's political position. Whether a scandal grows or fades often depends on how the media handle it. The Menendez bribery case is one example: liberal U.S. outlets kept it on the agenda from 2023 through 2025. The Clarence Thomas ethics story went the other way – it kept dropping out of view and resurfacing, depending on which outlets chose to frame it and how. Interpretations change quickly, and different actors may promote competing versions of the same event.

These observations indicate that media coverage constructs interpretive frames that define the meaning of the event for the public. Analysing the rhetorical-stylistic features of these representations, therefore, helps explain how scandals are framed, how political actors are positioned and how public interpretations emerge.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. Actions or events become socially significant only when the violation becomes visible and begins to circulate publicly. Scandal is therefore closely connected with communicative processes through which information is disclosed, discussed and interpreted.

Instead of treating scandal primarily as a sequence of events, researchers increasingly focus on the interaction between actors who interpret and communicate those events. For Åkerlund (2025), scandal does not exist on its own – it emerges only when politicians, journalists and audiences talk about an event together. The focus then moves from what actually happened to how the event is told, retold and finally labelled a scandal. Language matters here because it is the very material from which scandals are built. Horn (2024) makes a similar point: news coverage does not just relay events, it arranges them so that some readings come more easily than others. The same story can read as a small controversy in one paper and as a full-blown political crisis in another. The difference comes down to wording – which adjectives appear, which phrases keep recurring, what gets emphasised – even when nothing is said outright.

Applied to political scandals, this perspective draws attention to how meaning is distributed within the text. Responsibility may be foregrounded or backgrounded, actors may be positioned as agents or as targets, and evaluation can remain implicit rather than openly stated. The patterns identified become more apparent if the texts are analysed on the basis of broader discursive practices.

Within this approach, researchers emphasise that texts should be viewed not merely as purely linguistic constructs, but also as components of broader social practices. Van Dijk (2008) emphasises that discourse contributes to the reproduction of ideological positions through patterns such as lexical choice, presupposition and thematic organisation. When applied to political scandals, this perspective shifts attention to how responsibility is distributed in the text. Some actors are foregrounded, others recede into the background, and evaluation often remains implicit rather than directly stated.

Several studies also draw attention to the emotional dimension of scandal communication. Media reports about controversial political behaviour rarely remain

purely informational. Instead of merely describing events, they frequently use emotionally charged expressions to convey outrage, betrayal or moral indignation. From a stylistic point of view, such effects are produced through evaluative adjectives, intensifiers and rhetorical emphasis. Hamed and Alqurashi (2025) point out that political rhetoric is often built to make audiences feel close to the speaker. Wodak (2021) describes a related move: politicians and the media frame events in terms of crisis and moral conflict. The relevance of these observations is illustrated by the case material analysed below: evaluative lexemes such as *corrupt*, *political* and *biased* recur in Menendez's public responses, while metaphors of attack and victimhood (*target*, *stood my ground*) organise Adams's self-positioning. These instances show that emotional lexicon functions as a marker of specific discursive strategies rather than as an undifferentiated feature of scandal coverage.

Research by Daiva and Purwanto (2025) on discussions on the platform X shows that linguistic markers of the "us–them" opposition intensify affective polarisation and shift attention from factual questions toward group identity. Pinto-Garzón and Meini (2025) further show that misleading interpretations often emerge not from false content as such but from small framing shifts applied to otherwise factual material.

The circulation of scandal narratives has become less stable in recent media environments. Digital platforms allow political statements, journalistic interpretations and public reactions to appear almost simultaneously. Today many people take part in shaping a story at the same time, and narratives keep getting reshaped on the fly. Add to this the rise of deepfakes and other synthetic media, and the very idea of "evidence" starts to look less stable.

As the World Economic Forum (2026) puts it, AI-generated content gives politicians a convenient escape route: even genuine recordings can now be brushed off as fakes. This development introduces an additional layer of uncertainty into scandal communication and interprets political statements increasingly dependent on discursive credibility rather than direct factual verification.

Multimodality also needs to be considered. Political debates in today's media landscape are expressed not only through written texts, but also via short videos,

memes and other combined formats. Lexical choices and modal markers work together with visual framing, forming interdiscursive configurations that influence how political actors are perceived.

Despite the amount of work on political scandals, their linguistic representation in media texts is still described unevenly. Much more attention has been given to communication strategies and media effects than to the stylistic mechanisms through which scandals are constructed in discourse. Many studies focus on political communication strategies, digital dissemination or audience reactions. By contrast, the stylistic and linguistic mechanisms through which scandals are constructed in media texts receive less systematic attention. For this reason, analysing the rhetorical and stylistic features that shape media representations of political scandals remains an important task for further research.

An analysis of media coverage shows that the portrayal of political scandals is shaped by linguistic framing, which determines how they are interpreted. Rather than restating that frames shape interpretation, the analysis below specifies how this occurs at the textual level: through lexical selection, syntactic foregrounding of certain actors, and the sequencing of evaluative and factual elements within a single report. These mechanisms operate below the threshold of explicit commentary and account for the difference between formally similar reports that nevertheless produce divergent interpretations of the same event.

A distinctive feature of media discourse is the widespread use of evaluative vocabulary. Headlines and opening paragraphs frequently contain words associated with crisis, violations of norms or moral failure. Such lexical choices strengthen the perception of seriousness and encourage audiences to interpret the event as a violation of public norms.

According to Robert Entman's foundational theory (Entman, 1993), 'framing' enables the media to highlight specific aspects of reality to identify an issue and assign it a moral judgment as early as the headline stage. An important feature of this process is the 'personalisation of scandal narratives', where the audience's attention shifts from abstract institutional structures to specific political actors. Iyengar (1991) refers to this

type of information presentation as 'episodic framing'. In this case, events are viewed through the prism of individual actors, which facilitates the attribution of individual responsibility and simplifies the broader political context. Thus, the headline functions as a primary cognitive filter.

In turn, Klas de Vreese (2005, 2012) emphasises that the 'responsibility frame' is one of the key mechanisms through which the media elicit moral condemnation, using specific lexical markers to identify the 'guilty party'. Within the modern 'hybrid media system' described by Chadwick (2017), political communication unfolds almost simultaneously across different platforms. Statements by politicians, media reports and audience reactions appear at the same time, which reduces the space for detached interpretation. In such conditions, language becomes a key resource in shaping how events are understood.

Wodak (2021) shows how words like *betrayal*, *cynicism* or *public outrage* turn political reporting into something closer to drama. Such words are never neutral – they carry a verdict, casting politicians as either villains or victims long before any argument has been made. As a result, scandals tend to be framed through a contrast between 'pure' society and 'corrupt' elites.

Such lexical choices contribute to the construction of clear moral contrasts between 'pure' society and 'corrupt' elites, thereby reinforcing polarised interpretations of political events. Such affective reasoning leads to the formation of an 'affective audience', within which emotional engagement functions as the primary criterion for interpreting controversial events. Therefore, the combination of lexical evaluation, narrative framing and the rhetorical positioning of actors creates an environment in which responsibility for moral transgressions is assigned not through a systematic analysis of facts, but through the power and emotional intensity of the constructed media image. These theoretical perspectives inform the analytical framework of the present study.

This article examines the rhetorical-stylistic characteristics of media representations of political scandals, focusing on how language shapes public interpretation of such events. Particular attention is devoted to the rhetorical and lexical

strategies employed by journalists in reporting accusations, political reactions and public response.

The study analyses how media texts use linguistic tools to shape interpretations of scandalous events. It examines evaluative vocabulary, media framing mechanisms, narrative structures and how political actors are represented in media discourse.

The empirical material of the study is conceptual rather than corpus-based. It consists of four illustrative cases of U.S. political scandals from the period 2021–2025: Senator Bob Menendez (bribery case), Donald Trump (classified documents case), New York Mayor Eric Adams (corruption charges) and Justice Clarence Thomas (ethics controversy). For each case, representative media texts from major English-language outlets — The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN, BBC, Reuters and Politico — were examined alongside public statements, press briefings, and interviews in which the politicians concerned responded to accusations. News reports were considered together with analytical and opinion pieces to capture different modes of media representation. The selection is guided by analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness: each case illustrates a distinct discursive strategy through which scandals are constructed in contemporary media discourse. Accordingly, the study does not claim frequency-based generalisations; its findings describe types of rhetorical-stylistic patterns rather than their distribution.

Taken together, the collected texts form a corpus that reflects the interaction between political actors, media institutions and audiences in the process of scandal representation. The material therefore provides a basis for analysing how linguistic and stylistic choices contribute to the construction of scandal narratives in contemporary media discourse.

The Methods Applied in this Research are as Follows. Purposeful sampling was used to select U.S. political scandals from 2021–2025 that received significant public resonance and involved allegations of corruption, fraud, bribery or ethical misconduct. This approach made it possible to focus on cases that generated sustained media attention and were widely represented across different communicative platforms. Cases were selected on the basis of three criteria: (a) significant public

resonance during the period under study, (b) availability of both journalistic coverage and direct statements by the politicians involved, and (c) thematic diversity, allowing for the identification of distinct discursive strategies.

Because the study is conceptual rather than quantitative, the analysis proceeds qualitatively. Examples were chosen for their illustrative force in relation to specific discursive strategies — delegitimisation, euphemisation, rhetorical justification and persecution framing — rather than for their statistical weight. This approach is consistent with the tradition of critical discourse analysis, in which interpretive depth is prioritised over quantitative generalisation (Fairclough, 2003; Van Dijk, 2008).

Critical discourse analysis was used to identify and analyse discursive strategies in the representation of these scandals. Following Fairclough's (2003) approach, particular attention was paid to interdiscursive features, including the interaction between legal, political and media narratives. To examine how meanings are constructed and negotiated, the texts were approached as dynamic communicative processes.

Research Results. The first case examined is that of Senator Bob Menendez, whose public responses to the 2023 indictment illustrate strategies of delegitimisation and procedural reinterpretation. Menendez was found guilty on all 16 counts, including bribery, conspiracy to commit fraud, extortion and conspiracy by a public official to act as an agent of a foreign state. In his public statements, the politician directly challenges the investigation's legitimacy. This rhetoric reached its most vivid manifestation following the verdict in January 2025. As he left the courthouse, he declared: "*President Trump is right – this process is political and corrupt to the core*", thereby appealing to the authority of the current president rather than articulating his own independent position.

This phrasing reflects a clear strategy of delegitimisation, in which legal procedures are presented as politically biased and institutionally unjust. This becomes a particularly relevant strategy in situations where the evidence base for the charges is difficult to refute. In such cases, rather than analysing specific facts, the interpretation shifts from the factual level to the institutional level.

A shift in rhetoric is visible when comparing Menendez's earlier and later statements in his corruption case. After the indictment in September 2023, his public statements began to emphasise external pressure and political targeting. He refers to "*forces behind the scenes*" that, in his view, are attempting to silence him. Menendez also leans on familiar legal principles – above all, the presumption of innocence. The effect is to pull attention away from the actual charges and towards bigger, more abstract questions about fairness in court. Step by step, the conversation stops being about what he allegedly did and starts being about whether the trial itself is legitimate. In other words, he is doing what politicians often do under pressure: reshaping the very frame within which the story is being told, so that the link between accusation and personal responsibility becomes harder to see. For instance, a recorded conversation cited in the indictment, in which co-defendant Wael Hana tells a confidential informant that a payment of \$150,000 was made to purchase a car and an engagement ring for Nadine Menendez in exchange for the senator's intervention in a New Jersey criminal case, reinforces a transactional interpretation of political power, where official actions are discursively linked to material benefits. In this way, legal discourse functions not only as evidence but also as a narrative resource that strengthens media framing of corruption.

A useful contrast can be seen in Trump's rhetoric in the classified documents case. His statements tend to downplay procedural norms while also introducing elements of rhetorical justification. In the interview, he stated: "*There doesn't have to be a process.*" Here, the importance of established institutional procedures is reduced, and bureaucratic rules appear less strictly binding. This kind of phrasing chips away at procedural authority – not by attacking it head-on, but by hinting that the rules are not really binding. Elsewhere, Trump dismisses his own earlier remarks as "Bravado." That single word does a lot of work: what could have been read as an admission is suddenly recast as showmanship, a turn of phrase, nothing to take seriously in court. The legal weight of the statement quietly evaporates. A different strategy – persecution framing – appears in the Eric Adams case. Adams returns again and again to the image of being attacked, building a story in which he is the one under fire. In his public statements, he

emphasises: "*I always knew that if I stood my ground for New Yorkers that I would be a target – and a target I became.*" This phrasing introduces the metaphor of a "*target*," which suggests the speaker is a victim of outside forces. The expression '*stood my ground*' further constructs a heroic self-representation, within which legal prosecution is reframed because of a principled political stance. The repetition of this framing across various statements indicates the formation of a controlled and consistent narrative.

A similar logic of discursive transformation can be seen in the case of Clarence Thomas, where the strategy is based on relational legitimation and euphemisation. In response to ethics concerns, he describes his relationship with a donor in the following terms: "*Harlan and Kathy Crow are among our dearest friends . . . As friends do, we have joined them on many family trips.*" The use of the lexical item "*friends*" shifts the interpretation of material benefits from the legal domain into the sphere of private relations. This allows potentially problematic exchanges to be normalised as elements of personal interaction rather than institutional misconduct. In another statement, he claims: "I was advised that this sort of personal hospitality from close personal friends . . . was not reportable." The expression "*personal hospitality*" functions as a euphemism, replacing legally marked terminology with socially acceptable language. At the same time, the phrase "*I was advised*" introduces a strategy of responsibility diffusion, in which the speaker shifts accountability to an external authority.

Taken together, the four cases show that political scandals should be understood not as fixed events but as dynamic sequences of communicative interaction. The material shows that political actors do not simply respond to accusations but actively reconstruct the meaning of events through discursive strategies such as delegitimation, euphemisation, rhetorical justification, and persecution framing.

Conclusions and Perspectives for Further Research. The generalisation of the analysis allows us to conclude that political scandals should be understood not as isolated events, but as dynamic discursive processes in which meaning is continuously constructed, negotiated and contested. The analysed material demonstrates that media representations of scandals are shaped by rhetorical and stylistic choices, including

evaluative vocabulary, framing mechanisms, and narrative structures that guide interpretation and influence the attribution of responsibility.

Further research could focus on the following areas: First, the empirical material could be expanded by including political scandals from different national and cultural contexts, thereby enabling a comparative analysis of rhetorical and stylistic strategies. Second, further attention should be paid to the role of digital media environments, particularly the influence of algorithms and platform-specific formats on the visibility and interpretation of scandal narratives. Third, more attention should go to audiences. They do not just react to scandals – they take part in shaping them. This happens through their emotions, through political divides, and through the comments and posts they put online.

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