

# The co-construction of political scandal in hybrid media

*A Swedish case study*

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the lack of critical empirical research into the power relations of those involved as hybrid media events unfold. Specifically, I address a gap in the research on how political scandals are (co-)constructed by different contributors in the hybrid media environment. By recreating the sequence of events over the course of eleven days, I map and analyse the hybrid media scandal that triggered a Swedish Liberal Party leader's sudden resignation following statements made in a party YouTube video. The analysis adds insights into temporal complexities of contemporary scandal in hybrid media and displays the power of opinion leaders and the continued significance of legacy media in ensuring tangible political consequences for scandal narratives. The analysis further illustrates the importance of going beyond news end-products when attempting to gain a comprehensive understanding of how and why scandals unfold and highlights the relevance of social, cultural, and political contexts to grasp hybrid media scandals.

**KEYWORDS:** hybrid media, political scandal, social media, news media, Sweden

## Introduction

On 8 April 2022, Swedish Liberal Party leader Nyamko Sabuni unexpectedly declared her immediate resignation following negative press coverage in Swedish news outlets. While party leaders must, of course, resign at some point, it is exceptional in Swedish parliamentary history to do so with a mere five months

left before a national election. What is particularly noteworthy about this event is that the media critique stemmed from statements made in an official Liberal Party YouTube video posted just ten days before; it then made its way into the news via social media. In this article, I map how these events unfolded in digital and social media.

As a progressively complex and hybrid media environment interconnects society and everyday lives through digital technologies (Chadwick, 2017; Couldry & Hepp, 2016), digital and social media have come to play increasingly central roles in how political parties represent and market themselves, and consequently, how these efforts are picked up by the news media (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). However, while the mutual dependency of different actors, technology, and norms in the contemporary media environment has become increasingly well-established (Chadwick, 2017), there remains a lack of critical empirical research into the power relations of those involved as hybrid media events unfold (Jungherr et al., 2019). This is especially problematic because little is known about how political scandals, specifically, are (co-)constructed by different contributors in the hybrid media environment (Warner, 2023; Zulli, 2021).

Against this backdrop, the resignation of the Swedish Liberal Party leader offers a rare opportunity for a temporally concentrated case study of the complexities of hybrid media and scandal online. With a starting point in the notion of discursive power as control over what can be expressed, how, and by whom in the mediation of political information (Jungherr et al., 2019), and with a focus on the social construction of political scandals (Zulli, 2021), this article identifies who mattered, when, and where, in the events leading up to the party leader's resignation. Specifically, by mapping the digital circulation of the video and those responsible for its spread across platforms over time, and by analysing the video's reception as the scandal developed, I aim to shed empirical light on how the hybrid media system works in practice, and specifically how it can facilitate the production of scandals.

## The mediation of digital political communication

For something to become a full-blown scandal, it must at some point take hold of the public's attention, and research has shown that this has historically been done primarily through the reporting of mainstream news media (Allern & Pollack, 2012a; von Sikorski, 2018). However, the way that such (and other) news is produced has changed drastically through the increasingly *hybrid* nature of media. In the current age of deep mediatisation (Couldry & Hepp, 2016), the logics of legacy news media have become hybridised with those of online media when it comes to technology, but also in terms of softer values, like norms and behaviours.

Legacy media have become increasingly digital, multi-channel, public, and interactive, and, beyond journalists, they involve more numerous and diverse actors – from politicians to private individuals – at various stages of the

newsmaking process (Chadwick, 2017). While some claim that legacy media remain powerful (Langer & Gruber, 2021), others argue that they have lost at least some of their gatekeeping and agenda-setting powers to social media platforms (Meng, 2019).

Nevertheless, these new conditions have fundamentally altered the 24-hour news cycle of the print era (Bucy et al., 2014). Through media hybridisation, it can be argued that the rhythm of news is nowadays detached from the newspaper printing deadlines of the past, and better characterised by how a story develops through “political information cycles” (Chadwick, 2017). This logic of news production involves increased opportunities for leads, breaking news, and developments in stories to happen in real-time at any hour, and with new possibilities for various actors to act on, delay, disseminate, or repeat information across multiple digital formats and outlets (Chadwick, 2017).

Importantly, these actors do not operate independently of each other, they (re)act to the presence and contributions of others (Jungherr et al., 2019). Accordingly, the hybrid media environment is characterised not only by the velocity and breadth with which information can spread, but also by continuous struggles for visibility, space, and attention by different actors and perspectives (Canter, 2015; Towner & Muñoz, 2020). Individual hybrid media events occur through complex interplays between actors, between people and the settings in which the event forms and spreads, and with varied forms and intensities of attention, affect, and timing (Sumiala et al., 2018).

As a specific hybrid media event unfolds, the ability to introduce, amplify, and retain the attention of specific political perspectives, topics, and voices in the public space has become what characterises political discursive power in this system (Jungherr et al., 2019). These power positions can, according to Jungherr and colleagues (2019), be manifested in some parts through the characteristics of individual participants and temporary situational factors. Beyond this, discursive power relations are also dependent on organisational as well as systemic prerequisites. Specifically, on an organisational level, discursive power will depend on a contributor’s ability to reach a wide audience. More than this, it is contingent on the (in)dependence of external audience-based and financially related expectations on what issues to address and how. Furthermore, on a systemic level, the regulatory environment and especially the presence or absence of public service media and the degree of political parallelism will form the prerequisites for specific power dynamics.

Finally, the conditions of the hybrid media system allow for multiplicity in several respects, but there remains a lack of research regarding the balance between different forms of digital media and contributors (Schroeder, 2018) and into empirical investigations of these power relations (Jungherr et al., 2019). This article addresses this gap through a multi-sited, multi-methodological, and multi-modal approach (Teszelszky, 2019), which is specifically focused on identifying distinct acts of discursive power (Jungherr et al., 2019) – the key instances in which central contributors were able to propel the (developing) scandal towards the public’s consciousness.

## Social media in newsmaking

A key dimension to media's hybridisation is the new role that social media have come to play in newsmaking. With the Internet, and especially the interactive opportunities brought on by Web 2.0, news media have increasingly become intertwined with social media. Social media are now key spaces for legacy media organisations to monitor information and consequently find and verify stories, sources, and facts (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Cage et al., 2020), and to extract quotes for articles (Molyneux & McGregor, 2022; Oschatz et al., 2022).

Yet, at the same time, research has also pointed out that news media's sourcing practices on social media remain understudied (Wang & Diakopoulos, 2021), that journalists are not necessarily transparent about their use of online resources to source information for articles, and that inspiration and ideas for stories have a tendency to get lost in the end product (Johnson et al., 2018; Van Leuven et al., 2018). This, in turn, has naturally complicated efforts to map how aspects of the news production process unfold in the hybrid media system and the power relations embedded within it. This article contributes new insights into these practices through the reconstruction of the digital and social media events as they unfolded over time. By creating a comprehensive timeline of key moments in the scandal's development, I can go beyond news media's (un)claimed sources to show the actors and moments that played a decisive role in propelling the scandal forward.

## The construction of political scandal

A political scandal can be defined as a wrongdoing or misconduct by a politician that is publicly presented as an urgent issue for society to not only acknowledge but to also address (Entman, 2013). In other words, political scandals are socially constructed and actively maintained norm transgressions that reach the public's consciousness and fuel their animosity (Ekström & Johansson, 2008; Zulli, 2021). Scandals vary depending on the nature of the actions and transgressed norms. More specifically, as a starting point, the Liberal Party leader scandal can be defined as a "talk scandal" that originated from the "unsuccessful utterances" (Ekström & Johansson, 2008) made in the YouTube interview.

However, not all political wrongdoings turn into scandals (Entman, 2013). Political scandals, therefore, are better characterised by their *effects* – condemnations and threats to reputation – than any inherent features of the actions themselves (Allern & Pollack, 2012a). Thus, if misconduct does not become publicly criticised and scrutinised, the severity of the transgression is inconsequential in terms of scandal (von Sikorski, 2018).

It is not uncommon for scandals to begin small and deepen as the story grows and develops (Allern & Pollack, 2012b; Pollack et al., 2018). According to research, news media's framing – or use of sources and angles – is crucial for how a scandal is understood and evaluated by the public, and oftentimes it is the commercial and professional motivations that drive reporting on political scandals (Allern et al., 2012; Meng, 2019). In the Nordic and Swedish context,

this has often led to tabloids being the first to expose and frame political scandals, followed by other news media outlets (Allern & Pollack, 2012b).

In the Nordic and Swedish context, person-oriented political scandals have become increasingly more common (Pollack et al., 2018). Oftentimes, the politician facing scandal allegations is accused on a highly personalised level and judged by the news media against an idealised moral standard (Allern & Pollack, 2012b).

Specifically, while there is literature exploring the building blocks of scandal, the bulk of this research focuses on scandal solely in legacy media, and there is an absence of detailed empirical research into how scandal develops in the hybrid media system. Because of the Internet's potential for cheap, accessible, quick, and scalable political participation, people are increasingly able to engage in (or co-construct) political action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Couldry, 2015), and importantly, without the need for any direct access to political actors themselves. Consequently, public critique and scrutiny of politicians' transgressions are increasingly co-constructed by a range of actors and through a range of digital platforms, also beyond traditional elites (Zulli, 2021).

Specifically, with the same mechanisms that have changed the dynamics of political communication and newsmaking in the hybrid media system, Zulli (2021) has argued that scandals have become more collaborative and dependent on actors also outside the news media who spread scandalous content based on personal motives. Although some research efforts highlight that the news media remain crucial for a scandal to reach the wider public (Vorberg & Zeitler, 2019), these changes result in scandal narratives that are multiple, spread quickly, and are more antagonistic and partisan (Stoycheff, 2019; Warner, 2023; Zulli, 2021). Accordingly, the many promotional advantages that come with the Internet for politicians also mean that they are increasingly visible and more easily scrutinised and that their reputations become increasingly reliant on mediation through digital and social media (Ekström & Johansson, 2008; Warner, 2023).

Although previous research highlights the multitude of actors involved in the hybrid media space and specifically in hybrid media scandals (Allern & Pollack, 2012a; Hau et al., 2024; Meng, 2019; Stoycheff, 2019), efforts tend to be limited to how hybrid media events (including scandals) play out in various news outlets (e.g., Entman & Stonbely, 2018; Mancini, 2018; Puglisi & Snyder, 2011), or, in exceptional cases, exclusively within individual social media settings (e.g., Lee, 2018; Warner, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this article's focus on the complexity and fluidity of contemporary political scandal provides a unique perspective on the co-construction of political scandals in the hybrid media environment. By extending the time horizon to also include what happens *before* the scandal ends up in the news media, and moreover to focus attention *across* individual digital settings, I can provide a richer and more comprehensive account of the formation of political scandals in the hybrid media system.

## Case and context

In terms of journalism and news media, Sweden is often considered a characteristic democratic corporatist country with strong public service media, protection and state support for the free press, comparatively high political parallelism, and high levels of journalistic professionalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Jakobsson et al., 2024). This does not mean, however, that Sweden is exempt from the fragmentation and internationalisation that has come with the development of the hybrid media system, and with this, the inevitable increase in private ownership of (digital and social) media (Flensburg & Lai, 2024).

Sweden has a proportional electoral system where votes in all levels of elections – local, regional, and national – are cast at the same time, every four years (Nord & Grusell, 2021). Overall, elections have a relatively high voter turnout, with 84.2 per cent in the last general election in 2022 (The Swedish Election Authority, 2023). Since 2010, when the far-right party Sweden Democrats first passed the 4 per cent threshold, the same eight parties have continuously held seats in the Swedish parliament: the Social Democrats, the Sweden Democrats, the Moderate Party, the Left Party, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats, the Green Party, and finally, the Liberal Party.

### The Alliance break-up and plummeting ratings

The Swedish Liberal Party defines its liberal stance as “freedom to live your life on your own terms” (Liberal Party, 2025). Politically, the party’s recent history has been defined by its part in the centre-right “Alliance”, launched in 2004. The Alliance, which was a political affiliation of parties also including the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Centre Party, collaborated in government formations as well as in opposition to Social Democratic rule. It was abruptly dissolved in January 2019 when the Centre and Liberal Parties voted to re-elect the Social Democrat prime minister to keep the Sweden Democrats from governmental influence (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021).

This so-called “January Agreement” was a 73-point written contract between the Social Democrats, Centre, Liberal, and Green Parties, and in collaboration with the Left Party, where the centre-left bloc could form a government with the help of the Centre and Liberal Party, which would in turn receive influence over the government’s politics. Subsequently, this caused an internal rift within the Liberal Party, between those who preferred to collaborate with the Sweden Democrats to form a right-wing government and those who agreed to support the Social Democrats and thereby leave the right-wing party coalition.

Shortly after the Liberal Party had joined the January Agreement, the then party leader of twelve years resigned, and Burundian-born Nyamko Sabuni was elected as the new party leader at the Liberal Party’s national conference. Sabuni, who is right-leaning, had previously served as Integration and Equality Minister in the 2006 Alliance government. While Sabuni herself disagreed with the January Agreement, she made it clear that she would stand by the decision made by her predecessor (Hållbus, 2019). Consequently, she also inherited the internal conflict

that came with it. Then, after political disagreements resulted in a no-confidence vote and subsequent collapse of the centre-left government on 21 June 2021, the Liberal Party declared the January Agreement invalid and once again sought to form a right-wing government. This too, according to the news media, further fuelled internal conflict (Gripenberg et al., 2021; Lönnaeus, 2021; Sennerö, 2021).

Since the Liberal Party's launch in 1934, it has secured seats in parliament in all subsequent general elections. While the party has seldom come near its peak result of 24.4 per cent in 1954, they have fared especially poorly in polling in recent years (Statistics Sweden, 2022). After receiving 5.5 per cent of votes in the 2018 election, the Liberals were polling as low as 2 per cent before Sabuni's resignation. Similarly, while Sabuni initially saw approval ratings of over 20 per cent, these plummeted to as low as 6 per cent in the months leading up to her resignation (Novus, 2022).

Against the backdrop of these ratings, it would not be surprising if either the party or Sabuni herself would see resignation as an option to keep the Liberal Party above the parliamentary threshold. However, there are few clues in the ratings to suggest that such a decision would be made so abruptly on 8 April. In fact, the previous poll had shown a slight increase in her ratings – from 6 to 9 per cent (Novus, 2022).

### The resignation and the video

According to the news media, the internal election committee had been informed only hours before that Sabuni and her parliamentary secretary were going to resign (Strömberg, 2022). At a press conference, Sabuni answered none of the news media's questions but read a brief message, which, among other things, stated the following:

In June 2019, the party chose all of me, but all of me is not what is needed now. All of me and the discussion about all of me obscures what is most important. (Blom, 2022)

When asked by a journalist at the press conference if the backlash to the video was what caused the resignation, the party secretary denied. Yet, despite this rebuttal, several news outlets nevertheless pointed to what Sabuni said in the YouTube video as one of the leading causes for the sudden shift in party leadership (Olsson, 2022; Sköld, 2022; Thurfjell et al., 2022).

The YouTube video in question, called *Politics from Seven Types of Cookies*, is an almost 40-minute-long clip of a conversation-like interview in which former Moderate youth party leader and political editor of the right-leaning national daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (henceforth *SvD*) asks questions to Nyamko Sabuni and Moderate party leader Ulf Kristersson. It is not clear through the video who arranged the interview or whether the questions had been made available to the party leaders beforehand. However, given the Liberal Party's poor ratings, it might be reasonable to assume that the party staged the interview and sought to associate themselves with the Moderate Party, which had considerably better ratings, as an election campaign effort.

The interview itself is framed as a conversation based on seven themes represented by seven types of Swedish cookies – a traditional number to serve for Swedish *fika* stemming from the 1800s. The first cookie, which directly translates to “farmers cookie”, is described as representing the tensions between the urban and the rural; the “Brussels cookie” is used as a starting point to discuss the EU; the “chocolate ball” – which in the not-too-distant past was more commonly referred to by an explicitly racist epithet – is used in the discussion for issues of segregation and integration; the “vanilla horn”, due to its horseshoe shape, is used in a discussion of luck; the “checkerboard cookie” is used to spur a conversation on strategy and analytic ability; the “radio cake” is used to discuss technology; and finally, the “dream cookie” is meant to stimulate conversations about the future.

**Figure 1** Wayback Machine screenshot of YouTube video



**Comments:** Screenshot taken on 3 April 2022.

As seen in Figure 1, the video only had 133 views on 3 April, six days after its upload. When the party leader resigned five days later on 8 April, the YouTube video had reached 23,554 views. Although these are not staggering figures, this kind of attention is nevertheless an uncommon occurrence for the Liberal Party YouTube channel, which at the time of the video posting had only 1,440

subscribers – a number which is low for any YouTube channel trying to reach large audiences and smaller than those of most other Swedish parliamentary parties. In April 2022, only the Christian Democrats had fewer YouTube subscribers.<sup>1</sup>

## Data and methods

The formation of hybrid media events is complex and requires paying attention to different settings, actors, and messages (Sumiala et al., 2018). Analytically, I draw inspiration from Jungherr and colleagues' (2019) use of “discursive power”, where mapping the flow of topics (here, specifically the evolution of the Liberal Party leader scandal) and how and by whom these topics are presented through the hybrid media space can help identify the points in time when different participants held positions of discursive power (see also Lee, 2018). In practice, I collected all available information about the spread of the video from when it was first posted on YouTube on 29 March 2022 until the party leader resigned on 8 April 2022.

To approach the potential complexity of this chain of events retrospectively, I took a digital archaeological approach, which entails using whatever multi-sited, multi-methodological, and multi-modal methods are available to recreate events as they unfolded (Teszelszky, 2019). The first exploratory step was to determine where the discussions had primarily taken place, who was involved, and what the triggering events might have been. To do this, I performed separate search engine searches for the now deleted *Politics from Seven Types of Cookies* video URL, “Sabuni”, “Liberalerna” [The Liberals], and “Politik utifrån sju sorters kakor” [Politics from seven types of cookies] limited to the time span between the posting of the video and the resignation. The search results included primarily news articles, along with occasional hits from online forums, aggregators, and alternative media. Furthermore, while search engines are insufficient at picking up social media content, these hits nevertheless drew attention to a long Twitter<sup>2</sup> thread about the video posted by a journalist a couple of days after it had been uploaded on YouTube.

Given the seeming importance of Twitter and news media in the initial overview searches, in the next step, I conducted large-scale, structured data collections from both these media types. Twitter data were collected through five individual queries: Specifically, using *twarc2*, I collected all Swedish-language tweets through the API in the said timespan which either 1) contained the *youtu.be* or *youtube.com* version of the video URL; 2) mentioned the Liberal Party Twitter account, *@liberalerna*; 3) contained the keyword “Sabuni”; 4) mentioned the journalist; or 5) were posted by the journalist responsible for the aforementioned Twitter thread. In total, after removing duplicates, this resulted in a dataset of 11,769 tweets. Furthermore, using the Retriever media archive, I collected all news articles mentioning Sabuni or The Liberals in the Swedish national and regional press (1,368 articles).

Finally, to ensure no relevant discussion points had been missed, I complemented these data by manual search engine queries through Bing, Google

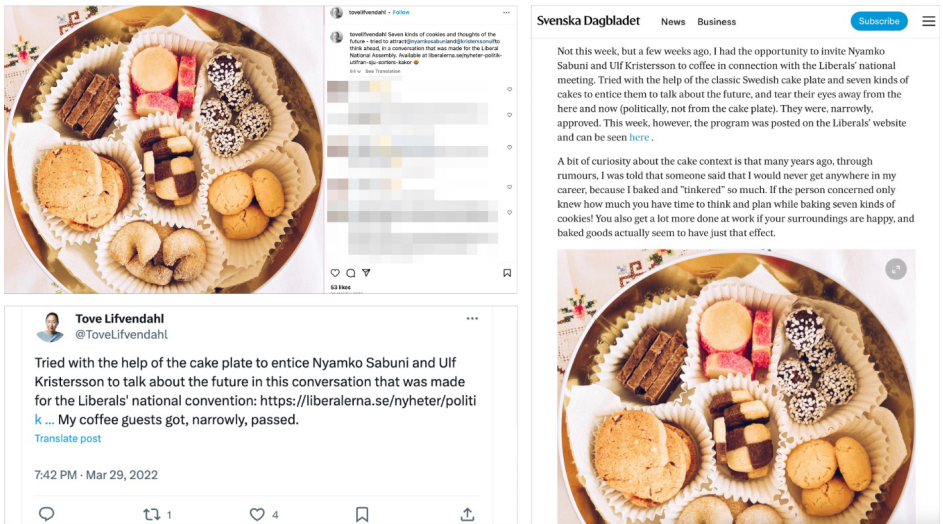
Search, and DuckDuckGo for any additional hits on the search queries. This yielded another 23 hits from alternative media, online forums, social media, and news aggregators. Beyond this, I used the archival sites ArchiveToday and the Wayback Machine to recreate snapshots of events, interactions, and metrics at key moments throughout the eleven-day period.

Practically, I constructed a chronological timeline of when and where discussions of the video appeared and the exact date and time when they had taken place, and I identified who initiated these discussions and how others responded. Alongside this, I mapped the social network of in-text citations and references to determine what contributors received the most acknowledgement and when, as the scandal emerged. Finally, I noted the accumulated views of the YouTube video and the relative attention to the issue through the number of media entries about the emerging scandal to substantiate my interpretations. Below, I detail the key moments and periods identified in the co-construction of the scandal.

### From dormancy to first public interactions

The video that would later come to cause a major political scandal in Sweden was posted on the Liberal Party YouTube channel on 29 March 2022. Digital archaeological searches revealed that on this same day, the Liberal Party embedded the YouTube video on the official Liberal Party website. Alongside this, the political editor interviewing the party leaders in the YouTube video also promoted it on the day of posting through their Twitter and Instagram accounts,<sup>3</sup> and four days later, the editor mentioned the interview in an editorial text published in *SvD* (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Screenshots of Instagram post, tweet, and *Svenska Dagbladet* article promoting the video



**Comments:** The Instagram post (top-left), tweet (bottom-left), and *Svenska Dagbladet* article (right), have been auto-translated.

Yet, despite the editor being ranked at the time as the 75th most powerful account on Swedish Twitter (Medieakademin, 2021), and even though the national newspaper *SvD* was the second most-read daily newspaper in Sweden (Kantar Sifo, 2022), these efforts had little impact in calling attention to the video. In fact, archived snapshots show that after four days, the video had been viewed a mere 133 times (see Figure 1). Assuming the video was properly embedded on the Liberal Party website, this count also included any views of the video there; this is noteworthy, given that the video did in fact make it onto Instagram, Twitter, and mainstream news media and was promoted by powerful political and media actors.

However, as previously noted, few of the Liberal Party's videos garner any considerable public attention. In fact, the attention the video received at this stage makes it indicative of the Liberal Party's campaign (in)visibility on social media in general (see Oscarsson et al., 2024), despite active and public promotional efforts by both the party and the *SvD* editor.

Up to this point, the Liberal Party had retained full control over the narrative and framing of the interview, but only because few seemed aware of the video's existence. Rather than the scandal breaking at the time of the YouTube video's posting, this delay illustrates the complexity of timeliness and pace in the hybrid media system, and it specifically shows how through the archival characteristics of sites like YouTube, political information can lie dormant for an extended period of time before it is discovered or deemed worthy of sharing (Chadwick, 2017). An extreme version of this is when old statements or visuals that are no longer deemed acceptable are resurfaced from politicians' social media feeds, many years after the fact (Purna Kambhampaty et al., 2019; Walker & Boddy, 2024).

The YouTube video was publicly interacted with for the first time following a Twitter thread on the evening of Sunday, 3 April, when a journalist for the left-leaning national newspaper *Dagens ETC*<sup>4</sup> posted:

I know you know that the Liberals suck at communication. But I don't think you know how bad they actually are, even in their own channels. Today I saw the clip "Politics from seven types of cookies" on L's [Liberal's] YouTube channel. It is 39:27 minutes long, uploaded on March 29th.

Following this is a 20-tweet-long thread of the forty-minute video cut up into chunks, uploaded, and interspersed with critical, yet light-hearted commentary about its content (see Figure 3). Given that the clip is uploaded rather than linked, the norm transgression(s) that would come to cause the scandal were at this stage preserved beyond YouTube and the control of the Liberal Party and can thus be accessed regardless of what happens to the original video (see also Ekström & Johansson, 2008).

**Figure 3** Screenshots from *Dagens ETC* journalist's Twitter thread



**Comments:** Screenshots have been auto-translated and compiled.

Commenters noted the thread's entertainment value, quoting and replying to it as "fantastic", "magical", "funny", and "amazing". But beyond this, the journalist's repackaging of the long video into more approachable and easily digestible short clips appears central in making it accessible also for those who were not core supporters (or critics) of the Liberal Party. As commenters also noted:

Thanks for this! I couldn't have gotten through it myself.

We don't have to watch it now because [the journalist] has already done it.

You can just read the commentary, that way you don't have to watch the whole clip yourselves.

The clip has already been cut and commented on to spare you unnecessary suffering.

In this way, the shorter presentation format and its delivery through humorous storytelling is not unlike how late-night shows use humour to critically comment on segmented statements made by political actors (Nitsch & Lichtenstein, 2019).

Importantly, for the first time since the Liberal Party posted the video on YouTube, an audience, following the perspective and points raised by the journalist in the thread, began approaching the video critically. Although users commented and critiqued several points raised in the YouTube video snippets, one statement particularly stood out to Twitter users: Four clips into the Twitter thread came the discussion of the “farmers cookie” and the tensions between the urban and the rural, and at that point, the Liberal Party leader made a comment about potentially leaving Sweden in case of war:

In crisis and war, you manage better in the countryside, I think that is quite noticeable now. I myself have thought... I had a women's network [referencing a meeting] this weekend and a woman said, “Oh, I have a relative on the west coast [of Sweden] and it's close to Norway. If there is a war, I'll go to the countryside and if it gets worse, I'll go to Norway, they are NATO members”. I have thought the exact same thing myself. We have [a summer house close to the Norwegian border], where we can manage with food and water and so on. If it gets even worse, we'll drive over to Norway.

The commenting users expressed outrage at Sabuni's supposed lack of allegiance to Sweden, describing her reasoning as “unbelievable”, “terrifying”, and “idiotic”, and most damningly, criticising her lack of patriotism and leadership:

How could a Swedish party leader even think to hide or leave the country if there is a war?

Sabuni seems to have missed Sweden's total defence duty thinking she could do whatever she wants without consequences, but Swedes should defend their nation.

Shouldn't elected politicians try to help people around them and not just think of themselves?

In this sense, the first framing of the scandal followed a common theme in Nordic political scandals wherein a politician has failed to adhere to the standards expected from ordinary citizens (Pollack et al., 2018). Here, this means being prepared to defend one's nation and act in solidarity with their fellow citizens. While there are comments directed at the statement itself, it is also evident that the critique was centred specifically on the party leader Sabuni as a person and leader, but also as a “Swede” not living up to the standards set for ordinary – brave and patriotic – natives. This echoes previous research showing how ethnic minorities failing to act adequately “native” are easily reduced to their (othered) ethnicity (Trimble et al., 2015).

While the party leader's comment might not at first glance seem overly severe, further Twitter comments give clues as to why in this specific cultural, societal, and historical context it is considered scandalous (see also Allern &

Pollack, 2012a; Ekström & Johansson, 2008). At this time, in April 2022, Russia had recently launched its full-scale war on Ukraine, and Sweden, with its close geographic proximity to Russia, had begun its move towards a NATO membership. Against this backdrop, ideas of patriotism, and even the threat of a potential Russian invasion, were at the forefront of Swedes' minds – so much so, in fact, that commenters drew direct contrasts with the Liberal Party leader's lack of leadership instincts and the capability of Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Sabuni's lack of leadership at such a precarious point in time, and not least during an election year where political leadership for the coming four years would be determined, seemingly made her norm transgression particularly severe and indicated that she was not the dependable or trustworthy Swedish leader needed during uncertain times.

## From opinion leaders to mass (media) spread

The tweeting journalist identified, consumed, and interpreted a piece of political campaign content which no other commentators had yet noticed. Through what appears to be a combination of luck, timing, and knowledge of their audience, they repackaged, interpreted, and redistributed it in a way that drew attention (see also Mohr, 2014; Warner, 2023). Within a day of the thread being posted, it had received attention from several highly influential people within legacy media and parliamentary politics. In most cases, these actors commented on the thread's entertainment value, for instance, "Judging by the music, someone must really enjoy riding elevators" (parliamentary member of the Left Party ranking as the 25th most powerful on Swedish Twitter in 2021) and "Do yourselves a favour and read this thread" (political editor ranking 64th most powerful on Swedish Twitter in 2021). But others also raised critical concerns, like a political editor ranking 63rd most powerful on Swedish Twitter in 2021, who exclaimed: "It cannot be how it appears in the video. Can someone in L [the Liberal Party] explain what she really means?"

Indeed, content from the thread was retweeted, quoted, and replied to by members of parliament representing the Social Democrats, Centre, and Left Parties. The thread was also interacted with by journalists, columnists, and political and cultural editors from both local newspapers and major national evening and morning newspapers. These influential Twitter users helped amplify attention to the video and its initial framing and interpretation as scandalous. Thus, the discursive power of the journalist tweeting the original thread was mediated and amplified through influential Twitter users.

This became even clearer the following day. On 5 April, reconstructions of the event timeline show not only that mentions of the video begin to pop up outside of Twitter – on other social media sites and forums – but news of the video was also for the first time reported on in mainstream news media. Specifically, and in Swedish scandal custom, the coverage was through two editorials in the evening newspapers *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, which adhered to the same scandal narrative established in the original Twitter commentary:

You want to become a minister – but with the prepper bag fully packed so that you can leave the country if Sweden is ATTACKED? And you say that in a situation when a warlike Russia is rattling its weapons in our direction. [...] Mentally, she has obviously already checked out as party leader. The election is lost, the Liberals have crashed... (Marteus, 2022)

The following day, news of the video spread to other daily national newspapers and sites, national television, far-right media, and news aggregators, and it was also picked up by local and regional newspapers. In total, the topic of the video headlined 15 news articles on 6 April. These legacy media articles again amplified the framing first introduced in the original tweet. Although in previous commentary several of the party leader’s statements were in focus, they now appeared more distilled and focused solely on her statements about abandoning responsibilities and fleeing to Norway:

Rights and duties go hand in hand, and that is something which Liberal Party leaders used to agree with. (Bergström, 2022)

She is not prepared to stay and take government responsibility if things get messy, but instead heads to Norway. (Kristoffersson, 2022)

At this time, my analysis shows that the image of the party leader in legacy media was changing. A word2vec model based on the content posted about the party leader during the sample period shows that reporting before 6 April associates Sabuni with the Liberal Party, her opposition to then centre-left government issues, and to the other female party leader in the rightist bloc, Ebba Busch. In contrast, reporting after 6 April associates the party leader increasingly with her statement about fleeing to Norway (see Table 1). Interestingly, no such differences appear when the same model is applied to “the Liberal Party”.

**Table 1** Gensim Word2Vec similarity scores “Nyamko”, “Sabuni”

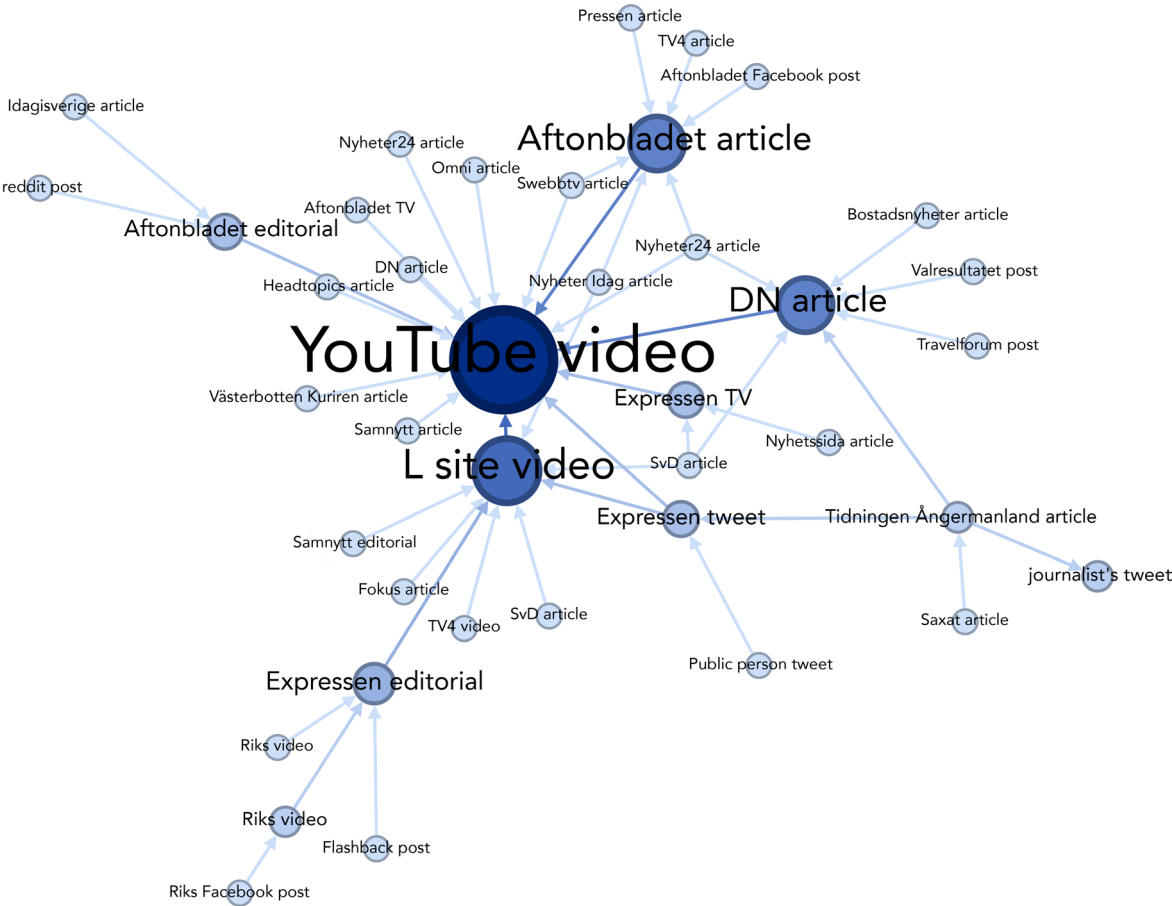
| 29 March–5 April |                  | 6 April–resignation |                  |
|------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| word             | similarity score | word                | similarity score |
| party leader     | 0.94             | party leader        | 0.99             |
| oppose           | 0.88             | Norway              | 0.95             |
| Busch            | 0.87             | the Liberals        | 0.94             |
| Ebba             | 0.87             | flee                | 0.93             |
| the Liberals     | 0.87             | stumbled            | 0.92             |

**Comments:** Gensim Word2Vec similarity scores “Nyamko”, “Sabuni”. Python Gensim version: 4.3.1, parameters: minimum count = 1; vector size = 300; window size = 3.

Against this backdrop, it appears that the statements became synonymous with the party leader rather than the party itself in mainstream media, wherein the scandal framing was primarily directed at the party leader as an individual (Lengauer et al., 2012). This is noteworthy, given that the video was orchestrated and published by the party in their official digital party channels, rather than by the party leader herself.

Although this analysis does not claim to demonstrate causality between events, the lack of attention to the video for several days after its publication, and the subsequent attention following the Twitter thread and the interactions of influential politicians and journalists, likely served as the trigger for subsequent mainstream media coverage. Yet, as I retraced the journalistic references made to the video, the Twitter thread was often omitted. Only one regional news article from before the resignation on 8 April, five days after the original tweet, credited the journalist for first having called attention to the video. Instead, news media articles most often, including the two initial ones from 5 April, referred directly to the original video either on the Liberal Party site or on YouTube (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Social network of sources with explicit in-text references (excluding tweets)



By failing to credit the journalist for discovering the story, news media appeared more well-informed than they would have, had they acknowledged another (competing) journalist. The lack of recognition might also, as shown in previous research (van Leuven et al., 2018), be a way of streamlining the story and not distracting from its key points. The lack of recognition caught the attention of several other journalists on Twitter, who described the move as “stingy” and “distasteful”, but this still failed to provoke any visible response from legacy media. Instead, omitting the reference became a way for them to capitalise on and get credit for the journalist’s work and insider knowledge with minimal effort of their own (see also Berger, 2016).

Although it is recommended for scandal-affected politicians to swiftly admit to and apologise for scandalous remarks (Pollack et al., 2018), it was not until midday on 6 April, three days after her statements were initially criticised on Twitter, when the party leader responded by describing the scenario as merely a “thought experiment” and that she is “ready to defend Sweden, my country” (Svensson, 2022). This gesture, however, proved too little and too late. As the image of the party leader was reforming, the analysis shows that the nature of the video itself had also shifted. In fact, at this stage when the resignation was looming, the analysis shows that the original Twitter thread was increasingly being treated as a journalistic scoop online – or as it was noted by one political editor on Twitter, as a “legendary exposé”. Interestingly then, what had emerged as an intentional promotional digital campaign effort had by the end evolved not only into a scandal but also to some extent even a “leak” (see also Wheatley, 2020).

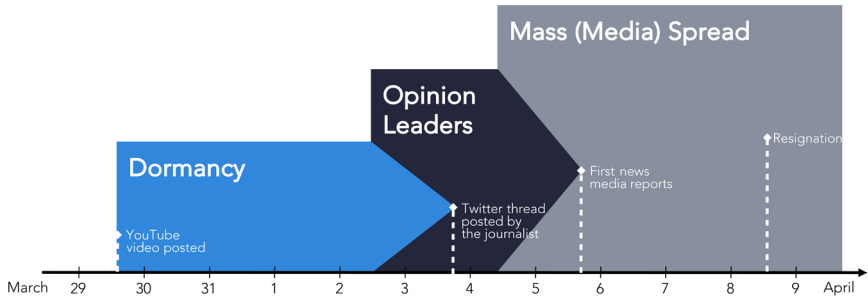
## Discussion

In this article I have addressed the current lack of critical empirical research into the power relations of those involved as hybrid media events unfold (Jungherr et al., 2019), and specifically, I have addressed the gap in research on how scandalous political stories are (co-)constructed by different contributors in the hybrid media environment (Warner, 2023; Zulli, 2021). By recreating the sequence of events over the course of the scandal’s development, I have mapped the hybrid media scandal that triggered a Swedish Liberal Party leader’s sudden resignation following statements she made in a promotional party YouTube video.

The complexity of hybrid media means that contemporary media events can play out very differently (Sumiala et al., 2018; Zulli, 2021), and beyond this, there are few points of comparison for how hybrid scandals typically unfold. Beyond this, it is rare that unsuccessful or even scandalous public relations stunts lead to resignations, and the party leader’s confidence ratings, as well as the Liberal Party’s general polling numbers, were exceptionally low. However, the Sabuni case includes many of the characteristics that have been identified as typical of a hybrid media scandal, not least a Swedish one. It is a clear-cut “talk scandal” (Ekström & Johansson, 2008), which begins as a seemingly insignificant event which grows in seriousness as the scandal unfolds, and develops into accusations on a highly personalised level whereby the politician is measured by

the news media against an idealised moral standard, including expectations of bravery and national identity (Allern & Pollack, 2012b; Pollack et al., 2018). Thus, although I present a specific case study and scandal process (see Figure 5), this article nevertheless provides insights that can be used to understand how other hybrid media scandals could unfold.

**Figure 5** Timeline of the unfolding of the scandal



This article makes several contributions. First, the analysis offers insights into the temporal complexities of contemporary scandal formation in hybrid media, where rapid eruption of activity and interest followed an initial period of dormancy lasting several days. The findings of the article also complicate previous research indicating publication timing as important for the spread of political information (Ketelaars & Sevenans, 2021). Instead, the very possibility of this chain of events occurring can be attributed to the “archival permanence” (Chadwick, 2017) provided by YouTube. Although seldom addressed, this potential dormancy further complicates predicting and pre-empting scandals in the hybrid media system.

Second, despite showing the varied contributors and spaces involved in the co-construction of a hybrid media scandal, the findings of the article highlight the continued importance of elites. Specifically, it showcases first the power of opinion leaders in mediating scandal into the public limelight (see also Chadwick, 2017), and second, the continued significance of legacy news media in ensuring tangible political consequences for the scandal narratives (Jungherr et al., 2019; Langer & Gruber, 2021).

Beyond this, the article sheds light on the opacity of journalistic sourcing (Humayun & Ferrucci, 2022; van Leuven et al., 2018). It shows how although it is likely that legacy news media relied on information about the scandal provided through a specific tweet, this source was seldom made explicit in the journalistic end products. This might be because journalists are generally less likely to promote content that comes from other news sources (or in this case, a journalist) (Russell, 2019; see also Hau et al., 2024). This reluctance might potentially also have been exacerbated by the explicitly leftist profile of the journalist and the newspaper they worked for.

Finally, the fact that legacy media had the power to make the journalist almost completely invisible in their subsequent reporting moderates previous

findings about the waning authority of news media in favour of the growing influence of social media platforms for news distribution (Hu et al., 2012; Meng, 2019). By not including the Twitter source, the news organisations were able to strip the journalist of their episodic discursive power while asserting their own organisational power, reaffirming their positions as agenda-setting authorities (Jungherr et al., 2019). The importance of elites, however, does not diminish the need for scandal research to explore the process of scandal co-construction. In fact, the invisibility of the process and early key contributors in legacy news media's subsequent reporting highlights the importance of going beyond the end-product presented in the news media, not only when attempting to gain a comprehensive understanding of how and why scandals unfold, but also more generally the dissemination of political information in the hybrid media system.

## Limitations

A key limitation in this article – and others that use search engines in sampling – is the lack of hits on radio, television, and social media content. As a result, there might have been more media settings in which this event took shape, but which remained inaccessible in this study. Still, this limitation was somewhat mitigated, as readings of the accessible texts did not refer to additional inaccessible sites or content. Furthermore, although findings did not explicitly address the party leader's gender or ethnicity, future research should explore if and to what extent social categories might have played a role in how the scandal unfolded. Finally, in this article I have only mapped an episodic and specific instance of discursive power. Future research would do well to focus on a greater number of events, and on how the mechanisms and actors involved in scandalous hybrid media events in Sweden and abroad might evolve over time.

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## Endnotes

- 1 According to April 2022 statistics from Social Blade ([https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/\[party YouTube handle\]/monthly](https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/[party YouTube handle]/monthly)) the Sweden Democrats had 62,000 subscribers, the Social Democrats had 8,560 subscribers, the Moderates had 5,030 subscribers, the Left Party had 4,070 subscribers, the Centre Party had 3,530 subscribers, the Greens had 2,230 subscribers, and the Christian Democrats had 1,370 subscribers.
- 2 Although the platform has now been renamed X, Twitter is used throughout this article to denote the platform as it functioned at the time of the event, before the sharp rightward turn and changing norms and functions of the platform following Musk's acquisition in October 2022.
- 3 Following Williams, Burnap, and Sloan (2017), public figures and content are not anonymised. Content posted by private individuals is adjusted and anonymised to ensure privacy (Markham, 2012).
- 4 Dagens ETC officially describes itself as “red, green, and independent” (<https://www.etc.se/>).