

Reporting the unsayable: scandalous talk by right-wing populist politicians and the challenge for journalism

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the moral work of journalism as displayed and enacted in the reporting practices used in news coverage of scandalous talk by right-wing populist (RWP) politicians. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, we analyze a set of cases of journalistic framing of RWP talk recently circulating in Sweden, Greece, France, and the UK, and examine ways in which anti-democratic or racist talk is represented within print, online and broadcast news media. We show how the complex dynamics of different kinds of discursive framing of scandalous talk construct boundaries between right and wrong which contribute to processes of normalizing populist discourses and agendas. Moreover, we call attention to the challenge that this poses for contemporary journalism both within public service and commercial networks, as reporting on right-wing populism involves a balancing act between disparate constraints and exigencies of journalism.

Keywords: discourse analysis, news discourse, right-wing populism, scandalous talk, discursive framing, normalizing/mainstreaming, marginalizing

Introduction: Scandalous talk and the challenge for news journalism

As ¹right-wing populist (RWP) parties move to the centre of the political stage across Europe, recent research (Akkerma n et al. 2016; Hatakka et al. 2017; Herkman and Matikainen 2019; Wettstein et al. 2018; de Vreese et al. 2019) has been increasingly concerned with the challenges facing news journalism when reporting on “the populist radical right” (Mudde 2007). Since journalists are inevitably required to report on the rising tide of radical populism in Europe, and in particular, on talk by RWP politicians whose content often falls outside the traditional domains of legitimate controversy in the public sphere, the news media are

instrumental in the process of mainstreaming right-wing discourses (Author 2020; Barnett 2017; Blassnig et al. 2019; de Jonge 2019; Mazzoleni 2008).

The dynamics of political scandals (including scandalous talk) and the role of the media in the disclosure and dramatization of norm transgressions that seriously threaten the reputation and career of the politician involved, have been widely examined (Author 2019a, Author 2019b, Thompson 2000, Tumber and Waisbord 2019). However, in the current era of radical populism, the interplay between scandalous talk and news reporting has become more complex. What were previously framed as norm transgressions in the media are now frequently integrated into characteristic anti-establishment populist performances, often strategically designed to attract media attention (Author 2019a, Moffitt 2016, Herkman, 2018).

The moral work of journalism is central to media scandals (Tumber and Waisbord 2019; Author 2008). This includes the disclosure and framing of wrongdoing, and the discursive construction of evaluative standards and boundaries between right and wrong. We argue that the reporting of scandalous talk by RWP politicians can play a critical role in either marginalising it as deviant, i.e. beyond the pale of what is publicly, politically ‘sayable’, or conversely, normalising it, bringing it within the mainstream of legitimate political discourse. As the dynamics of mediated political scandals shift, these changes have serious implications for journalistic practice and the production of news, creating uncertainty as to the role of journalism, and challenging the standards being applied when reporting on controversial opinions and scandalous talk (Herkman 2018, de Vreese et al. 2019).

In this explorative study, we show how journalists variously cope with the potentially conflicting demands of reporting on the extreme discourses circulating within this new era of radical populism, and, more importantly, how aspects of mainstreaming are played out (or not) in journalistic constructions of deviance and legitimacy.

Mediating scandalous talk

A basic assumption in the theory of mediated political scandals (Thompson 2000) is that they contain media disclosure and public criticism of norm-transgressing, back-stage activities that were not initially intended to be public. Drawing on this theory, Authors (2008) develop the notion of a ‘talk scandal’ where talk itself, specifically a speech act, is the point of contention.

The core of a talk scandal is described as “an action that constitutes a transgression of norms, rules or moral codes” (2008: 62). These transgressions relate to what people in public office are conventionally supposed to say. Authors (2008) have identified two types of talk scandals: back-stage utterances that are documented and leaked *to* the media, and denounced performances that were originally publicly produced *in* the media. In each type, however, the political transgressions were considered as failures in communication, not intended or designed to create a political scandal. As our analysis will show, contemporary radical populism adds a new dynamic to mediated scandals. Creating a talk scandal can serve as a communicative resource for RWP actors, enacting a clean break with established norms and values of the political establishment, in which the perpetrators portray themselves as candid and anti-elite, despite the risk of damaging their public image or suffering legal penalties (Author 2019b).

The rise of right-wing populism (RWP) has thus led to a destabilization of moral standards through “shameless normalisation” of the previously unsayable and unacceptable (Wodak, 2019: 207). By breaching the norms of conventional political communication, populist leaders can lay claim to speaking ‘for the people’, and ‘saying out loud what most people think’ (Author et al. 2018), addressing, not only their supporters, but also broader audiences through their characteristically disruptive, politically incorrect discursive style. Such intentional provocations are generally regarded as a communication strategy of RW populists when seeking voter and media attention, especially so in their “insurgent” phase of first-time electoral success (Herkman and Matikainen 2019). Similarly, Herkman (2018) identifies neo-populist scandals, which capitalize on the moral transgression of members of populist movements, who may engage in offensive language or behaviour which targets non-natives or other minorities. Such provocations, and playing the role of the underdog, are thus common strategies employed by RW populists. We argue that *how* this transgressive behaviour is reported in media coverage can contribute to the normalisation of RWP through the process of mainstreaming, by shifting moral boundaries between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable talk.

Mainstreaming and the challenge for journalism

Mainstreaming is a complex process that involves the inclusion of RW populism in democratic institutions, public debates and routine news reporting, the convergence between mainstream and populist parties, and the normalization of RW populist discourses (Akkerman

et al. 2016, Author 2020). As RWP politicians are elected to parliaments in several European nations, and in some cases participate in government, the role of journalists is critical, particularly in terms of negotiating the boundaries between legitimate and deviant positions.

Political actors with power and electoral support cannot be ignored, and, therefore, their declarations and policies are integrated in the routine reporting of mainstream media. As populist parties move centre stage, populist arguments are, accordingly, being transferred from the margins of politics to the middle ground, and in the process, potentially legitimized. In this context, populist actors can engage in political performances which serve to ‘de-toxify’ their policies, and establish their commitment to the rules of public culture and discourse. Yet, it may also be the case that previously marginalized parties are transforming the discursive norms and established conventions of argument while promoting an anti-establishment RW populist agenda.

Reporting on populist politics in the borderland between the deviant and the legitimate poses challenges for journalists working within the twin constraints of balance and impartiality (Wettstein et al. 2018; de Vreese et al. 2019: 243). Hallin’s (1986) account of the spheres of consensus, deviance and legitimate controversy in the ways in which the news media position political actors and events, suggests that different journalistic norms apply within these zones, with the sphere of legitimate controversy being the field for objective and balanced journalistic presentation of ‘both sides’ of an issue, whereas the other two spheres are terrains for the promotion of consensus. The relevance of Hallin’s account to the analysis of news reporting on populist political actors is also invoked in Wettstein et al. (2018). Based on a large-scale cross national content analysis, the authors conclude that in countries in which populist parties are treated as deviant and excluded from coalitions with mainstream parties, news media tend to be particularly restrictive in making populist actors visible in media content (gatekeeping), as well as more negative in their interpretations of populist actors and their statements. Our qualitative in-depth analyses of reporting discourses is complementary to quantitative findings on the journalistic coverage of RWP, allowing for the uncovering of more fine-grained differences, and shedding light on the complex, nuanced - even contradictory - dynamics of the moral work performed by journalism. From a discourse analytic perspective, the impact of the discursive design of journalist questions to politicians on marking societal preferences, and on “policing” and shifting the boundaries of the mainstream has also been documented (Clayman 2017: 59; Clayman and Loeb 2018).

Certainly, a fundamental mission of journalists as public watchdogs is to put anti-democratic, racist, or generally offensive speech under public scrutiny. This may involve ascribing ‘moral discrepancy’ (Housley and Fitzgerald 2003) to the actors or collectives producing such talk, and may result in political repercussions for them and the parties they represent. However, applying common standards of newsworthiness also means that news media can thrive upon populist actors’ propensity for dramatic, ‘media savvy’ performances that attract public attention and thus increase viewing figures (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Whether reporting on either intentionally or accidentally revealed scandalous talk, these – often incompatible – concerns underlie the transformation of shocking, racist or otherwise anti-democratic discourses of the populist right into lucrative media narratives.

Here we propose a qualitative discourse analysis of the reporting practices through which journalists frame scandalous speech performances by RW populists. Although routine news reporting is an important mechanism of normalization at large (Author et al. 2020), reports of scandalous talk represent critical cases in which normality is challenged. As the boundaries between deviant and normal, acceptable and non-acceptable are at stake and explicitly negotiated in media discourse, the importance of discursive framing can be fruitfully explored as contributing, in diverse and nuanced ways, to the process of mainstreaming.

Focusing on salient cases of scandalous speech performances by RW populists in Sweden, Greece, France and the UK, we show how the news media play a vital role in either displaying the moral deviance and norm violations of populist discourses (marginalizing), or downplaying that deviance (mainstreaming).

Analytical approach and data corpus

Through the analysis of news data we are able to examine the dynamics of political communication as discursive routines and repertoires which underpin the way in which different political positions are endorsed, negotiated or resisted in the business of reporting political news.

While the differential framing of political scandal across media outlets has been documented in the literature (Maier, Jansen and von Sikorski 2019), the diversity of mediated forms of RWP scandalous talk are far from accounted for in systematic analyses (Herkman and

Matikainen, 2019). While our intention is not to provide a comparative analysis of reporting practices in different media systems, this analysis complements existing research on media and political scandals, by exploring how actual reporting practices of news framing shape political meanings (Entman 1992, Author 2012, Author et al. 2012).

In this study we examine the following aspects of the discursive framing of RWP scandalous talk:

- Attribution of blame for the scandalous talk (to the individual political actor or the party as a whole)
- The type of reporting language used to represent the original statement and its aftermath (discursive and non-discursive reactions, etc.). More specifically, how is an evaluative journalistic stance constructed in the genres and structural units of news discourse, namely in the headline titles, the main body of articles/reportage, commentaries, interviews and re-contextualisation of quotes? Is it explicitly signalled, or is it subtle and indirect? Is it entirely absent?
- Practices of foregrounding and backgrounding, such as emphasizing conflict (between different political actors/parties), while discounting the propositional content and moral implications of the contentious utterance. How do these practices work to establish boundaries between right and wrong?

This paper is part of the output of the international research project entitled *Right-wing populism in the news media: a cross-cultural study of journalist practices and news discourse*, focusing on France, Greece, Sweden, and the UK. First, what all four countries share is the rise of popular support for and parliamentary representation of RWP parties and politicians in the last six years (since the 2014 European elections), which has inevitably led to increased news coverage, including coverage of provocative or anti-democratic talk.

Secondly, they represent a diversity in media and politics allowing for cross-cultural analyses, although an account of the differences in media and political systems among the countries is beyond the scope of this study.

The five case studies presented here form part of a large corpus of news data collected between 2014 and 2018, which includes print and online news articles, as well as television news and broadcast interviews covering significant political moments in four different European contexts. The examples have been translated into English by the authors from their

native languages. This has inevitably led to some variation in translation style (more or less literal) depending on the source language (see Nikander 2008 for a discussion of translation-related issues in comparative qualitative research).

The cases presented below were selected as representative of the range of journalists' framing actions in the country corpora at hand. More specifically, they illustrate the array of mediated RWP discourses and their normalizing potential on the basis of the following criteria:

- a) *The intentional/non-intentional aspects of producing scandalous talk*: rather than a clear dichotomy, we propose cases on a continuum, from clearly intentional provocations (case 2), to actions not intended to be scandalous (case 1), and back-stage utterances that are still understood as purposefully produced (case 3).
- b) *The political actor's position in the RWP party*: This ranges from party leaders (case 5), elected members of the party in parliament (case 2), local party representatives (case 1), and former party leaders (case 3).
- c) *The position of the party in the national political landscape*: from (ex) government ministers of mainstream parties in power (case 4), radical right parties with parliamentary representation, but heavily marginalized in mainstream media and public debate (case 2), and parties in between the two ends of the spectrum, i.e. that have become increasingly mainstreamed, though still controversial (case 1, 3, 5; see also Author et al. 2020).

While not exhaustive, the analyses presented below identify various ways in which the moral work of journalism is discursively accomplished when 'reporting the unsayable'.

Discursive framings of scandalous RWP talk

Case study 1: The canonical political talk scandal

The canonical political talk scandal refers to a speech act that is framed by the media as an unambiguous transgression of values or moral codes, which seriously damages the reputation and position of the responsible politician (Authors, 2008). The following example from Sweden illustrates key aspects of the discursive framing and role of journalism in such cases. On 26th November 2017, Martin Strid, a local politician of the far-right nationalist party the Sweden Democrats (SD), made a statement about Muslims in a public speech at the party's annual conference. The speech was broadcast live in a public service current affairs program. The following extract was then reproduced and criticized in the media:

One can say that there is a scale from zero to hundred. At one end of the scale, you find one hundred percent fully human beings, and everything that we put into that concept. At the other end, you are one hundred percent Mohamedan. And all Muslims are somewhere on that scale.

This utterance became breaking news in all major news media. In a comprehensive news package in *Aktuellt* (public service news), the presenter introduces the news stating that the closure of the SD party conference “came to be about a controversial statement by one of the delegates yesterday, a statement that aroused strong reactions”. These reactions were articulated in an edited report where the criticized speech segment was shown, followed by interviews with two leading representatives of SD. In the soundbites from these interviews, the SD leaders condemned the utterance as “racist” and “completely unacceptable”, and declared that Strid must resign.

Back in the studio, the presenter first announces a formal renunciation of the statement, referring to the Broadcasting Act, which states that programs must follow basic democratic ideas and the principle of equal value for all people. The presenter says the politician concerned has been asked to withdraw from the party, and then introduces a live commentary in the studio by an in-house political reporter. The commentary takes an explicitly evaluative stance, comparing the content of the statement with references to Nazism:

It's a remarkable statement, a shocking statement and a racist statement. And it is an argumentation that reminds of the 1930s and the Nazi attempt to dehumanize the Jews. Even more remarkable it becomes, because it is delivered from the rostrum at a party conference...

Note the three-part evaluative scheme in which what was described as “controversial” in the news-headline is amplified: “It’s a remarkable statement, a shocking statement and a racist statement”, followed by further value-laden adjectives whose meaning is augmented with intensifiers like “*even more* remarkable”. The inclusion of in-house commentary which allows for an evaluative journalistic voice, different from the formal, neutral voice of the presenter’s headline (above), thus indicates that mainstream news journalism positions the utterance in the sphere of deviance, and frames the event as an unambiguous moral transgression.

Coverage in other media (public service and commercial TV, print and online) shows that the politician's utterance was uniformly condemned by different news actors. The online edition of the tabloid *Expressen* (26-11-2017), for example, includes a clip from the speech and a quote from SD's party leader in the headline: "Could be the worst I've heard". A series of quotes are presented in which the SD party leadership defines the statement as "remarkable" and "unacceptable". The news also includes quotes from politicians representing other parties, describing the statement as "racist", "shocking" and "sickening".

The discursive framing of a canonical political talk scandal is thus openly negative, and the politician is held morally accountable. The evaluative standard is established mainly through condemnatory quotes from different actors, in headlines, news texts and reportage, and also in the voices of journalists in the sub-genre of political commentaries. In this example, the sparse references to the politician's own account of the scandalous talk help frame his subsequent apology as merely a bad excuse. His explanation of the utterance as a blunder, not meant to be racist, is backgrounded in the news. The discourse of moral transgression is thus collaboratively produced by journalists, leaders of the SD and politicians from other parties.

Notwithstanding, there was still some negotiation in the news media on how the event should be understood. Was the racist utterance a sign of something bigger that the party and its leadership should be held responsible for? In the news, journalists questioned SD leaders about the fact that none of Strid's fellow party members in the audience listening to the speech criticized the politician at the time. However, treatment of the utterance as a sign of more general party values, was backgrounded in the discourse of breaking news. Essentially, the news foregrounded the unequivocal blaming of an individual politician.

The example shows how distancing tactics (Hatakka et al. 2017) in response to accusations of racism were articulated in the news without being critically questioned. The media coverage served as an opportunity for the party to actually demonstrate a 'zero tolerance' policy for anti-democratic views. Paradoxically, the dynamics of the political scandal (the homogenous condemnation of the individual utterance) all together contribute to the discursive inclusion of the party in a political culture of legitimate controversies.

The next four case studies illustrate the complexities involved in processes of mainstreaming and marginalizing RWP discourses, and diverge in specific ways from the canonical talk scandal.

Case study 2: Scandalous talk as intentional provocation

This case study represents intentionally provocative speech that is treated by the media as anti-democratic and predictably provocative. However, in contrast to case 1, here the moral breach is not attributed to the individual perpetrator, but to the party as a whole, thus positioning it as directly antagonistic to the democratic political world.

Here, intentionally scandalous talk is articulated by an elected member of parliament from the radical-right Greek party ²Golden Dawn (GD), who essentially trivializes the impact of the Athens Polytechnic Uprising. This was a massive demonstration against the Greek military junta (1967–1974), which ended in bloodshed in the early morning of 17 November 1973. In November 2018, two days before the annual commemoration of the Athens Polytechnic Uprising, G. Lagos declared in parliament that there were no deaths during the uprising, and challenged the MPs of other parties to name “even two dead people”. The incident was extensively reported in mainstream TV news and in the online press the following day.

As shown below, the majority of media reports denounced Lagos’s denial of the Polytechnic killings. However, the incident was also relayed through neutral reporting in the online press, thereby integrating, even foregrounding, far-right discourse in the news agenda.

On *Alpha* channel news, following a soundbite of the contested statement, the voice-over says:

This statement by MP Lagos, who questioned ((the fact)) that there were dead at the Polytechnic ((uprising),) triggered tension in the Parliament, with the parties condemning this new provocation, of Golden Dawn.

The screen caption in the reportage reads: ‘They question the dead at the polytechnic: A NEW GOLDEN DAWN PROVOCATION’. The voice-over is followed by edited soundbites of the immediate reactions of MPs at the Parliament plenary. Lagos’s statement is clearly positioned within the sphere of deviance (Hallin 1986), hence the collocations “a new – provocative incident”, and “this new provocation, of Golden Dawn” on *ANTI* and *Alpha* channel news. The reports also capitalize on the uniform outcry with which the statement was met inside the Parliament. The MPs’ reaction to the anti-democratic talk is legitimized as

“strong of course”, while Golden Dawn is positioned at the opposite end of “MPs from the democratic arc”:

strong of course was the reaction by both the presidency but also all the: MPs from the democratic arc who were in the hall

[*ANTI*, parliamentary field report]

By casting the party as the blamed agent of the transgression, this framing works to marginalize the discourse of GD as yet another outright challenge to assumed, universally shared, democratic values. Similarly, online news reports emphasize the stir caused in Parliament by Lagos’s statement with titles such as “UPROAR IN PARLIAMENT BY THE PROVOCATION OF GOLDEN DAWNIST G. LAGOS – “a fairytale the Polytechnic [uprising], there weren’t any dead”. Here, the subtitle reads:

In an anti-democratic rant from the Parliament podium Golden Dawnist MP Giannis Lagos characterized the Polytechnic ((uprising)) as “fairlytale” and “fairground”.

In the reports, “fairytale” («παραμύθι») and “fairground” («πανηγύρι») are selectively quoted from Lagos’s talk as contested characterizations of the Polytechnic events. At the same time, his speech performance is labelled “anti-democratic rant”. The Greek counterpart of “rant” («παραλήρημα») is recurrent in online articles that openly condemn scandalous talk by far-right politicians (Author 2019). Moreover, the lexical items chosen point to a head-on clash between ‘them’ (Lagos, GD) and the democratic political world (“MPs of the democratic arc”) triggered by Lagos’s contentious talk (‘fierce row’ [άγριος καβγάς], ‘uproar’ [σάλος] in the headlines). The negative frame thus plays directly into the media’s “vested interest in conflict” (Putnam and Shoemaker 2007: 1). Yet, in contrast to the canonical scandal (case 1), here there were no direct repercussions for the perpetrator.

Despite its negative authorial stance, one of the articles (*gazetta.gr*, 15-11-2018) contains a clickable video of Lagos’s full parliamentary speech, in which he also denounces mainstream political parties on account of corruption scandals. While negatively framing far-right scandalous talk, these online sites are thus quick to reproduce populist anti-establishment discourses, re-contextualised as newsworthy within the narrative of political conflict.

Importantly, in two of the articles analysed, the authors did not evaluate Lagos's statement, adopting a 'neutral' reportorial mode instead. The article entitled "Giannis Lagos of Golden Dawn insists that there were no dead at the Polytechnic - Incident in Parliament" (*zougla.gr*, 15-11-2018) merely relays Lagos' statement and the reactions caused, again, through a blend of direct and indirect quotes. The article ends with a mini transcript of the oppositional exchange between Lagos and other MPs, which is *not* followed by journalistic commentary. Here, the reporting verb chosen ('επιμένει πως'/'insists that') foregrounds the perspective of the far-right politician, whereas the protests by the MPs of democratic parties are neutrally described through the nominalization 'Επεισόδιο' ('Incident') in 'Incident in Parliament' ('Επεισόδιο στη Βουλή').

Albeit a minority, these articles illustrate how journalists uncritically integrate far-right discourses in the news agenda, while disregarding their import as political action that attacks democratic values. This framing subtly works in the direction of mainstreaming, by situating RWP discourses within the sphere of legitimate controversy, thus paving the way for their further normalization.

Case study 3: Intentional 'inadvertent' provocation

The next case of scandalous talk is produced in an ostensibly 'backstage' conversation, 'overheard' by a journalist. Most importantly, it was neutrally framed in most of the reports that followed, and its meaning was contested in subsequent interviews with other party members.

At a pre-campaign speech cocktail party for the press in Marseille, May 2014, ex Front National (FN) leader Jean-Marie Le Pen (JMLP) was overheard by journalists discussing the population 'explosion' in Africa with another FN member. He remarked that France was about to be 'submerged' by immigration and that "*Monseigneur Ebola peut régler ça en trois mois*"³. In view of its extreme racist content, reports appeared in French online news sites and other mainstream European media almost immediately. The remark also generated substantial comment on social media. The two main national daily titles immediately published it as breaking news. However, they adopted neutral rather than negative framing, reproducing the

talk in either direct quotes or reported speech attributed to the speaker, with no journalist evaluation, thus treating the racist content as self-evident (reporting lexis marked with italics):

Ebola to sort out the problems of immigration; a simple observation *according to* Mr Le Pen. During a discussion about the world's demographic explosion, the honorary president of the Front National *announced that* 'Mgr Ebola can sort that out in three months.'

(Le Monde, 21-05-2014)

During a press cocktail he *talked to* the FN mayor of Cogolin (Var) Marc-Etienne Lansade and *set out* the issues that he was going to discuss in his speech: overpopulation, and the risk of 'France being submerged by immigration'. Jean-Marie Le Pen *said* he was optimistic: 'It is never too late, but it is too late nevertheless' *he said*, before *adding* 'Monseigneur Ebola can sort that out in three months'.

(Le Figaro, 21-05-2015)

A report in centre-right weekly news magazine *Le Point* gave more context and used direct quotes, but the reporting frame is still neutral; only the closing sentence represents it as an 'incident' using scare quotes, and its impact is summarised not in terms of its shock value, but its publicity for JMLP in the run up to the EU elections. Centre-left weekly news magazine *L'Express* gave more detail, framing the talk negatively, not in terms of its semantic content, but, rather, in terms of its potential consequences for the politician in the headline text:

A declaration that could cost him his EU MP immunity if he is re-elected.

and later in the report, as potentially sanctionable by the EU Parliament:

If an organisation decided to lodge a complaint against Jean-Marie Le Pen, the European parliament could remove his parliamentary immunity.

(L'Express, 21-05-2014)

The story was also picked up on the same day by the UK *Guardian* and in the *Irish Times*. The *Guardian* paraphrases the speech act in quote marks, but the title ‘Monseigneur’ is absent. The quote marks serve a double function, not just quoting direct speech in translation, but also as ‘scare quotes’, a frequent distancing mechanism. The *Irish Times* includes the remark in full at the end, foregrounding its intentionality: ‘he said in front of journalists’.

In this case, therefore, none of the press reports take direct issue with the extreme racist content of the statement, which is treated as self-evident, without any explicit attribution of moral deviance. A similar position is adopted the next day by Nathalie Saint-Cricq interviewing the current leader of the FN, his daughter Marine Le Pen (MLP) on public service channel F2. She treats its newsworthiness as revelatory of divisions within the FN, rather than directly addressing its scandalous content: old-school, hardline supporters of JMLP (who did get re-elected to the European Parliament in 2014), are embarrassing for the newer, supposedly de-toxified ‘frontistes’, whose political goal at the time was focused on MLP winning the presidential elections in 2017.

In the extract below, taken from a highly antagonistic exchange, MLP defends her father’s words as simply “an expression of concern”. In her follow-up question, the IR uses a third-party source attribution to Dutch RWP Geert Wilders, framing the quote in these terms:

NSC: I said to you- I just wanted- if it was in good taste
for the image of France monseigneur Ebola can sort that out
in three months that is something- Geert Wilders even said
good thing her father is no longer the leader of the FN
so even him one of your allies [saw that it was problematic]
MLP: [madame madame he has read]
the French press who have totally [taken this out of context]
NSC: [Ok so he has been]
misinformed too

(*Des Paroles et des Actes*, 22-05-2014)

In her extended question preface, the interviewer treats the statement as ‘problematic’ for the party image, since even Wilders has commented negatively on its content. MLP responds with

an accusation that it is the journalists who have misinterpreted the remark. This specific sequence from the interview was widely circulated on social media, and was re-diffused online on 23-05-2014 by the news website *FigaroLive*. On the one hand then, reporting this toxic comment by taking up a ‘neutral’ position in relation to its content reminds voters that JMLP was still able to publicly reveal the unacceptable face of the FN, at a time when the new leader, MLP, was trying hard to clean it up. On the other, it provides a platform for MLP to turn the tables, blaming the mainstream (elite) media for being biased against the party and, therefore, as she often claims, against ‘the French people’.

Case study 4: Scandalous talk as political strategy

The next case is an example of a former government minister strategically producing scandalous talk and adopting a populist style (Moffit 2016, author et al. 2018). Although not a member of a RWP party, Boris Johnson, currently the Conservative UK prime minister, often engages in populist ‘straight talking’, and breaks the rules of conventional political behaviour. Before becoming leader of the Conservative party he wrote a weekly column for the *Daily Telegraph* in which he expressed controversial populist opinions on a range of issues, which have been relished and endorsed by the extremist far-right (*Independent*, 26-9-2019).

In August 2018 Johnson commented that Muslim women wearing burqas look like letterboxes or bank robbers. This was picked up immediately by all major online news sites, and featured as a headline report the following day on BBC2’s flagship programme *Newsnight*. Like JMLP’s remark, it was treated as scandalous and therefore highly reportable. This time, subsequent commentators did not attribute it to the Conservative party as a whole, but as deliberately designed to keep Johnson himself firmly in the headlines, while telling conservative grass-root voters what they want to hear⁴.

Despite the similarities with case 3 above, the reporting frames across the online UK tabloid and broadsheet press differ significantly from those in French press reports. In the right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail Online* (6-08-18), there is frequent use of negatively evaluative reporting verbs (e.g. “mocked”, “refuses to apologize”), positioning the speaker as agent of speech acts that are morally reprehensible, such as: ‘ex foreign secretary *mocked* the full face veils, he *hit out at* male oppressive regimes around the world and “*refuses to apologise* for burqa ‘letterbox’ remark”.

However, these are mitigated in the subsequent text, where more neutral reporting verbs are used, ‘said’ and ‘warning’: “But he also *said* he does not agree with Denmark's decision to ban the coverings, *warning* the move risks backfiring and fanning the flames of radicalism”. Reactions from opposition politicians and Muslim groups are reported as equally negative and forceful, as for example “he was *slammed* by Labour”, “David Lammy *branded* the ex-cabinet minister “a ‘pound shop Donald Trump’”, and “Conservative party Muslim peer Baroness Warsi *accused* him of ‘dog whistle’ Islamophobia”. The *Mail* report goes on to list a series of circumstances justifying Johnson’s statement, including “Terror suspects have escaped surveillance by disguising themselves in burqas”. The moral discrepancy of the initial speech act thus becomes neutralized, with the result that, by the end of the report, the racist statement is brought within the domain of legitimate controversy. Reports across all UK news sites used the same quotes and soundbites to do the work of evaluating Johnson’s remark, deploying negative reporting verbs attributed either to Muslim conservative politicians or politicians from other parties reacting to his comment.

The tenor of these reporting verbs produces news of verbal attack, from one side or the other, wherein controversy is regularly whipped up by UK news media. It is the conflict generated by the statement that is newsworthy, not its content. When questioned on *Sky News* (28-09-18) about the comment, Johnson responded “I stand by what I said”. That response went largely unchallenged, as the interviewer follow-up was “it’s not really prime ministerial language is it”, thus framing the contentious talk as politically inappropriate for a potential future leader, rather than morally unacceptable. In sum, while the views expressed are populist and provocative, their toxic content is normalised when they are framed as strategic by reporting journalists.

Case study 5: Disputable meanings and the normalization of far-right nationalist talk

Characterizing this last case is the normalization of the language of RWP (in this case radical nationalist statements) through the framing of talk as disputable (rather than deviant) in news discourse. We refer to statements labelled anti-democratic, racist, or homophobic by critics, but argued to be non-controversial by the speaker himself and his supporters. The meaning of potentially scandalous utterances is thus dependent on the moral and cultural climate in society at the time (cf. Thompson, 2000:15), as well as the utterance in context, its potential ambiguities and the related possibilities for actors to claim different meanings. In foregrounding the dispute (rather than the scandalous content of the talk), and presenting

opposing views in headlines and quotes, news journalism casts the contentious talk as a legitimate political debate. Yet, precisely through these neutral reporting practices, journalism tends to contribute to the normalization of the language of far-right nationalism (see also Author et al. 2020).

Our example comes from a party leader debate on Swedish television, a few days before the national election in September 2018. The leader of the Swedish Democrats talked about why immigrants have a hard time finding jobs; his explanation was met with immediate criticism from the leader of the Centre Party, Annie Lööf:

Åkesson: that's why you have to ask why it's so hard
for these people to get jobs yeah it is because
they are not Swedes because they- they are-
they don't fit into Sweden and of course then it's
difficult to [get a job

Lööf: [but how- how do you express yourself

Besides Lööf's protest in the live debate, various other reactions suggest that Åkesson's utterance was widely perceived as illegitimate. In news interviews the day after, the utterance was condemned by a number of politicians across the political spectrum. In *Aftonbladet* (8-9-2018), Sweden's largest tabloid, former leader of the left party, Lars Ohly, said: "I don't think I have ever heard such a racist statement in a party leader debate ... This was a clearly racist statement." The interpretation of the utterance as racist is warranted, since the articulated division between "them" and "Swedes", and the definition of the problem of immigrants as not fitting in, displays circular logic (immigrants cannot fit into Sweden because they are not Swedes), and resonates with xenophobic discourses opposing the ethno-cultural 'others', and proposing instead a homogenous community of native Swedes.

However, in this case, Åkesson's talk about immigrants developed into a political controversy, rather than a political scandal. The reasons can be found in the disputable value of the utterance, as well as the mix of production routines enacted in news journalism. The controversy was distinctly represented through quote-driven news discourse in the two days after the live debate, after which the event disappeared from the media limelight. In the two

tabloids, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet* (and also in other media) most of the news texts and headlines contain quotes and reported speech from interviews with Åkesson, his critics and his supporting party colleagues. There are no journalistic interpretations of Åkesson's original statement about immigration. Nor are there interview questions indicating an adversarial stance towards the political statements cited. The news event is therefore framed as a political conflict orchestrated by an invisible and formally neutral journalism.

To illustrate this, in *Aftonbladet* (8-9-2018), Åkesson and the Prime Minister Stefan Löfven are quoted in two consecutive sections. Both sections have subheadings with extracted quotes from the two politicians. In the first section, the headline reads "Careful and inclusive", and in the main text Åkesson is quoted describing his utterance about immigrants: "What I said was careful and inclusive. I said that they don't fit into Sweden because they haven't adapted and then we have to give them an opportunity to adapt". In the next section, Löfven is quoted in the subheading: "Abominable statement", and in the main text: "It is an abominable statement, we have lots of people coming from other countries who are doing great things in health and care." The cited politicians thus articulate entirely different understandings of the disputable utterance, and invoke different contexts to justify their moral claims. The news article contains no commentary on these different understandings; rather, it enacts a balanced, formally neutral stance, assuming quotes from the two sides have an equal weight and speak for themselves as opinions in a legitimate controversy.

Discussion

This study has drawn attention to the complex – even contradictory – dynamics of reporting on scandalous talk by RWP parties and the attendant moral work of journalism. It offers insights into the diverse discourse mechanisms at work in the media framing of ethically problematic political talk, and their potential for shifting the boundaries of what is publicly perceived as moral deviance, legitimate political debate, and socio-culturally acceptable norms of political discourse.

Our discourse-analytic approach has revealed how a set of combined mechanisms contribute to processes of normalising and mainstreaming radical RW discourses and agendas: from the publicly performed ousting of the transgressor from the Swedish Democrats, and symbolic inclusion of the party in a democratic political culture in a de-toxifying move (as in the Martin Strid case), to lack of sanctions for the perpetrator and publicity-generating forms of

deliberate provocation (as in the Golden Dawn, J-M le Pen and Boris Johnson cases), to subtle negotiation of political moral boundaries and journalistic standards for reporting (as in the Jimmie Åkesson case). Each case of framing discussed in this paper has a distinctive normalising/mainstreaming potential for the populist discourses and party agendas being reported on.

We have thus shown that identifying a preference for negative news coverage of RW populists (e.g. Wettstein et al. 2018) may still obscure the complex discursive dynamics that underlie processes of normalisation and mainstreaming. Moreover, while Wettstein et al. (ibid) identify a tendency for mainstream news outlets to follow the responses of the mainstream parties toward populist actors, this study shows that, even when mainstream parties recognize RW populist talk as scandalous and racist, news may still position it within the sphere of a legitimate controversy (as in the Jimmie Åkesson case). Finally, RWP scandalous talk may well emanate from mainstream parties/politicians (as in the Boris Johnson case).

Importantly, two main findings merit attention with respect to the role of news media:

1) The normalising potential of neutral reporting based on an ostensibly balanced juxtaposition of (direct and indirect) quotes by adversarial parties in a political dispute. By merely citing oppositional quotes in mediated ‘conflict narratives’, the political actors’ own (re)definition of the meaning of their contested statements is circulated in the news. By distancing itself from the object of the dispute, journalism thus creates the conditions for far-right anti-democratic discourses to come forward as legitimate.

2) The framing of scandalous talk as expectedly provocative (publicity strategy) on the part of RWP actors addressing grass-root and broader conservative audiences, similarly, avoids substantially taking issue with far-right populists on ethical grounds. This shows the implications of strategically manipulating the interplay between political populism’s ‘straight-talking’ agenda and media logic to produce a constant feed of headline news (“...what sells, scandal, conflict, and that is what populists provide”, Mudde 2017b).

These two interrelated findings combine in the direction of normalizing and mainstreaming scandalous talk, and may overshadow marginalizing journalistic narratives that call attention to the moral deviance of RWP talk from accepted democratic standards. The centrality of

these routine journalistic practices highlights the challenge for European journalism when reporting on anti-democratic, racist and otherwise ethically controversial talk by RWP politicians.

The media's appetite for populism has been attributed partly to a lack of strong journalist standards (de Vreese et al. 2019: 236), but, as we show here, the application of long-standing, routine journalistic practices also appears to be a key mechanism in the normalization of right-wing populism.

In sum, practitioners of news journalism are increasingly required to balance disparate – and often ethically conflicting – concerns, by being constantly aware of the routine discourse choices they make in creating the news, as these choices help shape, and possibly shift, public perceptions of the socio-cultural legitimacy of racist, anti-democratic and fringe political discourses. As reporting the unsayable increasingly becomes part of journalistic routines, journalism education should work to cultivate responsible reporting practices that align with, nurture and promote democratic ideals in the citizenry.

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Notes

¹ By 'RWP' (right-wing populism and right-wing populist parties), we refer to political parties that are critical of the existing institutional order; parties that are nativist, nationalist, and exclusionist (de Jonge 2019: 191) and that are also 'populist' in that they construct politics as an expression of the general will of 'the people', which they posit as being in an antagonistic relationship to the corrupt 'elite' (Mudde 2007, 2017a).

² Following an incident in June 2012, where the Golden Dawn spokesperson, I. Kasidiaris, slapped a female politician of the Greek communist party and threw water over another live on a daily morning political show, the mainstream television channels imposed an embargo on GD by excluding them from live interviews and talk show panels. In the latest legislative election of 2019, Golden Dawn failed to secure the minimum threshold to enter the Greek parliament.

³ In French, the personification of a deadly virus as 'Monseigneur' (the title normally used for an archbishop) invokes the biblical image of a deadly disease as some form of divine intervention.

⁴ Interviewed for *Newsnight* (07-08-2018), Jack Blanchard, London editor of *Politico*, said that "he [BJ] knows exactly what he's writing [...] it's all very carefully thought through ...".