

Enhancing Celebrity Status: Disinformation Media's Contribution to the Image Formation of Marian Kočner in the Context of the Murder of Slovak Journalist Ján Kuciak

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Abstract: The paper presents the celebrity image of Marian Kočner as it was presented by selected disinformation media while informed about the murder of journalist J. Kuciak and his fiancée M. Kušnírová. We pointed out that the „celebritisation” of M. Kočner in the Slovak society has been contributed to, among others, by disinformation media, which did so by means of 1) narratives related to the person of M. Kočner and 2) the tonality of published texts (positive, negative, neutral). Through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 600 articles from five disinformation media sources, the study identifies six prevalent narratives depicting Kočner with predominantly neutral tonalities. Notably, these neutral depictions persisted long after mainstream media began portraying Kočner negatively. This study aims to shed light on the phenomenon of contribution to the image formation of celebrities through disinformation media, even in cases where the celebrity is a negative public persona.

Keywords: Marian Kočner; Ján Kuciak; narratives; tonality; disinformation media in Slovakia.

INTRODUCTION

For the media, Marian Kočner was an interesting personality, a controversial businessman, and, in a sense, a mysterious showman who readily and relatively charmingly answered journalists' questions. This image was prevalent until 2018 when M. Kočner was perceived as a personality who did not undermine the importance of media but put himself in the position of their ally (e.g., he called journalists on his own initiative to answer their questions) to which media responded in servile manner (elegant portraits of groomed M. Kočner from press conferences, positive collages of M. Kočner with his acquaintances,

and the like, are well known). Thus, M. Kočner acquired his „celebrity status” due to his repeated presence in the media (Sámelová, 2020, p. 15). In other words, he became a celebrity, which D. J. Boorstin, an author of a classic piece of cultural criticism, „From Hero to Celebrity: The Human Pseudo-Event,” defined as „a person known for his well-knowingness” (Boorstin, 1962, p. 57).

Now it is well known that M. Kočner influenced serious mainstream media, lifestyle and/or tabloid media and that he himself operated, and even supported, selected media with problematic content, i.e., disinformation media. These platforms have long operated by appropriating information from traditional media sources and augmenting it with deliberate falsehoods, aligning with the definition of disinformation provided by various sources (Merriam-Webster dictionary, n.d.; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012; Zhou & Zafarani, 2020). This behavior poses a threat to democracy, journalism, and freedom of expression by undermining public trust in governments, scientific facts, and recognized authorities, potentially influencing contentious decisions. Within the broader landscape of cyber threats, disinformation is therefore regarded as one of the most prominent forms of online propaganda (Gorwa, 2017, p. 3). In this context, disinformation media constitute a distinct communicative environment in which narratives and evaluative tones shape public images in ways that differ from mainstream journalistic coverage (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

According to Kasarda and Szomolányi, who conducted a content analysis of the image of Marian Kočner in Slovak mainstream (both news and lifestyle/tabloid) media in 2006-2018, the long-time activities of M. Kočner in Slovakia were presented predominantly in a neutral manner; mainly in 2006-2011, and in the tabloid media, this image persists as long as until 2017. Kasarda and Szomolányi also state that the relatively servile and surely neutral tone towards M. Kočner in mainstream media changed after the murder of Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová (Kasarda & Szomolányi, n.d.), which occurred on 21 February 2018 at 9:00 pm in their house. The murder was committed by one person, another one was a driver, the third was an intermediary, and the fourth person allegedly ordered the murder. According to the law enforcement authorities, the fourth person was M. Kočner (Filová, 2019).

Against this background, disinformation media can be understood as an alternative space of representation within the broader disinformation order (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). This environment is shaped by platform-specific dynamics of content circulation and visibility (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). It enables the construction of public figures through narrative logics and evaluative frameworks that differ from mainstream journalism, including discursive and framing practices observed in contemporary online communication (Baider & Constantinou, 2024). In the case of Marian Kočner, whose public image underwent a significant

shift after the murder of Ján Kuciak, this raises the question of how disinformation platforms contributed to shaping his media portrayal during this period.

The aim of this paper is to analyze five popular disinformation media in Slovakia and to identify their main narratives about M. Kočner in the period under review, i.e., from February 2018 to February 2021. The selection of narratives was conditioned not only by the information about M. Kočner in the texts of disinformation media, but also by their correlation with the murder of Ján Kuciak. The research was also interested in the tonality of the published materials about M. Kočner. In short, the study focuses on how narrative structures and evaluative tones contribute to shaping the public image of M. Kočner as a celebrity in disinformation media.

CRITICISM OF DISINFORMATION MEDIA IN RELATION TO CELEBRITY-MAKING CULTURE

The concept of celebrity is closely tied to the development of modern mass media, which transformed fame into a mediated form of visibility. While earlier forms of recognition were linked to achievement, contemporary media environments increasingly privilege attention, regardless of its positive or negative character. As a result, individuals with controversial or even criminal reputations may become media figures. In digital environments, this process is further intensified, as visibility can be achieved independently of traditional media through self-mediated communication channels (Sámelová, 2020; Sámelová, 2021). This dynamic also extends to disinformation media.

Research about celebritization shows that media representations are shaped not only by individual trajectories but also by broader social and ideological contexts (Dyer, 1986; Marshall, 1997). Contemporary media environments amplify this process by prioritizing visibility, dramatization, and narrative appeal over moral evaluation (Redmond & Holmes, 2006; Gaffney & Holmes, 2007; Rončáková, 2021), allowing even socially contested figures to attain celebrity status through sustained media attention.

In this sense, celebrity is less a reflection of individual merit than an outcome of mediated visibility, controversy, and narrative construction.

Disinformation media represent a heterogeneous and problematic segment of the media environment, characterized by the dissemination of misleading, manipulative, or false information, conspiracy content, and attacks on public actors. These platforms often combine factual elements with distortions, creating persuasive but deceptive narratives that may influence public perception and erode trust in institutions.

Importantly, disinformation media frequently draw on mainstream sources but supplement them with interpretive additions aligned with their own agendas (Conroy et al., 2015; Heydari et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2016), often amplifying selected narratives (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

From the perspective of celebrity-making, several tendencies can be identified within disinformation media: the prioritization of sensational and controversial content; the circulation of distorted or false narratives about public figures; the amplification of polarising interpretations; and the active role of audiences in spreading such content (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018). These dynamics contribute to public images that may diverge from mainstream media representations.

In the Slovak context, disinformation media have expanded since approximately 2016, with their number and influence steadily increasing (Denník N, 2017; Konšpiratori.sk, n.d. a). Their identification is based on criteria such as the dissemination of false or misleading information, promotion of conspiracy narratives, violations of journalistic standards, and lack of transparency (Konšpiratori.sk, n.d. b). These platforms rely heavily on social media distribution, particularly Facebook (Klingová, 2020; Digital News Report, 2020).

This study examines how disinformation media construct the public image of Marian Kočner through recurring narrative structures (story) (C1) and evaluative tones (C2), and how these elements contribute to his celebrity status despite a predominantly negative public profile.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH TIME FRAME

Content analysis of selected texts begins at the time of the murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak and of his fiancée Martina Kušnírová on 21st February 2018 and ends in February 2021.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The first step in data collection was to identify media texts from mainstream sources in the Newton Media archive (1998–2021). The initial stage of data collection involved identifying mainstream media texts in the Newton Media archive (1998–2021); however, the analysis revealed no references to disinformation websites. The analysis of the archive data showed no references to the activities of disinformation websites, including major platforms such as Hlavné správy (Struhárik, 2019; Struhárik & Augustín, 2018).

Therefore, the data collection for analysis continued by requesting and conducting a bibliographic search of articles published on five popular disinformation websites in the period under review. However, this search did not yield relevant sources from disinformation media.

Eventually, based on several recommendations, it was decided to manually collect the data currently available online using search engines. Due to technical limitations of the platforms (e.g., absence of time filters and unstable availability of content), the search required manual verification and selection of relevant materials.

Thus, the research process involved manual identification of texts related to "Marian Kočner" published between February 2018 and February 2021 on five disinformation websites (n=1,179). Next, a second sample (n=875) was defined, using the keyword „Kuciak". Finally, based on the use of the keyword „murder", a definitive specific sample (n=600) was extracted, relating only to our research's subject. Focusing research is consistent with the indications of methodological models (Cleary et al., 2014; Silverman, 2016).

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine the selected texts. Quantitative content analysis was used to identify the frequency of narratives and tonalities, while qualitative analysis enabled their interpretation within a broader communicative context.

Content analysis, as a standard research method, was applied to systematically assess and interpret the material under review. The analysis focused exclusively on the verbal component of the texts; visual elements (e.g., photographs) and multimodal aspects of communication were not included.

The qualitative dimension of the study allowed for an interpretative understanding of narrative patterns, while the quantitative component provided a structured overview of their distribution.

RESEARCH AIMS

For the purpose of this study, we will address the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What narratives were connected to the occurrence of the name „M. Kočner" in the texts informing about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová?
- RQ 2: What was the tonality of the published materials about M. Kočner in the texts informing about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová (positive, negative, neutral)?

To operationalize the research, we defined variables related to narratives and tonality in the selected disinformation media. We assume that these elements contributed to the “celebritization” of M. Kočner within the Slovak disinformation media environment. The analysis follows an inductive approach, moving from data collection to broader interpretative conclusions.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample consisted of 600 available texts from five disinformation media listed in Table 1. At the time of Kočner’s cases (i.e., at the time of writing this study), these outlets had substantial audience reach, as reflected in their follower counts.

Table 1. Research Sample – Five Disinformation Media

Name	Description
Hlavné správy	The website Hlavné správy was closely connected to Kočner’s activities. Police-obtained WhatsApp communications indicated that M. Kočner financially supported the portal, which, in turn, disseminated his interpretations of social and political developments, including conspiracy theories (Madleňák, 2020). The platform also maintains a Facebook page with over 55,000 followers.
Slobodný vysielateľ	The disinformation internet radio Slobodnyvysielač.sk provided M. Kočner with significant media exposure, including in connection with the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. Its Facebook page has over 84,000 followers.
Ďateľ	The disinformation blog Ďateľ, described as an “information and analytical portal,” was linked to M. Kočner through content produced by his associate Peter Tóth, a former journalist and intelligence officer. The platform has over 9,000 followers on Facebook.
Infovojna	Infovojna operates as a disinformation website, radio, and online platform known for conspiracy-oriented content and uncritical coverage of extremist political actors. Its reporting on M. Kočner often relied on both mainstream and alternative sources. The platform has tens of thousands of followers across social media (over 15,000 on Facebook).
Extraplus	Extraplus is a nationwide political-social monthly with a long-standing presence (since 2000), promoting itself through slogans emphasizing alternative narratives neglected by mainstream media (Extraplus, 2022). Its Facebook page has over 10,000 followers.

The sampling frame consisted of articles containing the terms “Kočner”, “murder”, and “Kuciak”. Units of analysis were defined as occurrences of these terms within selected texts. Given the scale and fragmented structure of online content (Potter, 1999, p. 12), search engines were used to identify relevant materials within disinformation media. The final research sample comprised randomly selected n=600 texts.

The analysis focuses on five widely accessed disinformation websites in Slovakia, selected for their audience reach and their extensive coverage of M. Kočner across

texts, images, and videos. The selection reflects the broader expansion of disinformation media in Slovakia in recent years (Denník N, 2017; Konšpiratori.sk, n.d.). This ensured that the sample captured the most visible narratives within the Slovak disinformation environment.

RESEARCH PROCESS: CODING, RELIABILITY, ANALYSING

The study combines quantitative content analysis with a qualitative interpretative approach to narrative identification. We analyzed texts (n=600) referring to “M. Kočner” in coverage of the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová. The analysis focused on identifying dominant narratives and assessing the tonality of each text (positive, negative, neutral).

A coding scheme was developed with three analytical categories: (1) type of content, (2) communicative function, and (3) evaluative framing, each consisting of mutually exclusive sub-codes. The scheme was pilot-tested and revised twice.

Type of content included: reproduced or adapted mainstream news, rumors, fake news, conspiracy content, and hate speech. Communicative function captured discursive roles such as criticism, statements attributed to M. Kočner, black PR, sensationalism, and imprecision. Evaluative framing addressed the portrayal of M. Kočner, including downplaying the situation, presumption of innocence, political framing, criticism of mainstream media, and positive representations.

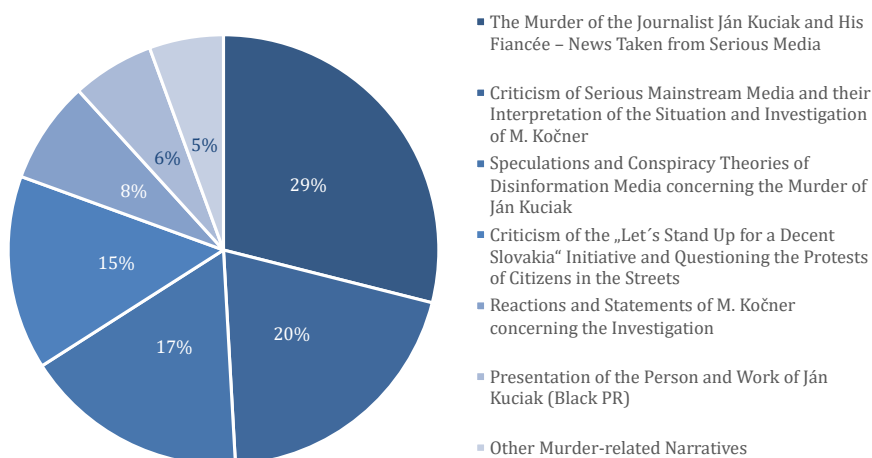
Using multiple trained researchers for coding, each applies the coding scheme independently. One primary code per category was assigned to each unit. Inter-coder reliability was tested on a 5% subsample (n=30) using Cohen's kappa (κ), reaching acceptable levels. The data were then analyzed to identify narrative patterns and tonal distributions.

FINDINGS

NARRATIVES CONNECTED TO THE OCCURRENCE OF THE NAME “M. KOČNER” IN THE TEXTS INFORMING ABOUT THE MURDER OF J. KUCIAK AND M. KUŠNÍROVÁ

An overview of the most frequent narratives concerning the name of M. Kočner is presented in Graph 1. In the analyzed texts (n=600), multiple narratives often occur within a single article (typically two to three). All identified narratives were recorded and statistically interpreted; therefore, their total in the graphical representation exceeds 100%.

Graph 1. The most frequent narratives connected to the name of M. Kočner in the texts informing about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová



Source: Own elaboration

THE MURDER OF THE JOURNALIST JÁN KUCIAK AND HIS FIANCEE – NEWS TAKEN FROM SERIOUS MEDIA

In the period under review, disinformation media informed about Marian Kočner predominantly in the context of the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée. Disinformation websites describe the investigation as one “also participated in by people from the Kuciak team” (Infovojna, 2019b), while a substantial part of their coverage relies on content taken from mainstream media.

The coverage of the murder also brought increased attention to these platforms. Shortly after the murder, in March 2018, the portal Hlavnespravy.sk reported a record readership of over one million visitors (Struhárik & Augustín, 2018).

The presentation of M. Kočner includes references to his financial scandals, his presence on the so-called Mafia Lists, and cases such as secret prison instructions intended to obstruct justice. Disinformation media intensified their coverage of the murder in relation to Kočner from March 2019, following the official charge of ordering the murder. From this point onwards, the volume of coverage increased.

At the same time, disinformation media differ from mainstream outlets in their interpretation of key facts. While mainstream media emphasize Kočner’s threats against Kuciak and the authorities’ failure to investigate them, disinformation media tend to downplay or reinterpret these elements, sometimes portraying Kočner in a more favorable light.

CRITICISM OF SERIOUS MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND THEIR INTERPRETATION OF THE SITUATION AND INVESTIGATION OF M. KOČNER

In texts about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová, the construction of M. Kočner's image often serves as a tool for criticizing the Slovak mainstream media and its representatives (e.g., SME, Denník N, Trend, Aktuality.sk). Disinformation media frequently label them as "hacks", "hypocrites", "propagandists" or "liars", and portray mainstream outlets as "venal media" serving oligarchic interests (Slobodný vysielateľ, 2019; Infovojna, 2020). Within this framing, Kočner functions as a vehicle for broader attacks on mainstream journalism.

This criticism, as a long-term feature of disinformation media, is often accompanied by accusations of coordinated bias or conspiracy (Hlavné správy, 2019a). Mainstream media are described as "uniform in opinion" or "corrupted", and their coverage is framed as exploitative. Such discourse has been characterized as a form of harassment of the Slovak media (Reporters without Borders, 2018).

SPECULATIONS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF DISINFORMATION MEDIA CONCERNING THE MURDER OF JÁN KUCIAK

Regarding M. Kočner, disinformation media publish texts that speculate about the work of law enforcement authorities and the legitimacy of criminal proceedings. They also question Kočner's communication with prominent figures and provide space to conspiracy theorists' statements, thereby amplifying speculative interpretations.

For this study, particularly relevant are those speculations that negate or downplay Kočner's possible involvement in the murder. This is illustrated by claims that question whether the case was solved or point to missing evidence (Infovojna, 2019b). Disinformation websites also disseminate unverified theories about Peter Tóth, including alternative explanations of the crime's motive or target (Ďateľ, 2018, 2019). Further narratives involve so-called "leaked information" about the weapon used, often suggesting alternative scenarios of the crime.

In extreme cases, conspiracy narratives challenge the assumption that the murder was related to Kuciak's journalistic work.

CRITICISM OF THE "LET'S STAND UP FOR A DECENT SLOVAKIA" INITIATIVE AND QUESTIONING THE PROTESTS OF CITIZENS IN THE STREETS

Disinformation websites under review consistently attempted to discredit the "Let's Stand Up for a Decent Slovakia" initiative, which emerged as an immediate reaction to Kuciak's murder. Public protests attended by prominent figures were portrayed as an attempt at a Slovak "majdan", while their significance and

scale were openly questioned. This contrasts with their widely recognized status as the largest public protests in Slovakia since 1989.

Another example of this delegitimization was an article taken from a conspiracy website, which claimed that the initiative had been “hijacked” and linked to a supposed attempt to seize power (Hlavné správy, 2019b; Únos iniciatívy “Za slušné Slovensko”, n.d.). In this framing, the protests were also labeled as a “decent fraud”.

REACTIONS AND STATEMENTS OF M. KOČNER CONCERNING THE INVESTIGATION

In the disinformation media under review, M. Kočner’s own reactions to the investigation can be found. He refuses any involvement in the murder, which the media repeatedly emphasizes. Positively formulated reactions and statements by M. Kočner to the investigation into the murder are also a regular part of the courtroom coverage, including references to his explanations of relevant communications (Extraplus, 2020; Infovojna, 2019a). During his detention, statements from his advocate also appear, questioning the investigation’s legitimacy and highlighting alleged procedural flaws.

PRESENTATION OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF JÁN KUCIAK (BLACK PR)

In relation to the coverage of the murder, a different presentation of the person and work of Ján Kuciak in serious and disinformation media can be observed. Serious media present Ján Kuciak as a responsible journalist with strong analytical skills in working with sources. Disinformation media, despite Kuciak’s murder, continue to use invectives and repeatedly apply the label “presstitut” also to Ján Kuciak (Ruttkayová & Tóth, 2019).

Within examined disinformation media, this takes the form of black PR aimed at discrediting Kuciak’s professionalism and reputation, including criticism directed at his friends, colleagues, family members, and other opponents.¹ This framing is further illustrated by the reporting of Kočner’s threats in a manner favorable to him, which was subsequently disseminated across disinformation platforms (Hlavné správy, 2017).

¹ Ján Kuciak recorded Kočner’s threats and filed a criminal complaint, which was not investigated at the time. Only after Kuciak’s murder did the police acknowledge this failure and later include the complaint in the investigation following Kočner’s arrest (Reporters without borders, 2018).

OTHER MURDER-RELATED NARRATIVES

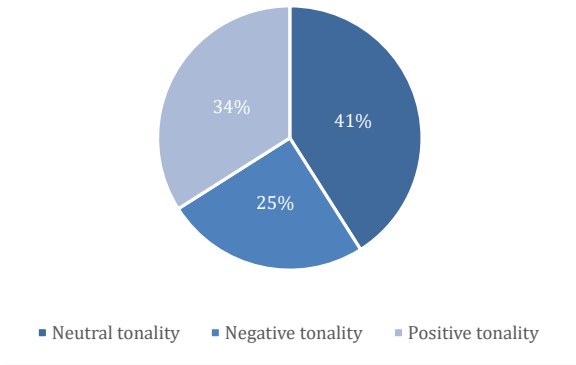
A sporadic occurrence of additional narratives related to M. Kočner was identified in the analyzed texts. These narratives reflect the broader, long-term agenda of disinformation media in Slovakia, which typically includes criticism of corruption, investigations, law enforcement, democratic institutions, the president, and the European Union.

However, no new relevant themes emerged beyond the six dominant narratives identified in the analysis. These categories, therefore, proved sufficient for presenting the findings.

THE TONALITY OF THE MATERIALS PUBLISHED ABOUT M. KOČNER IN THE TEXTS INFORMING ABOUT THE MURDER OF J. KUCIAK AND M. KUŠNÍROVÁ

In the analyzed texts (n=600), the depiction of M. Kočner was predominantly neutral (n=246, i.e., 41%). Negative tonality, largely adopted from mainstream media coverage of the investigation, was the second most frequent (n=204, i.e., 34%), while positive tonality was least represented (n=150, i.e., 25%). The findings are illustrated in Graph 2.

Graph 2. The tonality of the materials published about M. Kočner in the texts informing about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová – overview of the findings



Source: Own elaboration

The neutral tonality is accompanied by efforts to downplay the situation and emphasize unreliable evidence. The texts also frequently invoke the presumption of innocence, portraying M. Kočner as not convicted and sometimes as a victim of mainstream media. Disinformation websites simultaneously produce their own alternative interpretations of the case (Hanus, 2019).

Negative tonality (n=204, i.e., 34%) was seen mainly toward information about the criminal prosecution adopted from mainstream media. These articles often attempt to downplay accusations and are accompanied by the derision of political actors who publicly condemned the murder. Notably, negative depictions appear only approximately one year after the murder (from March 2019), in connection with Kočner's prosecution.

Positive tonality was the least represented (n=150, i.e., 25%). It is typically associated with criticism and derision of mainstream media. Disinformation websites and the positions attributed to Kočner converge particularly in their critique of mainstream journalism. According to the analyzed texts, interpretations of Kočner's communication obtained by the police were framed as being misused by mainstream media.

DISCUSSION

Our research has discovered the most well-known narratives connected to the name of M. Kočner in the texts informing about the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová, as well as their tonality, i.e., we were interested in investigating the nature of the informational qualities (story and tone) that work to build a picture of Marian Kočner as a celebrity in disinformation media. Let us remind that this study and subsequent analysis of the celebrity process of M. Kočner in Slovak disinformation media have introduced the phenomenon of celebritization as a process of the medialization of M. Kočner in fame in disinformation media, despite his negative reputation, i.e., based on research analysis, this study also offers a consideration of the possible celebritization of a negative character.

According to Kasarda and Szomolányi, who conducted a content analysis of the image of M. Kočner in mainstream media (both news and lifestyle/tabloid) in 2006-2018, Kočner's long-term celebritization as well as the long-time operation of M. Kočner in Slovakia presented mostly in a neutral manner in mainstream media (in serious media it was in the period of 2006-2011, while in tabloids this image persisted until 2017). For a long time, M. Kočner was depicted in the media as a businessman, a rich man, and a celebrity. On the other hand, the neutral tone towards M. Kočner receded in mainstream media as the number of Kočner's mediatized criminal cases grew (Kasarda & Szomolányi, n.d.). In our research, we presumed that disinformation media were "tapped into" the status M. Kočner enjoyed in mainstream media; i.e., they took M. Kočner's image from the mainstream media. :

We found that disinformation media intensified their coverage of M. Kočner approximately one year after the murder, contributing to his "celebritization" despite an increasingly negative public profile and without a corresponding

shift in their overall evaluative stance. Notably, negative tonality emerged more clearly only from March 2019, when Kočner was formally charged. The murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová functioned as a trigger that opened space for broader narratives central to disinformation media, including criticism of mainstream journalism, government institutions, judicial processes and civic initiatives such as “For a Decent Slovakia.”

At the same time, disinformation outlets frequently relied on information from mainstream coverage of the trial but supplemented it with their own interpretations and evaluative frames. These additions often favored Kočner, emphasizing the presumption of innocence, foregrounding his statements, and questioning the legitimacy of the investigation and trial. This pattern suggests a tendency to downplay the situation, highlight alleged deficiencies in the evidence, and portray Kočner either as a victim of mainstream media or as part of a broader political narrative.

These findings support Gaffney and Holmes’s argument that even negatively perceived figures may function as celebrities and serve as a lens through which broader cultural tensions and values become visible (Gaffney & Holmes, 2007). In this sense, the mediated construction of Kočner’s public image within disinformation media reflects not only the dynamics of celebrity-making but also the wider socio-political context in which it unfolds.

Speaking about the possible celebritization of a negative character, based on research findings, it is also worth noting how the media co-creates celebrities by amplifying their visibility, shaping public perception, and contributing to their overall fame through various channels. But in the case of Slovak businessman Marian Kočner, it was evident that even a negative character can be “used” by the media to highlight its own messages and references. Thus, not only the celebrity as such becomes significant in the presentation of events. The narratives associated with this celebrity and those emphasized in connection with it are also significant. In addition, we could see that the tonality with which the message is presented to the public is an important part of the media message.

CONCLUSION

We examined how narrative structures and evaluative tones contribute to the formation of the public image of Marian Kočner as a celebrity in disinformation media. The analysis identified six dominant narratives related to M. Kočner in coverage of the murder of J. Kuciak and M. Kušnírová: (1) news adopted from mainstream media; (2) criticism of mainstream media and their interpretation of the case; (3) speculation and conspiracy theories; (4) criticism of the “Let’s Stand Up for a Decent Slovakia” initiative; (5) reactions and statements

of M. Kočner; and (6) representations of Ján Kuciak in relation to Kočner (black PR). Other narratives were only marginally present.

The findings further show that disinformation media predominantly framed M. Kočner in a neutral tone, even after the murder. This is notable given that mainstream media coverage during the same period was largely negative (Kasarda & Szomolányi, n.d.). Rather than reproducing this negativity, disinformation media tended to downplay the situation, emphasize unreliable evidence, invoke the presumption of innocence, or portray Kočner as a victim of mainstream media or broader political developments.

This pattern suggests that disinformation media do not simply reproduce existing information but selectively adapt it by adding interpretative layers aligned with their own agendas (Conroy et al., 2015; Heydari et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2016). Through amplification processes (Vosoughi et al., 2018), such content may shape public perception and reinforce particular social and political narratives. In this sense, the prevalence of neutral tonality may be interpreted as a subtle yet effective mechanism of reframing rather than neutrality in a strict sense.

More broadly, the findings highlight tensions between mainstream and disinformation media in Slovakia and point to the role of mediated narratives in shaping public understanding of high-profile cases. Although the results are limited to the analyzed sample, they provide insight into the dynamics of celebrity-making within disinformation media environments.

This study has several limitations. The sample does not cover the full range of disinformation media in Slovakia, although the focus on widely accessed platforms reduces this limitation. The temporal scope (2018–2021) does not capture longer-term developments, and future longitudinal research could address this gap. In addition, the study does not include a systematic comparison with mainstream media or audience reception, both of which represent important directions for further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported within the project *The Influence of Media on the Social Status of Celebrities: Changes in the Media Image of Marian Kočner in Slovak Society* (2021–2022), registration number 1/0203/21, that was financed by the Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Academy of Sciences in the Slovak Republic.

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