SCOOPS
A THEORY OF ACCESS JOURNALISM AND MEDIA CROOKEDNESS

Lorenzo Vicari (LSE)

EPSA - Panel 1703

INTRODUCTION
MOTIVATION

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INTRODUCTION

(i) **The media wants to sell.**

> *Whatever a patron desires to get published is advertising.*
> *Whatever he [sic] wants to keep out is news.*

(L. E. Edwardson, *Chicago Herald*, 1918)

(ii) **Politicians don't want scandals and** (iii) **they can produce news.**

> *It is part of the business of a newspaper to get news and to print it; it is part of the business of a politician to prevent certain news being printed. For this reason the politician often takes a newspaper into his [sic] confidence for the mere purpose of preventing the publication of the news he deems objectionable to his interests.*

(Lord Northcliffe, *Journalism as a Profession*, 1903)

$\implies$ **A deal is possible.**

> *The relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources.*

(Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding what's news*, 1979)

INTRODUCTION
MOTIVATION

Symbiotic Reporting: would this deal with the media increase the incumbent's reelection probability:

- ▶ when facing a perfectly Bayesian representative voter
- ▶ and a media outlet with reputational concerns?

INTRODUCTION
PREVIEW

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▶ The outlet's reputational concerns
- decrease concealment - but widen the parameter space of symbiosis,
- lead to claims of media crookedness.

LITERATURE
(INEXHAUSTIVE) REVIEW

Substantively, this converses with the formal literature on:

- access journalism (Ozerturk, '18, '22)
- coverage and incumbency advantage (see Sobbrio, '14 for a review)
- scandals (e.g. Diuzda & Howell, '21)
- endorsements (e.g. Chakraborty & Ghosh, '16)
- media slant and bias (see Gentzkow, Shapiro & Stone, '15 for a review)
- media power and media capture (see Prat, '15 for a review)

Formally, this loosely relates to:

- disclosure games (Milgrom, 1981)
- sender-receiver games (Crawford & Sobel, 1982)
- Bayesian persuasion (Kamenica & Gentzkow, '11)

LITERATURE
MEDIA CAPTURE

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Contribution: Media symbiosis promises access $\rightarrow$ sales:

- ▶ it is (mostly) legal,
- ▶ it is not just a bribe through sales: it impacts the credibility of the report for the voter, and through that the strategic behaviour of the outlet.

SET-UP
ENVIRONMENT

Two types of newsworthy materials:

▶ General news / access: $N \in \{n, \emptyset\}$ with $n \in \mathbb{R}^+ \to n$ is always available,

▶ Scandal / policy blunder: $S \in \{s, \emptyset\}$ with $s \sim \mathcal{U}(0, 1] \to s$ is probabilistic.

SET-UP
PLAYERS & ACTIONS - THE POLITICIANS

Incumbent I with congruence $\theta^J \in \{G, B\}$ and common prior $Pr(\theta^I = G) = \pi^I \in (0, 1)$
Produces scandal s:

- ▶ with probability $(1 - p)$ if $\theta^I = G$,
- ▶ certainly, if $\theta^I = B$

Can offer n in exchange for concealment of s.

Non-strategic challenger C with $\pi^C \sim \mathcal{U}(0, 1)$.

SET-UP
PLAYERS & ACTIONS - THE MEDIA

The media outlet M:

▶ discovers n and s with probability $q \rightarrow d(N, S)$
▶ might accept n and conceal $s \rightarrow r(N, S)$.

where $(N, S) \in \{n, \emptyset\} \times \{s, \emptyset\}$.

The representative voter V:

► updates on the quality of the incumbent: $r(N, S) \rightarrow \mu_{N,S}$

► chooses who to elect: $\mu_{N,S}$ v. π^C

SET-UP
PAYOFFS

I: pays cost c if she offers n, gains rent 1 if elected.
V: gains 1 if $\theta^e = G$.

SET-UP
PAYOFFS - THE MEDIA

$$u_M = \overbrace{N + S}^{\text{Sales}} - \overbrace{\alpha\, \kappa_{N,S}}^{\text{Reputation}}$$

with $\alpha \in \{0, 1\}$ and $\kappa_{N,S} = \dfrac{P\left(d(\emptyset, s)\right)}{P\left(r(n, \emptyset)\right)}$

Information:

▶ θ^J is symmetrically uncertain,

▶ $d(N, S)$ is observed by I and M,

▶ V also ignores if I and M made a deal, but observes $r(N, S) \to \mu_{N,S}$ and $\kappa_{N,S}$,

▶ all else is common knowledge.

Timing:

1. Nature chooses θ^I,

2. Nature chooses if bad news $S = s \in (0, 1]$ occurs,

3. M discovers $d(N, S)$,

4. I observes it and may offer n,

5. M accepts or rejects and publishes $r(N, S)$.

6. V observes the $r(N, S)$, forms $\mu_{N,S}$ and $\kappa_{N,S}$.

7. π^C is randomly drawn from $\sim \mathcal{U}(0, 1)$.

8. V decides who to elect.

9. Payoffs are realised, game ends.

PBE in pure strategies.

The types I am looking for:

Symbiotic Reporting $\rightarrow n$ for s happens with positive probability.

Independent Reporting $\rightarrow n$ for s never happens.

▶ $\mu_{N,S}$ is the probability of reelection,

RESULTS

- $\mu_{N,S}$ is the probability of reelection,
- *I* will never offer if the discovery $\neq d(\emptyset, s)$.

RESULTS
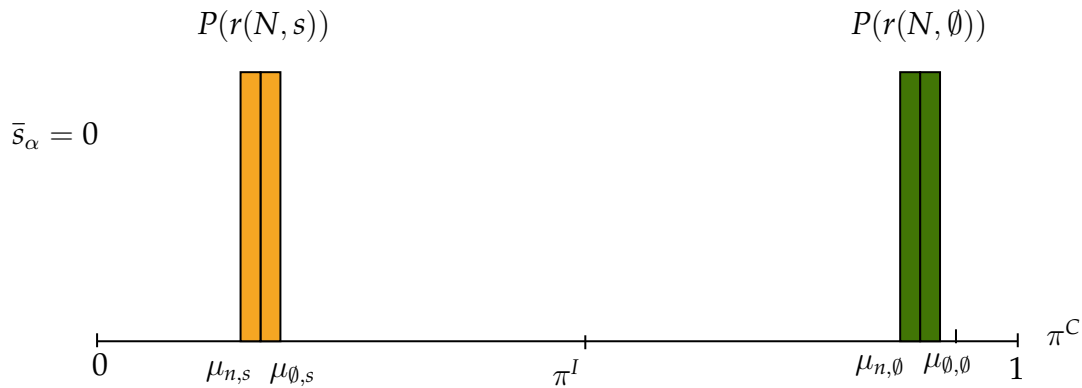
- $\mu_{N,S}$ is the probability of reelection,
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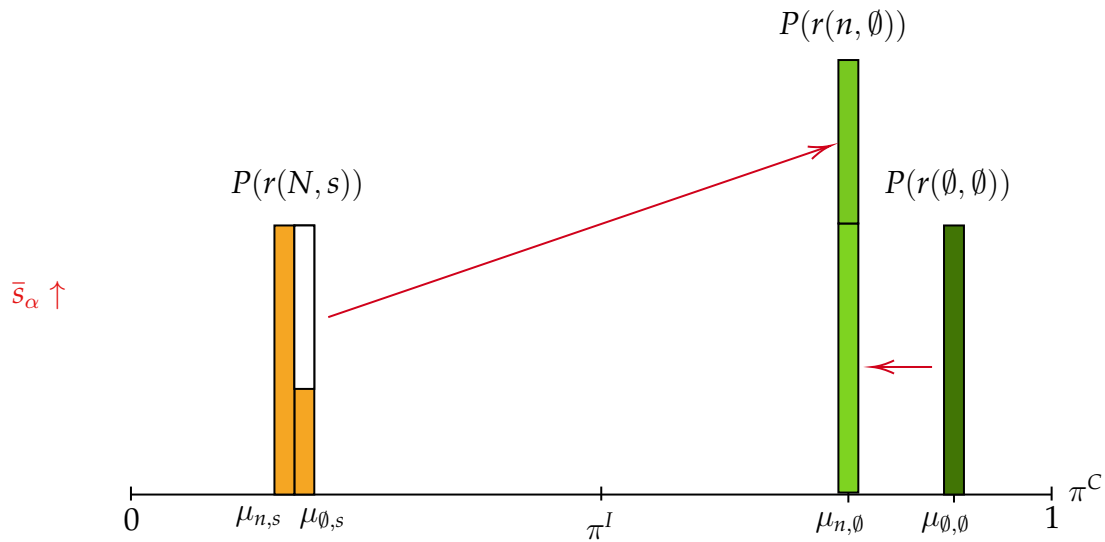- *M* will accept $\iff s \leq \bar{s}_\alpha$,

$$P(r(n, \emptyset))$$

$$P(r(N, s))$$

$$P(r(\emptyset, \emptyset))$$

$$\bar{s}_\alpha = 1$$

0 $\mu_{n,s}$ $\mu_{\emptyset,s}$ π^I $\mu_{n,\emptyset}$ $\mu_{\emptyset,\emptyset}$ 1 π^C
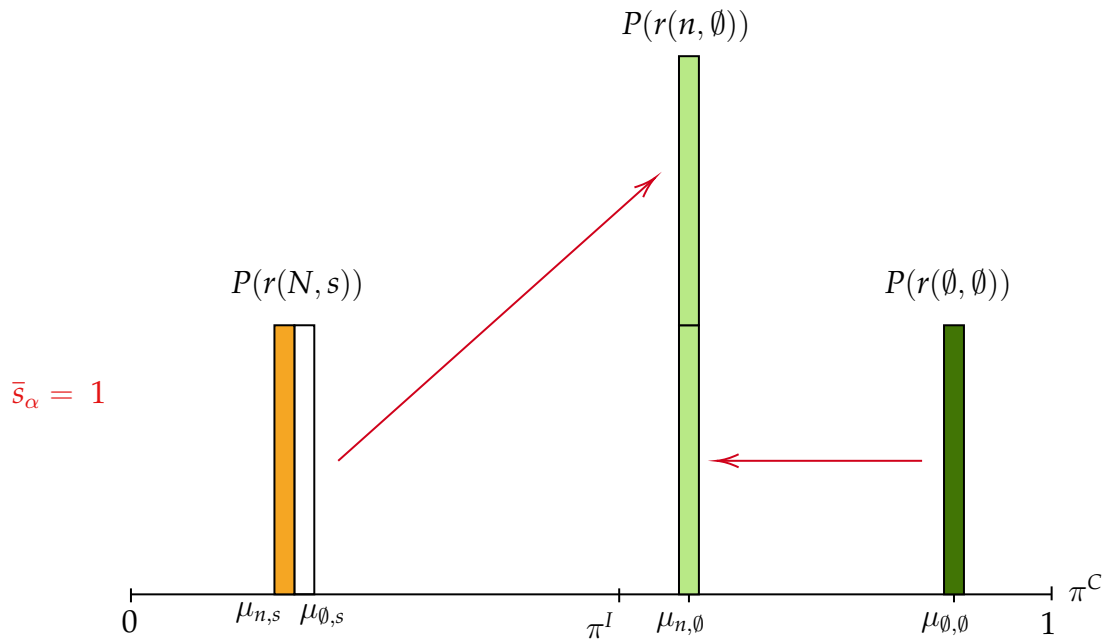
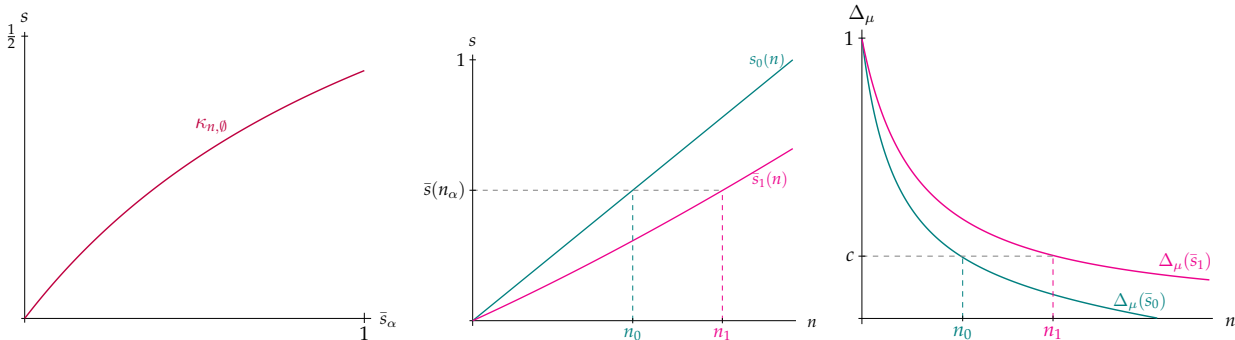For symbiosis to happen, $c \leq \Delta_\mu$.
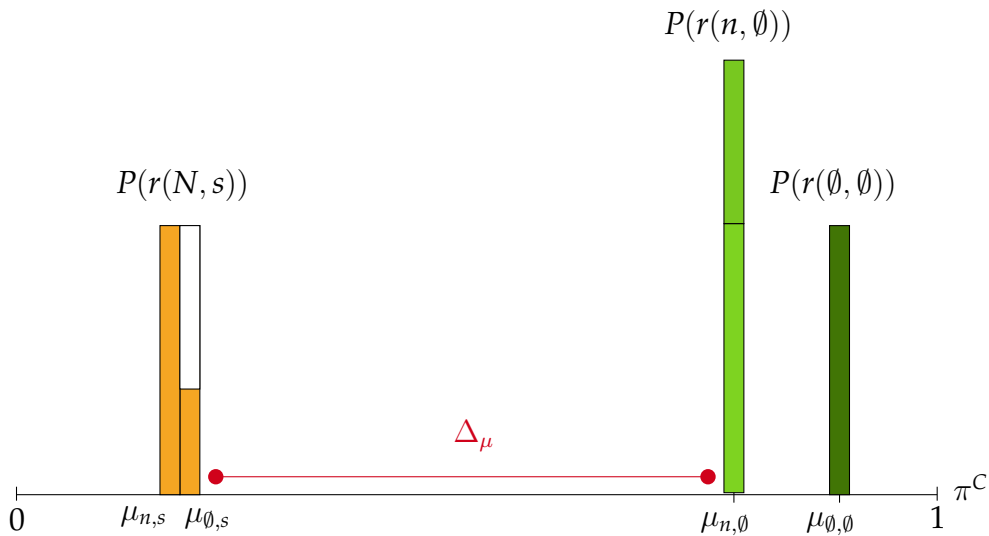
Δ_μ is decreasing in $\bar{s}_\alpha$ and $\bar{s}_\alpha$ is increasing in n
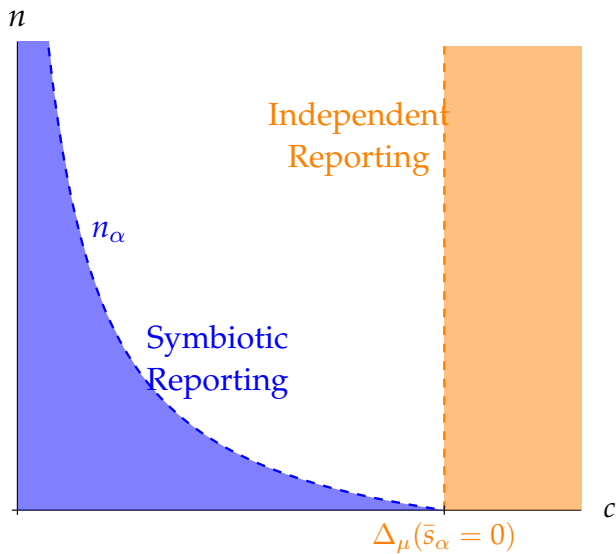
RESULTS

Without reputation, $\bar{s}_0 = n$, but with reputation, $\bar{s}_1 = n - \kappa_{n,\emptyset}$.
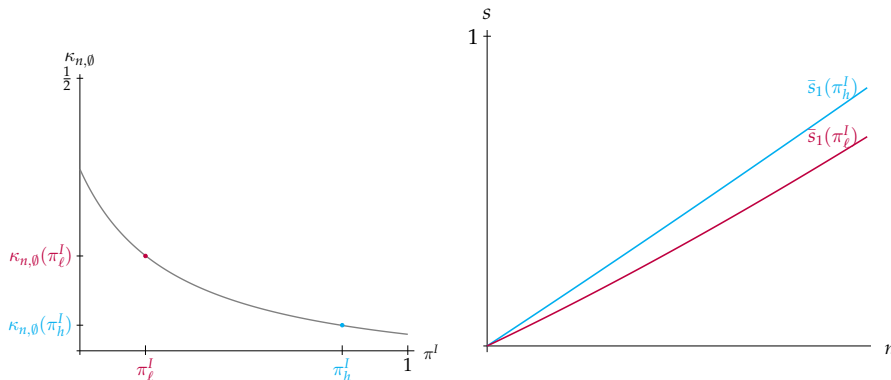

Intuition: V anticipates less concealment with reputation, so $\mu_{n,\emptyset}$ retains more informative power, and the difference with $\mu_{N,s}$ decreases at a slower pace.
Consequence: for the same n, less scandals are concealed, but SR happens on a wider range of n.

RESULTS
CROOKED MEDIA?

Comparing π_ℓ^I and π_h^I is similar to introducing reputation.

Intuition: if the incumbent is very congruent, $d(n, \emptyset)$ is relatively more likely.
Consequence: for the same n, the media is harsher with low-congruence incumbents.

EXTENSIONS

- θ^I as private information
- I can set a specific level of n
- I ignores $d(N, S)$
- s_B FOSD $s_G \rightarrow M$ asked to "tone it down"
- M has two quality types (previous version of the model) with $q_\ell = 0$
- heterogeneous priors distribution with income of the media equal to the willingness to pay of readers-voters
- single-peaked v. single-dip distribution of π^C
- M can commit, bargainning happens ex-ante

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    - ↪ but widen the range of n
    - ↪ and inflate the presence of scandals by low-prior incumbents
        - ▶ ↪ offering arguments to scandal-prone leaders trying to delegitimise the media.