UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Corruption: Multiple margins and mediatized transgression

Damgaard, Mads

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Mads Damgaard

abstract

The emerging global awareness of corruption in organizations and politics, ubiquitous in the media and public discourse in recent decades, has launched multiple ways of condemning corrupt phenomena. Every mode of condemning and critiquing corruption articulates a marginal zone of action and forms a boundary in relation to a specific notion of the common good. The different notions at stake in mediatized discourse on corruption render the social construction of corruption contested, ambiguous, and multifaceted. This article establishes an analytical framework, using ideas from Boltanski and Thévenot's *On justification*, Victor Turners theory of the *liminal*, and contemporary media theory. In this framework, the mediatization of corruption is analyzed as liminal, i.e. socially polluting and dangerous to the fabric of society, because corrupt actions represent transgression of the normal rules of conduct. As the media discloses such transgressions, processes of expulsion and discursive exclusion are triggered. In corruption scandals, corruption thereby discursively emerges as a shadow or a counter-concept of several different social orders, or several conceptions of the common good: As the dark side of the state, the law, economy, development, or other ordering principles of society. The multiplicity of concepts and the possible consequences of such multiplicity are explored here as a struggle between co-existing social orders or *polities*. Casting administrative or organizational practices as corrupt in the media, the polities struggle for boundary control of society through different modes of condemning corruption, and thereby shape public discourse and political reality.

> [...] the limits set by civilization can dictate the conditions without which it could not exist. But it is enough for it to dictate them rather often. If the situation appears clear, it is as if the limits were there to be transgressed. (Bataille, 1991: 220)

A theater of shadows

Critique of corruption proliferate in the media worldwide. How come? What makes critique of corruption so easily employed and broadly applicable? Why has corruption emerged as a global, political buzzword, denoting wildly varying transgressions, sometimes forcing governments out of office and draining credibility from organizations, and at other times referring to run-of-the-mill manoeuvring? The apparent multiplicity of perspectives in condemning corruption is explored here, seguing into a discussion concerning the consequences of corruption's multifaceted character. If condemnation, critique and justification of corruption emerging in the media in fact derive from multiple ideals of society, what are the consequences for the public discourse on politics and for society's resolve in the combat against corruption?

Several recent anthologies have placed corruption as a phenomenon in the margins of the state, partly inside and partly outside the law (Das and Poole, 2004; Harris, 1996; Nuijten and Anders, 2007). In these works and elsewhere, many imminent scholars have followed the argument persuasively made by Akhil Gupta (1995), who asserts that in constructing the discursive entity called 'the state', one of the ways to define such an entity and its conceptual boundary is by relegating some objects to the outside of 'the state', framing certain actions and dispositions as 'corrupt' relative to 'the state'. These accounts, however, crucially only observes a single zone of ambiguity, i.e. the inverted or shadow side of 'the state'. However, in contemporary discourse, corruption seems to emerge as a counter-concept in relation to several heterogeneous ideals of democratic ethics, administrative rationality, efficient and inclusive governance, amongst others. We are dealing not with a singular shadow, but with a theater of multiple shadows, crossing each other as intermingled 'discourses in a circular, Moebian compulsion' (Baudrillard, 1988: 176).

Theorizing corruption therefore requires specification beyond notions of 'the state' or 'the law' to explain the dynamics of the concept 'corruption' in its worldwide proliferation. Ethnographic research on corruption in fact shows that states, laws, and the everyday practices enacting such concepts are criticized, legitimized or justified in heterogeneous ways (e.g. Haller and Shore, 2005; Pardo, 2000). Accepting that 'corruption' transgresses multiple boundaries, and thereby functions as a multifaceted counter-concept, the question becomes: A counter-concept to what? What casts these intermingled shadows?

Tentatively, I will suggest that critique (or justification) of corruption implies some conceptualization of the collective, or some instantiation of the common good, when it states that transgressions of a certain boundary constitutes

corruption. Such an instantiation is articulated in a particular *mode of justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006), ascribing worth to some kinds of actions and objects and denying other kinds of worth. We can readily discern different ideas of the common good, co-existing in the same cultural circuit, when we open newspapers, websites or newscasts discussing corruption. But the multiple, simultaneous ideas of the common good in turn produce differing perspectives and configurations of corruption, and the transgressive act thus becomes ambiguous. The idea that societies operate with multiple conceptualizations of the common good, and multiple ways of attributing worth is drawn from the pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. The combination of a concept of the common good, a grammar of worth and a mode of justification will henceforth be referred to as a *polity*. Expanding this framework, the present article adds the notion that such polities yield a potential for articulating corruption in a specific marginal or excluded domain of transgressions.

If anthropology, social sciences and political sciences intend to study the discursive theater of shadows, where many transgressions are labelled corrupt, a comparative approach for analyzing the polities, their modes of justification, their mechanisms of exclusion and their public interplay is in order. Before heading into this endeavour, I will briefly remark on the discursive existence of corruption. For practical purposes, I will bracket the question of a precise definition of corruption, and instead collapse all definitions together, because the argument presented here concerns *transgressions* rather than a specific set of actions, taking transgression to mean the crossing of an instituted or constructed boundary from some perspective. The burgeoning of academic literature, policy initiatives and media scandals concerning corruption corroborates the contention that many contingent perspectives on corruption emerge and proliferate.

Whether or not an act is 'really' corrupt or not, from one perspective or other, is of course a relevant question to certain disciplines, law foremost of these. However, corruption frequently enters the media sphere as a focus of intense coverage, where the question of veridicality, important as it may be, often gets eclipsed by the tides of public attention. In such cases, public debate, defensive discourse and condemnations of corruption together assemble a media event, which in and of itself can influence political reality (Breit, 2011). As stated by John Fiske,

> in a postmodern world we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a 'real' event and its mediated representation. Consequently, we can no longer work with the idea that the 'real' is more important, significant, or even 'true' than the representation. A media event, then, is not a mere representation of what happened, but it has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it. (1994: 2)

Therefore, I will unfold my inquiry so as to wedge open this tangle constituting the social and mediated reality of corruption. What is gathered up or folded into this type of transgression? Aiming at exploring corruption as a media event with sociological consequences and political efficacy, I will sketch out the following framework:

The first part of the article discusses the idea of corruption as a threat to ideas of the common good, which in the second part is then linked to the theory of liminality. Framing corrupt transgression as actions crossing a boundary, existing in a liminal and ambiguous space, this conception of corruption is explored in the third part in the context of media, and the fourth part connects this to the socio-political dynamics of corruption discourse. Finally, the framework is used for developing a tentative typology of possible outcomes when corruption is condemned, defended or contested in the media.

Corruption: A threat to the common good

Though it may be obvious, I will start by underscoring that corruption cannot be seen strictly as a legal concept. In the tangled web of legality and morality, the concept of corruption often goes beyond the category of the criminal. We can observe this when a public servant has juggled a bit too deftly with principles and codes of conduct, or when a politician has grafted or embezzled, but still slid through the cracks of the legal system: The condemnations of the act and the outrage displayed in press and visual media shows that transgression is not only perceived in relation to a legal framework. Laws, whether bendable or clear-cut, are just one set of configurations enacting a moral order of justification. Other values can be at stake, and critique of perceived corruption frequently invokes extra-legal moralities (although such moral frames may very well be implicit). Thus, in many cases people perceive a corrupt act to be offensive, even if the act is not strictly illegal. Why? Because a corrupt act constitutes a transgression relative to several ideas about the common good and their associated modes of justifying or criticizing actions.

This, of course, makes for good television as well as flaming headlines: As the scandal breaks, critique and condemnation forms the bulk of the news material until (if ever) evidence is produced and a juridical process is initiated. Across a range of positions, including economic, liberal-democratic, juridical, institutional, developmental and moral standpoints, the normative condemnation of corruption is agreed upon. But every position in this repertoire hinges upon a particular notion of the common good: for the sake of equality before the law, for mutual economic benefit, for the quality of public institutions – and every single

evaluation thus contains or implies a reference to at least one specific polity debased by corruption. Of course, several polities might be activated in debates concerning corruption scandals, even in the same text or sentence, and every polity might be put to the test concerning its particular attributions of value (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 133).

A test, in the framework of Boltanski and Thévenot models how contention is constituted initially by differing schemata of value-attribution. The elements of the situation and their worth in the differing grammars will be included in such a test, and the arguments will bring forth deficiencies and challenge the given order, eventually maintaining or adjusting this order as required (*ibid.*). Thus, in the case of a corrupt politician, for instance, a test of his worth could proceed from the differing states of worth attributed to his corrupt actions; the test will attempt an unequivocal ranking in a hierarchy of worth. Continuing this example, the test could determine whether the politician had corrupt intentions or only incidentally transgressed the principles of democracy in his well-meaning efforts to serve his constituency.

Because the repertoire of polities available is contingent upon political and historical processes, the common good is not a world- or nation-wide, all-encompassing notion (as the founding fathers and midwives of modern anthropology remind us). This is not only apparent when visiting the notorious site of ethnographic fieldwork in all its exotic splendour or wildness, but obvious in the most trivial corruption scandals. When parliamentarians and office holders fall from grace in a Western society (whatever that may mean) and the public opinion makes a transgressor exit the Garden of Liberal Democracy, alternate ways of justifying transgressive actions in modern governance often emerge. The potential conflict of different polities might then form a second pool of raw material for the media to process. A few examples of different stances on corruption will suffice:

In the history of corruption studies, 'traditional economy', based on personal partaking in transactions, has often been noted as an alternative to Western bureaucratic governance. This was theoretically (as well as empirically) explored as early as Mauss's *The gift* (1923-24), and has emerged many times since, conceptualized as 'corruption' in developing states as well as established democracies. More recently, others have documented the alternative legitimacies developed in the wake of state transformations (e.g. Rivkin-Fish, 2005; Rose-Ackerman, 2009), the pragmatic solutions to lifestyles at the fringe of society (Gill, 2000), the embedding of bribes in highly formalized contracting processes (Li, 2011), the aura of charisma and audacity clinging to a leader that gets things done (Cotta, 2008), and even sexual potency associated with political thrust in

the murky domains of law (Mbembe, 2001: 13ff). In sum, the family, network connections, respect for professional qualities, and even the ideal of Progress can require illicit payments, just as personal qualities in individuals can justify their extra-legal dealings. Such modes of justification can easily eclipse the polities invoked in Western conceptions of the liberal-democratic state, replacing them with locally adapted definitions of the common good.

To summarize, corruption is constructed as a transgression from multiple angles, and justifications, such as the aforementioned, can similarly be criticized and condemned from a range of polities. When the media and politicians hold 'bribes', 'graft', or 'embezzlement' up for scrutiny against standards of transparency, efficient bureaucracy, and good governance, the grammars of economic, rational, legal and moral polities are invoked. In organizational settings, specific and more local notions about the shadow side of an organization might also form the vantage point from which to condemn corruption (e.g. Bowles, 1991; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2010; Lennerfors, 2008: 350). Indeed, during the last twenty-five years such invocations and scrutiny have multiplied in different societal domains and produced an audit society (Power, 1997), to the extent that 'we can think of audit as an actant to which all kind of powers are attributed', as Marilyn Strathern remarks (2000: 5).

But beyond these seemingly very diverse orders of liberal-democratic governance lie other realms, locally vested with power and legitimacy. Every polity draws its boundary conditions for defining corruption differently, based on its specific grammar of worth developed through semantic and historical contingencies. For this reason, it is beyond the scope of this article to provide an exhaustive list of the modes condemning corruption across the globe. Rather, in the next section, I will delve into a theory describing processes for creating and controlling the boundaries of social orders, before eventually heading into a discussion of the contestation of such boundaries in the public space of the media.

Thresholds of the social body

In this section, I will explore the *liminality* of corruption. As mentioned initially, anthropologists and political scientists have attributed marginality and ambiguity to corruption, pointing out that the discursive existence of the concept emerges from the boundaries of 'the state'. In the discussion above, however, it has been demonstrated that corrupt actions can be justified or condemned from a repertoire of polities, thus augmenting the number of boundaries from which concepts of corruption can be articulated: Corruption is situated on the fringes of political society and in the margins of law, working by logics of the market where

no trades officially take place, leeching on public trust – but at the same time, a deal struck illicitly can be a pragmatic solution to administration and demonstrate personal efficaciousness and network skills, and can even be morally superior to supporting an evil regime.

All of these conceptions can co-exist in the same society; they can be tried and tested in public discourse, and even held simultaneously at an individual level, but still their ambiguity might only show up on rare occasions, such as scandals (Cottle, 2006: 411; Thompson 2000: 194ff). In order to gain theoretical purchase on the 'paradoxical relationship between the legal and illegal, secrecy and publicity, condemnation and fascination' found in concepts of corruption (Nuijten and Anders, 2007: 12 and 19), I want to explore the structure of this ambiguous zone of morality and social order. I will proceed from the science of religions in order to investigate the idea of the *liminal*.

Liminality, in classic theories of religion (van Gennep, 1960[1908]; Turner, 1969), denotes the dangerous state between life stages, at the thresholds of transformations (*limen* means threshold). At this threshold, the ritual prepares and hedges off the liminal object in order to enact a religious change and safely transform the object from one stage to another. He who successfully moves across such a threshold returns to a normal, socially safe state, and the liminal traits recede as the object of the ritual gets incorporated into the ordinary social body again. The liminality is thus heightened during stages of ritual, making it a processual trait: Liminality can be attained and shed as the ritual processes unfold. The basic conceptual model is not necessarily processual, however.

The theory was developed by Victor Turner for comparative analysis of rites of passage, and Turner himself acknowledged the generic character of the theory: all kinds of ritual prescriptions can contribute to this process. Around the same time, Mary Douglas, another British cultural anthropologist, developed similar ideas with different objects of analysis, including food, dirt, and bodily fluids (Douglas, 1966). Douglas pointed out that ambiguity in religious categories and systems of classification is handled by introducing taboos. Such ritual restrictions guard against the construed dangers of stepping outside sacred zones, in touching religiously polluting material, and in manipulating divine powers.

The relevance of taboos and transformations in the context of corruption springs from the idea that liminal danger and power depend on conceptual and discursive structures pertaining to ambiguity (see also Bratsis, 2003: 19ff). Aligning Turner's concept of liminality and Douglas' notion of pollution allows for reformulating the relation between transgression and social boundary

control: Approaching the margins of common frames of action, we find power – and danger – in the form of potential transgressions.

Because the threshold isn't absolute but rather ambiguous, it permits transactions across the boundary. The negotiations of categories and boundaries are vested with power, as well as fraught with danger, and the very banishment of corrupt actions to the outskirts of normal activity and institutionalized practices is what invests corruption with discursive power. Similar effects pertain to other exceptional states of social order (c.f. Agamben, 1998; 2005, following Schmitt, 1985[1922]). Bribes, for instance, are morally polluting, powerful, dangerous, and efficacious. Those who successfully steer corrupt dealings escape ordinary systems of norms, their impunity proves their extraordinary abilities, and at the same time places the whole system at peril by suspending the economic order of society. The social body must expel such elements and thereby dispel the danger of *anomie*, i.e. a temporary state of de-regulation, formal or informal, in the economy (Durkheim, 1951[1912]: 252).

Those permanently residing at the religious threshold – for instance shamans, oracles, and other exceptional adepts – cannot exist as integrated in everyday society. While the regular members and legit frames of action in society need to build up liminality in ritual processes if they are to change, some conceptual domains maintain their marginal status (Turner, 1967: 112). These domains are discursively instituted by the attribution of value derived from a polity's grammar of worth, i.e. certain actions and states of worth are marked out as negative relative to the polity's conceptualization of the common good.

Although Turner developed his theory of liminality in the ritual context of minimally polycentric societies, expelling and relegating actions to the margins of society is just as important to societies with a greater repertoire of available polities. When a transgressive action crosses the threshold of a polity, it calls into question the basic values and threatens the configuration of the polity's social order. Quite possibly, a justification given for this action will refer to a deviant or competing social order.

Thus the denouncement and the scandal, in which different actors through the same or through different media evaluate the transgression, have some affinity with the rituals isolating religiously dangerous matter (Cottle, 2006; Douglas, 1966). Like these rituals, the scandal is a performative act, useful for strategically locating issues on either side of a threshold constituting the normative perspective of the performing polity. 'Scandals are struggles over symbolic power in which reputation and trust are at stake' for individual actors and organizations (Thompson, 2000: 245), but at the macro-level, the symbolic stake is actually an

entire fence: the threshold, beyond which lies the shadow zone, incidentally producing the transgression as something dangerous, extraordinary, and powerful, i.e. liminal.

Liminality, in this formulation, is a discursive effect resulting from the successful demarcation of a grammar of worth. In a Foucauldian manner, we can think of polities as formations of not just values, but also of knowledge. When a polity, esteeming some actions and condemning others, draw boundaries in social space, a knowledge is constituted: The ontology of the polity (what is?), the location of transgressions (what lies beyond?) and the associated value-attribution schemes (what holds value?). Normalizing and subjugating other definitions, emergent polities shape power relations because the polities' grammars are readily actualized in everyday critique and justification, and thereby stabilize their systems of norms and knowledge while rendering some actions (such as corruption) liminal by expelling and inhibiting them. In Foucault's words,

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980: 131)

To summarize: Processes of discursive expulsion of false, corrupt and marginal objects and actions instantiate such 'regimes of truth'. Corruption, in all its modern guises, 'emerges only with the formation of liberal constitutional states based on the fiction of public interest' (Poole, 2004: 62, with reference to Bentham, 1843), but since this formation of liberal constitutional states, more grammars of worth have emerged, based on other myths, beliefs and values. Every such regime of truth, existing in current cultural repertoires of ideas about the common good, casts its own shadow and thereby create an ambiguous zone, excluded from and therefore constituted by this particular social space. But where are these regimes established, maintained and possibly challenged?

Processes that discursively draw boundaries can be discerned in several settings. Boundary-drawing happens in everyday organizational interactions, as well as in many legal procedures (by definition), but especially in the type of discourse made public in the media. For a number of reasons, however, a discussion of the liminal spaces in the judicial sphere and internally in organizations will be omitted in the following: Though the social construction of corruption is certainly negotiated in court rooms, the legal sphere displays a state-sponsored closure, which is relatively immune to modes of critique and justification present in the social world in general. Therefore, processes of condemnation and

expelling corruption, that is, boundary control of the polities transgressed, are mirrored in the court room, but only in highly formalized or even autonomous (Bourdieu, 1987) ways. As mentioned earlier, an action may even be considered corrupt no matter the verdict of the court, and in many instances (e.g. Rigi, 2012) courts even approve of corruption by feigning or simulating justice (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2007).

Likewise, the boundary-drawing activities of organizations, where certain actions are permitted or restricted, are typically internal to these organizations, although several organizations might commit to a common charter or a framework for combating corruption, such as PACI, the Partnering Against Corruption Initiative (Hansen, 2012: 518; see also Hansen and Flyverbom, 2014: 8). The organizational responses to corruption target the organizations themselves and thus only rarely extend beyond the grammars of worth associated with industrial or market worlds (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 193ff).

The media, in contrast to court rooms and office towers, are especially salient as a series of arenas in which multiple boundaries and liminal spaces are manifested as well as contested. In the media, boundary-drawing is public, it is shaped and transmitted specifically to be attention-grabbing, and it is therefore a central function of contemporary political interactions. Because the media thus provides publicly available and politically vital spaces for imagining communities (Anderson, 1983), for articulating polities and for justifying actions, the rest of this article will concentrate on the media sphere.

Corruption as a media event in a sphere of publics

In the following, corruption will be explored as a media event, because it is arguably the *mediatized* existence of corruption that commands the spotlight and produces multiple shadows of society's polities. The question of corruption is submitted to the logic of the media and framed through the operations of the media, setting certain conditions for the dissemination of knowledge about corruption. The conditions of dissemination includes, but are not limited to, the institutional and corporate structures of the media, the market and target groups the media attempt to reach, the struggle for attention on the media's agenda and the modes of narration pertaining to specific media technologies (Fiske, 1994; Hjarvard, 2013; McCombs, 2005).

Despite the mediatization and possible streamlining of perspectives upon corruption, the tangle of shadows surrounding a media event about corruption is still ambiguous and polysemous. As it gathers 'up into itself the reality of the

event that may or may not have preceded it' (Fiske, 1994: 2), the media event doesn't have a predetermined script, and therefore holds potential strategic and political value (Thompson, 2000). Public allegations of corruption, rumours and investigations, though contested and opaque, can severely tarnish public images or precipitate polls and thereby shape political reality profoundly.

Because of the numerous possible thresholds transgressed, media spotlight homing in on corruption might result in a blurry picture, or rather, a contest of definitions (e.g. Cottle, 2006: 412; Ettema, 1990: 313). Though overlaps in condemnations do not necessarily result in dissent, consensus on a single verdict, remedy, or punishment for a corrupt transgression is still not easily brokered across a range of polities. The model of several thresholds, many shadows, and multiple margins thus needs to be able to handle the conflict and differing perspectives on corruption emerging in media. In order to satisfy this requirement, it is necessary to unpack the notion of the public sphere.

In Habermas' (1989[1962]) early conception of the public sphere, which informs later thinking about the link between (national) media and the state, the conflict of interests in liberal states could, if only in principle, be tempered by critical and rational debate. The sphere of public opinion would then, through rational deliberation, reach a decision. But as private interests succeed in imposing opinions in legislature and other state sanctioned instruments, 'critical publicity is supplanted by manipulative publicity' (*ibid.*: 178). In this model, theoretically developed by Neo-Marxists such as Chomsky and Herman (1988) and eerily reminiscent of many modern Latin American mediascapes (Kitzberger, 2010), the power games of political elites dominate the public sphere, although subversive perspectives might surface from time to time.

In a more recent discussion on the public sphere, Nancy Fraser (2007) has convincingly argued that the very idea of a *united* public sphere, legitimate and efficacious because it holds the body politic accountable, no longer stands up to close scrutiny in a globalized, mediatized world. To be sure, the 'integrity warriors of the anti-corruption industry' (Sampson, 2005: 103) have certainly exported and disseminated a liberal-democratic definition of corruption globally, thus partly eclipsing specific national notions of corruption. But in any given media context, be it more or less globally intertwined, the concept of corruption still appears as an empty signifier, as it 'provides the terrain for the articulation of particular struggles – and may potentially lead to the creation of a plurality of political spaces and public spheres' (Koechlin, 2013: 93ff).

Corruption thus conceptually challenges the Habermasian public sphere and the notion that the media forms a single political space. Michael Warner (2002) has

cogently argued that the unity of the public sphere is and always has been a necessary discursive postulate of any text, which is embedded in the reflexive act of constituting its public. A public is not necessarily united, Warner reminds us, but is rather constituted through attention. This attention is governed by semantic spaces in which individuals can meaningfully reflect their identities and ideas. Inserting this idea into the framework developed presently, such spaces, and publics attentive to them, are also constituted by the grammars of worth which are active in debates about corruption in the public sphere. Supported institutionally and intertwined with political agency, articulated through different media outlets (or in different utterances in a single media), many synchronous publics may exist. Each public points to its own conception of the common good and its specific definition of corrupt transgressions. The notion of a public sphere in the singular, Habermasian sense, thus needs to be multiplied.

While Warnerian publics might have potentially infinite axes of signification, spiralling inwards in their reflexivity (see also Eco, 1984 concerning unlimited semiosis), I would contend that social imaginaries invoked in the constitution of a public nonetheless refer to conceptualizations of a particular polity. Society's polities are finite in number and historically contingent: As Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs point out, 'there are a limited number of publics available to serve as interpretive communities for narrating the social' (1998: 29). Such a set of available polities seems well suited as the entry point of empirical inquiry for interpreting transgressions against society and the mediated reality. In this way, we can discern a local configuration of transgression and corruption – performed in a specific media context, or disseminated through a specific cultural narrative – and through its reference to a public trace the transgression back to a polity. The public realizes its world and rehearses its mode of justification in the critique of corruption, carried by and performed in particular cultural forms (media, narratives, metaphors) adapted to this public.

In an overly simplified example of this, business newspapers might have specific notions of growth as the greater good harmed by corruption. The business journalists and commentators might use economic rationalities in their condemnation, and rhetorics suitable for suits. Of course, this wordplay doesn't hold up to close scrutiny, because any public and any media nexus can incorporate several stances or dissolve into factions among many fault lines in spite of institutional or subcultural underpinnings and the media-structural support. In the next section, a real-life example of this, drawn from Brazil, will illustrate such pressures and conflicts in the mediascape.

To sum up, different media give voice to one or several modes of justification, and even while speaking of the same corrupt action, different publics are discursively brought forth in these discrete configurations, drawing upon the legitimizing structures associated with their modes of justification. The media event, scandal, or mediatized ritual (Cottle, 2006) can thus be seen as the equating of an act with a liminal aspect of a grammar of worth, placing the transgression in the margin and establishing the boundary of a polity. In the following, the interplay between multiple publics and contested boundaries will be unpacked.

Corruption aligned or contested in an arena of multiple publics

What happens when different polities' view of corruption are simultaneously articulated in different publics? Critique and justification of corruption emerge in contested discursive fields of media publics, ultimately structured by culturally specific grammars of worth. The modes of justification anchor these discussions in the media by providing frames for referring to ultimate values of society, the common good. The contestation of corruption, a *clash between worlds* in the words of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 224), based in differing perspectives brought forth in actual public debate and discourse, is in itself a very important facet of corruption: The multiple, floating character of the phenomenon (Koechlin, 2013: 128ff) is exactly what conditions the wide range of perspectives from which suspicions of corruption are raised. Likewise, the explosion of corruption discourses in recent decades (Breit, 2011: 1; Nuijten and Anders, 2007: 3) can be linked to the value that such clashes represent to media and political actors: The invocation of corruption and initiation of clashes draws attention useful for agenda-setting purposes (McCombs, 2005).

In debate, however, persistent disagreement can be avoided by working out compromises. Boltanski and Thévenot give several examples of processes of compromise or escape when an impasse between two or more modes is reached. The general formula of compromise consists in equating positions in two different polities with each other: Instead of seeking clarification by invoking each polity's hierarchy of worth, the differences are subsumed in an argument that can include both polities (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 277ff).

When several polities combine in this way, the zones of transgression in each polity are aligned and strengthen each other. At this point, the labelling process of the media associated with these polities will usually converge in the designation of a scandal (Heidenheimer, 1996: 339). As polities align, the stakes are greatly increased in anticipation of a legal verdict, condemning the culprits.

In many Western nations, we can detect such an alignment as a 'trend in various spheres of political and social life, from the development of codes of conduct to courses in corporate ethics' (Sampson, 2005: 104). In these cases, even though several publics are constituted through the observation and activation of multiple thresholds (pertaining to different grammars of worth), corruption threatens every polity's representation of the social order and its cohesion. Thus, multiple liminal spaces converge, fusing many shadows into one.

Here, especially, transgression carries an aura of danger and an air of potency if left unchecked or unpunished. Consensus on condemnation might, after all, not extend to all members of society, due to weak institutions, legal loopholes, etc. The lure of bypassing laws for personal gain, as well as the risks of denunciation and ensuing punishment, is heightened then. In circumstances of heavy media attention, what are the effects of corruption with impunity? Research has shown that media attention to corruption actually heightens awareness in individual encounters with transgression (Brunetti and Weder, 2001). However, as noted by George Bataille, the 'transgression [...] suspends a taboo without suppressing it' (1987: 36). Impunity can accompany a sort of circular mechanism, in which the boundaries (or Bataillian taboos) are instaurated anew, though temporarily suspended. As the transgression makes the norm of a polity visible, it is brought into discursive existence through the discussion and attention of the media. Of course, existing norms *de jure* might not be rules *de facto*, if transgressions repeatedly and publicly breach the principles of a polity. Such situations of de-coupled moralities and legalities are especially salient in cases of state upheaval and institutional change (e.g. Andvig, 2005; Rigi, 2012; Rivkin-Fish, 2005; Rose-Ackerman, 2009).

The taboo or boundary might, of course, eventually be re-inscribed upon social space. Any public's debate on corruption cases can lead to many cleansing activities and unfold many narratives, confirming the very boundaries transgressed (or perceived to have been transgressed) by corruption. Cathartic and condemning stories and activities proceed from a specific public, its cultural forms and value-oriented context, and reinstate the boundaries of a polity, while the media covering such activities provide enunciative and thereby privileged positions to the mode(s) of justification.

In media markets with a plurality of media outlets, publics and associated grammars of worth, corruption cases can last many months and even years. Exemplifying this, the *mensalão* case of Brazil emerged as a national scandal in May 2005, with the exposure of corruption in the Postal authorities. This minor incidence of corruption allegedly involved the parliamentarian Roberto Jefferson, who in turn denounced leading politicians in the main government party, *Partido*

dos Trabalhadores (Vasconcellos, 2006). The party leaders had allegedly handed out large monthly checks (hence the Brazilian neologism *mensalão,* literally meaning 'big monthly'*)* to supporting parliamentarians from secret slush funds. The investigations, lasting more than seven years, eventually led to the conviction of 25 businessmen, politicians and directors of two Brazilian banks. During these seven years, numerous different perspectives upon the *mensalão* case emerged.

In a case such as this, a society-wide hegemonic or consensual polity emerging through discussions on corruption can turn out to be difficult, as the prolonged contestation renders compromises between different polities unstable (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 282-4 and 293ff). This was also the case in Brazil: Tabloids, sensationalist newspapers and weeklies tried to implicate the president Luiz 'Lula' da Silva, hinting at larger conspiracies embedded in the government, while intellectual and left-leaning press tried to frame the scandal as the work of the mainstream and populist media conglomerates, covering up political corruption involving the right-wing opposition. Other media interpreted the convictions of the *mensalão* culprits as a decisive turning point in the combat against the systemic Brazilian corruption (Damgaard, 2015; Taylor and Power, 2011).

In the *mensalão* case, another possible outcome of mediated corruption is thus demonstrated: The multiplicity of publics and polities might render the norms of a society opaque, pitting several polities in a deadlock for definitions and suspend indefinitely the exclusion of the transgression. The complexity of modern society and polycentric bases of discursive and symbolic power also makes it very likely that a remainder escapes, that some perspective gets lost in the flux of a particular *mediascape* (Appadurai, 1996: 35). Finally, it is perfectly possible that one definition of corruption together with its proposals and remedies eclipse other polities' attempts at exclusion or inclusion in the scandal's circular torrent of images and words. Certain grammars of worth may be more salient in some media settings than others, which in turn may support these polities more than others and make arguments from their perspectives more likely to persist in debates. The specific elements in the scandal's narrative (characters, plots and themes) constitute important points of orientation in such mediatized clashes of polities and politics (Polletta, 2006; Somers and Gibson, 1994; Strömbäck, 2008: 233).

The media thus perform different roles in corruption cases: Narrators of cleansing catharsis in court rooms, public prosecutors against supposed perpetrators, campaigners against immoral groups or cultures, mediators of conflicts of interest, to name a few. The media can pick sides as well as amplify or attenuate conflicts between different views; indeed, the media are ubiquitous in such processes. Permeating society, the media have become a structural

condition for the processes and practices of the social, political and cultural sphere (Hjarvard, 2013: 3; Strömbäck, 2008). The social drama 'enacted within and through the press by other institutions of social power' merge 'the narrating of politics and the waging of politics [...] into a single process – the production of political reality' (Ettema, 1990: 327). Because politics are heavily mediatized, their reality, or indeed hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1988: 171), cannot be understood without considering how the tides of attention are modulated by (and distributed in) the media.

A typology of mediatized corruption

The possible outcomes suggested in the previous section can be seen as a tentative typology of societal responses to corruption under mediatized circumstances: A) compromise and alignment between several polities; B) transgression with impunity; C) re-inscription of prohibitions; D) unstable definitions and suspended exclusion; and E) overlapping and even eclipsed zones of liminality. These outcomes simultaneously spell out some of the trends visible in international and national public spheres and political fields of the last couple of decades. It must be emphasized that they are preliminary analytical categories of the theoretical framework presented here and, as such, need empirical exploration and evaluation. However, the outcomes can point to some important practical consequences of corruption's multiplicity.

A first possible outcome (A – *alignment*) supports the tendency towards a 'transparency creep' – an increasing obsession with standards of transparency, accountability and corporate social responsibility. As more sectors and spheres become entangled in the production of the transparent, the ambiguous zones of shadows also spread. Every corruption ranking produced, every audit performed and every media story on a corporation's new compliance standards begs the question amongst competing actors: What have we done to reduce corruption? What remains hidden? The liminal holds power because it appears, as Bataille has it, 'as if the limits were there to be transgressed' (1991: 220), and so there is always a possibility of transgression, and with it, the threats of mediatization: whistleblowers, denunciations and bad press. Proliferating layers of bureaucracy, *judicialization* (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2007; Filgueiras, 2013) and anti-corruption policies in turn feed back into the media sphere by projecting transparency (Hansen and Flyverbom, 2014: 11) and at the same time implying new liminal zones and new shadows of the state, organization or economy.

A second possible outcome (B – *transgression with impunity*) in this typology appears to result in declining trust in institutions and politicians, as experiments

and surveys show (e.g. Graeff and Tinggaard Svendsen, 2013; Rothstein and Eek, 2009: 90) show. It has become something of a truism (albeit a contested one) that this, in turn, will weaken the quality of institutions (e.g. Putnam, 1993). If corruption frequently goes unpunished, the incentives for other corrupt acts are increased. For the public servant, the prospects of turning around this negative spiral seem bleak (Morris and Klesner, 2010: 1259).

A third possible outcome (C – *the re-inscription of boundaries upon social space*) should in theory support societal integration. This idea, in a Durkheimian tradition, was proposed by Thompson in his seminal *Political scandal* (2000: 234ff). It is Durkheimian in the sense that the scandal, when resulting in convictions, discharges from office or other kind of norm-enforcing events, supposedly reinforces incentives to stay within the given boundaries of society (Cottle, 2006: 414). When thresholds of good governance and business ethics are re-inscribed, some practices are normalized and purified, while others are banned and condemned to the shadows. In this way, the re-inscription might drag some practices – administrative, organizational or political – into the limelight of critique. Therefore, politicians, public officials, employees and managers in organizations need to be keenly aware of the political value in defining liminal zones. To re-inscribe may also subtly re-define norms and their area of application, because the margins of polities are fluid, although their boundaries may only shift slowly.

A fourth possible outcome (D – *the de-stabilization of compromises between different polities*) highlights the uneasy relation between the media and politial actors. As more and more polities buy into the semantic space around concepts of corruption, accountability, transparency and similar ideas, the scope of disagreement and conflicts multiply. Unstable definitory frames can appear on several levels, for instance in the context of organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson, 1989), or a society-wide schism of legitimacies (Pardo, 2000).

This provides the media with a burgeoning pool of material for conflict-laden stories. For the actors who have steered clear of the liminal spaces, conflicts of definitions and unstable boundaries can then provide a launch pad for critique in the media along with much-desired attention in the public's spotlight. A media event which is spun around corruption issues, no matter any subsequent legal outcome, can make or break political or business careers. For politicians, corporations and even nations, mediatized corruption disputes thus constitute important symbolic resources that need to be managed or manipulated. International corruption indices, in this lens, put nations on display as competitors in a race for accountability (Hansen, 2012: 513; Hansen and Flyverbom, 2014: 11): High-ranking nations on corruption indices, for instance,

have an easier time attracting foreign investments, just like corporations with high-profiled CSR initiatives or compliance policies appear as better business partners.

The final possible outcome (E – *eclipsed or overlapping liminal zones*) implies a distinct kind of alignment that foregrounds one attribution of worth relative to other implicated grammars. To illustrate this, in the New Public Management style of management, auditing and monitoring of results is central (Hood, 1995). The instruments for this have become equally ubiquitous in the transparency industry (Sampson, 2005), although with another motivation: Auditing for transparency is lauded not for reasons of economic efficiency, but with public accountability in mind. The very same organizational practice creates a dual zone of liminality, but in the actual implementation, it might be difficult to discern what grammar of worth is invoked. In cases of institutional or organizational change brought about by corruption charges, such co-optation of processes is likely to create overlaps between polities' boundaries and modes of justification.

The above outcomes and consequences are starting points for empirical inquiry. The framework presented, describing multiple conceptualizations of corruption in mediatized publics, allows for tracing the dominance of certain polities' definition and connecting this to institutional and political structures and dynamics, as well as to the outcomes of political interactions. Like the mediatization theory in general, this theory is of the middle-range (Hjarvard, 2013: 4, following Robert K. Merton), in the sense that it connects identifiable speech acts of condemnation or justification to the media's societal structuration of the political field, or rather, the field of polities. As such, it is a theory for linking local modes of justification to nation- or region-specific socio-political arrangements and the concrete actors and publics activated in the narratives of a media event (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 31).

Conclusion: Constructing margins

In this article, I have developed a framework for thinking about corruption as a relational concept, constituted by discursive and mediatized processes that locate certain actions and actors in the margins of an order of worth. In such processes, discussions and debates sparked by public disclosure or allegations of corruption, corrupt actions are constructed as liminal by different polities. The exclusion of corrupt actions to marginal or liminal domains of these polities presents corruption as dangerous and threatening to a social order. Through different modes of justification and critique, multiple ways of attributing worth and ordering the social sphere can come to be articulated. Each mode or formation of

modes, stabilized by specific systemic and institutional links, articulates a public and propagates different calls for action against corruption, varying remedies, and heterogeneous thresholds of transgressions. The possibility of acting against corruption is shaped by this field of configurations and the specific societal legitimacies of each order of justification.

This multiplicity of publics and polities condemning corruption constitutes a politically potent, media-saturated field, but not only because it invokes powerful imagery of sinister dealings struck. The processes and strategies of dealing with the media also attribute or deny worth to the quotidian practices of institutions and organizations, and embed different conceptualizations of corruption in the cultural repertoire of different grammars of worth. Seen this way, debates in the media on corruption mirror struggles over the control of the social order's boundaries. These boundary-drawing processes can overlap, co-exist, compete, and interfere in a variety of ways, shaping public discourse and political agency. The media are instrumental in aligning or contesting the boundaries and thresholds inscribed by the different polities into social space.

This framework ties together ideas concerning the social reality of corruption, the mediatization of politics and ritual-theory approaches to corruption scandals. Building on the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), it integrates current media theory in the vein of Cottle (2006), Warner (2002) and Hjarvard (2013) into the polycentric model of polities. The culturally contingent polities, as well as the boundaries of their grammars of worth, are articulated in mediatized publics. Different perspectives upon corruption emerge from these publics and their margins. Taking concepts of transgression, exception, and shadows of the state – akin to those proposed by Bratsis (2003), Das and Poole (2004), Lennerfors (2008) and Rigi (2012) – and rephrasing them through seminal theories of religion, the framework builds a cross-disciplinary vantage point from which corruption can be analyzed.

The model of multiple thresholds of the social body doesn't answer the question of what corruption is, but rather probes how researchers can trace definitions of corruption and establish the relation of these to a specific but multifaceted social order. The tentative typology suggested here describes outcomes of mediatized contests of definition and exclusion, and can be utilized for cross-cultural comparisons of corruption cases. Such comparisons would enable systematic comparative research into the conceptual similarities and differences of national or local repertoires' influence upon corruption. The framework also constitutes a starting point for thinking about how settlements on corruption are performed in the media (Cottle, 2006: 427), how compromises are institutionalized and normalized in legislation and discourse, and what types of corruption cases

provoke which modes of critique. Though focusing on the mediated reality of corruption, policy-makers aiming at reducing corruption could benefit from heeding the practical and theoretical insights, especially in regards to disputes of values and the creation of shared conceptions of the common good.

Unpacking the alignments of polities that show up repeatedly in different contexts, or unusual configurations of publics, power and institutions, could help explain regional exceptions (such as Chile's low levels of corruption relative to other Latin American nations), as well as isomorphic organizational and political developments (as seen for instance in the Scandinavian countries). The mediatized ideas of the common good and liminal domains articulated in corruption cases represent a powerful aspect of the imagined state (Gupta, 1995). Such an aspect casts shadows in the political sphere of any state, but the sizes and hues of these shadows are not a question of latitude: Though concepts of corruption sometimes appear as variations of the global North/South divide, the approach developed here provides tools for identifying structural and narrative conditions for the public production of social order and transgression.

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the author

Mads Damgaard holds a BA in Science of Religions and a MA in Cross-Cultural Studies from the University of Copenhagen, and he is currently researching transparency in Danish social services at the University of Southern Denmark. His previous research has explored the dynamics linking media, juridical systems and political spheres, in Denmark as well as Brazil.
Email: mads_damgaard_andersen@hotmail.dk or damg@sam.sdu.dk