

# Scandals, Media, and Citizenship in Contemporary Argentina

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*This article examines several scandals in 1990s Argentina to discuss the linkages between scandals, media, and citizenship. Suggesting that media publicity is central for scandals to unfold, the article examines a particular arms scandal. An institutional approach that considers the role of different political actors in different scandals shows how and why the media and other institutions contributed to the making and unmaking of scandals. Although scandals offer opportunities for “doing politics by other means,” not all actors are similarly involved. Scandals that dealt with official corruption mainly featured political elites, whereas scandals that followed revelations about human rights violations showed a different pattern: public outrage and citizens’ mobilization. In a political context of “scandal fatigue,” scandals do not necessarily trigger public action or moral crusades. Only those scandals that directly affected groups of citizens and were not simply causes d’État were followed by public demonstrations and intense audience attention.*

**Keywords:** scandals; media; political communication; Argentina

**A few weeks after** a cease-fire was declared in the 1995 Ecuador-Peru war, a scandal broke out in Argentina. Initial revelations that Argentine weapons had been sold to Ecuador contradicted what was publicly known about the involvement of the government in the war. Because Argentina was one of the guarantors of the 1942 peace treaty, the government adopted a neutral position and made efforts to bring both countries to the negotiation table. Revelations suggested, however, that it had armed one of the parties at war. Early denunciations were found to be just the tip of the iceberg. In November 1995, the media revealed that the sale of 75 tons of armaments to Ecuador was actually a “minor business” of a larger operation: the sale of 6,500 tons of weapons to Croatia in 1991. If true, the arms-dealing operations violated the embargo imposed by the United Nations during the war in the Balkans. It was reported that the first shipment aboard a Croatian ship, out of a total of four transporting 200 containers with weapons, left Buenos Aires in September 1991. An unconditional ally of the United States, the Menem government had supported Croatia in the conflict and its struggle for independence and had participated in peacekeeping activities.

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 47 No. 8, April 2004 1072-1098  
DOI: 10.1177/0002764203262278  
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Argentina was the first Latin American country to recognize Croatia's independence. Whether Argentina equipped Croatia with the green light of the U.S. government is not clear. Many observers concluded that such a large-scale and sensitive operation would have been impossible without knowledge and consent from the U.S. State Department, which at the time was interested in strengthening Croatia to prevent Serbia from becoming the region's dominant power (Sanchez & Barón, 1990).

The Ecuadorian and Croatian sagas became part of a complex scandal with plenty of obscure details and topsy-turvy operations. If scandals usually beget other scandals, often rooted in cover-ups of original crimes, the arms scandal has not been the exception. The 1995 blast at an Army ammunition site that killed 7 people, wounded 300, and destroyed several neighborhoods in the town of Rio Tercero was suspected of being linked to the arms scandal. Opposition representative Horacio Viqueira, one of the most outspoken legislators during the scandal, called it sabotage. Speculations were that the explosion was intended to eliminate traces that might have linked the disappearance of weapons from the site to the sale to Croatia. The government affirmed that it was an accident. A number of seemingly unrelated deaths of military personnel and civilian professionals who had worked at the Army arsenal gave more fodder for rumors about the elimination of witnesses "who knew too much" about the arms dealings. Lastly, revelations that Ecuador had actually paid U.S.\$6 million for U.S.\$1.2 million worth of weapons spun another thread of the arms scandal (Santoro, 1998).

The press, some members of the opposition, and the prosecution accused the Ministries of Defense, Economy, and Foreign Affairs and the Armed Forces of planning the sale of weapons and covering up the operations. The Menem administration rejected any responsibility. It offered assorted arguments to explain why Argentine weapons wound up in the battlefields in the Amazonian jungle and in the Balkans. Originally, the government claimed that it did not sell weapons to either Croatia or Ecuador and ignored that Argentine weapons were used in the wars. President Carlos Menem asserted that the previous Alfonsín administration had sold the weapons. Then—Defense Minister Oscar Camilión suggested that the United Kingdom had actually sold weapons that had been taken from Argentine troops who surrendered in the 1982 Malvinas/Falklands war. Cabinet members stated that Fabricaciones Militares, the state-owned arms manufacturing company, sold weapons to Venezuela and Panama through arms dealers and speculated that if the arms wound up in the wrong hands, it was not the government's responsibility but the middlemen's. If illegal operations happened, officials justified, they happened "behind our backs."

Several testimonies and revelations, however, undermined the administration's efforts at stonewalling and detaching itself from the operations. The companies Debrol and Hayton Trade, which were mentioned in official documents as the mediators of the Panama and Venezuela deals, were found to be "rubber-stamp" organizations. The Venezuelan government categorically denied having

purchased Argentine weapons and even threatened to break diplomatic relations. Judge Jorge Urso later concluded that Venezuela never received weapons and that instead, Ecuador did. Critics pointed out that Panama was an unlikely destination for the arms; it has not had an army since the 1989 U.S. invasion, and its police force does not need heavy weapons (van der Kooy, 1996). The newspaper *Clarín* threw a bombshell by publishing a decree signed by President Menem and several ministers approving the sale of weapons to Panama and Venezuela. *Clarín's* coup was followed by revelations that President Menem and four cabinet members signed three other secret decrees authorizing the shipments between 1991 and 1995. It was later made public that Federico Bartlett and Arturo Ossorio Arana, then-ambassadors to Croatia and Peru, respectively, had wired several communiqués to the Foreign Affairs Ministry informing about the presence of Argentine weapons in the Balkans and in the Amazonian war. These revelations disarmed official explanations and expectedly, angered the Menem government, which brought a lawsuit against *Clarín* and insisted in maintaining its innocence.

The arms scandal puts in evidence new media politics in Argentina, namely, the emergence of scandal news and scandal politics. By analyzing the arms scandals against the background of other domestic scandals, the goal of this article is to tease out new dynamics of political communication. In doing so, it also addresses broader themes that underlie the study of scandals in contemporary democracies: What are media scandals? Are scandals moments for public involvement and moral regeneration, as several studies have argued? What if scandals neither bring citizens into public life nor provoke massive public outrage? Are they scandals? Do scandals require scandalized publics? Are all scandals equal?

### MODELS OF SCANDALS

Answering these questions requires that we discern among different types of scandals. Not all scandals are equal. They are about different subjects, trigger different political and media processes, and elicit different public responses. Recent Argentine scandals can be classified in three categories that outline differences as well as elements that they share in common.

The arms scandal fits the category of scandals that essentially deals with official corruption. The majority of scandals that rocked the Menem government, in its 10-year tenure in power dotted with scandals, belong to this category (Waisbord, 1994). The first scandal surfaced in 1991 when the newspaper *Página/12* revealed that then-U.S. Ambassador Terence Todman sent a letter to the government in which he accused a high-powered official of having asked the U.S.-based Swift company for bribes to allow the import of machinery (Verbitsky, 1991). Months later, Amira Yoma (President Menem's sister-in-law and appointments secretary), her husband, and other associates were implicated

in Yomagate, a scandal that involved drug-money laundering (Lejtman, 1993). Shortly thereafter, two close aides to President Menem were implicated in the sale of rotten milk to a federal program for poor children. A scandal brought down the former head of the national social program for senior citizens after she was accused of receiving bribes from favored providers. A television exposé about the building of an oversized airstrip near President Menem's private residence triggered a short-lived scandal that was quickly terminated after the owner of the television station decided to cancel the news program. The IBM–Banco Nación scandal embroiled top executives of Argentina's national bank, with close links to government higher-ups, in getting kickbacks from IBM Argentina for approving a multimillion-dollar contract. Several judges were at the center of many scandals, accused of a host of crimes: protecting smugglers, bribes, extortion, and complicity in police corruption. In 2001, the De la Rúa administration was rocked by the so-called Senate scandal involving a bribe-for-votes scheme implicating senators from the Peronist and Radical parties who were accused of receiving monies in exchange for passing a new labor law.

A second category of scandals foregrounds the violation of human rights: the murder of schoolgirl María Soledad Morales in the northwestern province of Catamarca, the death of Army Private Omar Carrasco, the assassination of news photographer José Luis Cabezas who was investigating shady dealings between a businessman and government officials, and the bombing of the Israeli embassy and the Asociación Mutual Israelitas de la Argentina (AMIA), the headquarters of the Jewish Social Services Center. If scandals require the revelation of corruption, as political scientist Theodore Lowi (1986) stated, these cases certainly fit the bill. Authorities were suspected of involvement in murder, cover-up, and mishandling subsequent investigations.

A third category of scandals involves typically tabloid stories featuring celebrities in trouble. A television diva was suspected of rigging her top-ranked game show. Soccer stars were accused of drug use and child molestation. A former boxing idol was found guilty of homicide.

This taxonomy suggests several characteristics of Argentine scandals. The first category includes the typical scandals involving official crimes and misdemeanors—scandals that carry the suffix *gate*, such as Swiftgate, Yomagate, Milkgate, PAMIGate, and so on. Human rights scandals, instead, have not been dubbed gates. There was no “Catamarcagate,” “Carrascogate,” “Cabezasgate,” or “AMIAgate,” although officials were implicated in wrongdoing (murder, cover-up, mishandling of investigations) in all these scandals. *Gate* seems to be used to denominate only those scandals that fit the Watergate mold, that is, purely *affaires d'état* that involve government corruption and deceit but neither involve ordinary citizens nor deal with human rights violations.

Another striking characteristic is that private companies have not been at the center of the many scandals in the 1990s. Considering that the Argentine economy experienced dramatic changes in that decade, in which dozens of state-owned companies were privatized and corruption was suspected in many cases

of privatization, scandals did not break. Even the IBM–Banco Nación affair, which for the first time put a major global company in the scandal spotlight, has mostly focused on the practices of government officials, internal rivalries, and connections between officials and IBM executives. News about high-politics battles virtually overshadowed business practices.

Sexual scandals have been almost absent. Rumors about “sexcapades” of politicians generate jokes and parodies rather than scandal news. The scandal that involved Judge Norberto Oyarbide might have been the exception. It featured the outing of a homosexual judge and its connection to a gay nightclub in an upper-middle-class Buenos Aires neighborhood. The broadcast of a security video showing Oyarbide half naked with another man in a room unleashed a media frenzy that put male prostitutes and a gay bordello at the center of the scandal and predictable “sex, lies, and videotapes” headlines. It was not just a sexual affair; confrontations among police departments reportedly spurred the scandal. It was alleged that Oyarbide protected police corruption, and that police chiefs, in complicity with the brothel’s owner, blackmailed Oyarbide by leaking information and the video to the press. The Oyarbide scandal suggests that in a homophobic society, heterosexual officials are spared from sexual scandal but homosexual officials might not be, especially when unidentified interests make X-rated videos available for ratings-minded television talk shows and voyeuristic audiences. Why political affairs are more typical than sexual affairs in Argentina deserves close attention, but it goes beyond the goal of this article. Latin American politics are virtually exempt from sexual scandals. If Puritanism is commonly indicated as responsible for sex scandals in the United Kingdom and in the United States, the absence of a Puritan culture in Catholic countries could have the opposite effect. Such an explanation, however, runs the risk of attributing all differences to “culture” without addressing how culture is incorporated into the complex dynamics of scandals. Scandals do not just happen because the religious values of citizens clash with publicized acts. An alternative is to consider arguments that see the post-1960s sex scandals in the United States as the outgrowth of the cultural wars. If such wars inspired the latest batch of sex scandals, the absence of cultural wars in Argentina probably helps us understand why such scandals are rare unless, like Judge Oyarbide’s case, they bring elements of voyeurism and sexual practices that run against dominant cultures.

### **ALL SCANDALS ARE MEDIA SCANDALS**

What is distinctive about different types of scandals? Why are certain events unified under the term scandal? Scandals originate in the publication of information that contradicts what is publicly known about certain individuals and institutions. Scandals bring out duplicitous behavior. The arms scandal unfolded after it was reported that the government had been involved in actions that breached existing laws. Revelations pointed at Argentina’s presumed two-

faced position during the Ecuador-Peru war and the military conflict in the Balkans. Although Argentina apparently followed international rules and declared itself to be neutral, the government violated laws. Scandals raise questions about public reputations, positions, and images that result from bringing out information about misdeeds that had remained private. Scandals start when information comes out about someone having committed an act that contradicts legal and/or moral standards. Such information is no longer privy to a few individuals but becomes widely disseminated. Transgressions that have been known only to participants and accomplices must cross the threshold of publicity to become a scandal. In Argentina, cabinet members were involved in kickbacks and influence peddling, military officers in murder, and sport celebrities in drug use. But those violations became scandals only after the media publicized them.

To put it differently, wrongdoing is not sufficient for scandals to break out; instead, the revelation of corruption is a necessary condition. Scandals broke even though courts later proved that suspects were innocent. Scandals do not need legal proof of corruption but mainly allegations that wrongdoing existed. Making corruption public is the defining element of scandals. In times when publicity is synonymous with mediated publicity, the media wield unmatched power in converting secret acts of wrongdoing into scandalous actions. If it is hard to imagine a scandal without media attention, it is because of the capacity of the media to produce and distribute information that reaches mass audiences.

Sociologist John P. Thompson (1996) has made a persuasive argument about the affinity between scandal and the media. Thompson wrote,

The rise of mediated scandals is to some extent a product of the transformation wrought by the development of communication media. . . . Mediated scandals are intrinsically connected to the new forms of visibility and publicness created by the media. Mediated scandals arise when activities hitherto concealed are disclosed or made visible through the media: the media become the principal mechanism through which corruption is made visible to others. (p. 35)

Thompson offered a first approximation to understand the logic of scandal politics. Media publicity adds the spark that fires the gunpowder of corruption. Scandals presuppose visibility of illegal actions that were invisible, and the media give visibility in today's large-scale societies. This is why all scandals are essentially media scandals.

The Argentine case offers sufficient evidence to support this argument. The rise of scandal politics would have been unthinkable without the growing centrality of the media in Argentine politics. The entering of expressions such as *media politics*, *mediated candidates*, and *mediated justice* into the country's political vocabulary attests to a process in which publicity has lately become associated with media attention (Camps & Pazos, 1999).

The process of "mediatization" has been partially the result of the explosion in the number of radio and television stations and the nationalization of the media. Although most towns and cities had one or two television channels until

the late 1970s, the remarkable growth of cable television has ushered in a different media environment. With a penetration rate of more than 55% of television households, Argentina is the most cabled country in Latin America. Cable systems typically feature 24-hour domestic and regional news services, which have paid relentless attention to different scandals. This has made it possible for Buenos Aires stations to become widely available throughout the Argentine territory and to become the only truly national media. The multiplication of the number of radio stations has also contributed to a different media environment, one that puts in place an echo chamber for scandal news. Popular morning news shows, a staple of both AM and FM radio stations, offer nonstop news and commentary on daily events. Morning newspapers basically set the agenda of television and radio news. Although newspaper consumption has dropped considerably since the early 1980s, dailies still set the agenda for other media.

Since the return of democracy in the 1980s, the growth and nationalization of the media have overshadowed the role of political organizations that historically occupied the center of public life in Argentina as institutions for participation and involvement of citizens in public affairs. Although political parties, unions, and social movements formerly monopolized political life, the media have become the central political stage (Waisbord, 1995). They control access to the fishbowl of public life. They are the networks that link together the public actions of different institutions. They offer outlets for going public. If early views hoped that democracy would strengthen traditional political institutions, the process has arguably fallen short from such expectations and instead, has heightened the centrality of the media as both arena and actor in the waging of political battles.

If arguments about the media having conquered public life in late capitalism have it right, scandals offer evidence of this process. Scandals might be understood along Habermasian lines as a manifestation of the media colonization of the public sphere and a public life that has fallen victim to manufactured publicity. No other institution can compete with the media as arbiters of publicity, deciding what acts of corruption and subsequent developments merit public attention. No public space can successfully compete with the media as the ringmaster of scandals. Societies come to know about the existence of scandals through the media.

Scandals might also illustrate views that we live in a postmodern world in which mediated signs have replaced (political) reality and that politics has moved from traditional to mediated agoras. Scandals appear to us as media events, as conclusive evidence that politics happens in mediated spaces and that the media, to use Murray Edelman's (1988) expression, construct the "political spectacles" of our time. After all, scandals are fundamentally experienced, and become remembered, as media images. John Dean during his congressional deposition and Richard Nixon saluting from the helicopter after resigning are Watergate; Oliver North raising his hand before a congressional committee and Ronald Reagan affirming not remembering conversations are the Iran-Contra

scandals; Clinton wagging his finger, denying sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, and their embrace during one of the president's public appearances are Zippergate. In Argentina, images of Sister Martha Pelloni (principal of the school María Soledad Morales attended and organizer of the "marches of silence"), Luis Tula and Guillermo Luque (found guilty of the murder), and the marches of silence became symbols of the scandal. Images of Amira Yoma and her fugitive husband turned into the symbol of Yomagate. A photograph of José Luis Cabezas plastered everywhere, media appearances of Alfredo Yabrán (the businessman suspected of being the intellectual author of the Cabezas murder), and images of news photographers marching in the streets and raising their cameras in remembrance of their murdered colleague became identifiers of the scandal.

Publicity is what counts in scandals. Media inattention is tantamount to symbolic annihilation. Media images forge perceptions about the existence of scandals. Images of prosecutors and judges talking to reporters, witnesses scurrying through throngs of onlookers and camera crews, suspects sitting in congressional chambers, man-in-the-street interviews testing public reactions, and non-stop media appearances of commentators and pundits, as semioticians would have it, are signs of scandals. Headlines about the decisions of congressional committees and judges, reports and columns on positions of actors involved, and photos of public mobilizations also connote scandals.

Media coverage is the barometer that indicates the existence (or absence) of a scandal. If splashed in headlines, scandals seem present and relevant; if buried inside or ignored, scandals may be considered over. We know that a scandal may be on the verge of extinction when it is no longer front-page news and images of scandals become less frequent or disappear. Media absence determines that scandals may be moving into another phase, a minor footnote in historical records or enshrined in a country's political memory. Media presence suggests that moribund scandals might be resurrecting. Scandals that refuse to die are precisely those that may not only persist in prosecutors' investigations but also that the media bring back to public attention.

The media give life to scandals in many ways. Media revelations are often at the genesis of scandals. Although the exact date of the birth of the arms scandal is a matter of contention between the two leading newspapers, it is beyond doubt that a news story gave the initial push for the scandal. *La Nación* claims to have given birth to the scandal because it published a story on February 26, 1995, that revealed that there were suspicions in Peru that Ecuador had received Argentine weapons. The story did not generate much reaction, and the newspaper abandoned the story in subsequent days. *Clarín's* version is that the scandal gained momentum only after the paper reported on March 6th, 1995, that Argentina sold weapons to Ecuador.

*Clarín's* story prompted attorney Ricardo Monner Sans to bring a lawsuit against the government. Neither journalists nor the plaintiff expected early denunciations and the lawsuit to trigger a full-fledged scandal, however. They



did not anticipate that alleged crimes would involve powerful cabinet members and Army hierarchies. They had little idea about the dimensions of the operation and little suspected that initial revelations were sitting on top of a complex operation. Nor was it the first denunciation that affected the government. A record of numerous denunciations involving government officials that had previously run into dead ends, dissuaded them from having hopes about the arms case being different. Nor did Congress swiftly react to the revelations and order wide-ranging investigations. Against the background of previous scandals that prosecutors failed to investigate, judges threw out and manipulated causes, the government stacked the Supreme Court, and the Peronist-controlled Comisión de Juicio Político in Congress rejected petitions for investigations and hearings; thus, there were no grounds for thinking that a scandal would unfold.

Although important, exposés and investigative reports might not be the media's main contribution to fanning the flames of scandals. It is not unusual for muckrakers to rake prosecutors' probes rather than to conduct independent investigations according to the orthodoxy of investigative journalism or to take the backseat after prosecutors and congressional investigations take the lead.<sup>1</sup>

Newspapers also contribute to scandals by setting the political temperature; editorials that exonerate or call authorities to resign indicate the position of influential voices. Although their impact might be limited among general readers, editorials, particularly during political crises, are mandatory reading for elites. It would be hard to conclude that *Clarín's* call for the resignation of then-Defense Minister Oscar Camilión was directly responsible for bringing him down a few weeks later, but coming from Argentina's largest and most influential daily, it should not be ignored as the expression of powerful actors. *Clarín's* position was particularly telling considering that Camilión was formerly linked to the newspaper as a member of the Movimiento de Integración y Desarrollo, the party that had a powerful influence on the paper for decades.

Aside from investigations and editorials, the media fundamentally inject life into a scandal by making visible the actions and the words of different actors involved in a scandal. All scandals require the media to put the spotlight on individuals and processes. Media inattention unplugs the oxygen tank that scandals need to survive. So when cameras cover prosecutors and judges waving or talking to reporters, congressional hearings are fully televised or short snippets are included in newscasts, morning radio shows discuss and dissect recent developments, and rallies and vigils are broadcast, the media make scandals real.

Without exposure in the Buenos Aires media, neither the murder of school-girl María Soledad Morales in Catamarca nor the death of Army Private Omar Carrasco in Neuquén would have become full-fledged scandals. The provincial media historically have been close to local powers involved in the murders. Nor do they have the reach of metropolitan news organizations. It was only after the latter put attention on the murders, subsequent investigations, and public mobilizations that the dynamics of the scandals deeply changed. The scandal about the murder of news photographer Cabezas was different. The murder was likely

to receive a great deal of media attention because it literally hit home for journalists and news organizations. Already sensitive about antipress violence in the aftermath of the disappearance of 90 reporters during the last military dictatorship and more than 100 registered attacks during the 1990s, journalists came together to condemn the murder and demand justice. For them, it was an attack on human rights and press freedom, evidence of the escalation of antipress attacks, and a macabre reminder of the worst years of state repression.

The importance of the media in the life of scandals becomes apparent in the symbolic politics waged to shape public opinion. Scandals, as sociologists Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang (1983) have argued, are “battles for public opinion.” Symbols are key in the attempt to sway public opinion during scandals (Andersen, 1992; Fried, 1997). Colonel Egberto Gonzalez de la Vega, who was charged in the arms scandal, knew that symbolic politics were at play when he decided to testify without military uniform, leaving the Army “out of the scandal,” as the press remarked. Symbolic politics were also at play when General Martín Balza opted, instead, to wear his uniform when he gave his testimony to Congress.

Regardless of attire and other elements that communicate institutional belonging and cultural meaning, individuals themselves become symbols of corruption when under the media spotlight. This is why the Menem administration has made efforts to dissuade Congress from calling cabinet members to testify in different causes. Media visibility, particularly in settings where scandals unfold (courtrooms, congressional chambers), immediately links individuals (and administrations) to a scandal. Businessman Alfredo Yabrán (“Yabrán y Noticias: Una relación llena de conflictos” [“Yabrán and Noticias: A Relationship Full of Conflicts”], 1997), perfectly knew this principle of scandal politics when he warned journalists, “Taking a picture of me is like shooting me in the forehead.” Yabrán’s comments correctly recognized that media publicity rapidly bridges the distance between being an anonymous citizen and the symbol of scandal. An exasperated President Menem, whose administration was widely seen as having close contacts to Yabrán, made a similar assumption when he lashed out, “The media have condemned Yabrán.” Only after the media relentlessly put attention on Yabrán, especially after he was suspected to have ordered the murder of Cabezas, did he become synonymous with the scandal. Likewise, former members of the Menem administration who had been accused of corruption amid high-profile scandals, arguably, became enshrined in the government’s “hall of shame” even though most of them were never found guilty of any crime (“El general en su laberinto” [“The General in His Labyrinth”], 1998).

Aware that media publicity is the surest shortcut between anonymity and scandal, forces interested in keeping a scandal alive fear that a scandal might fall media silent. Prosecutors leak information to friendly journalists and news organizations with the hope that their own investigations and decisions would become public. Parties interested in gaining political advantage want adversaries embroiled in wrongdoing to be in the media spotlight as much as possible.

Televised hearings and other media events might simultaneously raise the visibility of adversaries as wrongdoers and their own as corruption busters. This is why high-ranking government officials who are summoned to testify, if unsuccessful in invoking immunity, try to persuade prosecutors to accept written depositions and congressional committees to keep cameras out of hearings. President Menem, as witness, chose to send a written deposition to prosecutor Stornelli. Even a short trip to prosecutors' offices, regardless of legal consequences, is likely to attract a media frenzy that could indelibly link an individual to a scandal. Television broadcasts of congressional hearings may also have a similar effect. Consequently, keeping a low profile, which essentially means avoiding or having sporadic media appearances, might lower the chances of being publicly pegged to scandals.

Even when scandals disappear from the media's radar, and images of prosecutors and accused individuals become far and few, it is still the media that warn readers that a scandal has not died and that it survives in judicial investigations. Many scandals do continue even after cameras stop hounding prosecutors and witnesses, experts on the case vanish from television screens, and headlines show no traces of them. But when scandals have an afterlife beyond the media, it is still the media that have to remind citizens that scandals have not died. We may ignore them, the media tell us, but they are not gone.

In summary, because all scandals are media scandals, they offer evidence to support scholarly views that the media are the only institution endowed with the power to confer life in media-saturated societies, and that the reality of scandals becomes what the media tell us about it.

### **PUBLICITY AND THE INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF SCANDALS**

The adoption of a media-centered approach to understanding scandals has important shortcomings, however. It runs the risk of being insufficiently political, of subsuming all scandals to media operations and decisions without addressing the politics that generate events and processes for media coverage. It minimizes the actions of a myriad of institutions that make scandals possible. There is no question that Congress, the judiciary, and mobilized publics depend and crave media attention to gain wide presence during scandals, but the media are not self-sufficient in generating scandal stories.

Consider the evolution of the arms scandal. Judging from its media presence, the arms scandal has not maintained a regular pace since its beginning. It had a sputtering development, with high- and low-intensity media moments. If we take front-page news about the scandal, the landscape of media attention shows many peaks and prolonged valleys. Intrigued about this seesaw media pattern, I asked journalists, politicians, and the prosecutor who have investigated the denunciations, "What were the key moments of the arms scandal between 1995

and 1998?” Invariably, they pointed to the same events. Some were media exposés, such as the publication of a telegram in which Ambassador Ossorio Arana told the Foreign Affairs Ministry about the presence of Argentine weapons in the Ecuador-Peru war. Other events were the coverage of actors investigating the scandal, such as the decision of prosecutor Carlos Stornelli to charge 22 officials with illicit association, and the public testimony given to Congress by Labor Minister Erman Gonzalez (who was defense minister at the time the weapons were presumably sold to Croatia). Those were media frenzies but certainly required other actors to be possible.

Here I suggest that scandals are emergent forms of political warfare that depending on the type of scandal, feature different publics at battle. What the recent succession of scandals suggests is new forms of political action and communication in Argentine democracy. Scandals represent the convergence of different interests and actions rather than the isolated actions of one institution or individual. The figure of lone scandalmongers that single-handedly put in motion and sustain scandals makes sense only in conspiratorial minds and in views that attribute to the media an all-powerful role, ignoring that scandals require a certain institutional architecture (see Lyons, 1996). The dynamics of scandals are institutionally located. Consequently, the analysis requires the placement of a network of institutions at the center. Individuals and individual institutions, as discussed below, do make a difference by spilling information and investigating allegations. In the arms scandal, broken loyalties (military officers who had been snubbed at the time of promotion decisions and civilian personnel of Fabricaciones Militares) seeded the grounds for information leaks. But without institutions receptive to indiscretions and legal frameworks that facilitate the publication of secret affairs, the intentions and actions of single individuals and organizations run against difficult hurdles. This is why scandals express the workings of “scandal machines” (Garment, 1991). For the wheels of scandal to run for a long time, one institution pouring gas into the machine is not sufficient. A scandal is likely to have a short ride if only one institution or individual pumps gas.

What actors use scandals to do “politics by other means” (Ginsberg & Shefter, 1990)? Are elites and ordinary citizens equally active? Who is at the center of scandals? Answers to these questions depend on the type of scandal. The Argentine cases suggest that elites are the protagonists of scandals that deal with official corruption, and scandals that deal with civil rights violations feature elites and citizens. Political elites are at the center of high-politics scandals as information leakers as well as carriers and targets of investigations and include presidential aides, cabinet members, representatives, military commanders, and judges. Citizens rarely, if ever, enter such scandals. None of the stories on the arms scandals analyzed in *Clarín* and *La Nación* since 1995 mention the public, even strategically by quoting or featuring opinion polls that could have legitimized the work of journalists.

Human rights scandals are different. Elites are present, but ordinary citizens are also present as sources of information and subjects of news. These scandals feature ordinary people as victims at the center of the story (a schoolgirl, an Army private, a news photographer, and employees who died in bombings) and as witnesses, sufferers, and participants in public mobilizations. Officials do not appear involved in influence peddling and kickbacks but as perpetrators of human rights violations and orchestrators of cover-ups.

In contrast to gate-like scandals, human rights scandals generated intense and prolonged public mobilizations. They were the catalysts for the emergence of budding social movements concerned with the defense of civil rights. Heirs to the discourse of human rights organizations during the antidictatorial struggles in the 1970s and 1980s (such as the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo), those movements similarly raised issues of truth and justice. Their forms of public mobilization and display, marches of silence, and candlelight vigils to demand investigation and justice also showed the influence of human rights organizations. The latter's legacy was also visible in the central place that the issue of memory had during those scandals. The roadside place where the body of María Soledad Morales was found became a makeshift memorial where citizens congregated in remembrance of the murder. (It was reported that it had more visitors than the sanctuary of the local Virgin.) "Don't forget Cabezas" became the rallying cry of journalists after the Cabezas murder. In the aftermath of the bombings of Jewish institutions, the organization Memoria Activa was formed to remember the attacks. And like human rights struggles, women had a central role in the organization of citizens, and families and young people participated in mobilization efforts.

Scandals that deal with official corruption, such as the arms scandal, almost inevitably originate in elite machinations. Only elites are likely to have sensitive information about state secrets and illegal operations. Only elites have fluid access to newsrooms and are capable of attracting reporters' curiosity. Ordinary citizens are unlikely to be responsible for setting high-politics scandals in motion. The power of elites lies in their power as newsmakers; citizens, in contrast, are mostly powerless in getting media attention (Bennett, 1986). Presidents, cabinet members, judges, prosecutors, and members of Congress not only are the subjects of news but also provide raw information to newsrooms to manufacture news. The arms scandal shows that newsmakers not only attract media attention but they might also direct it to specific transgressions in which they are interested.

Reporters have observed that because neither Congress nor the judiciary was particularly active during 1996 and 1997, there was less news about the arms scandal. The decisions of prosecutor Carlos Stornelli to launch an all-out investigation in March 1998 and of some members of the opposition to carry further investigations put the wind behind the sail of the scandal and consequently, more news was available. A sample of front pages twice a week in *Clarín* and *La Nación*, Argentina's most influential dailies, sheds evidence in support of this

conclusion. After having received a great deal of media attention in late 1995 and early 1996, particularly during the events that led to the resignation of then–Defense Minister Oscar Camilión, the scandal as news story virtually vanished. The arms scandal was in the headlines only once during 1997. The Cabezas/Yabrán scandal, and to a lesser degree the AMIA investigation, the María Soledad Morales trial, and other minor affairs were regular scandalous news. The arms scandal found a new media life in mid-1998.

What sustained the arms scandal during its most intense phases was the conformation of a three-legged institutional structure integrated by the judiciary, Congress, and the media. Scandals might not necessarily need to enter the public conversation to have a long life, as media scholar Elizabeth Bird (1996) suggested. Except for a few sporadic moments, the arms scandal has not dominated public discussions, but different powerful actors remained interested enough to keep it alive. Although prosecutors did not aggressively pursue charges and were suspected of mishandling investigations and protecting suspects in other scandals, prosecutor Carlos Stornelli has carried the investigation forward and openly confronted General Balza and the government. Stornelli was the target of the president's ire and attempts to isolate and/or remove him, particularly after he charged several officials with illicit association in October 1998. Journalists, some legislators, most federal prosecutors, and the three members of the Second Federal Chamber, where the case is located, strongly supported him.

The work of a few representatives of the Unión Cívica Radical and the Frepaso, the two leading opposition parties in Congress, was important too. They repeatedly called attention to the scandals and made calls for wide-ranging hearings. Their efforts ran against the Peronist-dominated Congress that had stonewalled proposals for hearings. The opposition has not solidly rallied behind the petition for investigations, however. Some observers speculate that members of the opposition, convinced that they would win the 1999 presidential elections, were disinclined to wage an all-out investigation and instead, opted to keep the issue on the political back burner. One observer was quoted as saying that “it's easier that everything remains the same. . . . Nobody wants to make a decision over such a sensitive matter like who will succeed [Armed Forces Chief] Balza in an election year” (“La herencia del Gral. Balza” [“Gen. Balza's Legacy”], 1998). The actions and calls made by some representatives to fully investigate the charges met lukewarm support and indifference from prominent fellow party members. Some representatives raised suspicions about the role of Army General Balza in the operations, whereas others rushed to his defense and supported him during his deposition in Congress. Former President Raul Alfonsín advised fellow party representatives that “he's the best thing the government has. Take care of him” (“1989-1999: El libro negro de la corrupción” [“1989-1999: The Black Book of Corruption”], 1998). The timing of intra-Peronist battles also dictated the tempo of the investigations. Open confrontations between President Menem and Governor Eduardo Duhalde over the nomination of candidates for the 1999 presidential ticket have trickled down

to Congress. Duhalde loyalists repeatedly sent threatening signals, warning Menemistas that if their leader was not at the top of the ticket, they would push for wide congressional hearings (which would certainly embarrass Menem's cabinet members). The Comisión de Juicio Político was formed by 27 members: 8 Menemistas, 6 Duhaldistas, 11 from the opposition, and 2 independents. The government had a majority only with the support of Duhalde's bloc.

### A JOURNALIST'S "HELL OF A STORY"

The combined efforts of members of Congress and the judiciary were key to prolonging the life of a scandal that many times, seemed like it would go away. Most of their efforts were devoted not just to investigations but also to media publicity of alleged crimes. Without the press, the scandal would have died long ago.

Why did media organizations chase the story? In Argentina, where publishers have been inseparable from larger political battles and exercised unmistakable influence, editorial politics are always suspected of prompting news companies to cover specific stories about wrongdoing (Waisbord, 2000). But understanding the actual motives that prompt newspapers and newscasts to follow or ignore scandals is not easy. The political and journalistic grapevines are full of speculations about why certain news organizations stress or downplay scandals. From personal vendettas to business dealings, from political sympathies to arm-twisting politics, the range of speculations is huge. It is almost impossible to find solid evidence to account for dissimilar interests and positions among news organizations, however.

What is remarkable about the arms scandal is that unlike previous scandals in which one newspaper "owned" a story and carried out much of the investigation, the three most influential Buenos Aires newspapers have covered the story. Moreover, they have maintained attention on the scandal for a long period of time. *Clarín* turned into the flag bearer of the scandal by throwing several punches at the government and giving ample space. After having extensively covered the murder of Omar Carrasco, a scandal that also shook military hierarchies, *La Nación* devoted substantial coverage to the arms scandal. *La Nación* Editor Jorge Urien Berri observed that the story was of great interest to military personnel and lawyers, some of the newspaper's core readership. *Página/12* also covered the scandal, but it confronted several problems. Working for a newspaper that repeatedly pounded on the government, the Armed Forces, and the judiciary, reporters lacked fluid contacts with sources in those institutions that would have offered exclusive information. Moreover, by the time *Página/12* found its niche, *Clarín* and *La Nación* had already crowded the field of news coverage. The arms scandal was unlike previous scandals in which *Página/12* was the leading and often, the solitary newspaper in search of sensitive information.

Editorial agendas, however, do not entirely explain why news organizations cover news scandals. Scandal stories also need to be journalistically appealing. They need to have elements that fit the conventions of newsrooms and appeal to the culture of journalism. If a scandal is a hell of a story, as it has been observed (Bird, 1996), it is above all a journalist's hell of a story.

News about official wrongdoing enjoys a substantial advantage over other news about wrongdoing because it fits standard journalistic principles about the newsworthiness of official actions. The arms scandal involves a coterie of officials that fit the *All the President's Men* cast of characters. If cabinet members, ambassadors and foreign attaches, military chiefs, and members of the judiciary and Congress are typically the subjects of news, they are more so when they are in trouble, fire accusations, offer justifications, contradict themselves, are caught red-handed, and so on.

Scandal news is not like any other news. Few other news stories have a similar capacity to induce adrenaline rushes in newsrooms and send journalists into a frenzy. Reporters frantically anticipate the possibility of finding juicy tidbits and editors reshuffle resources and news holes. The pulse of newsrooms goes faster particularly on days when what newsrooms deem to be explosive revelations are publicized. Scandals offer plenty of opportunities to drop bombshells as testimony of good reporting. Scandal news offers the opportunity to achieve professional notoriety. For a journalistic culture that prizes knocking down cabinet members and presidents as measures of professional achievement, the arms scandal has been obviously attractive. It embroils several ministers and high-ranking military officers in a web of corruption and offers the latent possibility of high-impact journalistic coups.

Scandal news is, like war coverage or investigative stories, a kind of news that offers an opportunity for a reporter to make a name for himself or herself. Professional credentials may be determined by how colleagues evaluate someone's performance in a high-profile scandal story. Professional names can be made (or unmade) with the coverage of scandal news. The arms scandal was to *Clarín's* Daniel Santoro what Watergate was to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. His coverage earned him the Rey de España award, one of the most prestigious awards for journalists in the Spanish-speaking world that is granted annually by King of Spain Juan Carlos I. It definitely catapulted him higher in the world of Argentine journalism. What fellow colleagues consider a well-done job might become the aura that follows reporters wherever they go. They might become forever associated with coverage of one scandal.

Scandals not only stroke professional egos but also certify credentials. Among journalists, such concerns are more present than whether scandal stories reap higher sales and ratings for their employers. In Argentine newsrooms that are increasingly governed by the culture of professional journalism, prestige and monetary incentives have recently become more important (Waisbord, 2000). Still, journalists need to be mindful of editorial lines and reactions to stories among the upper brass. Reporters who covered the arms scandal often



had to balance their interest in the story with editorial positions, carving out spaces and pushing boundaries to get stories through, knowing that their organizations were under continuous pressure from identified and unidentified interests to kill the stories.

The arms scandal has offered sufficient elements to be a journalist's dream story, particularly for those immersed in military topics. It was about intrigue, backstabbing, double-crossing, and wrongdoing in high places. It featured a cast lifted out of a John Le Carre potboiler: high government officials, military officials, intelligence agents, and arms dealers involved in a complex operation in which tons of arms and millions of dollars changed hands. It has been a circuitous story that left an extensive paper trail including contracts, presidential decrees, documents about ghost companies, and reports by intelligence services in Argentina, Croatia, Ecuador, and Peru. As a thriller without a known finale, the scandal had unexpected twists that made it journalistically irresistible. What started as an investigation about an apparently small arms-dealing operation turned into a far-reaching scandal.

The publication of a smoking gun, a presidential decree authorizing the sale of weapons, also stimulated journalistic interest. Secret documents that peg President Menem to the arms dealings, even though he ducked any responsibility, have given the scandal a unique twist. No hard evidence linking him to alleged crimes of members of his administration was published in previous scandals. Instead, the availability of documents with his signature have fed the rumor mill and speculations about, to paraphrase one of Watergate's for-the-history-books phrases, whether the president knew and when he knew.

The fact that the scandal has been peppered with high-noon political drama provided more attractive elements. Resignations and congressional hearings are not just news events but also offer attractive news hooks. Former Defense Minister Oscar Camilión and Air Force Commander Juan Paulik resigned in 1996 after Judge Urso charged them with malfeasance. Former Fabricaciones Militares executives Luis Sarlenga and Edberto González de la Vega were criminally processed. Prosecutor Stornelli called to testify two other ministers, Foreign Affairs Minister Guido Di Tella and Labor Minister (defense minister at the time the weapons were sold to Croatia) Erman Gonzalez. Army Commander Martín Balza has been in the eye of the scandal's hurricane. Stornelli has charged him with illicit association, misappropriation of weapons, and altering public documents. The prosecutor concluded that Balza could not have ignored that Army weapons were missing and wound up in countries at war. Colonel Diego Palleros, the head of the arms-dealing company Hayton Trade, was charged and then fled to South Africa. After a 2-year silence, his declaration to a *Clarín* reporter that "the government knew about the sale [of weapons]," not only reverberated in political circles but also found newsrooms salivating for more shocking statements.

If all these elements were not sufficient to make the Pavlovian newsrooms drool, persistent rumors about the linkages between several deaths and the

scandal were the cherry on top of a mouthwatering story. Foul play was suspected in the explosion of the Rio Tercero ammunition site in November 1995 (Goodbar, 1998; Kollman, 1998). The October 1996 crash of the helicopter carrying former Fabricaciones Militares director General Juan Carlos Andreoli and the former military attaché in Lima (who had notified military authorities about the existence of Argentine weapons in the Ecuador-Peru war) spurred rumors (Wornat, 1998). The heart attacks that killed Vicente Bruzza and Francisco Callejas, both of whom were civilian technicians at the Army arsenal that exploded, also fueled speculations. And in the context of previous and subsequent suicides that the press skeptically received, the death of Navy Captain Horacio Estrada in August 1998 was also followed by a flurry of gossip and conspiracy theories (Amato, 1998). Fugitive arms dealer Colonel Diego Palleros had mentioned Estrada as someone who was familiar with the operations. Officially declared a suicide, the press smelled a rat and second-guessed the coroner. It reported that the gun was in his right hand (Estrada was left-handed) and that according to several testimonies of relatives and friends, Estrada had not seem particularly distressed or shown suicidal tendencies. Pornographic videos and a bottle of champagne found in Estrada's apartment added yellow color to a story made in "tabloidland."

### **SO MANY DENUNCIATIONS, SO LITTLE OUTRAGE**

The arms scandal has been a great story for journalism. A journalist's hell of a story might perfectly be the public's yawn, however. What got Argentine journalists rubbing hands together with anticipation did not seem to excite citizens. What for journalists might be momentous moments in the life of the republic and high peaks in the history of the press, for citizens might be media static.

Journalists admit that the arms story has not been a best seller or a subject of intense public conversation. Although the scandal has put in evidence inner dynamics in the functioning of political power and brought plenty of sensational elements to satisfy diverse media appetites, it has not elicited wide attention, let alone electrified the public. It basically remained, journalists have observed, a story for reporters—too much of an insider's story. Readers have not gathered around newsstands anxiously waiting for breaking news, and the scandal has not made ratings go through the roof.

Several indicators of public opinion confirm such impressions. The arms scandal has been a different priority in the minds of journalists and in the public mind. Opinion polls show that citizens did not seem particularly interested in the scandal. Public mobilizations, a traditional form of expression of public opinion in Argentine politics, have not taken place. Unlike human rights scandals, in which rallies and vigils were organized and deeply affected the course of the scandals, citizens did not take to the streets to petition investigation and

resignations. Neither political parties nor other political and civic associations have urged citizens to mobilize. Nor have citizens inundated representatives with letters and phone calls to demand specific actions. Granted, such forms of public action are still rare in Argentine politics, but even minimal changes could have suggested growing public interest. In sum, there have not been any visible signs that suggest that the arms scandals struck a chord that prompted public interest and actions. If citizens were outraged at the revelations, they kept their discontent private.

Is the seeming lack of public interest in the arms scandal a sign of political apathy, of citizens absorbed in private pursuits rather than in public life? The fact that the arms scandal has not visibly irritated the public can hardly be considered conclusive evidence of an apathetic public. By the same measure, the mobilization of thousands of citizens during the scandals that unfolded after the murders of María Soledad Morales, Omar Carrasco, and José Luis Cabezas and the bombings of the Israeli embassy and the headquarters of the Jewish Social Services Center suggest the opposite: a highly active and participatory citizenry that takes action and manifests opinions through different forms of public display.

Neither set of cases offers grounds to conclude that citizens are passive or citizens are active. Instead of reaching for blanket conclusions, it is necessary to analyze why specific scandals spark (or fail to spark) public interest and action and what public chords they strike. Scandals need to be analyzed on two levels: as occasions for citizenship (audiences-as-citizens) and as media events (citizens-as-audiences). Let me turn to consider these levels in the remainder of this article.

### “SCANDAL FATIGUE”

As a news story that reflects aspects of the state of Argentine democracy, the arms scandal has not evinced much excitement among audiences-as-citizens. The scandal re-treaded the same ground already tilled by a long list of scandals about government corruption: officials abuse public positions for private gain. What is new about the arms scandal that Argentines have not heard before? In the aftermath of scandals that have hammered the idea that officials line their pockets with public monies, possibly the public grew jaded and lost enthusiasm in scandalous news. Considering that large segments of the public seem convinced, as opinion polls reflect, that politicians are corrupt, should it be surprising that scandals about newly discovered webs of corruption hardly scandalize anyone (“Encuesta de Gallup: El 96% de los argentinos cree que la corrupción es ‘elevada’” [“Gallup Poll: 96% of Argentines Believe That Corruption Is ‘High’”], 1997)? Scandals require the publicity of information that contradicts widely held ideas about individuals; the clash between previous and new opinions breeds scandalous reactions. So, unless stories are about someone who was

widely perceived to be honest and reputable, should citizens be scandalized when media stories confirm what they already suspect?

In Argentina, mediated corruption has become so ubiquitous that it hardly scandalizes large segments of the public. Its effect, or lack thereof, can be understood along the lines of Keith Tester's (1994) argument about the incapacity of the media to build a sense of moral solidarity because terrible events are so visible on television screens and in newspapers that audiences are desensitized. Tester finds improbable philosopher Richard Rorty's position that the media can successfully operate as a channel for the transmission of moral solidarity. Through the media, millions of citizens are familiar with the calamities that affect fellow humans but are seemingly unsusceptible to so much suffering. The repetition of images of human tragedies and the spectacularization of people's suffering strips them from any moral significance. What apparently is morally important becomes debased of any moral power. More visibility makes such images less likely to elicit compassionate feelings. Inundated by images of famine, devastation, and war, citizens do not make a leap to develop moral bonds with other human beings. The media do not motivate people to act; instead, it has an anesthetic effect. The result is scandal fatigue, a permanent sense of *déjà vu* among overstimulated and bored audiences inattentive to new images of suffering.

Tester (1994) provided elements to understand the inability of scandals to stir citizens' blood. The silence during the arms scandal suggests scandal fatigue among Argentines. It has not visibly enraged vast numbers of the public, partially because previous scandals might have been too successful at instilling the sentiment that corruption is widespread. How can new scandals shake up citizens seemingly numb by ceaseless revelations? The sedimentation of scandals telling similar stories and raising identical morality tales results in the banalization of corruption. Because it is so common, according to the media, it has become banal, hardly a matter of public outrage.

A scenario of scandal fatigue raises questions about the place of morality in scandals. Scandals, we are told, are basically about morality, about moral lapses, about individuals who have crossed expected ethical boundaries and violated shared moral standards (Thompson, 2000). Political scientist Carolyn Fink (1996) wrote, "Scandal is the shorthand for publicized behaviors by a politician that are in conflict with society's moral standards" (p. 3). Scandals feature outraged publics that find certain behaviors morally offensive. Read through a Durkheimian glass, they are moments of social cohesion and regeneration. By outing and stigmatizing deviant behavior and purging corrupt individuals from the political system, scandals reinforce social mores and reaffirm the social order. Scholars Andrei Markovits and Mark Silverstein (1986) offered a clear example of this view:

Invariably, scandals serve to strengthen the community's *conscience collective*. In addition to reaffirming and ultimately strengthening the bonds of a common

morality, scandals help to create the scapegoats, enemies and pariahs needed by all communities. . . . The ritual of scandal and punishment provides social systems with a means for self-legitimization and purification. Scandals, in short, constitute an important opportunity for reaffirming the social order. (p. 5)

If citizens are not always revolted (or express such feelings publicly), can scandals be interpreted as moments for social integration? A proposition central to media audience studies offers an alternate way to deal with this question: The meaning of the text is not identical to the meaning that audiences draw from texts. Because audience reception is selective and multiple interpretations are possible, meaning lies in the unique engagement between audiences and texts. Considered as media events, scandals also offer separated textual and audience levels. The texts of scandals might outline moral boundaries, but audiences might get a quite different message. Newspaper exposés or speeches lambasting corruption do offer neat lessons in morality, drawing clear boundaries between right and wrong. The language of outrage that permeates media exposés does not invariably translate into outraged publics, however (Protess, Cook, Gordon, & Ettema, 1991). The lessons that different publics draw from scandals might be completely different. They might not draw any at all or become deeply involved. They might be mostly inattentive to stories and pay only perfunctory attention to developments. They might be unmoved by loud expressions of outrage. They might find reported behaviors morally reprehensible but decide to keep feelings private.

So, particularly in the context of scandal fatigue, if diverse publics react differently to scandals, should scandals be necessarily interpreted as civic teachings in morality and engines of social integration? If citizens seem desensitized to the arms scandal, does scandal news effectively outline moral boundaries and reaffirm ethical standards? If we take Durkheim's theory, we might conclude that the cascade of scandals in contemporary Argentina, scandals that gobble each other up and rarely find closure, is the expression of a society deeply concerned about morality and amid a process of moral regeneration. But the silence of citizens during gate scandals (such as the arms scandal), widespread feelings of nihilism, and the lack of legitimacy of political institutions hardly indicate moral regeneration in progress. Such scandals suggest, instead, the inclination among political elites to resort to media politics to battle each other out rather than a society deeply concerned with morality. And politics, rather than moral crusading and ethical cleansing, drive elites to push and sustain scandals.

It would be a mistake, however, to draw the opposite conclusion: that moral laxness dominates and a state of postmorality is pervasive. Human rights scandals offer evidence that citizens find certain acts morally objectionable and make their outrage public by mobilizing in demand of truth and justice. Citizens seem to recover from scandal fatigue when they feel that certain acts affect them. This is why different publics responded so passionately to news about the

violation of human rights and at best, paid casual attention to the arms scandal. Human rights–related scandals created and/or directly touched existing constituencies and featured many “participatory moments” (Thelen, 1996).

The murder of María Soledad Morales initially touched relatives and schoolmates but later, it evolved into an issue that galvanized large sectors of the population who marched in thousands. María Soledad Morales, as she became nationally known, could have been anyone’s daughter dreaming of becoming a model and involved with a married man. In a country where the abuse of Army privates are legendary, the death of Omar Carrasco was followed by demonstrations near the military garrison where his body was found as well as in the rest of the country. He could have been anyone’s son or friend abused by Army authorities. News about the cold-blooded murder of news photographer José Luis Cabezas spread like brushfire in newsrooms sensitive to endless episodes of antipress violence and ignited massive demonstrations and actions by journalists. For journalists, the brutal murder of a colleague meant that all were targets; banners at rallies read “We are all Cabezas.” And against the background of a long history of anti-Semitic acts, the bombings of the Israeli embassy and the Jewish Social Services Center were one-two punches that directly went to the heart of the Jewish community. The bombings left no doubt that the Jewish community was (and remained) the intended victim. Barricades cordoning off Jewish institutions (schools, yeshivas, temples) to minimize the possibility of car bombs became ominous reminders of a community under siege.

The arms scandal has neither directly affected a community of citizens nor generated a constituency. The murders of María Soledad Morales, Omar Carrasco, José Luis Cabezas, and hundreds of people at the bombings, instead, were both personal tragedies for relatives, friends, colleagues, and schoolmates and issues of significance, proximity, and currency to citizens who mobilized to demand justice. The murders were not old stories but current events that resonated with the lives of ordinary people and citizens concerned about power abuses. Doubtless, the arms scandal is an issue of relevance to all Argentines as members of a national political community. It is about the administration of public resources. Public monies were assigned to a state-owned company to produce armaments and supposedly, profits were made out of the sale of weapons. It is also about the legal and ethical dimensions of the behavior of public officials who, apparently, took advantage of public office for private gain and violated national and international laws. If confirmed true, the explosion of an Army ammunition depot and the murder of several individuals glaringly violate fundamental laws and basic ethical principles. The question is not whether Argentina sold weapons, which some citizens might repudiate, but what the transactions reflect about the workings of Argentine democracy. Citizens, however, might not perceive that any of these issues affect their lives or if they do, might opt not to publicly mobilize to express opinions.

### A BOYS-WITH-TOYS STORY

Scandals affect not only audiences-as-citizens but also citizens-as-audiences. Do citizens avidly follow scandals because they are concerned about the health of the republic? Or are they interested in being amused by peeking into the antics and the lives of the rich and famous? Some scandals might be the best show in town for media audiences; others touch off public mobilization because they affect them as citizens.

When the boundaries between news and entertainment are continuously blurred, scandals as media events are news and entertainment. We lose sight of important dimensions if we presume that scandals that have citizens glued to their television sets are of immediate concern to them only (or mainly) as members of a political community. This might be true, but why not contemplate the possibility that attention-grabbing scandals are good, entertaining stories that captivate audiences? As media narratives, the subject, the characters, the plot, the action, and other dramatic elements are greatly important in determining the kind of audience attention scandals receive. What is the story about? Whose story is it? Who tells stories? What dramatic elements are presented? What audiences might find the story interesting?

Except for fans of high-politics news, the arms scandal has not been a story terribly interesting to most audiences. Who but military personnel and specialists can find pleasurable the reading of stories packed with details about rifles, cannons, and mortars? Who but news junkies can follow a Russian-doll news story that holds scandals inside scandals and multilayered sagas? Who but legal connoisseurs can keep track of three judicial causes and understand stories full of legalese?

If the subject was not of tremendous interest to most audiences, neither were the individuals who have been at the center of the scandal. Scandals typically focus on individuals rather than institutions. Affairs involving political (and other) celebrities are likely to attract more attention than those implicating ordinary citizens. The cast of characters of the arms scandal lacked political personalities and was populated by peripheral politicians and military officers. Even the cabinet members involved hardly fit the mold of political celebrities and lack what journalists call "sellable" angles. It has been a heavily masculine narrative centered on boys-with-toys in trouble.

Low entertainment value sets apart the arms scandal from previous high-politics scandals that featured individuals who straddled the boundaries between hard and soft news, were front-page news in political and entertainment magazines, and had a weakness for appearing in all media. Former Interior Minister Jose Luis Manzano, who resigned amid revelations of corruption, was the target of political reporters and paparazzi. Maria Julia Alsogaray, the presidential appointee who spearheaded the privatization of the telephone company and was caught in a scandal, was featured in a newsweekly cover scantily dressed

and frolicking with showbiz divas. President Menem's telegenic and attractive sister-in-law was at the center of Yomagate. President Menem often has been applauded and criticized for being a media "crossover" politician. Equally at ease in cabinet meetings and discotheques, rallies and resorts, official ceremonies and offshore competitions, Menem himself has been a typical subject of both serious news and tabloid news. His low profile during the arms scandal, a journalist observed, has taken away an element that could have made the arms scandal more interesting to various audiences.

The narrative of the arms scandal can be understood by setting it against the dominant narratives of human rights scandals. The latter had a melodramatic structure with stock characters that stood for moral polarities. There were heroes and villains representing virtue and vice, right and wrong, power and powerlessness. Do-gooder María Soledad Morales, her lower-middle-class family, and humble Sister Pelloni were pitted against María Soledad Morales's cheating lover Luis Tula, rogue Guillermo Luque (the son of a local representative), and the Saadis, a political dynasty that ruled the province for four decades (some of its members were suspected of cover-up). Mild-mannered Private Omar Carrasco and his poverty-stricken family were pitted against contemptuous military officers and immoral judges. Big-hearted and well-intentioned news photographer Jose Luis Cabezas was pitted against corrupt police officers, corrupt politicians, and a corrupt all-powerful businessman. The victims of the bombings at Jewish institutions and their families were pitted against a two-faced government and questionable investigators, police, and intelligence services.

Instead, the arms scandal has been a drama of the court, not of commoners. The plights of unknown court members hardly resonate with audiences. There are no ordinary victims as protagonists with whom audiences could identify. The blast at the Army arsenal had many ordinary victims, but they were not at the center of the scandal, nor did they receive extensive coverage. The absence of victims (except for the seldom-invoked figure of the abstract citizen victimized by corrupt officials) has lessened the potential emotional appeal of a scandal full of imperturbable, straight-faced officials. The María Soledad Morales scandal, in contrast, featured quite a different cast. María Soledad Morales was the Laura Palmer to the local *Twin Peaks*. The fact that the tabloid newsweekly *Gente* devoted plenty of attention to the scandal indicates that it was not just hard political news. The story titled "That Night It Was Me or Maria Soledad" featured one of her schoolmates spilling details about the orgies that the sons of the powerful organized in which they drugged and abused girls from poor families. Another story brought morbid details about María Soledad Morales's corpse. In an interview, Sister Martha Pelloni accused the local elite of murder and the bishop of hiding the truth. The high expectation generated by the trial in 1996 suggested that it was not just another scandal involving stuffy and obscure officials but one that had an audience-grabbing plot and characters who could perfectly compete with afternoon soap operas and bring in new audiences.



## CONCLUSION

The arms scandal has not unleashed wide reaction as either a public issue or a media story. As a public issue, it has not tapped into typical concerns of most citizens. It is situated far from most people's lives in comparison to other gate scandals like the one that involved the head of the national program for senior citizens in kickbacks and influence peddling. The latter brought preoccupations of a large number of citizens who either personally or through relatives depended on that program for health care and other basic needs. The arms scandal, instead, is a quintessential *cause d'état* that although it competes for the public interest, has not attracted public interest.

As a media story, the arms scandal has been a magnet for journalists but lacked narrative elements that could have attracted large audiences. It squarely fits the frame and format of "serious news" consumed by the "attentive public." It has not offered any angles that might have pushed it to straddle "quality journalism" and "the other news" (Langer, 1998). Nor has the arms scandal been part of an "audience-building strategy" of tabloid media, a strategy that has turned business news into scandals in the British media. No riveting courtroom drama, no ordinary victims who touched citizens-as-audiences, no female protagonists, no melodrama that crystallized moral polarities. Scandals that deal with matters of public interest (such as the abuse of public office and the covering up of crimes) might not have wide repercussion without human-interest story lines. Scandals that featured staple themes of tabloids (such as dramas of political celebrities, the plights of ordinary citizens in extraordinary situations) had added value that appealed to citizens-as-audiences uninterested in hard news about political elites.

The different reactions to the arms scandal, excitement in political circles and newsrooms and indifference among citizens, indicate that different publics experience scandals differently. If we look only at media hype, we might get a distorted view of scandals. Gate scandals are typically causes célèbres of political elites and journalists. They neither require citizens to burst out nor must they be long-lasting events; instead, they need powerful actors with media access to fan the flame of scandals. Citizens-as-audiences might follow them and even express outrage at revelations, but unless they become audiences-as-citizens, they often remain "phantom publics." In contrast, scandals that directly affect ordinary citizens as members of small and large political communities engender different political dynamics. When they cross media boundaries, straddling "quality" and "tabloid" news, they are able to engage a diversity of publics removed from and uninterested in high politics. They also show that, at least momentarily and with regard to specific issues, even scandal-fatigued audiences recover and become citizens mobilized to demand accountability and justice. The contrast between these two categories tells us that scandals are neither made equal nor are similarly linked to questions of citizenship and morality. Gate scandals have been the subject of media frenzies and triggered high-politics

actions and gossip but largely remained the white noise of contemporary Argentine democracy. Instead, nothing has lately sounded more powerfully that mobilized publics outraged at violations of civil rights and official responsibility and duplicity in the murders of ordinary citizens.

### NOTE

1. Access to prosecutors' investigations violates judicial secrecy, but it barely raises eyebrows in Argentina. In the arms scandal, the Menem administration has threatened to reveal conversations between a journalist and prosecutor Stornelli and between Stornelli and representative Horacio Viqueira, a member of the opposition. Viqueira was quoted saying "My relation with Stornelli is one of total collaboration" (Urien Berri, 1998). The regular collaboration between reporters and judges is a public secret in political circles. Regardless of individual motives for pursuing an investigation, both parties take advantage of this relation: Reporters lack legal protection to get information and talk to witnesses, and prosecutors and judges need regular access to the media to raise the public profile of their investigations.

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