THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SCANDAL: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE 2009 BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY EXPENSE AFFAIR

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Abstract

We propose that the media has an active role in shaping how external audiences come to understand and make sense of a scandal, independent of the actual transgressions. We investigate the evolution of meaning and its effect on Members of Parliament (MP) resignations during the 2009 British Parliamentary Expense Scandal. We find broad support for the active role of media in socially constructing the meaning of a scandal. Specifically, we find that MPs who are featured centrally in the scandal narrative face increased pressures to resign. We also find that MPs who are structurally associated in the media narrative with other MPs who have previously resigned also resign at a higher rate. Finally, we find that the effect of an MP’s level of wrongdoing is only significant when the MP is also featured centrally in the scandal narrative. Overall, we contribute to research on scandal by showing that an MP’s treatment in the media is an important predictor of scandal outcomes.