

Why, if at all, do mediated scandals matter in terms of social power? Justify your argument with reference to at least one example of scandal.

Media scandals have always been prominent in the media and political landscape and are defined by concealed actions of “morally discreditable” (Thompson, 2000) public figures becoming public knowledge, in particular in the last decade with the increased use of social media. However, when such scandals are used as means of entertainment or sensation, it raises questions regarding the abuse of power of those controlling the media, and this has a direct impact on social power, societal values and cultural hierarchy. In this essay I will argue that mediated scandals are highly significant in determining social power as they can force social change, as well as use the media to marginalise particular groups which keeps society divided. Using examples such as the #MeToo movement and racism within the sporting industry I will explore how the media pushes a certain cultural agenda that decides what stories count as ‘scandal’ and what is just entertainment, and show that these media scandals influence social order, culturally, economically and politically. Ultimately, mediated scandals do matter in terms of social power as they provide news organisations with control over what the public consume, acting as a public watchdog whilst simultaneously reinforcing historical ideas of hierarchy that maintains the social order.

Mediated scandals matter in terms of social power due to the business interests of media conglomerates who push specific stories and often create scandals that push their own agenda and views onto wider society. Controversial news stories only become ‘scandals’ if they are newsworthy, emphasising the role that the media has in determining what classifies as a media scandal. However, it can be argued that the media create such scandals for entertainment purposes and ultimately their own benefit with political dramas, love affairs and deceit stories getting the largest audience figures and subsequent engagement online. This links to Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) Propaganda theory which suggests that scandals are made worse by the news media who have specific business interests to get maximum viewers. This highlights the power in which the media holds as they are in control of the news agenda and giving airtime to specific scandals that are good for their business in an act of “amplified partisanship” (Zulli, 2021). If a scandal in anyway could harm the

reputation of the media industry, it is likely it will not be shown in the news media, and therefore not become a mediated scandal at all. Therefore, media conglomerates uphold their favourable position in the social hierarchy by controlling which scandals ordinary citizens should care about, and which should be kept quiet, favouring those who own the news.

Another reason that media scandals matter significantly in relation to social power is due to the increased usage of social media in the last decade that has made it harder for scandals to be hidden in the digital age. Baker & Rowe (2013) studied race related issues occurring on digital platforms within a UK context and found that there is an underlying pattern of “postcolonial guilt” presented in racism scandals and the news media struggles to balance the relationship between power and emotion when presenting scandals which is often why more opinions are generated and valued online. This argument opposes previous scandal theories that suggested only public figures can be involved in scandals. The subversion theory of scandal has been made common through social media and with the increased usage of social media anyone can be involved in a scandal and anyone can voice their opinions and views online regarding any story that is circulating. This is important in terms of social power as it allows everyone in society to contribute to the conversation, allowing for a more equal platform in which everyone can be heard, not just those at the top of the social hierarchy, or news organisations acting as a fourth estate. Giving ordinary citizens the power to create their own “speech acts” and “respond to these acts with suitable forms of expression” (Thompson, 2000) highlights how social media and personal online presences have transformed the way we consume scandals, and this adheres to Jenkins (2012) Participatory Culture theory of the ‘Prosumer’. However, despite the fact that social media allows for more scandals than ever before, with how fast-paced social media is scandals often do not last as long in terms of their newsworthiness as there is always another story the next day. The emphasis on cancel culture online can damage the person in questions reputation despite only being in the public eye for a few days, as a result of everyone in society having the power to comment and share. Ultimately, mediated scandals are highly significant when they are circulated on social media as they provide a platform for people to

act as watchdogs and express their own anger online which often leads to mass social change, rather than just being passive consumers of news.

One important case study that explores the way in which mediated scandals affect social power, especially within an online context, is the Blatter racism scandal that sparked huge moral outrage and dominated the sporting industry in 2011. In an interview with CNN Blatter suggested that racism did not exist within football, after being questioned whether more could be done to tackle the problem, and this was met with direct anger from sporting ministers, footballers and millions of fans worldwide. The FIFA president demonstrated here how individuals in positions of power often are ignorant and oblivious to real societal issues and that these “power relations inform the country’s emotional memories” (Baker and Rowe, 2013) explaining the huge public criticism made visible to the world via social media. The power in which this gives ordinary people to decide the future, not only of Blatter as president, but also to have a say in how FIFA should tackle the problem of racism in football is momentous. This links to Kantola and Vesa’s (2013) theory of scandals as “social dramas” where they argue that scandals are increasingly dangerous for the elites in the digital age as citizens will lobby for individuals such as Blatter to be removed from power. It shares out the social power and is a positive outcome from a terrible racism scandal. However, scandals that focus on race, sex, and/or other marginalised groups often push the narrative of a ‘them’ and ‘us’ when it is engulfed with such media attention, and this arguably enhances the social divide and creates inequalities in terms of social power. Ultimately, this scandal portrays how emotions and power are intertwined and how they work on social media to bring communities together, highlighting how important mediated scandals are for sharing out social power.

However, it could also be argued that mediated scandals are a force for good in terms of social power as they often result in protest that forces social change. Cottle (2006) argues that it is up to society to decide whether the outcomes and changes from scandal are “hegemonic or transformative”. This implies that scandals can either be for sensation and entertainment purposes, or people can lobby and protest for real change regarding the

issue and this is when media scandals are for the good of social power. One recent example of this has been the #MeToo movement that was established after the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse scandal in 2017. The movement helped women across the world speak about sexual violence, thus paving the way for improved gender equality, raising awareness about where survivors could seek help and working with businesses to create a safer working environment for women (Seales, 2018). This negative Hollywood scandal was used as means and drive for social change and is a prime example of how mediated scandals “produce a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change” (Lull and Hinerman, 1997). Therefore, media scandals can have a positive impact on wider society which in turn affects the social hierarchy by giving the particular group in question more power.

Mediated scandals matter highly in terms of social power as they allow everyone in society to express anger and discontent with the person, group or government in question, and they determine a course of justice that allows people to protest for social change. Historically, scandals gave all the power to the news organisations who chose what stories were deemed ‘newsworthy’ enough to become a public scandal based on their business values and interests. However, the increased usage of social media has made it easier for everyone to commentate on the issue, and harder for the individual involved to stop the story circulating. This gives ordinary people the power to make decisions that could have a serious impact on society, such as the #MeToo movement arising from the Harvey Weinstein scandal, and the petitions to get rid of Blatter as FIFA president after his remarks on racism. This temporary restructuring of the social hierarchy often creates positive social change that impacts millions of people globally, all due to the fact that during scandals power is distributed equally between everybody who consumes news, traditionally and through social media. Ultimately, mediated scandals do matter in terms of social power as they highlight inequalities within society as well as forcing social change that helps to give ordinary people more social power.

WORD COUNT: 1542

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