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Editors' Introduction

Communication research has long moved between two vantage points: the close-up view of a single institution, newsroom, or community, and the wider question of what such a case reveals about democracy, media systems, and public trust. The papers gathered in this issue sit deliberately at that intersection. Each begins from a bounded, closely observed setting - Czech journalists' perceptions of populism, a set of disinformation outlets in Slovakia, polarization trends in Croatia, a public broadcaster in Greece, a cluster of local newsrooms in north-eastern Poland, two competing television news formats in Croatia, a government office in the Basque Country, and Islamophobic hate speech on Spanish Twitter/X - and uses it as a lens onto problems that reach well beyond any single country or newsroom: populism through the media, the spread and normalization of disinformation, social and political polarization, the marginalization of regional voices, the changing habits of young news audiences, the institutionalization of listening in government communication, and hate speech in online media.

What unites these contributions methodologically is a commitment to the micro perspective as a way of making macro-level claims accountable to evidence. The authors rely on case studies, in-depth interviews, surveys, and systematic content analysis of hundreds of texts and broadcasts, rather than on abstract theorizing alone. This grounded approach allows each paper to speak with precision about a specific context while still illuminating general and pressing concerns for the field.

In particular, they address the following questions: to what extent journalists perceive populism as a threat to democracy; how disinformation media construct celebrity and shape public perception of controversial figures; how new media landscapes shape polarization; to what extent social media facilitate the rapid circulation of discriminatory discourse; how structural imbalances between center and periphery are reproduced on screen; how local journalists build resilience against disinformation from the ground up; how the aesthetics of news presentation reshape what younger viewers expect from journalism itself; and how listening can (or cannot) be institutionalized in government communication. Taken together, the issue offers a mosaic of contemporary European communication research, unified by its insistence that the biggest questions about media and democracy are best answered by looking closely at particular people, institutions, and practices.

The issue opens with Jan Křovák, whose study explores how early-career Czech journalists who entered the profession after 2011, when Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura

emerged as major populist actors, perceive populism. The findings suggest that younger Czech journalists view populism neutrally, as a pragmatic mainstream strategy, while partially confirming the heightened appeal of populism to journalists.

Hedviga Tkáčová turns to a different and more troubling dimension of public communication: the role of disinformation media in constructing celebrity. Focusing on Marian Kočner and coverage of him in the context of the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, the paper draws on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 600 articles from five disinformation outlets. Tkáčová identifies six recurring narratives and shows that these outlets sustained largely neutral portrayals of Kočner long after mainstream media had turned decisively negative.

A paper by Željko Pavić, Boris Badurina, and Juraj Jurlina explores the relationship between media consumption and political polarization in Croatia, with a specific focus on the differential effects of traditional and internet-based media. Drawing on cultivation theory and the reinforcing spirals model, the paper examines how media use contributes to political polarization in this context. Croatia serves here as an example of a country characterized by a noticeable alignment of political orientation and ideological attitudes, as well as a relatively strong connection between political identification and other significant forms of social identity, such as religiosity.

Georgia Gioltzidou and Foteini Gioltzidou examine the visibility of regional politics on Greek public television, focusing on ERT3's evening news bulletins. Through content analysis of airtime allocation, thematic focus, and story placement, the authors document a persistent imbalance in favor of central political actors and a corresponding marginalization of local political affairs. Their findings speak to broader debates about media centralization and the structural constraints that regional broadcasters face in fulfilling their democratic role.

Marta Więckiewicz-Archacka investigates how local and hyperlocal media in Poland's Warmia and Mazury region confront disinformation in their everyday editorial work. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2024 and April 2025, the study finds that journalists' close knowledge of the local context and their capacity for rapid verification make these outlets a reliable counterweight to anonymous claims circulating on local social media. The article makes a compelling case for the distinctive role that local and hyperlocal media can play in building societal resilience against disinformation. Branimir Felger and Andrian Curiš compare traditional and infotainment-based television news formats in Croatia — HRT's Dnevnik 3 and RTL Direkt — to assess their impact on young viewers. Combining content analysis with a survey of youth audiences, the authors find that infotainment elements shape young people's preferences, with many respondents favoring more engaging, visually dynamic content over traditional reporting styles. The paper points to a broader tension in contemporary journalism, in which the manner of presenting news can influence audience engagement as powerfully as the information it conveys.

Ion Muñoa Errasti, Xabier Barandiarán Irastorza, María José Canel Crespo, and Jim Macnamara propose a novel link between organizational listening and collaborative governance. Drawing on an in-depth case study from the Basque Country, the authors show, through thematic analysis of qualitative data from policymakers, how structured listening practices reshape officials' understanding of and responsiveness to public feedback. Their study reframes government communication not as a one-way transmission of information but as a dynamic driver of democratic engagement, offering practical implications for practitioners seeking to embed listening at the heart of policy development.

Finally, the study by William González-Baquero and colleagues estimates the prevalence and temporal distribution of Islamophobic hate speech on Spanish Twitter/X and describes recurrent and overlapping discursive patterns within the hateful subset. At the same time, the design of the study makes it possible to compare human annotation with a general toxicity-scoring system and a target-specific multilingual BERT classifier. The central premise is that computational architecture should follow the construct being measured: if Islamophobic hostility can be explicit or frame-based, its detection requires more than generic toxicity scores.

Read together, these eight articles trace a shared concern with how communication practices — whether enacted by governments, disinformation networks, social media users, public broadcasters, journalists, local newsrooms, or television news formats — shape citizens' relationship to public life. We hope readers will find in their combination of careful, situated inquiry and broader relevance a fitting reflection of the Central European Journal of Communication's aims.

This issue also features an interview with Silvio Waisbord, conducted by Bartłomiej Łódzki, in which Waisbord reflects on the two challenges he sees as most decisive for journalism today: economic sustainability and social relevance. His argument that journalism's importance can no longer be assumed, but must instead be traced empirically — through the real-world conditions in which specific publics encounter, avoid, or disengage from news — speaks directly to the spirit of this issue. Waisbord calls for research that follows the actual lifespan of news and communication practices rather than studying them in the abstract, and the eight articles gathered here answer that call in their own ways. In this sense, the interview and the research articles converge on a common conviction — that the question of whether, and for whom, communication institutions still matter can only be answered by looking closely at how they work in practice.

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Populism through the Eyes of Early-Career Czech Journalists: Dangerous, or Mainstream?

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Abstract: Populism has become a central theme in contemporary politics and media, raising debates about its disruptive potential or normalization within mainstream discourse. This study explores how early-career Czech journalists, who entered the profession after 2011 when Andrej Babiš and Tomio Okamura emerged as major populist actors, perceive the concept of populism. A total number of 55 respondents completed a questionnaire that combined open- and closed-ended questions. The study is exploratory in design, seeking to map dominant patterns in journalistic understandings of populism and generate a baseline for future research rather than to produce statistically generalizable claims. The sample includes journalists from both public and private outlets across television, radio, print, and online media. The analysis addresses three areas: (1) how journalists define and conceptualize populism; (2) whether they regard it as a threat to democracy or a legitimate political strategy; and (3) whether populist figures are considered more appealing than conventional politicians. Findings suggest younger Czech journalists view populism neutrally, as a pragmatic mainstream strategy, while partially confirming its heightened journalistic attractiveness. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the relationship between populists and journalists.

Keywords: Populism, Mainstream, Journalism, Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš.

INTRODUCTION

This article is the first part of a broader project examining the relationship between journalists and populist actors in the Czech Republic, a nexus often described as ambivalent. Populist figures are highly newsworthy owing to their provocative behavior and polarizing rhetoric (see Mazzoleni et al., 2003), features that resonate with established news values and the commercial imperatives of media organizations. Yet journalists simultaneously frame populist actors as potential threats to democratic norms and institutions (Stanyer et al., 2019).

The term populist actor here refers to political figures consistently labelled as populist in academic literature and media discourse, whose communication exhibits the core features of populism, most centrally the Manichaean distinction between a virtuous „people" and a corrupt „elite" (e.g., Mudde, 2017). The two primary actors of interest are Andrej Babiš, current Prime Minister and leader of ANO, and Tomio Okamura, chairman of the Chamber of Deputies and leader of SPD. Despite the growing prominence of social media, traditional news outlets remain a crucial arena through which political actors reach electorates, including populist leaders who portray journalists as adversaries yet actively pursue coverage in mainstream media (Wettstein et al., 2018, p. 477).

Scholarship has documented the complex „love-hate" dynamic between populists and journalists (e.g., Esser et al., 2016; Wettstein et al., 2018; Stanyer et al., 2019), yet systematic analyses in the Czech context remain scarce (e.g., Smolík & Đorđević, 2020). This gap is striking given the centrality of populism in Czech political life since the early 2010s. The rise of Andrej Babiš and his ANO 2011 („Action of Unsatisfied Citizens") movement marked a turning point: he rapidly ascended to finance minister, then prime minister, and later contested, albeit unsuccessfully, the 2023 presidential election (Suchánek & Michal, 2024, p. 277). A new generation of journalists has thus entered the profession in an environment profoundly shaped by populist politics.

Drawing on a survey of 55 early-career journalists, this study investigates whether populist leaders are seen as integrated into the Czech political mainstream or as destabilizing actors posing risks to democratic governance. It is an exploratory investigation, the first systematic survey of its kind in the Czech context, mapping journalistic attitudes towards populism to provide a foundation for more in-depth follow-up research.

POPULISM AND THE MEDIA

Populism is widely regarded as a contested and ambiguous concept (e.g., Kaltwasser, 2018). Mudde (2017) advances the ideational approach, defining populism as a thin-centred ideology contrasting a morally pure people with a corrupt elite, whereas Weyland (2017) conceptualizes it as a political strategy through which leaders mobilize support by direct, unmediated and often personalistic appeals. Ostiguy (2017) offers a socio-cultural perspective emphasizing style, while Laclau's (2005) discourse-theoretical approach frames populism as a discursive strategy constructing political frontiers through popular demands. Czech scholarship adopts mainly the political-strategy or the ideational lens, though in political communication, the discursive approach is gaining traction (Křovák, 2024, p. 28).

At the core of populism lies a binary opposition between a virtuous people and a corrupt elite. Spruyt et al. (2016, p. 336) define its minimal conceptual content as the belief in two homogeneous, antagonistic groups, with the will of the people upheld as the ultimate source of legitimacy. Populism is also widely held to be closely tied to leadership and charisma (McDonnell, 2016, p. 720), an assumption that is particularly relevant, given the role of two charismatic leaders in the Czech political arena.

The relationship between populist politicians and journalists reflects the broader mediatization of politics, the convergence of media and political logic (Manucci, 2017, p. 469). Media visibility is essential to the electoral success of populist actors, and even where populist messages bypass traditional gatekeeping, legacy media remain vital in disseminating them (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1113). Mény and Surel (2000, p. 126) argue that populist actors feed the media „provocative and fiery statements, and (...) violent attacks on their opponents", giving them a significant advantage in attracting coverage.

Manucci (2017, pp. 468–469) further contends that media prioritization of conflict and negativity fosters alienation and cynicism, creating fertile ground for populist messages. Esser et al. (2016) distinguish two dynamics here. Populism through the media occurs when outlets provide visibility to populists, reflecting convergence between media logic and populist strategy (Mazzoleni, 2008, pp. 54–55) and creating a favorable environment. Populism by the media arises when journalists adopt populist rhetoric themselves, promoting the people-versus-elites dichotomy (Esser et al., 2016). Mazzoleni et al. (2003) and Krämer (2014, p. 48) call this media populism, the use of populist „stylistic and ideological elements" by media actors; combined with hostility toward outgroups, it becomes right-wing media populism. Bobba et al. (2025) note that this second dynamic has received considerably less attention.

The relationship is also marked by antagonism. Journalists often conceive their role as that of „paladins" of democracy, defending democratic values against the perceived anti-democratic tendencies of populist actors (Mazzoleni et al., 2003, p. 234). Populists, in turn, construct journalists as members of a corrupt elite, delegitimizing critical reporting while exploiting visibility, and accuse mainstream media of serving establishment interests and deliberately misleading the public (Haller & Holt, 2019, p. 1669).

THE CASE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The ambivalent relationship between populism and the media has taken a distinctive form in the Czech Republic since 2011, when entrepreneur Andrej Babiš, one of the country's wealthiest individuals, entered politics by founding ANO 2011. His populist style has been conceptualized in diverse terms: as valence populism, competing on nonpositional issues such as anti-corruption, transparency and moral integrity while stressing anti-establishment motives (Zulianello, 2020, p. 329); as neo-patrimonialism, in which Babiš stylizes himself as a „ruler-patron of society" whose practices surpass liberal-democratic procedures (Stulík & Naxera, 2022, p. 42); and as technocratic populism, rejecting the left-right divide in favor of expert-led, „apolitical" solutions for „ordinary people" (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019, p. 304). These labels illustrate the multidimensionality of his political identity and the difficulty of applying rigid typologies.

Babiš launched his „anti-corruption revolution" in September 2011 (Pšenička, 2021), entered government in 2013, and became Prime Minister in 2017, a tenure coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, for which he was criticized (Císař & Kubát, 2021). Although ANO won most votes in 2021, other parties formed a coalition majority, sending Babiš into opposition (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). His narrative shifted markedly during the 2023 presidential election, in which he instrumentalized the war in Ukraine against his opponent Petr Pavel, a former NATO general; media coverage largely inverted this framing, casting Babiš himself as the warmonger, and he lost the election (Křovák et al., 2025). In 2025, he targeted the EU (without advocating an exit), migration, and Ukraine, departing from anti-elite rhetoric that had become difficult to sustain after eight years in office. His current politics combine anti-elite framing, valence populism, technocratic populism (advocating a government of experts, see Malecký, 2025), neo-patrimonialism (using institutions to reinforce personal wealth; Stulík & Naxera, 2022, p. 43), and nationalism (depicting Ukrainians and other „outsiders" as threats, see Naxera, 2024), a coexistence enabling him to broaden his base even as his credibility as an „outsider" wanes.

His career has been marred by scandals, including alleged ties to the communist secret police, the Stork's Nest fraud trial,[1] and his inclusion in the Pandora Papers (Křovák, 2026). From 2013 to 2023, he owned the Mafra publishing house (iDnes.cz, Mladá fronta DNES, Lidové noviny), whose purchase led to mass staff resignations over his editorial interference (Waschková Císařová & Kotišová,

[1] The Stork's Nest case concerns alleged EU subsidy fraud in which ownership of Babiš's farm was temporarily transferred to family members to qualify for funds designated for small enterprises. Babiš was shielded from sentencing after coalition MPs refused to lift his parliamentary immunity; his former advisor Jana Nagyová received a three-year suspended sentence and a fine, pending appeal (Bádal & Bartosz, 2026).

2022). This ability to shape mainstream media discourse directly distinguished him from many European counterparts.

Around the same time as Babiš, Tomio Okamura entered politics via the Senate in 2012. He is labeled a radical right-wing populist (Zulianello, 2020), and his career has centered on anti-immigration, Islamophobia, hostility to „unadaptable" groups, most notably Roma, and opposition to the EU and NATO, including advocacy for withdrawal referenda (Vít, 2015). His Úsvit přímé demokracie (Dawn of Direct Democracy) secured 6.88% and 14 seats in 2013; after intra-party disputes, he founded SPD in 2015, adopting a more radical nativist discourse targeting elites, the media, and immigrants (Kluknavská et al., 2026, pp. 33–34). SPD gained 10.64% in 2017 and 9.56% in 2021, remaining in opposition, and its anti-Roma messaging resulted in a court-imposed fine of three million Czech crowns for incitement to hatred.[2] Historically characterized by limited coalition potential (Křovák, 2026), SPD nonetheless entered government after the 2025 elections through party-aligned expert ministers, following its merger with Trikolora, the Free Citizens Party, and PRO.

Other high-ranking politicians have also been characterized as populists, including former President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023), who declared his intention to serve as president of the „lower ten million", contrasting himself with the urban elites he pejoratively termed the „Prague Café" (Buben & Kouba, 2023). In 2017, Zeman met Vladimir Putin in Beijing and remarked that "there are too many journalists and there is a need to liquidate [them]" (Heřmanová & Drahokoupil, 2017). This statement underscores another dimension of the fraught relationship between (populist) actors and journalists.

The focus on Babiš and Okamura is particularly pertinent at present. Following his defeat in the 2023 presidential elections, ANO won every subsequent election, including the 2024 European Parliament elections, after which it co-founded the Patriots for Europe group, the third-largest bloc in the Parliament despite a „cordon sanitaire" imposed by the mainstream European parties (Just, 2025). ANO then won the 2025 general election with a record 34.51% and formed a government with Okamura's SPD and Motorists for Themselves (Machálková, 2025), a coalition condemned by the so-called „democratic bloc" under former Prime Minister Fiala as an alliance of „populists and extremists" (Pánik, 2025). The new government adopted an openly adversarial stance towards journalists, with Babiš regularly targeting the media at his press conferences and in his Sunday social media videos, prompting more than 20 editors-in-chief of major Czech outlets to issue a joint critical response (Seznam Zprávy, 2026). At the

[2] In June 2026, a court fined SPD three million Czech crowns for incitement to hatred through racist electoral posters used in the 2024 campaign (Bádal, 2026). Okamura, originally a co-defendant, was shielded by parliamentary immunity gained after the 2025 elections, as Babiš was in the Stork's Nest case.

time of writing, the government was also advancing a proposal to abolish the public service media license fee in favor of direct state financing, a reform that drew significant scholarly criticism (Urbániková et al., 2026).

The nexus has been studied comparatively. Stanyer et al. (2019, pp. 36–46) found populism framed predominantly negatively across 13 countries; Czech journalists associated it with strategic communication, identified Babiš and Zeman as the main figures, and named urban elites, intellectuals, mainstream media, and the EU among its targets (p. 41). That study covered only four outlets, whereas the present paper incorporates journalists from 23 organizations. A survey of Czech scholars specializing in populism further revealed widespread skepticism about how the concept is handled in journalism: 63.6% considered Czech journalists to use the term „rather inaccurately" and a further 18.2% described their usage as „absolutely inaccurate" (Křovák, 2024, p. 30). As Stanyer et al. (2019, p. 35) stress, journalists significantly shape public discourse. This study does not assess definitional correctness but rather illuminates how Czech journalists perceive populism and how they contribute to its representation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The dataset is derived from a questionnaire administered via Google Forms to Czech journalists who began their careers after Andrej Babiš entered politics, with data collected between May 9 and June 18, 2025. The initial target of 35 responses was adjusted, following consultation with the *Worlds of Journalism Study* (WJS) project coordinator, to 10% of the relevant population (≈48 individuals), and was exceeded: 52 journalists from 23 national outlets and three freelancers. The questionnaire combined closed-ended, open-ended, and five-point Likert-type questions.

A pilot study with eight journalists preceded the main survey. Published through the non-peer-reviewed European Journalism Observatory (Křovák, 2025), it used only open-ended questions to capture spontaneous understandings of populism prior to any structured instrument. Although it did not ask whether Babiš and Okamura were perceived as mainstream actors, respondents spontaneously described them as such. This unanticipated pattern warranted the inclusion of structured Likert-type items measuring mainstreaming and democratic threat, following the empirical logic of the pilot phase and consistent with established mixed-methods practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

As Reja et al. (2003, p. 161) note, open-ended questions capture spontaneous responses, whereas closed-ended ones restrict answers to predefined categories. Two closed-ended items were included: the general evaluation of populism (negative, neutral, or positive), and whether populists attract disproportionate journalistic

attention („yes, always", „yes, in some cases", „no"). Both were followed by open-ended prompts requiring elaboration, as were personal definitions of populism and explanations for the negative or neutral assessments (no respondent categorized populism positively). Further open-ended questions asked participants to name politicians perceived as populist, and those not usually labeled populist but employing populist rhetoric. Such items minimized researcher influence and diversified data quality (Reja et al., 2003, p. 169). Coding was manual and inductive, with categories emerging from the data rather than imposed prior to analysis (Thomas, 2006, p. 238), then quantified to capture prevalence, while illustrative quotations provide contextual depth.

Respondents also completed six Likert-type items on a five-point scale from „strongly agree" to „strongly disagree". Following Koo and Yang (2025), these are individual Likert-type items rather than a composite scale: each measures a distinct attitudinal dimension, such as the perceived mainstreaming of Babiš and Okamura or the perceived threat of populism to democracy. Individual analysis is appropriate, and indeed necessary, where items are unique and measure phenomena that cannot be meaningfully combined (Clason & Dormody, 1994, p. 31), so the approach is descriptive, reporting frequencies and percentage distributions per category rather than composite scores or parametric statistics (Koo & Yang, 2025, p. 6). A five-point format balances detail against respondent effort (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014, p. 5).

The study poses three research questions:

- RQ1: How is the phenomenon of populism conceptualized by early-career Czech journalists?
- RQ2: How do populism and mainstream politics overlap in the Czech Republic in the early-career Czech journalists' perspective?
- RQ3: To what extent are populist actors perceived as more appealing by early-career Czech journalists?

SAMPLE

The empirical foundation comprises 55 journalists employed exclusively in nationwide Czech media who began their careers after 2011, the year Andrej Babiš entered politics. This criterion ensures that all respondents formed professional identities within a media environment already reshaped by populism, capturing a cohort whose routines and perceptions evolved in direct interaction with populist governance, rhetoric, and media strategies. The sample is further limited to journalists covering domestic politics, foreign affairs, and business, the domains most directly affected by populist discourse; lifestyle, sports, culture, and regional reporters were excluded.

The Czech journalistic population is estimated at 2,150 (Worlds of Journalism Study, n.d.); since 18% are aged 18 to 29 and 27% fall within 30 to 39 (Němcová Tejkalová et al., 2025), the relevant pool narrows to about 968. Following consultation with Alice Němcová Tejkalová, a co-coordinator of the WJS, a qualified estimate excluding regional, sports, culture, and crime reporters halves this, yielding roughly 480. The collected sample of 55 thus represents around 11.5% of this group, a conservative figure given that entry into the profession after 2011 effectively excludes journalists above 35 years of age or significantly limits the number of journalists from this sub-group. The questionnaire was sent to 140 journalists (30% of the target), with a response rate of 39.3%. Non-probability sampling methods were employed since no comprehensive database of Czech journalists exists; the author relied on professional networks, snowball sampling, and staff lists, so self-selection bias cannot be excluded.

The sample reflects the institutional and ideological diversity of Czech nationwide media, spanning television, radio, print, and online formats. Public service broadcasters (Česká televize, Český rozhlas) account for 10 respondents, alongside private broadcasters (TV Nova, CNN Prima News), conservative (*Echo24*), liberal (*Deník N*), right-wing (*Hrot24*), and left-wing (*Deník Referendum*) outlets, mass-market platforms (*Seznam Zprávy, iDnes.cz, Blesk*), business-oriented outlets (*E15, Forbes, CzechCrunch*), and a specialized environmental medium (*Obnovitelně.cz*), with three freelancers likewise included. Demographic and professional information is summarised in Table 1.[3]

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample (N = 55)

Variable	Distribution	Notes
Age	20–33 years; Mean 27.22; Median 27 (15 respondents, 27.3%, aged 27).	A relatively homogeneous group.
Gender	Male: 52.7%; Female: 47.3%; Other: 0%.	WJS3 estimates 56.7% male, 43.3% female.
Education	56.4% university degree (media focus); 25.5% university degree (non-media); 3.6% post-secondary vocational school; 14.5% secondary education.	Over four-fifths hold a university degree.
Focus of reporting	Domestic politics: 50.9%; Foreign politics: 30.9%; Business: 18.2%.	Beats most directly shaped by political discourse.
Experience	0.5–10 years; Mean ≈ 5.35; Median 5.	A generation formed after 2011.

Source: Own elaboration

[3] The same respondents also completed a parallel set of questions addressing their perceptions of the role of journalism. This second dataset was presented at the 2025 MEDIG conference and is currently under peer review as a separate manuscript.

RESULTS

A total of 61.8% of the respondents perceive populism as a neutral phenomenon, an ordinary part of politics, whereas 38.2% view it as negative and threatening to democracy. None evaluates populism positively. These proportions remain consistent across education levels: 62.5% of those with secondary education, 61.3% of university graduates in media-related fields, and 57.1% of graduates from other disciplines consider populism neutral. A modest gender difference appears, with 34.5% of male respondents versus 42.3% of female respondents seeing populism as negative. A follow-up Likert-type question revealed that 52.7% of the journalists „strongly agreed" or „agreed" that populism poses a danger to democracy (see Figure 1).

Those who view populism negatively argue that it erodes respect for democratic institutions and fosters societal division. As Respondent 47 noted: „*Society is held together, among other things, by shared values. Yet these values are gradually disappearing among populists, as their strategies are designed to offer supporters whatever happens to be 'in vogue' at the moment. I would sum up populism with the saying: 'whichever way the wind blows, that is the way I will go.'*"

Respondents' definitions varied considerably. Only one explicitly cited Mudde, labeling populism a (thin) ideology, while nine (16.4%) defined it as a political strategy. The most common view, expressed by 32 respondents (58.2%), was that populism seeks to maximize voter support by any means. As Respondent 12 stated: „*(Populism is) a political strategy that subordinates everything to pleasing voters.*" Respondent 44 emphasized the role of opinion polls, with populists using topics popular among voters despite their unreality or the concealment of their consequences.

A second recurrent theme was oversimplification: 26 journalists argued that populists offer overly simple solutions to complex problems, 20 highlighted the division of „us" versus „them", and 19 named „the people" and 18 „the elite" as key categories. Respondent 4 offered a comprehensive definition: „*Populism essentially divides society into a kind of vague pure people and an equally vague malevolent corrupt elite. Populists identify themselves as a kind of warriors on behalf of these people, their discourse involves simplifying complex problems, blaming others (elites) for these problems, and offering simple and often unrealistic solutions.*"

Eighteen respondents underscored lying and empty promises as central features. Respondent 18 put it directly: „*Populists lie and distort the facts.*" Respondent 17 highlighted another difficulty: „*Not every citizen can recognize that this is populism.*" Nine respondents similarly emphasized the subtlety and unrecognizability of populism for „ordinary people". Other aspects mentioned at least five times included manipulation (8), ignoring relevant issues (6), and focusing on irrelevant topics (5).

Respondents also identified actors they regard as populist. Andrej Babiš was mentioned 52 times, followed by Tomio Okamura (42) and Donald Trump (12), for a total of 24 figures named. Former president Miloš Zeman was mentioned only once, while Filip Turek, an MP for the Motorists for Themselves, was mentioned 10 times. A further 43 politicians were identified as not typically classified as populist but employing elements of populist discourse; nine were mentioned more than once, with Petr Fiala, prime minister at the time of the data collection, cited most frequently (18 times) and labeled as populist on five occasions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Political actors mentioned more than twice in the questionnaire

Populist politician	Mentions	Non-populist politician	Mentions
Andrej Babiš (ANO)	52 (94.5%)	Petr Fiala (ODS)	18 (32.7%)
Tomio Okamura (SPD)	42 (76.4%)	Vít Rakušan (Mayors and Independents)	11 (20.0%)
Donald Trump	12 (21.8%)	Marian Jurečka (Christian Democrats)	7 (12.7%)
Filip Turek (Motorists for Themselves)	10 (18.2%)	Jana Maláčová (SOCDEM)	6 (10.9%)
Alena Schillerová (ANO)	7 (12.7%)	Danuše Nerudová (STAN)	4 (7.3%)
Kateřina Konečná (KSČM)	7 (12.7%)	Jan Grolich (Christian Democrats), Emmanuel Macron, Ivan Bartoš (Pirates)	3 (5.5%)
Jana Maláčová (SOCDEM)	5 (9.1%)		
Petr Fiala (ODS)	5 (9.1%)		
Viktor Orbán	4 (7.3%)		

Source: Own elaboration

Whilst no substantial gender differences appeared in the overall perception of populism, female respondents more consistently identified Okamura as a populist (84.6% vs. 69.0%) and named Kateřina Konečná, chair of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, nearly three times as frequently as men (19.2% vs. 6.9%), suggesting a broader application of the label across party lines. These differences are not statistically significant, given the sample size, but point to a fruitful avenue for future research on gender and political labeling in journalism.

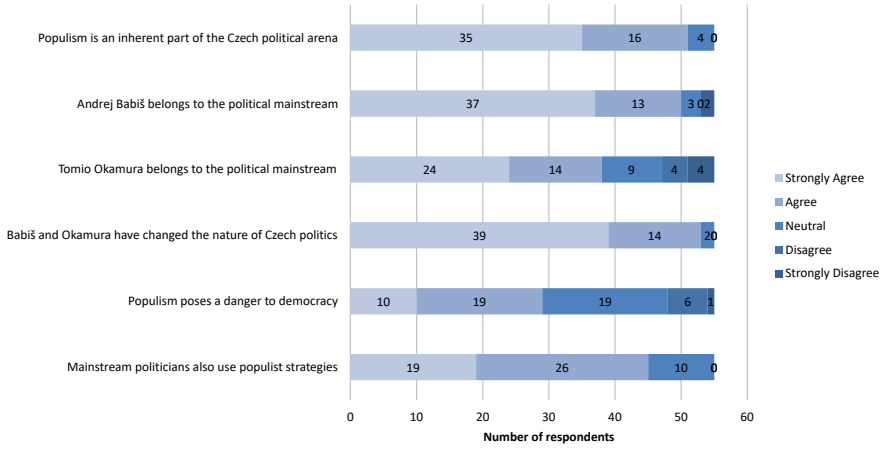
Chi-square tests and a Mann-Whitney U test assessed whether these patterns varied across subgroups, examining perception of populism and perceived media attractiveness by gender, education, reporting focus, and experience. None yielded statistically significant differences (all $p > 0.05$), suggesting that

the dominant pattern, populism as a neutral, mainstream phenomenon with conditional journalistic attractiveness, is consistent across the sample.

In response to RQ2, 14 journalists stated that populism has always been present in the Czech political arena, and 9 argued that even mainstream parties employ populist strategies. The Likert-type items support these claims: 51 of 55 (92.7%) strongly agreed or agreed that populism is an inherent feature of Czech politics, and most affirmed that mainstream politicians use it. Thirty-seven respondents (67.3%) strongly agreed that Babiš belongs to the political mainstream, and 24 (43.6%) said the same of Okamura. The highest proportion of journalists (strongly) agreed that both leaders had reshaped the Czech political arena.

Respondent 2 observed: „*Populism is currently a standard part of mainstream domestic and global politics. While it has always existed to some extent, it does not necessarily pose a threat to democracy. For example, the Czech Republic's defense issues are not at risk under the ANO movement's government. However, a populist government will simply not communicate about them.*" Despite criticism of his foreign policy, Babiš has consistently insisted on remaining in the EU and NATO.

Figure 1. Journalists' Agreement with Six Statements on Populism and Its Key Actors (N = 55)



Source: Own elaboration

Five journalists added that the duty to provide context makes populists more attractive as targets for polemics. Respondent 4 stressed incumbency rather than populism per se: „*Populists are more attractive if populism is not the only thing that makes them interesting. For example, Andrej Babiš is written about more because he is a populist, but he was also the prime minister and leads the strongest movement…*" adding that Tomio Okamura in the past lacked coalition potential was thus not as interesting for journalists.

Turning to RQ3, 14.8% of journalists stated that populists are „always" more attractive to the media, 68.5% „in some cases," and 16.7% not at all. Twenty-two respondents agreed that populists behave more outrageously than mainstream politicians, while 28 confirmed that such behavior fuels clickbait headlines. Other explanations, such as populists being easier to reach, were mentioned only three to five times. As Respondent 13 put it: *„An annoying loudmouth always attracts more attention than a calm pragmatist."* Respondent 36 elaborated: *„The media landscape has changed, and content is largely determined by how people click on texts. Populists make strong statements, attract attention, and so they often receive much more attention."* Respondents 17, 31, and 32 agreed that traditional politicians' more measured style makes them less appealing to readers.

DISCUSSION

The data for RQ1 show that younger Czech journalists rarely engage with academic definitions of populism. Only one respondent explicitly drew upon the ideational approach advanced by Mudde (2017), while a larger group conceptualized populism in terms of strategy (Weyland, 2017). The dominant understanding was that populism represents a pragmatic technique to maximize electoral support by adapting messages to voter preferences, frequently at the expense of coherence, feasibility, or truth, an interpretation resonating most closely with Weyland's approach. Other recurrent themes included oversimplification, the binary opposition of „the people" versus „the elite" (cf. Spruyt et al., 2016), and empty promises, alongside dependence on polls and emotionally charged rhetoric, which align with the literature on the communicative style of populism (e.g., Ostiguy, 2017; Manucci, 2017). Respondents did not reproduce more theoretically sophisticated approaches such as Laclau's (2005) framework, nor did they mention charismatic leadership. This predominance of pragmatic descriptions may reflect journalists drawing on their experience covering daily politics rather than on political theory, and may indicate a generational normalization of populism.

The findings for RQ2 suggest that early-career journalists overwhelmingly consider populism a fundamental aspect of Czech politics, with over 90% agreeing that it is part of the political arena (see Figure 1) and a majority placing both Babiš and Okamura in the mainstream. This contrasts with earlier findings by Stanyer et al. (2019), in which Czech journalists described populism more negatively and identified Miloš Zeman as a key figure. Zeman's absence here reflects both his retirement from active politics and the fact that a younger generation now perceives populism less as a dangerous anomaly than as an ordinary aspect of democratic competition. These findings echo arguments about the

mainstreaming of populism (Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Schwörer, 2021; Stulík & Naxera, 2022), and several respondents stressed that mainstream parties, including the traditional party ODS, employ populist communication strategies, a perception also noted by Křovák and Charvát (2022). Populism is thus no longer associated solely with actors on the political margins but constitutes a common rhetorical repertoire across party lines. Further research could examine how this relates to the long tenure of Babiš as minister of finance and prime minister, which accustomed journalists and the public to populist styles of communication, and whether the „Anti-Babiš" strategies of his opponents, grounded in personalized critique and polarizing rhetoric, themselves contributed to the normalization of populist discourse.

The data confirm that populists are regarded as more attractive media subjects, though not unconditionally: 68.5% indicated they are „sometimes" more attractive, while only 14.8% considered them always more appealing. Journalists cited their tendency to behave provocatively, provide quotable soundbites and make scandalous claims, all of which fulfill established news values of conflict, negativity, and immediacy (cf. Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Esser et al., 2016). Respondents repeatedly stressed the economic pressures facing Czech newsrooms, where content is increasingly driven by digital clicks and populists are perceived as useful sources of attention-grabbing material, which resonates with Esser et al.'s (2016) argument that populist figures are attractive not only because of their political significance but because they align with the commercial imperatives of news production. Several respondents also emphasized that attractiveness depends not solely on populist style but on incumbency and political relevance: Babiš, as a prime minister and leader of the largest parliamentary party, inevitably draws more coverage than Okamura, who, despite becoming the chair of the Chamber of Deputies, remained much less relevant in real decision-making. Journalistic attention to populists is therefore mediated both by structural factors of newsworthiness and by the broader political context.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals a paradoxical stance among early-career Czech journalists. They conceptualize populism as a rather neutral phenomenon, a pragmatic strategy rather than a threat to democracy, yet acknowledge that it can be dangerous, with more than half agreeing that it undermines democratic norms (see Figure 1). This duality, called a love-hate relationship by the author, reflects the ambivalence documented in comparative studies (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Wettstein et al., 2018) but suggests that the normalization of populism may be more advanced in the Czech context.

Such normalization might shape how journalists report on politics: if populism is understood as ordinary, journalists may be less inclined to critically interrogate its consequences; alternatively, familiarity may enhance their critical literacy, enabling them to detect manipulative strategies more easily. Distinguishing between these possibilities requires further research, as does the question of how journalists' understandings of populism influence actual reporting practices. Content analysis could reveal whether Czech news organizations reproduce populist frames, resist them, or combine both (cf. Bobba et al., 2025), while comparison between older and younger journalists would illuminate generational differences and cross-country research would show whether the normalization observed here is specific to the Czech media environment or reflects a broader European trend (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018). More attention should also be paid to the economic conditions of Czech journalism and their role in amplifying or constraining populist visibility, and researchers should revisit the case to see how journalists react to the aggressive behavior of Babiš's new government.

As an exploratory study, the findings should be understood as a first systematic mapping rather than a definitive account; their value lies in identifying patterns and raising questions that future research can pursue with greater depth. In sum, early-career Czech journalists perceive populism primarily as a political strategy, view it as deeply integrated into mainstream politics, and acknowledge its particular media attractiveness. Their perspectives highlight the normalization of populism within the Czech political arena and raise important questions about journalism's future role in shaping democratic discourse.

Still, the findings of this study must be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, coding was conducted manually and solely by one person, which may introduce a degree of subjectivity, yet the limited number of open-ended questions made consistent coding feasible without multiple coders; such single-researcher inductive coding is well established in small-N studies aiming to identify recurring patterns rather than statistically generalizable claims (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, responses were translated from Czech into English, which might have caused some loss of nuance without compromising the substance of the data. Open-ended questions also yield more episodic responses than semi-structured interviews, the methodology of the closest comparable study (Stanyer et al., 2019); this is inherent to the survey format rather than a shortcoming, since the design prioritizes breadth, capturing patterns across 55 journalists from 23 outlets.

Finally, excluding the 40+ age group, who may hold different views on populism, Babiš and Okamura, limits generalizability to the entire Czech journalist population, although the views of a generation likely to remain active for decades are vital for understanding the future Czech journalistic landscape. Response bias is a further concern: despite assurances of confidentiality, journalists may

have moderated their answers out of fear of being identified or of presenting socially desirable views (Grimm, 2010). Lastly, the author cannot verify whether respondents used external sources, despite instructions not to do so, although all data are treated as originating directly from the participants.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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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 vysielač	The disinformation internet radio Slobodnyvysielac.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.

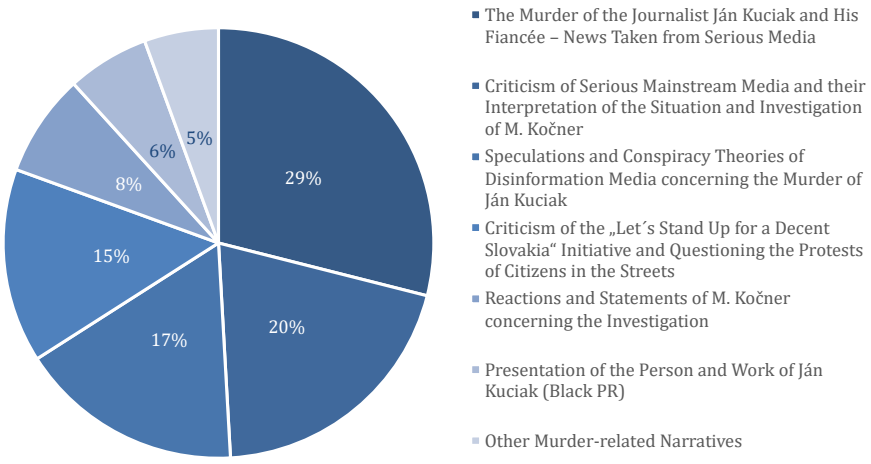
Using multiple trained researchers for coding, each applies the coding scheme independently. One primary code per category was assigned to each unit. Intercoder reliability was tested on a 5% subsample (n=30) using Cohen's kappa (κ), reaching acceptable levels. The data were then analyzed to identify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

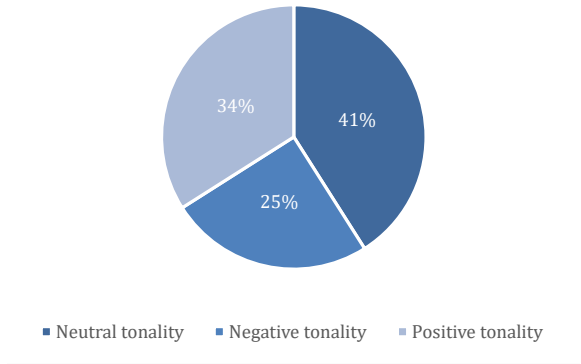
A sporadic occurrence of additional narratives related to M. Kočner was identified in the analyzed texts. These narratives reflect the broader, long-term agenda of disinformation media in Slovakia, which typically includes criticism of corruption, investigations, law enforcement, democratic institutions,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

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The Reinforcing Spirals of Beliefs: How New Media Landscapes Shape Polarization Trends in Croatia

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Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between media consumption and political polarization in Croatia, with a specific focus on the differential effects of traditional and Internet-based media. Drawing on cultivation theory and the reinforcing spirals model, the paper examines how media use contributes to political polarization. The paper utilizes survey data from an online opt-in sample of the Croatian population (N = 1,021), to test hypotheses related to media consumption patterns and their connection with political identification. The findings suggest that consuming Internet news tends to increase political polarization. In contrast, television news consumption is associated with more centrist political identification. The study also discusses the broader implications of these findings, highlighting the role of digital media in shaping political identities. By integrating theoretical frameworks with empirical analysis, this paper strives to present valuable insights into the complex interplay between media consumption and political polarization in the digital age.

Keywords: Political polarization; Cultivation theory; Reinforcing spirals model; Media environment; Croatia.

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this paper is to empirically investigate the relationship between media consumption and political polarization, with a specific focus on comparing the effects of traditional television media and Internet-based media in Croatia. The study aims to determine whether the consumption of these media types contributes to political mainstreaming or polarization among the public. Over the last decades, Croatia has experienced an increase in political and value polarization, characterized by a noticeable alignment of political orientation and ideological attitudes, as well as a stronger connection between political identification and other significant forms of social identity, such as religiosity (Pavić, 2024). While much of the literature focuses on the US, this paper aims to discuss the specific trends in political polarization in Croatia and the media underpinnings within the broader context of global developments. The rationale for this study is particularly pronounced in the context of increasing political polarization observed in many democracies worldwide, as it seeks to contribute to understanding political polarization in the digital age.

MEDIA CULTIVATION

During the 1970s and 1980s, a research program started by George Gerbner and his associates aimed at discovering media effects, especially the "cultivation differentials", i.e. differences between heavy and light television users in their adoption of the "television world" (Gerbner et al., 1986). Their basic contention was that the television world significantly diverges from the real world, and that exposure to television programming creates a blueprint for interpreting reality. Through the process called "mainstreaming", the political differences that arise from social, cultural, and demographic processes tend to shrink among more active media users. Namely, the mainstreaming implies that these differences should be smaller or even nonexistent between the sub-groups of heavy users (Gerbner et al., 1986). For instance, Gerbner et al. (1986) found that heavy television users from all political affiliations are more likely to identify themselves as moderates compared to light users, who are more likely to apply liberal or conservative labels. In this context, mainstreaming would result from television programming that attempts to maintain the middle-of-the-road position to attract mass audiences. Gerbner et al. (1982) also confirmed the political mainstreaming of television viewing by showing that heavy television viewing blurs class distinctions based on socioeconomic status (SES), making lower-SES groups more likely to label themselves as middle-class, while at the same time making higher-SES groups more likely to label themselves as working-class.

Recent contributions in cultivation theory often investigated the cultivation effects of specific media genres rather than the overall cultivation effect (for an overview, see Morgan and Shanahan, 2010). The rationale behind such a decision relates to the vast differences between various media genres and their content, which may lead to a nonexistent overall cultivation effect.

Moreover, in the initial phases of the research program development, the cultivation approach primarily focused on television, whereas recent decades have witnessed significant changes in the media environment. For instance, Roche, Pickett, and Gertz (2016) noted that users consume Internet news differently than they do in the case of traditional media. Namely, internet news content comes from increasingly varied perspectives and is more freely selected and shared. Partisan information sources are gaining traction on the Internet, thereby offering partisan news not only to politically active individuals but also to apolitical ones (Lelkes et al., 2017). Pariser (2011) claimed that web personalization leads to unintended consequences, such as the creation of "filter bubbles" that reinforce existing attitudes and worldviews. Barbera et al. (2015) found that information exchange on Twitter about political issues (via retweets) is primarily related to communication among individuals with similar ideological preferences.

Overall, the nature of media landscapes has undergone a dramatic shift, characterized by evolving from traditional mass media to contemporary social media. This shift has introduced new dynamics in how information is disseminated and consumed, leading to a more fragmented yet personalized media experience—one that can both challenge and reinforce established belief systems. As audiences increasingly curate their media environments, the potential for echo chambers and filter bubbles grows, further complicating the relationship between media exposure and belief formation (Pariser, 2011; Montag & Hegelich, 2020; Sunstein, 2017). The question "What's your reality?" is becoming increasingly prominent and relevant in contemporary societies (Lindemann, 2020).

However, the growing influence of the Internet and active media consumers also drives media convergence, understood as the flow of content across delivery channels that blur the distinction between old and new media (Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, the fragmentation of old media provides users with the opportunity to select content that aligns more closely with their existing political and social attitudes, and the gate-keeping role of journalists is changing as well (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that some studies (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Steppat et al., 2022) did not find significant differences in levels of selective exposure between traditional (old) and online (new) media users. These recent trends imply the need for reanalysis and reevaluation of the cultivation effects of old and new media.

A slightly different approach from cultivation theory, the reinforcing spirals model (RSM), proposed by Michael D. Slater (2007), hypothesizes a cyclical

relationship in which media use influences political ideology over time, leading to increased polarization. While George Gerbner's cultivation theory posited that long-term exposures to media content shape perceptions and beliefs about reality, often resulting in more homogenized values and worldviews, contemporary approaches recognize a more complex and dynamic relationship between media and audiences (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). While RSM emphasizes active engagement with media that aligns with existing beliefs, cultivation theory focuses on the gradual shaping of attitudes through consistent media narratives, highlighting different mechanisms of influence.

These theoretical frameworks underscore that individuals are not merely passive consumers but active participants in a dynamic interplay between their beliefs and the media landscape. RSM appears to contradict cultivation theory by suggesting that individuals are not simply shaped by media exposure over time but actively engage with content that reflects their preexisting beliefs and values. This creates a more complex interaction between personal agencies and media influence.

Recognizing the evolving media landscape, Cöster and Shehata (2024) proposed the idea of self-cultivation, emphasizing an active user role in selecting and interpreting content that aligns with their perspectives. This idea offers a more nuanced understanding of how digital media shapes values and attitudes. Andersen et al. (2023), drawing on uses and gratifications theory, explore how individuals actively seek media that fulfill specific needs, such as information acquisition, social interaction, or emotional support. This perspective highlights the dynamic interplay between user motivations and media consumption, suggesting that individuals are not merely passive recipients of information but actively shape their own media experiences. Essentially, Cöster and Shehata (2024) propose that modern media create seemingly parallel mainstreams, diverging from the classic cultivation theory notion of a single, homogenizing mainstream. Instead, self-cultivation leads to the consolidation of different mainstreaming frames, ultimately reinforcing contrasting beliefs rather than bringing them closer together.

This perspective aligns with recent research on the impact of social media on perceptions and beliefs. Studies have shown that high social media usage correlates with the development of more negative worldviews, exemplifying the Mean World Syndrome in digital contexts (Tsay-Vogel et al., 2018). Furthermore, the personalization of content in new media environments has intensified media dependency, making media content more relevant and potentially more influential (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Stroud, 2010; Törnberg & Uitermark, 2021). The concept of self-cultivation also builds upon earlier work on selective exposure and confirmation bias in media consumption (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2015). As digital platforms offer content customization, users have become more selective in their media choices, leading to the creation of personal information

ecosystems (Bakshy et al., 2015; Stier et al., 2025). The transition from cultivation theory to self-cultivation reflects the need for more dynamic models to understand media effects in the digital age. As media environments continue to evolve, so too must our theoretical frameworks for understanding their societal impacts. The interplay between media selectivity, personal agency, and the reinforcing nature of digital media consumption presents both challenges and opportunities for future research in media effects and political communication (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Given the recent evolution from traditional mass media to digital and social media, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between media consumption and political polarization has also changed.

PATTERNS OF POLITICAL POLARIZATION AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

DiMaggio et al. (1996) identified four dimensions of opinion polarization that threaten social and political stability: dispersity, bimodality, constraint, and consolidation. Polarization increases as opinions diversify, become more extreme, correlate within domains, and align with individual identities. DiMaggio et al. (1996) also stated that they had not found evidence of an increase in those measures, indicating no evidence of political polarization at that time.

However, recent scholarship has revealed that political polarization, especially in developed democracies, has deepened as the media landscape has evolved. The proliferation of broadband Internet and the subsequent rise of digital and social media have contributed significantly to this trend. For example, Iyengar et al. (2012) found that, in recent decades in the USA, affective political polarization has increased, as measured by emotions toward members of opposing political parties, concerns about inter-party marriage, and stereotypes of party supporters. The authors attribute this rise in polarization not to growing ideological differences, which have remained relatively stable, but to increased exposure to negative political campaigning. This suggests that the nature of political discourse and the media environment may play a more critical role in driving affective polarization than shifts in political beliefs or policy positions. Prior (2013) concluded that partisanship in the USA increased only to the extent that ideological polarization between the main parties increased.

The increase in ideological polarization among citizens is primarily linked to the polarization of politically engaged citizens. Thus, linking ideological polarization and political engagement, Prior (2013) also notes that the most plausible explanation for the link between the increase in political polarization and the growth of cable television and the Internet is that less politically engaged citizens have increasingly chosen entertainment over political news.

Consequently, elections have become more partisan because less engaged and more moderate citizens are less likely to show up at the polls. Lelkes et al. (2017) found that the introduction of broadband Internet in the USA influenced the increase in affective political polarization by exposing users to more partisan media content. They concluded that broadband Internet access significantly contributes to increasing partisan hostility, attributing this rise to the enhanced consumption of partisan media online.

In more conventional mass media, Campante and Hojman (2013) found that the introduction of radio and broadcast television contributed to a substantial reduction in partisan polarization among political elites in the USA around the mid-20th century. They proposed two theoretical mechanisms that could explain the findings: the ideological and motivational effects.

The former leads to a decrease in polarization by exposing media users to mainstream political messages. The latter increases the number of politically motivated individuals, which provides incentives for political elites to shift their ideological and policy positions toward the center. This is consistent with the conclusion of Iyengar et al. (2012) that the rise in polarization cannot be attributed to growing ideological differences.

Moreover, Hollander (2008) argued that the media in the USA have become fragmented, and their audiences have become more partisan. His research has revealed that as the media environment has become more fragmented, news audiences have grown more partisan, with a significant shift toward outlets that align with their political beliefs. This migration is attributed to the availability of a broader array of news sources, enabling viewers to select media that reinforces their existing viewpoints.

Davis and Dunaway's (2016) study also supported the idea that media fragmentation is significantly associated with partisan-ideological sorting, that is, the process whereby individuals' political party affiliations become increasingly aligned with their ideological beliefs, primarily among those highly engaged in politics and news consumption. Their results applied both to television and the Internet. The detected political polarization is not specific to the USA alone. Based on data on political polarization from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute dataset, McCoy et al. (2022) concluded that political polarization has been rising in recent decades.

For instance, in all parts of the World, polarization rose from 2000 onwards, while in Europe it rose sharply from 1990 onwards. In this dataset, political polarization was measured by asking country experts the following question: "To what extent is your society divided into mutually antagonistic camps in which political differences affect social relationships beyond political discussions?" (Coppedge et al., 2021). The study finds that depolarization often follows major systemic shocks, such as foreign interventions, independence struggles, violent conflicts,

or regime changes. However, sustaining depolarization proves challenging, with many countries experiencing cycles of polarization and depolarization.

To summarize, these findings highlight the intricate relationship between media consumption patterns and political polarization. The evolution of the media landscape, particularly the rise of digital and social media, has significantly deepened political polarization in developed democracies. Research indicates that increased exposure to negative political campaigning and partisan media content online has heightened affective polarization, not only due to rising ideological differences, but also due to changes in political discourse and media consumption patterns. The proliferation of broadband Internet has facilitated selective exposure to partisan media, exacerbating political divides. Conversely, traditional media, such as radio and television, have historically reduced polarization by promoting mainstream political messages. However, media fragmentation has led to more partisan audiences, further contributing to polarization. This trend is global, with political polarization rising worldwide, particularly in Europe since 1990, often influenced by systemic shocks but proving difficult to sustain in the long term.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, the following four hypotheses were put forward:

- H1: The total amount of television use will have neither a polarizing nor a mainstreaming effect.
- H2: The use of television to obtain current news information will have a mainstreaming effect.
- H3: The total amount of Internet use will have neither a polarizing nor a mainstreaming effect.
- H4: Internet use for obtaining current news information will have a polarizing effect.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis to determine whether the use of political and current events was associated with more extreme political identification, both on television and the Internet. Political polarization is measured in different ways across research studies. Stroud (2010) measured polarization by taking the absolute difference between the attitudes towards Republican and Democrat politicians in the USA. Iyengar et al. (2012) measured polarization using emotions towards members of opposing political parties, concerns about inter-party marriage, and stereotypes of party supporters. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute defines political

polarization as the degree to which society is divided into mutually antagonistic camps, where political differences influence social relationships beyond mere political discussions (Mc Coy et al., 2022). In the current study, political polarization was measured as a more extreme form of political self-identification, that is, a person is more polarized when their political self-identification deviates further from the center position.

Therefore, the questionnaire included the following indicators:

- *Political identification* – from 1 (left) to 10 (right); *political extremism* score was derived in the following manner: 1 and 10 – very high extremism; 2 and 9 – high extremism; 3 and 8 – middle extremism; 4 and 7 – low extremism; 5 and 6 – very low extremism.
- *Party leaning* – (respondents indicated which political party is the closest to their political views, or are members of the party),
- *Frequency of the total television and Internet use* – in hours daily.
- *Frequency of television current news use* – from 1 (never or very rarely) to 5 (very often),
- *Frequency of Internet current news use* – from 1 (never or very rarely) to 5 (very often),
- *Gender* (1 – Male; 2 – Female), *Age*, and *Completed Education* (from 1 – completed university education; 0 – did not complete university education) were used as control variables.

An online opt-in sample (N = 1,021) of the Croatian population (+18) was used in the research. The sample was representative of the general population of the Republic of Croatia in terms of gender and regional distribution. Higher-educated individuals were somewhat overrepresented – 30.3% in the sample versus 24.07% in the general population (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The average age of the sample was somewhat lower than the general (18+) population – 47.78 vs. 51.09 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Both discrepancies reflect the selection characteristics of an opt-in online sample. The data were collected by a public opinion polling company in 2023.

Table 1. Sample structure

Variable	Responses	n	%
Gender	Female	501	49.1
	Male	520	50.9
University education	No	712	69.7
	Yes	309	30.3

Variable	Responses	n	%
Age group	18 to 30	149	14.59
	30 to 59	574	56.22
	60 and over	298	29.19
Region	Slavonia and Baranja	173	16.94
	Central Croatia	109	10.68
	Northern Croatia	129	12.63
	Zagreb	280	27.42
	Istria and the Croatian Littoral	123	12.05
	Dalmatia	207	20.27
Total		**1021**	**100.00**

Source: Own elaboration

RESULTS

From Table 2, we can see that the largest share of respondents (61.11% of the total) spends between 2 and 5 hours in front of TV screens. Similarly, the share of the respondents who spend between 2 and 5 hours using the Internet amounts to 66.41%. It is also worth noting that 44.47% and 59.26% of respondents consume TV and Internet news about current events, respectively. As for political leaning, 46.69% of the participants expressed a leaning toward a political party on the left or center-left end of the political spectrum, while 38.92% of the participants positioned themselves on the right or center-right end of the spectrum. As for political self-identification, 43.29% of the respondents are classified as a low-extremism group, as they positioned themselves at 5 or 6 on a 1 to 10 scale. Extreme positions (1 and 10) were quite rare (11.17%).

Table 2. Descriptive results

Variable	Responses	n	%
Total time – TV	Less than 2 hours	313	30.66
	2 to 5 hours	644	61.11
	More than 5 hours	84	8.23
Total time – Internet	Less than 2 hours	222	21.74
	2 to 5 hours	678	66.41
	More than 5 hours	121	11.85

Variable	Responses	n	%
Total time – TV news	Very rarely	107	10.48
	Rarely	161	15.77
	From time to time	299	29.29
	Often	345	33.79
	Very often	109	10.68
Total time – INT news	Very rarely	30	2.93
	Rarely	98	9.60
	From time to time	288	28.21
	Often	459	44.96
	Very often	146	14.30
Political leaning	Left	199	23.82
	Centre-Left	191	22.87
	Centre	120	14.37
	Centre-Right	256	30.66
	Right	69	8.26
Political extremism	Very low	442	43.29
	Low	183	17.92
	Middle	192	18.81
	High	90	8.81
	Very high	114	11.17
Total		**1021**	**100.00**

Source: Own elaboration

To test the stated hypotheses, ordinal regression analysis was initially used as a data analysis method; however, the parallel lines test was statistically significant, indicating that the proportional odds assumption was violated. Therefore, multinomial regression analysis was subsequently used to test the hypotheses, given that it does not require the aforementioned assumption. No significant multicollinearity between the predictors was detected. The reference value of the criterion variable (political extremism) was "very low".

In the first model, the total time spent watching television and the total time spent following the Internet were included as the predictors. As control variables, gender, level of education, and age were included in the model. In the second model, the frequency of searching for information about current events on television and the frequency of searching for information about current events on the Internet were used as predictors. To test whether people with the same political leaning have different political self-identifications depending on the amount of use of current events information on television and the Internet, political leaning was also included in the regression in the third model. In the fourth model, a variable measuring whether the research participant expressed

closeness to a political party was entered as a predictor. The rationale for using this predictor is to test whether the level of political interest, measured by the presence of a political leaning towards a political party, can serve as a proxy variable to account for the connection between current-events media use and political self-identification. In other words, it is possible that people with more interest in politics more often inform themselves about current events, and at the same time are more likely to position themselves at the extreme points of the political self-identification scale. Therefore, the inclusion of the existence of political leaning served as an attempt to detect a possible spurious correlation between media use and political extremism.

The results from Model 1 indicate that the total time spent on TV and Internet use was not statistically significantly associated with the level of political extremism. As for socio-demographic predictors, older age was associated with a higher likelihood of being in other response categories in comparison to being in the very low category. Females were less likely than males to belong to the low and middle categories compared to being in the very-low category. People with higher education were less likely to belong to the low or high categories than to the very low category.

From Model 2, we observe that individuals who used the Internet for current news were more likely to belong to the middle, high, and very high categories of political extremism than to the very low category. The more frequent use of television for current news made people less likely to belong to the very high category than to the very low category. From the results of Models 3 and 4, we conclude that the results remained similar, even when political leaning and its very existence were considered. The only difference from Model 2 was that when the existence of party leaning was entered as a predictor, the more frequent use of TV for current news information made a person less likely to belong to the high category, and not only to the very high category, thus more strongly confirming the mainstreaming effect of television.

Table 3. Estimated effects of the selected predictors on *political extremism* using a multinominal logistic regression model – exp(B)

Model 1		Low	Middle	High	Very high
TV time daily		1.02	1.06	0.99	1.10
Internet time daily		0.96	0,98	1,02	1,05
Age		1.02*	1.03**	1.05**	1.02*
Gender	Male	1.84**	1.70*	1.16	1.00
	Female (ref.)	-	-	-	-
University education	No	0.52**	0.71	0.56*	1.08
	Yes (ref.)	-	-	-	-

Model 2		Low	Middle	High	Very high
TV News		0.99	0.87	0.81	0.72*
Internet News		1.21	1.58**	1.42*	1.52**
Age		1.01*	1.03**	1.05**	1.03**
Gender	Male	1.81**	1.67*	1.17	1.04
	Female (ref.)	-	-	-	-
University education	No	0.54	0.76	0.59*	1,17
	Yes (ref.)	-	-	-	-
Model 3		**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**Very high**
TV News		0.98	0.84	0.83	0.67**
Internet News		1.15	1.51**	1.43*	1.55*
Age		1.02*	1.03**	1.04**	1.03*
Gender	Male	1.62*	1.61*	1.13	1.00
	Female (ref.)	-	-	-	-
University education	No	0.50*	0.67	0.54*	1.02
	Yes (ref.)	-	-	-	-
Party leaning	Left	1.55	1.49	0.91	0.62
	Center-left	1.57	1.52	0.94	1.26
	Center	0.60	0.33*	0.14**	0.29*
	Center-right	2.33*	1.62	0.41	0.65
	Right (ref.)	-	-	-	-
Model 4		**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**Very high**
TV News		0.97	0.84	0.77*	0.69**
Internet News		1.18	1.51**	1.34*	1.43*
Age		1.01*	1.03**	1.05**	1.03**
Gender	Male	1.73*	1.59*	1.10	0.97
	Female (ref.)	-	-	-	-
University education	No	0.53**	0.75	0.57*	1.14
	Yes (ref.)	-	-	-	-
Party leaning	No	0.46**	0.34**	0.20**	0.17**
	Yes (ref.)	-	-	-	-

* $p < 0.05$ / ** $p < 0.01$; Reference category = very low.

Source: Own elaboration

Predicted probabilities provide a more intuitive interpretation of ordinal regression results than odds ratios, as they directly show the estimated likelihood of belonging to each category of political extremism at different levels of media consumption. Unlike odds ratios, which indicate only the direction and relative strength of associations, predicted probabilities illustrate the substantive magnitude of these effects in an easier and more visually interpretable way.

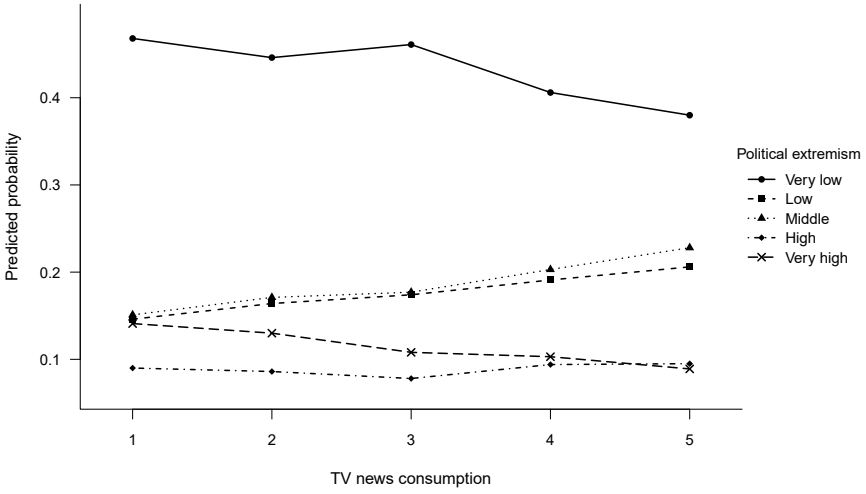
Figure 1 shows predicted probabilities of political extremism across various levels of television news consumption. We can note that the most probable category across all levels of TV news consumption remains "Very low" extreme position, with its predicted probability declining substantially as television news consumption increases. At the lowest level of TV news consumption (Level 1), the probability of belonging to the "Very low" category is approximately 0.47 (47%), and by the highest level of TV news consumption (Level 5), this probability falls to 0.38 (38%). This represents a decline of approximately 9 percentage points, or nearly a 20% relative decrease. Thus, we conclude that individuals who consume television news more frequently are less likely to be in the least extreme political category.

At the same time, the probabilities of intermediate categories increase steadily, with the probability of belonging to the "Middle" extremism category rising from approximately 0.15 (15%) at TV consumption level 1 to about 0.23 (23%) at level 5. This is a significant increase of about 8 percentage points, representing more than a 50% relative increase. Similarly, the "Low" extremism category increases from around 0.15 to approximately 0.21. We can conclude that these changes indicate that television news consumption is associated with a shift toward moderate or intermediate political positions.

We can also note that the "Very high" extreme orientation category shows the clearest decline, as its predicted probability decreased from approximately 0.14 (14%) at the lowest level of television news consumption to around 0.09 (9%) at the highest level. In relative terms, this corresponds to a decline of roughly 36%. The "High" extremism category remains comparatively stable across the observed range, fluctuating between approximately 0.08 and 0.10.

From Figure 1, we can also note the changing relationship between the "Very low" and "Very high" categories. At TV news consumption level 1, respondents are approximately 3.4 times more likely to belong to the "Very low" category than the "Very high" category (0.47 vs. 0.14), while at level 5, this ratio increases to approximately 4.2 (0.38 vs. 0.09). Thus, although the probability of "Very low" extremism also declines with greater TV news consumption, the probability of "Very high" extremism declines even more strongly. In relative terms, higher television news consumption is increasingly associated with a lower probability of holding the most radical political position.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities – Television news consumption



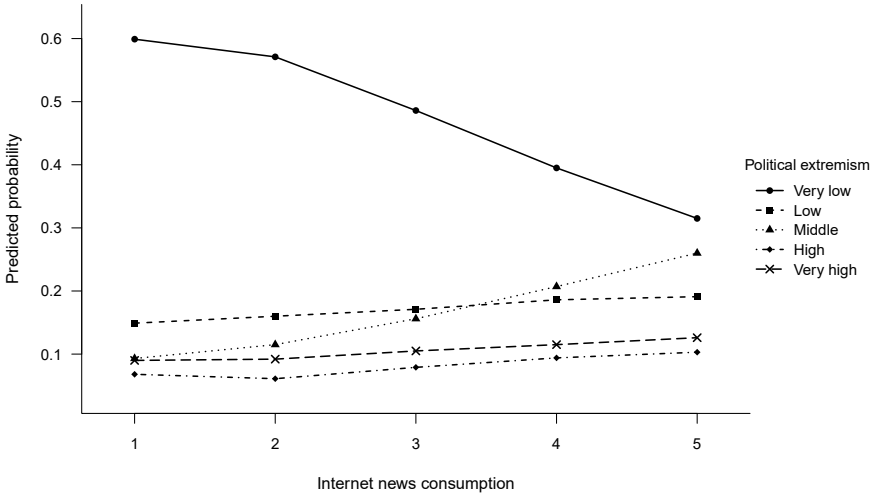
Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 shows predicted probabilities of political extremism across all levels of Internet news consumption, and this figure shows a markedly different pattern from the television news model, suggesting that internet news consumption is associated with a broader shift toward greater political extremism. Most notably, the probability of belonging to the "Very low" extremism category declines sharply with increasing internet news consumption. Namely, among respondents with the lowest level of internet news consumption, the predicted probability of very low extremism is about 0.60, but it decreases steadily to around 0.32 among those with the highest level of internet news consumption. This substantial decline indicates that intensive exposure to online news environments is associated with movement away from the least extreme political positions.

At the same time, all other categories of extremism increase as internet news consumption rises. The strongest increase is observed for the "Middle" extremism category, whose predicted probability grows from 0.09 to 0.26 across the observed range of internet news consumption. The "Low" category also increases moderately, rising from around 0.15 to 0.19.

Importantly, unlike the television news model, the probabilities of the higher-extremism categories ("High" and "Very high") also increase with higher internet news consumption. The "Very high" category rises from 0.09 to 0.13, while the "High" category increases from 0.07 to 0.10. Although these changes are more modest than those observed for the middle category, they are substantively important because they indicate that increased internet news consumption is associated not only with moderation away from very low extremism, but also with a gradual increase in the likelihood of stronger forms of extremism.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities – Internet news consumption



Source: Own elaboration

DISCUSSION

We have already noted the trend of political polarization in Croatia (Pavić, 2024), which aligns with similar patterns observed in other countries, particularly in Western democracies. For instance, Varga and Buzogány (2020) demonstrated how right-wing populist parties in Poland and Hungary have reshaped foreign policy in ways that challenge core liberal democratic values, indicating a similar trend of polarization in these countries. Van Beek (2022) examined the growing influence of populism across various nations, focusing on the tensions between nationalism and globalization and their impact on democracy. In the United States, political polarization has become one of the most significant features of society in the 21st century, with ideological conflicts between the major parties, Democratic and Republican, significantly increasing over the past six decades (Iyengar et al., 2019).

The results of this study partially confirm the hypotheses regarding media consumption and political polarization. While the total mainstreaming effect of television was not established, thus confirming H1, the specific television mainstreaming effect (H2) was only partially confirmed. The frequency of following current news on television differed only between the lowest and the highest groups in terms of political polarization. The polarizing effect of the overall Internet use was not detected, thus confirming H3. However, the polarizing effect of consuming Internet news about current events (H4) was confirmed, even among individuals with the same political leanings, and even among people with

the same level of political interest, as measured by the proxy variable of political leaning. These findings align with research from other countries. For example, Lelkes et al. (2017) found that increased Internet access was associated with higher levels of partisan affect and ideological polarization in the United States. This suggests that the Croatian experience may be part of a broader trend related to the changing media environment. Similarly, Flaxman et al. (2016) investigated the phenomena of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" in online news consumption, which further support our findings on the polarizing effect of Internet news.

An alternative explanation of our results relates to the partisan exposure hypothesis, which maintains that people choose media congruent with their preexisting views, implying reverse causation and limited media effects. However, as Stroud (2010) noted, the partisan selective exposure hypothesis is no longer connected to the limited media effects perspective. The fact that people selectively choose media outlets that align with their convictions does not mean that such media exposure does not reinforce their beliefs, thereby making them more polarized. In a study using lagged panel regression, Stroud (2010) found that selective exposure predicted later political polarization but also found some evidence for reverse causation, thus suggesting possible spiraling effects. These findings have been corroborated by subsequent research. For instance, Dvir-Gvirsman et al. (2016) conducted a three-wave panel study in Israel, confirming Stroud's results. They found that ideological selectivity led to increased polarization over time, and this polarization, in turn, also increased subsequent selectivity, providing further evidence of spiraling effects. Similarly, Weeks et al. (2017) used a two-wave panel survey to demonstrate that selective exposure to partisan news sources predicted increases in affective polarization, while affective polarization also predicted subsequent selective exposure, supporting the notion of a reinforcing spiral.

Another question that follows from our results is whether the media are to blame for the increased polarization. The media may just be picking up cues from increased elite polarization, thus producing more polarized content. For instance, Hetherington (2001) demonstrated that the increase in partisan identification in the United States during the 1990s can be attributed to the greater ideological polarization between partisan elites in Congress, which clarified public perceptions of party ideologies. Hetherington also found that both the perception of elite polarization and real elite polarization contributed to partisan-ideological sorting, i.e., to the congruence between partisan affiliation and ideological self-placement. Furthermore, Druckman et al. (2013) demonstrated that elite polarization influences how citizens process media information. In polarized environments, partisans tend to engage in motivated reasoning, seeking out information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and discounting contradictory evidence. This suggests that while media may not be the primary

cause of polarization, they play a crucial role in reinforcing and potentially exacerbating existing divisions. However, it is important to note that the relationship between media, elite polarization, and mass polarization is not unidirectional. As Prior (2013) argues, changes in the media environment, such as the rise of cable news and later the advent of social media, have also contributed to elite polarization by allowing politicians to communicate more directly with their base and reducing the need for compromise. In the Croatian context, the rise of populist parties since 2015 has introduced new dynamics to the political landscape, potentially contributing to increased polarization. Nikić Čakar and Čular (2022) noted that the presence of these parties has led to greater instability in government formation and coalition-building processes, which may be reflected in more polarized media coverage and public discourse. This aligns with broader European trends, as evidenced by research conducted in five countries (Germany, Poland, Turkey, Mexico, and the USA) that identified the creation of a new political cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians, causing divisions within the electorate and party structures in established parties (De Vries, 2018). However, it is important to note that the relationship between media consumption and polarization is complex and may vary across different cultural and political contexts. Prior (2013) emphasized the need to consider multiple factors when examining media effects on political polarization.

For instance, the "traditional" media landscape in the United States exhibits a significantly higher degree of polarization and political alignment compared to the more mainstream-oriented media in Croatia. This difference in media environments can have profound implications for political polarization and public discourse in these countries. In the United States, research has consistently shown a high level of partisan bias in media consumption and trust. A comprehensive study by the Pew Research Center (2021) found that Republicans and Democrats in the United States turn to and trust two distinct and divergent media environments. Fox News stands out as the dominant source of political news for Republicans, while CNN plays a similar role for Democrats. This division creates what scholars refer to as "echo chambers," where individuals consume news that primarily confirms their existing political views (Garrett, 2009). Conversely, the Croatian media landscape, especially television, does not exhibit such a pronounced division along political lines. The Croatian media landscape still comprises a significant role for public television, which tends to be under public scrutiny to remain politically neutral. Although sometimes unsuccessful, the idea of political neutrality in the media is strong in most Croatian mainstream media outlets and can have a depolarizing effect. Croatian traditional media outlets tend to be more mainstream-oriented, aiming to reach a broader audience without stark political polarization. For example, as in the case of public television, national private television networks do not have a clear

political orientation, i.e., they are not publicly perceived as close to certain political movements or parties. This difference can be attributed, in part, to varying media traditions and political cultures in the two countries. The U.S. media system encourages audience fragmentation along political lines, whereas Croatian media outlets strive to maintain a broader consensus in their reporting (Peruško et al., 2021). The consequences of these differing media environments are significant. In the U.S., the polarized media landscape has been linked to increased political polarization among the public (Levendusky, 2013). In contrast, the more mainstream approach of Croatian traditional media (television and radio) may contribute to a less polarized political discourse. However, this relationship requires further investigation in the Croatian context. These observations underscore the importance of considering the broader media environment when examining the relationship between media consumption and political polarization, as the structure and norms of media systems can significantly influence the degree and nature of political divisions within a society.

CONCLUSION

Building on cultivation theory and the reinforcing spirals model (RSM), this study examines the relationship between traditional and digital media consumption and political polarization in Croatia. The results demonstrate that Internet news consumption is associated with more extreme political positions, whereas television news consumption corresponds with more moderate political positions. These findings support the assertion that digital media environments can foster polarization through mechanisms such as selective exposure and the creation of echo chambers, while traditional television news may exert a moderating influence on its viewers. This dynamic exemplifies the interplay between media cultivation and the reinforcing spirals model by highlighting the role of digital media environments in contributing to polarization. The study further emphasizes the importance of modern media in shaping political identities and underscores the need to better understand media effects in rapidly evolving digital environments.

Since Internet news consumption proved to be positively associated with higher levels of political extremism, even when controlling for political orientation, educational interventions should prioritize enabling citizens to critically assess online political content, recognize manipulative or emotionally polarizing communication strategies, and understand algorithmic filtering and selective exposure. Consequently, media literacy programs should expand their focus beyond addressing "fake news" to encompass how digital media environments can intensify ideological attitudes and reinforce political polarization. The findings

suggest that mainstream television news continues to serve as an integrative or moderating force within democratic societies, as increased television news consumption in our study was linked to a lower likelihood of extreme political orientations and a greater prevalence of moderate positions. This implies that professionally regulated and institutionally accountable media environments can help mitigate ideological fragmentation. Accordingly, public service broadcasting and high-quality mainstream and gate-keeping journalism remain essential democratic institutions, especially within increasingly fragmented and polarized digital information environments.

These findings further indicate that future research and policy discussions should distinguish among different media types rather than treating "media consumption" as a homogeneous phenomenon, thereby enabling more nuanced interpretations of cultivation theory. Traditional television news and online news environments employ distinct approaches to presenting political positions. Consequently, regulatory debates, civic education strategies, and democratic resilience policies should consider these differences rather than assuming uniform media effects. Future research should also focus on a more detailed discovery of the mechanisms behind the media's influence on political and social polarization, especially when it comes to the application of in-depth qualitative research.

This study has several limitations. First, although the online opt-in sample was representative in terms of gender and regional distribution, higher-educated individuals were over-represented, and the average age was lower than that of the general population. This could affect the generalizability of the results. The study's cross-sectional nature implies that it can identify correlations but cannot reliably establish causality and its direction. However, previous studies and theoretical approaches suggest that cultivation and self-cultivation are indeed mutually reinforcing interwoven processes, which somewhat downplays the importance of detecting a unidirectional causal relationship. Finally, political polarization was calculated from self-reported political identification, which is only one of many possible measures of a complex phenomenon that encompasses affective, social, and ideological dimensions.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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The Invisibility of Regional Politics on Television: The Case of Greece's Public Broadcaster ERT3

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Abstract: Regional media play a crucial role in democratic journalism by fostering local accountability and promoting public debate. Yet inequalities between central and peripheral areas may shape the visibility of regional political issues. This study analyzes political news coverage in the main evening bulletins of ERT3, a Greek public television station. Drawing on content analysis, it examines airtime allocation, thematic focus (local, national, and international politics), and story placement within the news agenda. The findings indicate limited visibility of local political affairs and a clear imbalance in favor of central political actors. These results shed light on the structural constraints facing regional broadcasters and contribute to broader debates on media centralization and the democratic role of regional journalism.

Keywords: Journalism; Political communication; Regional politics; Public media; Newscast.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, regional media worldwide have undergone sweeping, rapid changes in structure, operations, and organization (Scholz, 2014). At the same time, the international literature reveals significant disparities in regional development, characterized by pervasive heterogeneity in economic conditions between urban centers and rural areas.

Since September 2023, ERT3, one of the regional channels of the Hellenic public broadcaster ERT, has officially been designated as a „regional medium". This change has influenced both programming and news production routines, particularly the editorial focus on local versus national political issues. While

news bulletins primarily cover culture, sports, agriculture, and social and economic topics specific to the region, political news remains focused on both national and sub-national (regional and local) political developments.

Regional media play a crucial role in democratic societies by documenting local events, raising awareness of community concerns, and providing a channel to communicate with central authorities (Mitka & Gioltzidou, 2023). Habermas' (1974) theory of the public sphere emphasizes the importance of inclusive public discourse, while Mills (2002) highlights the media's influence on shaping individual behavior and public opinion. In this context, regional media contribute to the public sphere by enabling diverse viewpoints and fostering civic engagement.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How is political news represented in ERT3's regional television bulletins, in terms of airtime, topics, and placement within the news agenda, and what does this reveal about the visibility of local politics? To address this, a content analysis was conducted on 29 evening news bulletins broadcast in May 2024, systematically coding political news by topic (central government, local government, and international news), duration, and placement within the bulletin.

Regional journalism also strengthens local communities by providing relevant information, ensuring accountability, and promoting civic participation (Barnett, 2009; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). Research by Cooper et al. (2017) further shows that regional media can foster community understanding by employing positive, humanizing narratives, even on topics that are often negatively framed at the national level, such as the representation of refugees and asylum seekers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE CHALLENGES OF REGIONAL MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

The ongoing decline of local journalism, particularly in professional reporting, jeopardizes the functions and, by extension, the health of democracy itself. In the last decade, regional media have experienced rapid transformations in their structure, organization, and operations. These transformations occur alongside pronounced disparities in regional development, particularly between urban and rural areas (Barnett, 2009; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). While some regions, particularly those surrounding urban centers, have benefitted from these transformations, others, especially in rural areas, face challenges that lead to disparities in media coverage and regional development (Bennett & Strange, 2008). If regional media disproportionately focus on national issues, they risk neglecting their communities' information needs, thereby potentially reducing civic engagement. (Wright, 2018)

At the same time as these changes, Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) assert that audience preferences for political information are shifting, which contributes to the long-term decline in local political coverage. This reduction, in turn, leads to a growing emphasis on national politics, leaving critical gaps in coverage of local political issues. This trend can negatively impact local communities by depriving them of essential information regarding the political issues that directly affect their lives. Understanding how specific ‚publics' seek and process information is vital, as citizens are more likely to engage with media that address issues of high personal and local relevance (Grunig, 1983).

Independent news media serve as the cornerstone of a democratic society. To cultivate a democratic culture, media organizations must enhance their representation of citizens and foster stronger connections within their communities (Meijer, 2010). This aligns with the principles of public journalism, which emphasize the media's responsibility to encourage civic participation and improve the quality of public life (Voakes, 2004). A critical strategy is detailed coverage of local political news, highlighting public television's role in shaping the regional agenda.

Flint (2002) posits that citizens develop a sense of attachment to their city only when they see their experiences reflected in the media. Without such representation, individuals are less likely to view themselves as active participants in their communities (Meijer, 2010). Through local media, viewers and readers can either embrace local democratic customs or distance themselves from them if they feel unrepresented (Meijer, 2010). Meijer (2010) identifies seven social roles that residents expect from local television stations: delivering trustworthy information, promoting social integration, inspiring citizens, ensuring representation, enhancing local awareness, building civic memory, and fostering social cohesion.

Building on these challenges, local television broadcasters must not only represent the city to its residents but also adopt democratic practices in their news production, providing nuanced and diverse stories reflecting local experiences (Meijer, 2010; Biltereyst, 2001). As noted by Gioltzidou et al. (2023), overemphasizing "local" elements can artificially skew narratives, highlighting the need for balance in regional reporting.

JOURNALISTIC INVISIBILITY

The concept of journalistic invisibility refers to the underrepresentation or limited coverage of specific regions, topics, or local issues by the media, often resulting in the marginalization of local voices and concerns (González-Bailón, 2017). This phenomenon can stem from editorial prioritization of national over regional stories, resource limitations, and production constraints in public television, often favoring national narratives over local concerns (González-Bailón, 2017).

In addition, structural and organizational factors of regional public broadcasters, such as ERT3, influence the editorial decisions and the visibility of local political issues. Examining journalistic invisibility in regional contexts is critical to understand how local political voices are sidelined and how democratic engagement may be affected. The literature suggests that the independence and visibility of regional media are essential factors for subnational democratization and political accountability (Obydenkova, 2008).

Similarly, agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 1997) provides insight into how the media prioritize certain topics over others, shaping public perception of issue importance. In regional media, agenda-setting interacts with journalistic invisibility, shaping which local issues gain visibility. As national news gains precedence, political discourse becomes more centralized, often sidelining crucial local matters (Martin & McCrain, 2019). This shift not only diminishes the public's awareness of regional political issues but also limits citizens' capacity to participate in local governance, thereby threatening their democratic empowerment (Harte et al., 2018).

Public television, as a state-funded broadcaster, has specific responsibilities to represent local communities and ensure democratic accountability. Structural limitations, newsroom staffing, and prioritization rules collectively determine how local politics is framed and how local voices are included in the news agenda (Barnett, 2009; González-Bailón, 2017). Addressing these gaps is essential to promote a more informed and engaged citizenry (Franklin, 2006).

AGENDA SETTING AND REGIONAL NEWS

As McCombs (1997) points out, agenda-setting research demonstrates how news media shape the public agenda and influence perceptions of issue significance. Agenda setting highlights which issues are emphasized or neglected, affecting the perceived importance of local versus national topics (Coleman et al., 2009). The placement and duration of news items within a broadcast affect the perceived importance of local versus national topics. Stories appearing early in the bulletin are deemed more significant; later items may be considered minor. To a certain extent, the media's political stances shape how news is portrayed (Gioltzidou & Gioltzidou, 2023).

In regional news, agenda-setting interacts with structural constraints and local audience expectations. Regional political issues may receive less coverage or be positioned later in the bulletin, contributing to their invisibility (McCombs & Funk, 2011). Local events of high relevance may be prioritized, reflecting the interplay between newsroom decisions, audience needs, and production routines.

The agenda of regional media is deeply connected to the local society it serves. McCombs and Funk (2011) emphasize that regional newspapers mirror the

unique characteristics, interests, and concerns of their communities. Their agenda is not merely influenced by national narratives but is also shaped by local events, issues, and community needs, making them essential reflections of local identity and priorities.

METHODOLOGY

The primary research question of this study is: What is the role of political news in regional media, as revealed by the duration, content, and placement of political stories in the bulletin? To explore this, a content analysis was conducted on 29 evening news bulletins from ERT3 over one month (May 2024). While this short period does not allow for long-term trends, it provides a preliminary assessment of regional political coverage patterns. Future studies should expand the sample to include a longer time frame and a larger number of bulletins in order to capture more consistent patterns and strengthen the robustness of the findings. Content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method to systematically evaluate the presence and significance of political news in a regional media context. The analysis involved categorizing political news items into three groups: international news focusing on the Balkans, central political news, and local government news. This categorization reflects both the external political context and domestic priorities while clarifying that ERT3 emphasizes Balkan news as part of its regional remit.

Several aspects were considered during the analysis to explore how political news is prioritized. First, the duration of political news segments was recorded. This involved timing each political news item to determine how much airtime was dedicated to political content in each bulletin. This measurement enabled a quantitative evaluation of the visibility and importance assigned to political news, either related to the central political scene, local government, or international developments in the Balkans.

Second, the total number of political news items per bulletin was tallied. By counting the frequency of political stories in each news program, the study could assess how often political issues appeared in relation to other news topics. This helped highlight the overall prominence of political news in the regional media's agenda.

Third, the study focused on the position of political news within the bulletin. Each political news item was coded based on its placement in the newscast (e.g., first, second, or later positions). This aspect was crucial for understanding editorial priorities, as stories placed at the beginning of the bulletin are typically regarded as more significant. The position of political news in the lineup

revealed whether political content was considered a priority for the regional audience or was relegated to less prominent slots.

Finally, the subject of each political news item was classified into one of the three predefined categories (International news, central political scene, or local government). This allowed for a comparative analysis of how different political topics were treated in terms of airtime and placement within the bulletin. It also helped assess the extent to which local political issues were represented compared to national and international ones. ERT3, as Greece's regional public television channel based in Thessaloniki, has a specific institutional role that frames its news output. As part of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT), it combines its remit as a public service broadcaster with a regional focus, emphasizing Northern Greece and Balkan affairs. Its structure and operation provide the context for editorial decisions, and this institutional role was taken into account when interpreting the content analysis findings.

The data collected from this content analysis was used to identify preliminary patterns in the representation of political news on ERT3. Specifically, the study aimed to answer key questions such as: (1) What proportion of airtime is devoted to political news? (2) How often are different political topics (international, central, and local) featured? (3) Where in the bulletin are political stories placed? By addressing these questions, the study sought to evaluate the visibility and prioritization of political news in a regional television setting, while acknowledging that the limited time frame precludes robust conclusions about long-term trends.

RESULTS

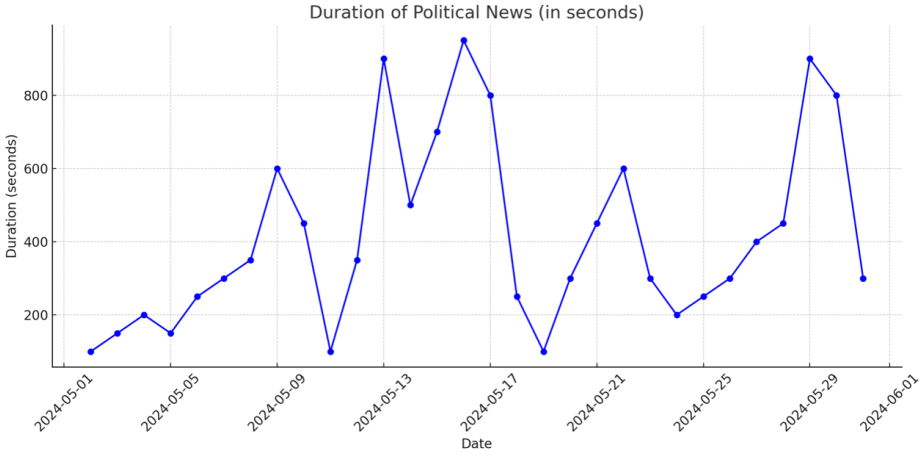
DURATION OF POLITICAL NEWS

Figure 1 presents the duration of political news coverage (in seconds) over a one-month period, offering insight into ERT3's political news focus during May 2024. Given that each news bulletin lasts 45 minutes (2,700 seconds), this context is essential for understanding the proportion of time devoted to political content in each broadcast.

The average daily coverage of political news is 415 seconds (6.9 minutes), which is about 15.4% of the total broadcast. The duration varies significantly, from as low as 100 seconds (1.6 minutes) to nearly 950 seconds (15.8 minutes), depending on the importance of specific political events, particularly those at the local level. On days with minimal political coverage, such as in mid-May, political news accounts for less than 4% of the total airtime. Conversely, during peak coverage days, particularly

around May 13 and May 29, political content takes up to 35% of the broadcast, likely reflecting key local or regional political developments.

Figure 1. Duration of Political News, May 2024

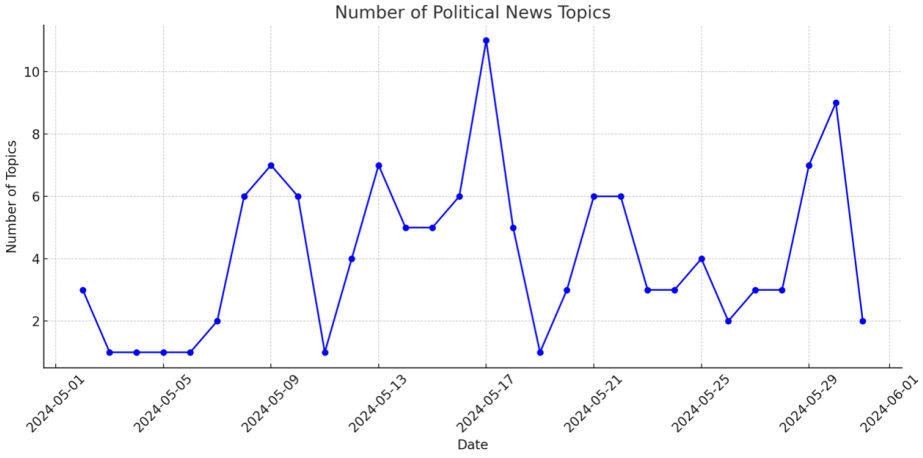


The data suggest that political news on ERT3 is influenced by the local and national political landscape and specific events. However, to determine the sufficiency of coverage, further comparison with other regional broadcasters would be needed. ERT3 prioritizes political news during major regional developments but generally covers a broader range of topics. The duration of political news provides a preliminary assessment of visibility, but it should be interpreted with caution given the limited sample period. These patterns are consistent with studies showing that agenda-setting in regional media often prioritizes national over local political issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Harte et al., 2019).

NUMBER OF POLITICAL NEWS ITEMS

Figure 2 illustrates the daily variation in the number of political news items broadcast by ERT3 between May 1 and June 1, 2024, with an average of 4.13 topics per day. The number of political stories ranges from 1 to 11. Notable peaks are evident on May 17 and May 30, when coverage rose sharply, likely due to major political developments. On some days, local political events also contributed to the increase in reporting. In contrast, periods with fewer political items can be attributed either to limited political activity or to editorial choices that favored other areas, such as cultural or economic news.

Figure 2. Number of Political News Items, May 2024



From the perspective of agenda-setting theory, the frequency of political reporting reflects editorial prioritization of certain issues and the balance between local and national politics (Coleman et al., 2009). Considering that a typical news bulletin includes 20–25 stories, political news accounts for a smaller yet steady and important share of the content. Although the number of political stories fluctuates, the overall pattern points to consistent coverage. In this context, "sufficient" coverage refers not only to the regular presence of political news but also to the stable airtime it receives and the inclusion of significant local developments.

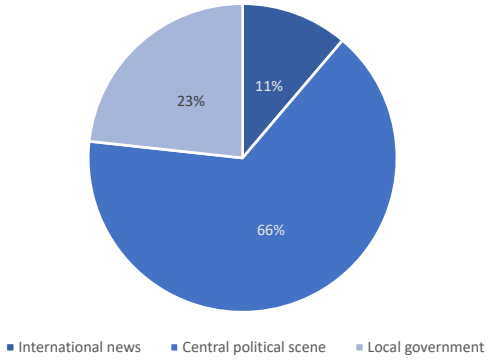
SUBJECT OF POLITICAL NEWS

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of political news on ERT3 across three categories: central political scene, local government, and international news. The majority, 66%, focuses on the central political scene, reflecting ERT3's significant emphasis on national government and political developments. Local political events, despite occasional coverage peaks, account for only 23% of the content, indicating that local politics is generally underrepresented. International news accounts for the remaining 11%, providing context beyond Greece while further emphasizing the domestic political focus.

Given the station's regional focus, the relatively lower coverage of local political matters supports the concept of journalistic invisibility of regional issues (González-Bailón, 2017). For a regional medium like ERT3, the underrepresentation of local government topics points to a missed opportunity to enhance local democratic engagement and foster closer connections between the audience and local political processes. The distribution of political topics reflects a clear imbalance in coverage, with a substantial portion of airtime devoted to the central

political scene at the expense of local and regional politics. This pattern shows how regional politics can remain invisible, even on a channel meant to serve local communities, and points to opportunities for regional media to better support local democracy.

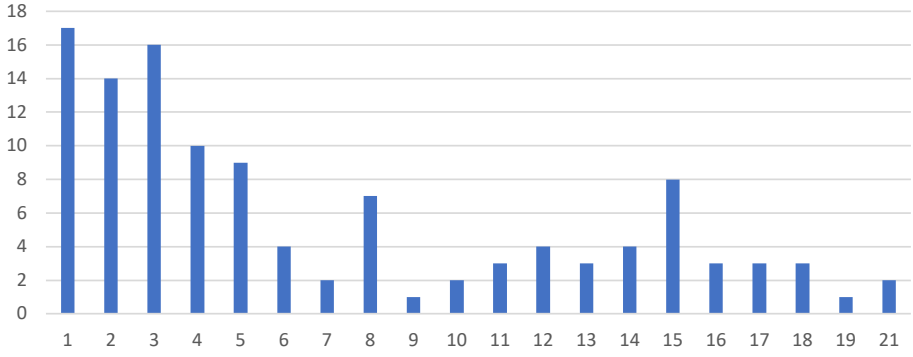
Figure 3. Subject of Political News, May 2024



PLACEMENT OF POLITICAL NEWS

Figure 4 indicates the agenda of political news in ERT3 bulletins. Political news issues generally appeared in the first three positions of the bulletin, with the first containing the most political items (16), followed by the second and third, which contained 14 and 16 issues, respectively. The early allocation suggests editorial judgment of importance, as hypothesized by agenda-setting theory (McCombs, 1997).

Figure 4. Placement of Political News



Interestingly, there is a significant drop in the prevalence of political topics after the fifth position. From the sixth position onward, political reporting

occurs sporadically and with notably lower frequency. Analysis of the ordering of local and central political stories indicates that while local political items are few in number, they are, in general, found earlier in the bulletin, indicating a conscious editorial emphasis and not a total decline. Political coverage briefly returns to the 14th and 15th positions, though at much lower frequency, with fewer than 4 topics in both cases. After the 15th position, political content practically disappears from the bulletin.

This allocation also highlights the study's key argument about the „invisibility" of territorial political issues in broadcast media. While political news remains the focus in the early parts of the bulletin, much of the content focuses on national or central political issues, while territorial and city-based issues are downplayed or left out altogether. The significant drop after the fifth spot could mean that only significant or sensational political stories are covered, possibly excluding territorial political issues from proper representation or leading to their omission in the latter part of the program.

While initial political bulletins emphasize early news, the overwhelming focus is on national politics, reducing attention to local issues. Contextual factors, such as notable national events and parliamentary amendments in May 2024, contributed to these editorial choices. The asymmetric distribution of political topics in the bulletin highlights media editorial choices that, as studies show, favor centralizing political debate and excluding local political views.

DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence presented in this article confirms the problematic coverage of regional or local political news by regional media outlets. More specifically, the findings suggest a structural tendency to prioritize national political narratives, even within a regional public broadcaster such as ERT3. Although these media appear to adequately cover regional news across a variety of topics, they provide comparatively less coverage of local political issues, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Initially, the label for political news is insufficiently specified to include news that genuinely concerns local communities, while national political news is extensively promoted. This imbalance suggests that local political realities are often subsumed by a broader national agenda, limiting their visibility in the public sphere. Such a practice clearly marginalizes the specific needs of local communities, which are left under the umbrella of a generalized national interest, without due attention being paid to their specialized needs, as well as to the particular problems faced by smaller and more remote communities—problems that the central political scene may not even be aware of.

The findings further indicate a clear imbalance in the regions covered, thereby fostering a sense of injustice and a lack of transparency in local news coverage. This uneven distribution of coverage can be interpreted through the lens of journalistic invisibility, as certain regions and local political issues remain systematically underrepresented. Ultimately, the Greek periphery does not appear to constitute a unified area with distinct characteristics; rather, it is fragmented, resulting in the formation of multiple smaller "peripheries" with strikingly heterogeneous coverage of local political news. This leads to an inevitable, potentially detrimental reduction in the informational role of local news, as well as a growing gap in local media's ability to fulfill their watchdog function. In conclusion, the findings of this study confirm Franklin's (2006) observation that local news tends to focus more on entertainment and human-interest stories and less on local political news.

For instance, one of the key findings of the study is that "sufficient" coverage of political news is found in ERT3's regional television, whether it concerns central national news or news related to significant local developments. However, this "sufficiency" should be interpreted with caution, as it primarily reflects the volume of political content rather than its balance or representativeness. These findings gain further significance when compared to the findings of Moy et al. (2004, pp. 538-539) as they reinforce the argument that exposure to local news is associated with democratic engagement, while at the same time highlighting the limitations of this relationship when local political content is restricted. Furthermore, the results of the study as regards the sufficient coverage of political news from a local television part, may influence citizens' attitudes toward political participation, including their likelihood of voting in national elections, as Filla and Johnson (2010, p. 688) found a relationship between the availability of daily local newspapers and voting while "survey respondents with access to a daily newspaper are more likely to vote than those without daily print news access". In the case of ERT3, however, this potential democratic impact appears constrained by the dominance of national political narratives.

Another important finding of this study is that the majority of political news on ERT3's local television (66%) concerns the national government, while only a small proportion (23%) focuses on genuinely local political issues. This pattern strongly aligns with agenda-setting theory, as it demonstrates how editorial prioritization shapes the audience's perceived importance of political issues. Thus, although political bulletins emphasize political news, they primarily focus on national politics, thereby reducing attention to local political matters. In this respect, it becomes evident that local news and local media are not necessarily synonymous. These findings are consistent with Ekström et al. (2009, p. 257), who note that, for example, in Sweden, when local newspapers first emerged, they often contained limited local news. Local news, particularly local political news,

was not considered sufficiently interesting or valuable compared to national and international news (Jacobsson, 2008).

However, these results do not align with the arguments of Tichenor et al. (1980) and Donohue et al. (1995), who suggested that the local press functions as a "voice of the community". The present findings, therefore, challenge this normative expectation, suggesting that regional media may not always fulfill their democratic role as effectively as theoretical models propose. Given that the present findings demonstrate insufficient coverage of local political news, the role of local media cannot remain beyond criticism. On the other hand, Hayes and Lawless (2018) addressed a similar issue and appear to support this conclusion, demonstrating that local newspapers now publish less political news in both quantity and substance, raising concerns about political engagement within local communities. As a result, the local news environment continues to deteriorate.

Acknowledging this phenomenon, Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) goes a step further, attempting to explain it, arguing that journalists' tendency to relocate to urban centers makes it particularly difficult to cover routine local political events. This structural explanation is particularly relevant in the case of ERT3, where institutional constraints and newsroom practices may further reinforce the prioritization of centrally produced political content.

Another finding of this research is that different regions in Greece are covered to varying degrees, thus revealing unequal coverage of local news across regions. More specifically, there is a noticeable neglect of local political issues in areas that are geographically distant from major urban centers, while greater coverage is observed in regions that are more economically developed or more closely connected to large urban hubs. At the same time, a significant lack of geopolitical news is identified in news bulletins, including even those stories that could, in some way, concern the periphery. The „invisibility" of territorial or geopolitical issues in the broadcast media stands in stark contrast to the persistence of national political issues.

These findings of this study are consistent with Eshbaugh-Soha (2010:124), who explains that such inequality in political coverage by the regional press is often due to limited financial resources. In an effort to maximize profit, local media outlets tend to prioritize stories that require fewer resources, as well as topics that journalists can cover without traveling to other areas, or simply rely on political news reproduced from news agencies (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2010). The unfortunate consequence, however, is that local media fail to develop "independent positions" on foreign policy issues and instead rely on national sources for superficial coverage of geopolitical or political events, framed from a generalized national perspective rather than from the viewpoint of the local or regional journalist.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to international discussions on regional journalism by demonstrating how regional public broadcasters may reproduce centralized political agendas, thereby limiting the visibility of local political

life. While the Greek case reflects specific institutional and cultural conditions, similar patterns have been identified in other media systems, indicating a broader transformation in the role of regional media within contemporary democracies.

In conclusion, the findings discussed in this section highlight the persistent structural limitations of regional media in adequately addressing local political issues, revealing both quantitative and qualitative deficiencies, as well as significant geographical disparities in coverage. While the present study partially aligns with existing literature in acknowledging the declining prominence and effectiveness of local political news, it does not fully corroborate prior research, as notable divergences emerge regarding the extent, focus, and implications of such coverage. These inconsistencies suggest that the relationship between local media performance and democratic engagement remains complex and context-dependent. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon necessitates further comparative analysis and additional empirical studies to establish more robust and generalizable interpretations of the role and function of local media within contemporary democratic societies.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study explores the role of political news in regional media by examining the time devoted to it, the topics covered, and their position in the news agenda. The study is guided by the main research question: How is political news represented in ERT3's regional television bulletins, in terms of airtime, topics, and placement within the news agenda, and what does this reveal about the visibility of local politics? In a critical analysis of primary news bulletins transmitted by the public television broadcaster of Greece (ERT3), this work identifies significant changes occurring in regional media and underlines disparities in the representation of political news that directly affect local communities. In response to rapid structural and operational changes in regional media, the findings reveal consistent differences in political coverage that reflect both local–national inequalities and editorial priorities.

The analysis of ERT3's lead news bulletins underscores the limited duration and exposure of local political news in the general news agenda. On days of heightened political attention, significant local political events—such as municipal council decisions or policy announcements—tended to precipitate a surge in local political coverage. While political content averaged 415 seconds daily—around 15.4% of total airtime—this study clearly indicates a preference for national political events over local issues. However, despite such surges in coverage, news about local governance invariably accounted for a smaller share of coverage than central political events. The fluctuations in coverage indicate that while local media might respond to major

political events, there is a significant gap in coverage of local governance issues compared with country-level politics. The pattern reflects a broader trend toward the national orientation of political bulletins (Martin & McCrain, 2019), while also highlighting the selective attention to local political issues in local bulletins (Barnett, 2009; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). This centralization of the agenda reinforces González-Bailón's (2017) theory on journalistic invisibility, as the structural prioritization of national narratives effectively sidelines the local political sphere, leading to a ‚de-territorialization' of public discourse.

These results are of serious consequence, as there is evidence of journalism's neglect of local political matters, which could open the door to the concentration of political power and discourage public involvement in local politics. The lopsided representation also reflects deeper regional inequality: regions that are least developed, economically and in terms of infrastructure, tend to receive even smaller proportions of attention in political journalism, further entrenching status-quo differences in civic participation. The low level of representation of regional political matters results in a loss of opportunity to stimulate local democratic initiative and improve understanding of community concerns. Although local political stories tend to appear early in the bulletin, their overall limited airtime constrains the visibility of local issues.

It should also be recognized that this research has limitations. The analysis spans a limited time frame (one month) and is narrowly centered upon ERT3, which limits the immediate generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the patterns identified point to both universal and context-specific dynamics: the preference for central political events over local ones may reflect a widespread trend in regional media globally, but the scale, intensity, and editorial framing of these patterns are shaped by the Greek media system, public broadcasting norms, and regional socio-political conditions. Other media outlets in the region were not included, and a number of contextual factors, such as editorial rationales, audience preferences, and resource availability, may also influence political news storytelling. These limitations provide context for interpreting the results and suggest clear directions for future research, including comparative studies across regions and countries to explore how regional media coverage of local politics may vary and what lessons can be drawn for enhancing democratic engagement.

Overall, this study underscores the critical role that local media play in fostering an informed and engaged citizenry. By drawing attention to persistent disparities in coverage and the relative marginalization of distinctly local perspectives, it highlights the capacity of local outlets to enhance civic awareness and promote more balanced and context-sensitive political discourse. At the same time, the study identifies significant gaps in understanding the role of local media in relation to what constitutes local political news and what falls outside

its scope, while also highlighting both thematic omissions and recurrent thematic fixations within regional media coverage.

The findings further point to important avenues for future research. In particular, the literature review conducted for this study revealed a notable gap concerning the relationship between local journalism and local political news. There is a clear lack of systematic conceptualization regarding what differentiates national political news from genuinely regional or local political reporting.

Moreover, evidence suggests that many local media organizations tend to reproduce national political news, presenting it as broadly relevant to local audiences without adequately adapting it to the specific needs and conditions of local communities. Concurrently, they often underreport smaller-scale political developments, such as those involving municipalities, local authorities, and rural areas. This dual tendency raises concerns that local media risk functioning as subordinate extensions of national outlets, thereby diminishing their distinctiveness and potentially weakening public trust. Addressing these issues requires future research that more precisely defines local political news and systematically examines its impact on local publics, democratic participation, and community-level political engagement. At the same time, the findings raise broader questions about the capacity of regional public broadcasters to effectively support local democracy within increasingly centralized media environments—an issue that is gaining growing attention in international research on journalism and political communication.

Future research should address several critical gaps identified in the present literature review, particularly regarding the relationship between local journalism and the production and dissemination of local political news. Notably, there remains a lack of systematic and in-depth scholarly inquiry into the criteria that distinguish national political news from genuinely regional or local political reporting. This conceptual ambiguity is further compounded by the observable tendency of many local media outlets to reproduce centrally produced national political news, framing it merely as content presumed to interest local audiences, rather than contextualizing it within the specific socio-political realities of the communities they serve.

At the same time, such outlets frequently neglect the coverage of "smaller-scale" political developments, including issues related to municipal governance, local authorities, and rural communities. This imbalance raises concerns regarding the functional role of local media, as they risk becoming derivative extensions of national outlets—effectively minor channels unable to compete with larger organizations—thereby undermining their credibility and eroding public trust. Consequently, further empirical and theoretical research is required to develop a robust definition of local political news and to assess the extent to which such

content influences local publics, democratic engagement, and community-level political awareness.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Local and Hyperlocal Media in the Warmia and Mazury Region (Poland) in the Face of the Problem of Disinformation

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Abstract: This article presents the results of a study of the attitudes of local and hyperlocal media representatives towards disinformation. Between October 2024 and April 2025, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of selected media from the Warmia and Mazury region (Poland). The objective of the study was to determine how local and hyperlocal media experience disinformation in their daily editorial practice and what content verification rules they apply. The study reveals that knowledge of the local context and the ability to quickly verify information make local and hyperlocal media a reliable source of content, counterbalancing anonymous reports on local social media channels. Due to their specific nature, local and hyperlocal media can play a crucial role in building resilience against disinformation.

Keywords: Local media; Hyperlocal media; Warmia and Mazury; Poland; Disinformation

INTRODUCTION

Although the issue of disinformation has been the subject of scientific research and expert analysis, the prevailing approach primarily considers the global context and the perspectives of selected countries. Scientific literature and NGO reports most often address large-scale aspects of the phenomenon, such as the importance of social media in disseminating misinformation, disinformation campaigns conducted by individual countries as part of ongoing hybrid wars, and the impact of disinformation on national security and public health.

This article presents a distinct perspective on disinformation, specifically that of local media. At this point, it is appropriate to refer to the phenomenon of glocalization, which demonstrates the mutual interaction between globalization and localism, occurring in the areas of politics, culture, and economics

(Biernacka-Ligięza, 2013, p. 163). Since 'global' is becoming 'local', global problems also have their local counterparts. One example to consider is the NASK (2019) report entitled "The phenomenon of disinformation in the era of digital revolution. State. Society. Politics. Business", highlighting that local news websites are also victims of disinformation campaigns.

It is important to note that problems can be addressed more efficiently at the local level, especially when central institutions fail (Mihr, 2022). In the article "Disinformation at a Local Level: An Emerging Discussion", Pedro Jerónimo and Marta Sanchez Esparza (2022) emphasize the need to initiate a discussion on disinformation at the local level and to make this issue a subject of research. The authors note that, given the rapid spread of disinformation on social media, attention must be given to reliable sources of information on local issues. A local perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the circulation of disinformation within community-based communication networks and its implications for trust in local democratic institutions and processes.

When conducting research on disinformation, it is worth considering the role of local and hyperlocal media in counterbalancing, for example, social media channels that focus on local issues but are often created anonymously and disseminate unverified information or fake news (Fernández-Barreroet et al., 2024; Ardia et al., 2020; Zilic Fiser & Caks, 2023). Local and hyperlocal media can play an important role in fostering resilience to disinformation within their communities.

Drawing on existing scholarship (e.g., Humprecht, Esser & Van Aelst, 2020; Harich & Rosas, 2026), disinformation resilience can be conceptualized not only as an individual journalistic skill, but also as an organizational and community-based capacity embedded in local information ecosystems. The findings of this study suggest that such resilience is grounded in proximity to audiences, strong local knowledge, and established trust relations with communities. At the same time, it is reinforced by routine verification practices and selective engagement strategies that allow local media to limit the spread of unverified content while maintaining credibility.

In light of the current state of research on the situation and role of local media in the context of the growing disinformation problem, the analyses presented in this article are preliminary and aim to identify areas that could be explored further. It is not without reason that the material analyzed here consists of interviews with representatives of local and hyperlocal media who have extensive journalistic experience and are very familiar with the local environment. These interviews explore the local dimensions of disinformation and information-verification standards in local and hyperlocal media.

The aim of this study is to highlight the challenges faced by local media in relation to disinformation, without seeking to generalize the findings beyond

the context analyzed. The analysis is deliberately situated at the micro-level, focusing on the everyday professional practices, experiences, and perceptions of local media representatives within a regional setting. These findings highlight the importance of paying closer attention to the specific problems, information needs, and vulnerabilities of local communities, which are often overlooked in broader, macro-level analyses.

At the same time, the results underscore the crucial role local media can play in countering disinformation by providing verified, context-sensitive information and fostering trust among their audiences. Despite its qualitative, regionally grounded design, this study offers insights relevant to an international audience. By demonstrating how local and hyperlocal media operate as verification-oriented, trust-based actors embedded in community networks, it extends existing research on disinformation, which has predominantly focused on national and global levels. The findings suggest that strengthening local media ecosystems may represent a viable strategy for enhancing resilience to disinformation across different countries and media systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This article examines the attitudes of representatives of selected local and hyperlocal media outlets in the Warmia and Mazury region, Poland, towards disinformation. To better frame the empirical findings of this study within an established analytical approach, Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) typology of information disorder can be applied. The authors distinguish three interrelated categories: (1) misinformation, defined as false or misleading information shared without harmful intent; (2) disinformation, understood as deliberately created and disseminated false information intended to cause harm; and (3) malinformation, referring to genuine information that is shared with the intention to cause harm, often by moving private or contextual information into the public sphere.

This framework highlights that the key differentiating factor between these categories is not only the content itself, but also the intent behind its production and circulation. Particular attention is paid to how local media understand and address disinformation in their professional practice. Agnieszka Roguska (2012, p. 34) emphasizes that local media represent social capital that comprises "mutual trust (I trust my partners and my colleagues trust me), responsibility for oneself and the community, and deriving benefits from living and working together." Local media promote the strengthening of the local community's identity and can be seen as organizations that provide direction to the local community, as they are trusted (Roguska, 2012, p. 35).

Defining local and hyperlocal media presents difficulties that are exacerbated by the growing importance of communication in the online space (Skrzypczak, 2013, pp. 19-39). An overview of definitions of local media, conducted by Adam Szynol (2011, pp. 101-125) and Sylwia Męcfal (2019, pp. 31-37), provides a picture of the diversity of terminological approaches as well as the multitude of research positions resulting from them (Kowalczyk, 2008, pp. 96-98; Mądry, 1983, p. 75).

It is not the intention of this paper to review the definitions of local media, as this would duplicate prior work; instead, it focuses on one of the most frequently cited terminological approaches relevant to ongoing research. S. Dziki and W. Chorązki (2000, pp. 121-122) define local media as a formal category resulting from the division of the media according to the range of their impact. They point out that the criterion of press impact range is insufficient, and that aspects such as the place of publication and editing, the area of distribution, and, most importantly, the content should be taken into consideration. Adam Szynol (2011, p. 106) underscores that the content of messages is crucial in defining local media. He also highlights the significance of the local community as a group of local media recipients.

The functions and tasks of local media include: providing comprehensive and up-to-date local information, monitoring local authorities, promoting local initiatives, serving as a forum for the local community, integrating the local environment, shaping local public opinion, supporting local culture, integrating the community in local and supra-local structures, promoting one's local homeland and providing economic education to the local community, advertising and announcing, and entertaining (Dziki & Chorązki, 2000, pp. 130-131). When analyzing the above list, Adam Szynol (2011, pp. 110-111) considers the informational and monitoring functions to be the most important.

Another significant phenomenon in the field of locality is the development of hyperlocal media. Damian Radcliffe (2012) defines hyperlocal media as "Online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or other small, geographically defined community". The researcher perceives the role of local media as, among other things, defining local identity, filling content gaps for users, and holding authorities accountable. Radcliffe (2013) analyses the development of hyperlocal media in Great Britain, emphasizing the importance of technological and economic factors, such as the development of tools and platforms that facilitate content publishing by journalists and citizens, and changes in media usage patterns, involving a shift towards mobile devices that are altering the way media is consumed. Although many local media are created on a voluntary basis, there is a growing number of commercial initiatives, which the researcher also perceives as beneficial for local businesses that can advertise in hyperlocal media. The development of hyperlocal media in Great Britain is supported by grants, training sessions, and interest from the academic

community and decision-makers. Radcliffe (2013) sees opportunities for further development of the sector in intra-sectoral cooperation (cooperation between hyperlocal media), in building links between traditional and hyperlocal media, partnerships with academic institutions and local communities, and in developing industry organizations that represent their interests while cooperating with legislators and engaging in intra-sectoral cooperation.

The often-cited definition of hyperlocal media by Radcliffe (2013) is disputed by Krzysztof Wasilewski (2022, pp. 10, 33). According to this Polish researcher on digital regionalism, hyperlocal media, which have emerged as a result of the dissemination of Internet access and the simultaneous crisis of traditional local media, should be perceived as belonging to cyberspace and functioning especially in the area of social media. Wasilewski believes that geography cannot play a major role in defining hyperlocal media because territorial coverage, which is important in traditional media, loses significance in the online space. Wasilewski also emphasizes the interactive nature of hyperlocal media, the blurring of the boundary between creator and recipient, and the amateur nature of these media, understood as the absence of a commercial dimension in their activities.

This paper, however, will use Radcliffe's definition, which stresses the role of the geographical factor, but it is important to emphasize the accuracy of Wasilewski's observation, which highlights the transformations of hyperlocal media under the influence of new technological phenomena, as well as their diverse nature, which hampers the development of a systematic approach. Regarding the functions of hyperlocal media, Radcliffe (2012) mentions building local identity, filling content gaps, monitoring authorities, and expanding the range of media available to audiences.

THE STUDY

The research material analyzed in this article comprises 20 interviews conducted between October 2024 and April 2025 with representatives of local and hyperlocal media. The choice of this region as a research area was partly due to the fact that it is a border area neighboring the Kaliningrad Oblast, which, as one might expect, is associated with disinformation activities on the part of Russia, especially since a multinational NATO battalion battle group is stationed in the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodeship.

The study's participants were selected purposively. The interviews were conducted with those responsible for shaping the editorial line of individual media outlets, primarily editors-in-chief, and occasionally with individuals recommended by editors-in-chief, including publishers and journalists.

The interviews were semi-structured, with the main purpose of obtaining information on the attitudes of editors-in-chief of local media towards the problem of disinformation, including mainly their experience of disinformation in the daily editorial practice of local and hyperlocal media, as well as the principles followed by representatives of these media in the information verification process. The semi-structured nature of the interviews was linked to the fact that respondents raised topics not directly related to the subjects under discussion, but that were important to them (among them, the most frequently mentioned issues included the form of cooperation with local authorities and relations with competing media).

Local government media were excluded from participation in the study due to their distinct nature and functions. The interviews were conducted at the headquarters of individual editorial offices or at locations designated by the participants when the editorial office operated remotely. The respondents were guaranteed anonymity. Individual interviews were assigned random numbers and are referenced in the text next to the corresponding quotations.

With the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded in audio format and subsequently transcribed. The interviews were coded in order to highlight the most important and frequently addressed topics, and the results are presented later in this paper. The analysis of evocative source materials employed a qualitative research approach, enabling an in-depth understanding of editorial personnel's attitudes. Numerous quotes are presented in the article to reflect the respondents' perspectives as accurately as possible.

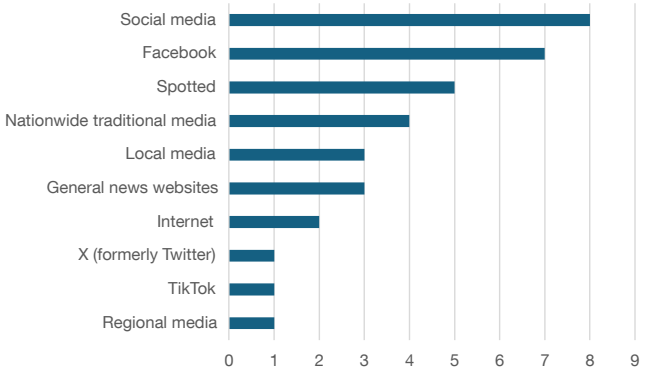
FINDINGS

The statements of local media representatives are dominated by a distancing from the Internet, particularly social media, as a source of information. When asked to indicate the channels on which they most often encounter disinformation, the respondents provided answers such as: "Well, it's social media for sure. […] everyone seems to thoughtlessly spout their pearls of wisdom, or at least what they consider wisdom, on social media" (I9); "I am very cautious when it comes to any information I found somewhere on the Internet, on social media" (I6); "These social media are a huge area open to… . A huge hotbed of all sorts of fake news" (I10); "We can often see, on social media, that this information, namely fake news, is being reproduced. It disseminates very quickly" (I1). The respondents noted that their critical assessment of the Internet, including social media, as a source of information stems from the spread of fake news in this information space, as well as the lack of access to the original source of information in cases of content that is repeatedly shared. It should be added that

local media representatives did not consider the problem of disinformation in the context of international politics, but rather from their own perspective, particularly by analysing their experiences related to searching for information on local topics, verifying content, and managing local and hyperlocal media.

The respondents indicated that they most often encountered disinformation in communication channels such as social media, the social networking site Facebook, Spotted channels on Facebook. They mentioned traditional Poland-wide media and competing local media less frequently (Figure 1)[1].

Figure 1. Media perceived by respondents as channels of disinformation



Source: Own elaboration

Facebook was a communication channel often associated with the spread of disinformation. The opinions expressed ranged from balanced views on the need to treat this source of information with caution to more emphatic assessments, such as: "[…] I think Facebook is such a channel […] where you need to take the information it contains with a pinch of salt" (I14); "Facebook is one big rubbish dump. In my opinion, every evil thing that has ever happened on the Internet has happened on Facebook. […] These days, Facebook is a Wild West of sorts, unmanageable in any way" (I8); "And that wonderful Facebook of ours, which allows much and punishes so little. This is the greatest threat at the moment, when it comes to disinformation" (I2); "The greatest disinformation is spread by Facebook. The greatest. Because they describe such things there that, you know, it just boggles the mind" (I17).

The respondents, seeking inspiration and interesting topics, check Facebook content, but note that it is often untrue. Some editors-in-chief acknowledged their own mistakes in assessing the veracity of content published on Facebook,

[1] The responses vary in their level of generality because the respondents did not complete a questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions, but answered open-ended questions.

citing cases in which they initially accepted and later disseminated unverified information. One respondent recalled an example related to the "Blue Whale Challenge", which was widely reported in the media at the time and later turned out to be misleading information, noting that the editorial office had followed the initial lead without sufficient verification (I16).

Representatives of another editorial office admitted that publishing false information sourced from Facebook prompted them to verify content from the Internet more carefully: "[…] we had a few minor slip-ups, such as posting events that were not necessarily confirmed by the city and so on… they did not take place, actually. […] Maybe someone had actually announced them, but they did not occur. People frowned upon us for publishing it. The source of this information, for example, was Facebook. […] And, after such experiences, we actually try to confirm this much more when it comes to events" (I20).

Another popular sources of information on local topics are the Spotted channels on Facebook. Users can send their content (messages, questions, announcements) to the site administrator, who publishes it without disclosing the sender's details. The administrator usually remains anonymous as well. The respondents were critical of the lack of reliability of the content on Spotted channels and pointed to specific instances of fake news they had encountered there. Many editors-in-chief participating in the study were able to identify the people managing local Spotted channels, while others emphasized that they did not know who the administrators of these channels were, so they did not trust the content published on them. Interestingly, both the awareness of who manages Spotted channels and the anonymity of their creators have been identified as the reasons for distancing oneself from the content shared on those channels and perceiving it as unreliable. The primary reasons for the critical approach to the content shared on Spotted channels, as mentioned by respondents, included its clickbait nature, the focus of such channels on quantity rather than quality, and the dissemination of unverified material.

Some respondents accused competitive local media outlets of sensationalism, political bias, a lack of professionalism, and the publication of unverified information. Critical opinions on the activities of other local media were sometimes substantive, but from time to time, respondents pointed out that conflicts between editorial offices result in hate directed at individual journalists and even their families, which is definitely not conducive to public debate in the local environment. Although relatively few editors mentioned online portals and traditional Poland-wide media as potential sources of disinformation, this issue warrants examination. Internet portals are being accused of presenting derivative content and communicating it without prior verification. Regarding the assessment of traditional Poland-wide media, the way local media journalists cover topics related to their local communities is important. Editors-in-chief

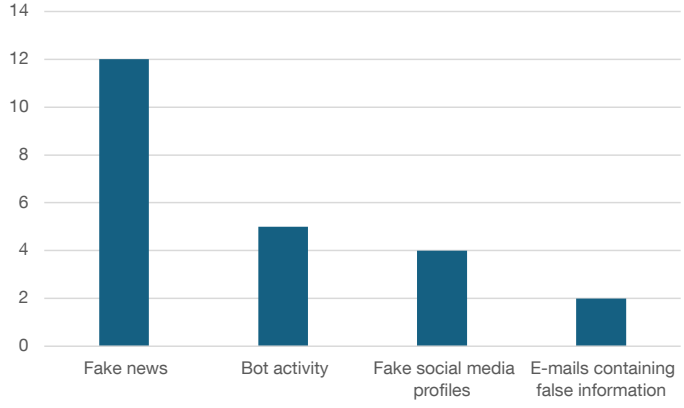
of local media accuse traditional Poland-wide media of bias, of seeking data that confirms a preconceived thesis, and of obtaining information remotely, without appearing at the scene of events.

The basic forms of disinformation encountered by local media representatives include fake news, comments posted by automated accounts (commonly referred to as bots), fake social media profiles, and e-mails containing false information (see Figure 2).

Among the fake news concerning local communities, the most common topics include kidnappings, accidents, and the deaths of well-known members of the local community. One of the most widespread pieces of fake news to appear in the region under study was the claim that the mayor of Orzysz was inviting people to participate in a march against the presence of American troops in the town. The publication of that piece of fake news on a local Internet website, as well as on the website of the Orzysz Town Hall, was the result of a hacker attack that was part of a widespread disinformation campaign. The content was shared in other media, not just local ones. Respondents also highlighted disinformation related to the use of bots, while issues such as fictitious social media profiles and emails containing false information were mentioned less frequently.

When discussing the problem of disinformation, respondents also pointed to political pressure on the media, aimed at ensuring that local journalists cover certain topics or ignore others, a practice that intensifies in the lead-up to elections. The aspects of local politics that can be applied to the national political struggle are particularly important. In recent years, this has included issues related to immigration centers, as well as investments important to the region.

Figure 2. Forms of disinformation that respondents encounter most frequently



Source: Own elaboration

However, the topic of relations between local governments and local media is a complex one, for instance, because of the issue of financing local media, and requires a separate study. One of the respondents outlined this issue in the following manner: "Well, it is well known that the city has, so to speak, certain instruments with which it can support local media, and some people are very keen to take advantage of this, so yes, in my opinion, pressure is a problem that needs to be solved in a way, because local media are often, very often, not independent, and if the city cuts off their funding in some way, then it is very dangerous, and there is a lot of dependence".

On many occasions, when local media exercise supervisory oversight over local government, this results in conflicts that lead to situations in which local authorities do not provide journalists with information or fail to respond to public information requests in a timely manner, thereby impeding the production of material.

Despite the problems discussed above, all respondents agreed that the specific nature of local media means that the problem of disinformation occurs on a completely different scale than in nationwide media. They also listed several factors that determine the veracity of local media. The respondents' statements clearly indicate that adherence to classic journalistic techniques and immersion in the local environment are the factors that most influence the credibility of local media.

The respondents pointed to the practice of classic journalistic techniques as the basis of their work: "This is how journalism should be practiced – namely, we verify every piece of information" (I9); "The credibility of a particular title or publication on the market sort of depends on how well these journalistic techniques are known" (I10).

One of the editors-in-chief addressed the issue of the number of sources in which information needs to be verified: "[…] it needs to be verified from five sources, all five of them. Indeed, there are situations where two sources are not sufficient", which was related to a lawsuit in which it was ruled that a journalist should obtain an expert opinion and not just present the positions of the parties to the conflict (I17).

Editors-in-chief observe the principle that it is the parties involved in a dispute that should be given a voice. As one of the respondents put it: "As a matter of fact, we always show both sides. If someone reports a problem, then we obviously show the other side as well. We strive to ensure that this information is as reliable and objective as possible. Presented from several perspectives" (I14). Some editorial offices noted that the lack of urgency due to low competition in the local media market allows for meticulous verification of each piece of information (I8, I19).

The aforementioned "immersion in the local environment" enables local media journalists to verify information quickly, thanks to their proximity

to events and extensive knowledge of local information sources. The respondents addressed this issue as follows: "This is simply the specific nature of our job – we have this information, so to speak, at our fingertips" (I10); "Well, you could jokingly say that all I have to do is open the window and see whether it's true or not. Yes, I am here, at the specific location where my website operates, and I am able to verify very quickly whether something is true or not" (I6); "[…] we are in direct contact with the inhabitants, and in direct contact with our sources of information.

So, for example, if we need to verify some information, say at the local council or the mayor's office, we know each other, we have that contact, so we can do it quite quickly" (I14); "There are people I know in every village, so I just call them and ask a question or two" (I17). The respondents point out that the strength of their media activities lies in their proximity to events and in easy access to people who can directly verify information, for example, on social media.

At the same time, some respondents noted that local media are reluctant to quote one another, so they independently consult sources to verify information (I19). Representatives from many editorial offices also stated that it was impossible for them to publish false or unverified information, as they obtained information independently and did not use content provided by outside sources. "We look for information, so to speak, at the very bottom, don't we? It is we who meet directly, if we want to. We participate in local government meetings, sessions, and committee proceedings. We try to listen to all of this. It is not the case that we receive a piece of information and then pass it on uncritically, without processing it in any way or involving ourselves. So, all this information is generated by us" (I10); "We provide materials, we don't source them from other parties" (I8).

Local media journalists are familiar with both the history of a particular place and its contemporary problems. A journalist's relationship with a particular place is a crucial factor in determining their credibility in the eyes of local inhabitants. At the same time, it should be noted that local editorial offices are often managed by one or two persons, so journalists put their own names behind the editorial office's activities, and the sense of responsibility associated with this is a recurring theme in the respondents' statements, e.g. "[…] in these local media, that's we who personally endorse all that" (I6). "When I appear somewhere, people know, they must know, they must be aware that this is a reliable material (I8); "this reflection in the mirror is important to me, for example, so that no one says to me: What is this rubbish you are writing? Well, for me, this is relevant" (I16).

Proximity to the local community is undoubtedly linked to credibility and reliability, as the respondents admit that it is the readers who are quickest to verify published content: "When you are a journalist working for 'Fakt', you

can let yourself release a piece of fake news. Here, it will be unforgivable. You will be reproached for this" (I2); "We cannot take the easy route, […] as we are being verified on a constant basis" (I9); "It is evident that if I post one or two messages that are not true, and so on, people will stop visiting my page" (I7).

For representatives of local media, credibility achieved through reliable, often long-term work in the local environment, and for the benefit of the local community, is of great importance. The respondents say: "I am sensitive to the credibility of what I write" (I2); "If we take ourselves seriously, we should take our readers seriously as well. And we cannot publish fake news and unverified information just to get clicks" (I6); "I care about good, reliable information, which, in my opinion, will always stand up for itself, so to speak" (I16); "For me, actually, credibility is important. […] Anyway, I'm glad about it, because when someone retires, one person, then another, then one more, I often hear people saying thank you for never lying. And this is so uplifting, inspiring" (I12).

Editorial offices that have been in existence for two or three decades have been paying attention to the effort put into shaping a positive image of a particular title, as well as to the efforts to maintain that image, e.g.: "We do not distribute unverified information at all, because we know that it can simply happen somewhere else, while we cannot afford to lose the credibility that we have been building for 20 years" (I3); "We have been working too long to build this reputation, and now we cannot lose it by publishing unverified information or misleading people. We do perform, like, a function of public trust […]" (I8).

The credibility gained over many years of reliable work by the editorial team means the local media's content is a crucial point of reference in discussions of local issues, and the editorial office enjoys the trust of the local community. One of the respondents stated: "We do not allow ourselves to publish unverified information, do we? People firmly believe that what is written in a newspaper is the truth. […] I will not publish something I am not sure about. […] And I think that's what we benefit from, because we write the truth. Indeed, sometimes there are light topics, not necessarily very difficult or important ones, but people trust us. […] And I think that's because they've probably never been disappointed by the fact that what the newspaper has written was completely untrue" (I15).

The respondents also commented on the strategies developed to address disinformation, e.g., fake news about the local community circulating on social media. The prevailing strategy is to ignore such content, which may arise from the belief that verification of fake news will not reach as many recipients as the fake news itself, for example: "It's a bit scary, this charm, so to speak, ironically, charm of social media, where if fake news appears and is reproduced countless times, then the verification of this fake news will never break through" (I5).

Situations in which editors-in-chief deliberately ignore false information circulating in other local media, especially on social media, sometimes prompt

readers to criticize a particular newspaper or website for failing to publish such information. The editors-in-chief indicated that their attitude resulted from the need to maintain reliability and omit information that was uncertain or verified as false: "I get blamed for it, because the following question later arises: why didn't you publish it? I did not publish it, because it has never happened. Or it did happen, but was completely different" (I12).

Respondents also tend to prefer careful observation and waiting to see how events unfold, rather than quickly sharing content: "It is essential to monitor attempts to disseminate unreliable, untrue, and not completely verified information, which can cause harm, both individually and collectively" (I1).

However, it should be noted that local media do not rely solely on a reactive approach to disinformation. In many cases, they actively counter false information by publishing clarifications about fake social media accounts (W19) and by verifying information about locally relevant events reported in national media (W3). Some newsrooms also reported collaborating with local police authorities to raise awareness of online scams and other forms of digital fraud (I2, I6, I7, I11, I13, I15, I17). These initiatives improve digital literacy and reduce vulnerability to disinformation-related threats. Such collaboration reflects an increasingly proactive role of local media in supporting public safety and strengthening community resilience to information-related risks.

CONCLUSIONS

As Stanisław Michalczyk (2010, p. 32) noted, "The rapidly changing media reality requires researchers to respond methodically just as quickly, and face new challenges." One such challenge, and there are many in today's media sphere, is to consider the local perspective when researching disinformation. The respondents' statements in the present study allow us to examine the problem of disinformation from a perspective other than that typically presented in expert analysis or scientific research. The interviews reveal that the content verification mechanisms employed by local and hyperlocal editorial offices enable them to maintain the credibility of their messages, and the content they share serves as a crucial point of reference for local communities.

When analyzing the phenomenon of disinformation, the respondents mainly pointed to social media and Facebook as a platform for spreading false content. Particular attention was paid to Spotted-type channels on Facebook, where users send and add information anonymously. The administrators who share the content also remain anonymous. The representatives of local and hyperlocal media who participated in the study most often encounter disinformation, such as fake news and fake social media accounts. Local media, while maintaining

high editorial standards, select information and provide the local community with verified and reliable content. Local media journalists, thanks to their proximity to events, knowledge of the environment, and contacts with inhabitants, are able to quickly verify content. The respondents' statements reveal, on the one hand, a sense of responsibility towards the local community, and on the other, concerns about trust in the local editorial office. The social capital built by local and hyperlocal media allows us to view them as entities that can play a significant role in combating disinformation, for example, by building resilience to it.

The potential of local media has been recognized in an Opinion by the European Committee of the Regions (2023), "The role of local and regional authorities in countering disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference". The document emphasizes that financial and programmatic support for local and regional media, especially those operating in "news deserts" (areas affected by a lack of local media), is recommended to strengthen pluralism and the information resilience of societies. This support would enable local media to develop initiatives to combat disinformation and enhance the public's resilience to it. Being rooted in the local context, having personal relationships with local residents, and being able to verify information sources make local editorial offices obvious allies in combating disinformation, which has both a global and a local dimension. In an era dominated by global platforms, being rooted in the local community can be an effective strategy for combating disinformation. The role of local media in developing resilience to disinformation is worth acknowledging, both in public debate and in scientific research.

The findings of this study can also be situated within broader theoretical discussions on the changing relationship between local media and digital platforms. Existing research (e.g., Ardia et al., 2020; Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022) often conceptualizes platforms as dominant actors in local information ecosystems, with local media positioned as increasingly marginal or reactive. In this perspective, platforms act as primary distributors of information, while local news organizations struggle to maintain visibility, authority, and economic sustainability. The results presented in this article both confirm and extend these models. On the one hand, the respondents clearly identify social media—particularly Facebook—as the primary environment in which disinformation circulates, supporting the view of platforms as central nodes in contemporary information disorder. On the other hand, the study demonstrates that local and hyperlocal media are not merely passive actors within platform-dominated ecosystems. Instead, they actively perform a corrective and filtering role, based on verification practices, local knowledge, and trust-based relationships with audiences. This suggests a need to reconceptualize local media not only as vulnerable actors, but also as key intermediaries in building community-level resilience to disinformation.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a relatively small sample of 20 interviews. Second, local government media were deliberately excluded from the analysis due to their specific institutional nature and functions. Despite its qualitative design and limited sample size, the study provides valuable exploratory insights into newsroom practices and contributes to a better understanding of how local and hyperlocal media respond to disinformation in their everyday professional practice. Therefore, the findings should not be directly generalized beyond the studied region. Future research could benefit from a comparative design that examines local and hyperlocal media across regions or countries, enabling the identification of context-specific and shared patterns in responses to disinformation. Such studies would make it possible to assess how varying political, media, and regulatory environments shape newsroom strategies. In addition, a comparative analysis of local, hyperlocal, and national media could further clarify differences in approaches to verifying and correcting false information. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in tracking how these strategies evolve over time, particularly in response to changes in digital platforms and information ecosystems. This would provide a more dynamic understanding of how resilience to disinformation is developed and sustained in journalistic practice.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Infotainment in Television News: A Croatian Paradox of Presentation Styles and Their Reception by Young Viewers

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Abstract: This paper explores how infotainment elements in television news influence the viewing habits of younger audiences. It compares traditional news formats in Croatia (HRT's *Dnevnik 3*) with infotainment-based formats (RTL's *Direkt*) to assess their impact on young viewers' perception and media behavior. Using content analysis and a survey among youth, the study examines differences in news presentation styles and their influence on content perception, source preferences, and attitudes toward news formats. The findings suggest that infotainment elements may play an important role in shaping young audiences' preferences, with many respondents indicating a tendency to favor more engaging and visually dynamic content over traditional reporting styles. The results also point to a broader media paradox, where the way news is presented may, in some cases, influence audience engagement as much as the informational content itself. This research offers insights into how news presentation styles affect the information consumption habits of younger viewers, linking theoretical insights to empirical data.

Keywords: Infotainment; Television News; Young Audiences; Media Consumption; News Perception

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary media environment, the boundaries between information and entertainment have become increasingly fluid, particularly within television news formats. This convergence has produced the phenomenon of infotainment – a hybrid genre that blends journalistic reporting with entertainment features such as fast-paced editing, emotionally charged visuals, dramatic narratives,

and personalized storytelling. While originally driven by market competition and digital transformation, infotainment has become a dominant force in the production and consumption of news globally (Thussu, 2007; Savolainen, 2022). The academic discourse surrounding infotainment is complex and often polarized.

On one side, scholars such as Postman (1985) warned that the transformation of serious public discourse into entertainment risks reducing citizens' ability to engage meaningfully with societal issues. Others, like Holbert (2005), have emphasized the potential of infotainment to attract disengaged audiences and foster political awareness in more accessible ways. Emotional and visual elements, while often criticized, have been shown to enhance attention and memory retention (Brosius, 1993), particularly in fast-paced media contexts.

While these perspectives remain influential, it is important to consider their limitations in the contemporary digital media environment. The media landscape has significantly evolved since these works were published, particularly with the rise of social media and on-demand content, which may alter the role and impact of infotainment in ways not fully captured by earlier theoretical models. Recent data further highlight shifting audience expectations and consumption patterns. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2025 (Newman et al., 2025), one of the key findings from 2024 is that a growing number of people are actively avoiding news content, often describing it as depressing, harsh, and boring. In contrast, short-form video news is accessed weekly by two-thirds (66%) of respondents, pointing to a growing preference for concise, dynamic, and visually engaging formats. This raises important questions about how infotainment influences audience perception, media trust, news consumption habits, and broader attitudes toward journalistic content.

Within this context, previous research has offered differing perspectives on the role of infotainment in informing the public. Indrati (2024) argues that infotainment can enhance news popularity and promote youth engagement with important societal issues without necessarily compromising journalistic standards. On the other hand, Dai and Wang (2023) caution that excessive simplification and entertainment-driven presentation may lead to superficial understanding and a decline in critical thinking among audiences. As a result, traditional news formats appear to be increasingly complemented by visually rich, emotionally engaging, and faster-paced alternatives.

Although previous research and recent data indicate that younger audiences increasingly rely on digital platforms rather than television for news consumption, television news remains an important reference point within the broader media ecosystem. It continues to shape journalistic standards, influence online news formats, and contribute to the overall framing of public discourse. Therefore, examining televised news provides valuable insight into the transformation of news presentation styles, even among audiences who do not consume it regularly.

Given these dynamics, this paper explores how infotainment affects the news consumption behavior of young audiences in the Republic of Croatia. By comparing the presentation styles of a traditional public news program (Dnevnik 3, HRT) and an infotainment-oriented commercial news program (RTL Direkt), this study seeks to understand how young viewers perceive, evaluate, and engage with different news formats. For the purpose of this study, "young audiences" are defined as individuals aged 15 to 30. This demographic group was selected for its distinctive media consumption habits, particularly its strong orientation toward digital and visually driven content, making it especially relevant for examining the influence of infotainment. Using a mixed-methods approach, content analysis, and a survey of younger viewers, this research provides empirical insights into how infotainment may influence how young audiences perceive and engage with televised news content.

Given the growing presence of infotainment in television news and the evolving media consumption habits of younger audiences, it is essential to explore how these formats shape how young people perceive and engage with news. Particular attention is given to content perception, source and format preferences, and tendencies toward different styles of news presentation. In this study, "presentation styles" are conceptualized as a set of formal and expressive features through which news content is structured and delivered to audiences. These include visual design, editing pace, narrative structure, tone, and the use of emotional or personalized storytelling. In line with previous research on infotainment and media formats (Thussu, 2007; Holbert, 2005), these elements are understood as key dimensions through which the blending of information and entertainment is operationalized in news production. For the purposes of this study, presentation styles are treated as analytical categories for comparing traditional and infotainment-oriented news formats. To systematically address this phenomenon, the study is guided by the following research questions: How does infotainment affect young viewers' perception of news? What are young people's preferences regarding news sources and formats? To what extent are young viewers more inclined to consume infotainment content compared to traditional news content.

THE RISE OF INFOTAINMENT: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND IMPLICATIONS

The term "infotainment", a blend of the words information and entertainment, emerged in the late 1980s in the United States as broadcast content intended to both entertain and inform (Thussu, 2007, p. 8). Historically, the term was used to discredit journalists assigned to cover "soft" news. It was expected that such news would be consumed mainly by women, who were also the primary

producers of this content, but it eventually evolved into a distinct genre. Historically, female journalists have been directed toward soft news such as lifestyle, entertainment, and human-interest reporting, while men have dominated political and economic reporting (North, 2014, p. 356).

Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero (2024) further elaborate that infotainment is a journalistic form that blurs the boundaries between hard news and entertainment, adapting traditional news values to the logic and dynamics of social media platforms, where engaging, shareable content often takes precedence over in-depth reporting. This shift is especially evident in the habits of younger generations. As Esquen and Palomino-Flores (2024) note, Generation Z increasingly evaluates the credibility of news content not solely based on source authority but on emotional resonance, relatability, and visual storytelling. This generational shift forces news producers to adapt their formats and tones to maintain relevance in an evolving media ecosystem.

According to Thussu (2007), infotainment cannot be neatly categorized as either information or entertainment; rather, it exists in the middle ground, using both to reach the widest possible audience. Savolainen (2022) similarly highlights that infotainment is a hybrid of informative and entertaining content. Both authors thus provide straightforward explanations of what infotainment entails. Infotainment is generally recognizable by its entertaining nature. It often incorporates flashy graphics, rapid editing, music, sensationalism, and, at times, satire to capture viewers' attention (Postman, 1985).

The demand for fast-paced news is often associated with an increased emphasis on style and visual presentation, sometimes at the expense of more in-depth analytical content. Such news is designed to attract viewers with short attention spans who are accustomed to switching between channels and media formats, especially on online and mobile platforms, as well as to condensed visual stimuli on YouTube and other social media (Thussu, 2007, pp. 8–9).

Traditional journalism emphasizes objectivity, credibility, and in-depth analysis of events. Its primary goal is to provide citizens with information that enables them to make informed decisions in public and political life. However, with the rise of commercial television and digital platforms, news content has gradually shifted from "hard" news to a blend of information and entertainment (Thussu, 2007). The dynamics of modern news, driven by the need for speed and visual effects, have led to a shift in news form, placing style ahead of content. Unlike traditional news, which seeks to provide context and understanding of events (Thussu, 2007), infotainment is often designed to appeal to audiences accustomed to faster and more dynamic media formats. In this regard, visual elements and presentation styles have become as important, if not more important, than the informational value itself.

Dai and Wang (2023) found that while infotainment formats boost viewer attention, they often result in shallow processing and reduced comprehension, especially among younger audiences. Indrati (2024) observed that infotainment can attract broader audiences through visual appeal and emotion, but frequently sacrifices analytical depth and contextual richness, aligning with Postman's critique. While Holbert (2005) acknowledges that infotainment may increase political interest among disengaged viewers, he also warns of oversimplification and a tendency to prioritize style over substance, again mirroring Postman's fears about the dominance of entertainment logic in news media.

While foundational authors such as Thussu (2007) and Postman (1985) provide important theoretical insights into the relationship between information and entertainment, their perspectives must be reconsidered in light of the contemporary digital media environment. The rise of social media platforms, algorithmic content distribution, and participatory cultures has significantly transformed the ways in which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, particularly among younger audiences. Therefore, infotainment today should not be understood solely through the lens of traditional broadcast media, but rather as part of a broader, hybrid, platform-driven media ecosystem.

NEWS CONSUMPTION TRENDS IN CROATIA: AUDIENCE PREFERENCES AND THE ROLE OF INFOTAINMENT

In the Croatian media system, the coexistence of public service broadcasting and commercially driven television has been widely discussed in terms of its impact on journalistic standards and audience segmentation (Peruško, 2008; Car & Peruško, 2010). Research on media consumption in Croatia suggests a gradual decline in trust in traditional news institutions, particularly among younger audiences, alongside a growing reliance on digital and platform-based sources (Vilović & Car, 2017).

At the same time, studies indicate that commercial broadcasters have been more successful in adapting to changing audience preferences by integrating infotainment elements that increase accessibility and emotional engagement. In the Croatian media context, the transformation of news formats must be understood within the broader post-socialist media development and the coexistence of public service and commercial broadcasters. The public broadcaster Hrvatska radiotelevizija (HRT) has traditionally maintained a more formal, information-oriented approach, while commercial channels such as RTL Hrvatska have introduced more dynamic, audience-oriented formats. This dual structure creates a particularly relevant environment for examining differences in presentation styles

and the role of infotainment in shaping audience preferences. Television news viewership and audience preferences can be tracked through various methods.

Ratings data from agencies such as AGB Nielsen (2024), along with internal statistics from broadcasters like HRT and RTL[1], provide basic insights into audience size and demographic composition. According to Thussu (2007), the style, format, and visual presentation of news content play a significant role in attracting viewers. This connection reinforces the argument that infotainment not only transforms the form of news but also reshapes the habits and preferences of younger generations. Postman (1985) argued that television transforms public discourse into entertainment, potentially reducing its analytical depth. While this perspective remains influential, contemporary studies suggest a more nuanced view, recognizing both the risks and the potential benefits of infotainment formats. According to the *Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2025), Nova TV leads Croatian news viewership with a weekly reach of 49%. HRT follows closely, with 46% of viewers accessing it at least once a week and 36% watching it 3 or more times a week. RTL is just behind HRT, with 43% weekly reach and 30% tuning in at least three times a week. However, HRT performs poorly in the digital sphere, with only 17% of respondents using it online weekly. These trends are particularly significant in the Croatian context, where younger audiences increasingly combine traditional television viewing with digital and social media platforms. As a result, television news is no longer consumed in isolation, but as part of a hybrid media environment in which content is frequently reinterpreted, shared, and commented on across platforms. According to Peruško (2008), the media play an important role in shaping culture and strengthening Croatian civil society.

Humor and sarcasm in news programming have been shown to make information more appealing and easier to digest compared to traditional formats. Boukes et al. (2021) highlight that satire enhances audience engagement, especially on digital platforms where users frequently comment on and share content. However, Holbert (2005) warns that excessive humor can undermine the seriousness of news topics and shift focus from facts to presentation style. Music, similarly, plays a complex role. Brosius (1993) found that while music can be used to emphasize key points, overuse can desensitize viewers. Over time, audiences become "immune" to musical cues, reducing their effectiveness. Therefore, music in news broadcasts should be used strategically and sparingly to support, not overshadow, the content itself.

Overall, research suggests that audiences, particularly younger ones, appreciate entertainment elements in news. However, these elements must be used with caution and balance to preserve the integrity and informative value of journalism.

[1] HRT (Hrvatska radiotelevizija) is the Croatian national public broadcasting organization, responsible for delivering public service television and radio programming, whereas RTL is a private commercial television broadcaster operating within the Croatian media market.

In this context, the concept of presentation styles becomes particularly relevant, as it captures the specific ways in which informational and entertainment elements are combined within news formats. Understanding these stylistic differences is essential for analyzing how audiences perceive and evaluate different types of news content.

MEDIA THEORIES AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO INFOTAINMENT

The following theoretical approaches are particularly relevant to interpreting the relationship between infotainment and audience perception in this study. Media theories provide a valuable framework for understanding the impact of infotainment on audiences, especially younger generations. By exploring these theories, we can better grasp how constant exposure to news that blends information and entertainment shapes people's perceptions of reality.

Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains how media influence what people think about, while concepts like media convergence and fragmentation reveal how modern media adapt content across platforms, amplifying infotainment's role in daily news consumption. Gerbner (1976) argues that long-term exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of reality. Infotainment can strongly influence young audiences by emphasizing spectacular and sensational aspects of social and political events (Indrati, 2024). This focus on visually appealing, emotionally charged stories may distort the audience's understanding of societal priorities, as they tend to pay more attention to sensationalism than to facts (Dai & Wang, 2023). Over time, such exposure can lead to changes in viewers' attitudes and behaviors.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) suggest that media affect what people think about without telling them what to think. Infotainment often prioritizes visually appealing and entertaining topics over their social importance. This influences the priorities and attitudes of younger audiences, who are drawn to dynamic and engaging news formats. Consequently, public discourse priorities become linked to media presentation, potentially shaping political views and everyday decisions (Dai & Wang, 2023).

Media convergence and fragmentation highlight how infotainment is intertwined with the integration of television, online portals, social media, and mobile apps. These platforms offer flexible content tailored to users' preferences and schedules (Thussu, 2007). Fragmentation divides audiences into small, targeted groups based on interests, making it more likely for younger generations to consume fast-paced, visually appealing infotainment rather than traditional news (Thussu, 2007).

This evolving media landscape changes not only how information is consumed but also how it is structured and perceived, increasing infotainment's influence on communication and social life (North, 2014). As Lycarião (2024) notes, platformization contributes to public sphere fragmentation, allowing users to selectively choose content that confirms their preferences, thereby creating "filter bubbles" that hinder shared public discourse. Furthermore, media convergence fosters creativity in news delivery and has significant implications for journalism research and practice (Yang, 2024).

METHODS

Based on the defined research problem, three main research questions guide this study:

- RQ1: How does infotainment influence young people's perception of news? This question examines whether young audiences perceive infotainment as diminishing the seriousness of news or as a format that facilitates the understanding and interpretation of information.
- RQ2: What are young people's preferences regarding news sources and formats? This question focuses on identifying the media platforms young people prefer for news consumption (television, online news portals, and social media) and the formats they find most appealing (short news clips, visual content, and in-depth analysis).
- RQ3: Are younger viewers more inclined to consume infotainment content or traditional news content? This question examines the extent to which younger generations consume and prefer infotainment over traditional news programs, with a specific focus on RTL Direkt and HRT's Dnevnik 3.

To address these research questions, two methods were employed: a survey and a content analysis. The survey was conducted among young adults aged 15 to 30 to capture their opinions, preferences, and media consumption habits. It provided insights into levels of trust in infotainment content, preferred news sources, and expectations of news media. In addition, a content analysis was conducted of RTL Direkt and Dnevnik 3 (HRT) to identify the presence of infotainment elements and highlight differences between the two formats.

The survey questionnaire consisted of four main sections. The first part covered demographic questions; the second, news viewing habits; the third, familiarity with and perceptions of RTL Direkt and Dnevnik 3 HRT; and the fourth, attitudes toward infotainment. A total of 164 responses were collected, including 128 women, 34 men, and 2 respondents who chose not to disclose their gender.

The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed-ended questions, was created using Google Forms, and was distributed online via social media from July 1 to July 30, 2025. The selected time period was chosen for its continuity and representativeness of regular broadcast programming without major external disruptions (e.g., elections or extraordinary events). Participants' anonymity was ensured throughout the process. The sample was obtained through convenience sampling, as the questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms.

This approach introduced a degree of self-selection bias, as participants who were more interested in media content may have been more likely to respond. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to the entire youth population in Croatia. Respondents were not required to watch specific episodes of the analyzed programs prior to completing the survey. Instead, their responses were based on prior familiarity and general perceptions of the programs, which may have influenced the accuracy of their evaluations. To facilitate understanding, key terms such as "informative," "entertaining," and "sensationalistic" were presented in simplified form; however, no formal definitions were provided within the questionnaire. As a result, responses reflect subjective interpretations of these categories. In this study, presentation styles are operationalized through eight observable content categories that reflect infotainment elements, including emotionalization, personalization, visual attractiveness, and entertainment features.

A content analysis of television news programs was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis focused on RTL Direkt and HRT's Dnevnik 3. RTL Direkt was selected due to its blend of information and entertainment, while Dnevnik 3 was chosen as a representative of a traditional news format. The study analyzed 14 episodes in total (7 episodes of RTL Direkt and 7 episodes of Dnevnik 3 HRT) aired between August 1 and August 14, 2025. The selected time period was chosen for its continuity and representativeness of regular broadcast programming, without major external disruptions. A total of 135 news items were examined, with 60 from RTL Direkt and 75 from Dnevnik 3 HRT. Eight specific elements were analyzed within the content of both programs.

The analysis examined whether the news items were designed to evoke emotions, looking for the use of words such as "shocking," "disturbing," or "terrifying," as well as visuals that might provoke feelings like fear or sympathy. It also assessed the depth of the information provided, determining whether the news offered in-depth analysis and background context or simply reported events as they happened. The personalization aspect focused on whether the story centered on a single individual and included statements from ordinary people, witnesses, or passersby, using their stories to clarify the topic further.

Additionally, the analysis considered whether the news content was simplified to make it more accessible and understandable for a broader audience. Visual attractiveness was evaluated by assessing the presence of animations, graphics, and fast or dramatic transitions, as well as whether shots were dynamic or static, and the overall editing style. The presence of entertainment elements was also explored, including background music, informal tone, comparisons, metaphors, and humor. Furthermore, the study identified whether the news items belonged to "soft" news categories such as lifestyle or crime stories, and how much airtime was dedicated to these topics. Lastly, the relevance of each news item was examined in terms of its societal importance, and whether it was presented impartially and objectively, supported by factual evidence. A coding sheet was used to systematically analyze television content, recording data on the type of news, presentation style, duration, and infotainment elements (e.g., visual components, tone, and rhetorical style).

Table 1. Coding Scheme for Content Analysis of News Presentation Styles

Category	Operational definition	Indicators	Coding
Emotionalisation	Presence of emotionally charged language or visuals intended to evoke strong audience reactions	Words such as "shocking", "disturbing", "terrifying", visuals evoking fear, sadness, empathy	0 = absent; 1 = present
Information	Degree to which the news item provides contextualized, in-depth information	Background explanation, expert statements, contextual data, analytical framing	0 = absent; 1 = present
Personalization	Focus on individual actors rather than broader structural issues	Interviews with citizens, eyewitness accounts, human-interest framing	0 = absent; 1 = present
Simplification of topics	Reduction of complexity to make content more accessible	Lack of detailed explanation, simplified narratives, generalizations	0 = absent; 1 = present
Visual attractiveness	Use of visually engaging production elements	Dynamic editing, animations, graphics, camera movement, visual effects	0 = absent; 1 = present
Entertainment elements	Inclusion of features primarily aimed at audience engagement and enjoyment	Humor, sarcasm, informal tone, background music, metaphors, comparisons	0 = absent; 1 = present
Soft news	Focus on less socially critical or lifestyle-oriented topics	Crime, lifestyle, entertainment, human-interest stories	0 = absent; 1 = present
Relevance	Degree of societal importance and informational value	Political, economic, or socially significant issues presented with factual grounding	0 = absent; 1 = present

Source: Own elaboration

The coding process was conducted by a single researcher. Given the exploratory nature of the study, intercoder reliability was not formally tested, which

represents a limitation of the research. However, coding categories were clearly defined prior to analysis to ensure consistency.

Table 2. Quantitative Comparison of Content Features: RTL Direkt and Dnevnik 3 HRT

Elements	RTL	HRT
Emotional Expression	35	41
Information	18	21
Personalization	31	29
Simplification of Topics	42	46
Visual Attractiveness	42	14
Entertainment	34	6
"Soft" News	7	2
Relevance	30	45

Source: Own elaboration

Each category was operationalized using binary coding (presence/absence), based on predefined indicators. For instance, "emotionalization" was coded when emotionally charged language or imagery was present, while "visual attractiveness" was identified through the use of dynamic editing, graphics, or visual effects. The results suggest the presence of two distinct editorial approaches. Dnevnik 3 HRT affirms its status as a traditional, serious news program that focuses on in-depth analysis, objectivity, and social relevance, with a strong emphasis on politics, security, and social issues.

Visual elements and entertainment segments are used sparingly, primarily to support serious content. This aligns with agenda-setting theory, which suggests media influence public perception by prioritizing certain topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Visual and entertainment elements are sparingly used to support serious reporting. On the other hand, RTL Direkt strikes a balance between information and entertainment, emphasizing visual appeal, entertaining elements, and humor and sarcasm to maintain the attention of a younger audience. Simplification of topics and personalization are more prominent, which can help make the news more accessible to a broader audience but may affect perceptions of the content's seriousness and objectivity. This reflects current media trends toward infotainment, balancing news delivery with audience retention (Esquen & Palomino-Flores, 2024). While this approach may increase accessibility, it also raises questions about the impact on perceived news seriousness and objectivity. This analysis indicates the potential role of infotainment in contemporary media as a tool for capturing audience attention, especially among younger viewers, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of traditional, deeper, and objective journalism that provides socially relevant information.

RESULTS

SURVEY

The research sample consisted of 164 respondents, with a strong representation of younger individuals. As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of participants (70.1%) were aged 19 to 24, while 12.8% were aged 25 to 30. Only 2.4% of respondents were aged 15 to 18, and 14.6% were aged 30 or older. This age distribution indicates a clear focus on young adults, particularly those in late adolescence and early adulthood.

Table 3. Distribution of participants by age group

Age group	N	%
15–18 years	4	2.4
19–24 years	115	70.1
25–30 years	21	12.8
Over 30	24	14.6
Total	164	100.0

Source: Own elaboration

Regarding gender distribution, the sample was predominantly female, with 78.0% of respondents identifying as female and 20.7% as male. A small portion identified as "Other" or chose not to disclose their gender. This gender imbalance should be taken into account when interpreting results related to gender-specific perceptions or behaviors. As for educational attainment, the majority of respondents had completed high school (68.3%), while 31.7% held a college or university degree. There were no participants with only primary education or no formal education. This indicates a sample that is generally well educated, which may influence their media consumption habits and their critical engagement with infotainment content.

Table 4. Distribution of participants by level of education

Education level	N	%
Primary school	0	0.0
High school	112	68.3
College / University degree	52	31.7
Total	164	100.0

Source: Own elaboration

The data on occupational status reveal that the majority of participants were university students (62.2%), followed by employed individuals (34.1%). Only a small number of respondents were unemployed (1.8%), high school pupils (1.2%), or retired (0.6%). This distribution is consistent with the age structure of the sample, suggesting a dominant representation of individuals in higher education or early-career stages. The occupational profile further supports the study's focus on young adults as a key demographic in analyzing media consumption and infotainment preferences. The results indicate that TV news consumption among young people is generally low to moderate. Only 14% of respondents reported watching TV news on a daily basis, while 17.7% tuned in several times a week. The largest portion of participants (31.7%) watch occasionally, and another 29.3% said they watch rarely. Notably, 7.3% of respondents reported never watching TV news. These findings suggest that traditional television news may not be the primary source of information for a majority of young viewers, which is consistent with global trends indicating a shift toward digital and on-demand content consumption. The relatively low daily engagement highlights the importance of understanding which formats and presentation styles may better capture this demographic's attention.

Table 5. Distribution of responses by news source

The News Sources	N	%
Newspaper	7	4,3
Online News Portals	83	50,6
Radio	31	18,9
Social media	141	86
Television	90	54,9

Source: Own elaboration. Note: The total exceeds 100% because multiple responses were allowed

Table 5 provides an overview of respondents' preferred news sources. Although television is not the primary news source for most respondents, more than half still report consuming it to some extent. This suggests that television remains a relevant, though not dominant, component of the broader media environment among young audiences. Social media platforms are the most frequently cited, with 141 respondents (86%) indicating them as their primary source of information. In comparison, newspapers are the least utilized, mentioned by only 7 respondents (4.3%). Online news portals are used by 83 respondents (50.6%), while television remains a significant source, with 90 respondents (54.9%) reporting its use. Radio is cited by 31 respondents (18.9%) as a news source. These findings suggest a clear shift toward digital and interactive platforms among the surveyed population.

Table 6. Comparison of Respondents Who Watch RTL and HRT Programs

%	Yes	No
HRT	38.4	61.6
RTL	89.7	10.3

Source: Own elaboration

Table 6 presents the comparison of respondents' viewing habits for RTL and HRT programs. The results indicate that a significantly higher percentage of respondents watch RTL programs (89.7%) compared to HRT programs (38.4%). Conversely, 61.6% of respondents reported not watching HRT programs, while only 10.3% reported not watching RTL programs. These findings suggest that RTL programs have a considerably larger viewership among the surveyed population compared to HRT programs.

Table 7. Perception of the Program's Style

%	Entertaining	Dynamic	Superficial	Informative	Sensationalistic	Dry	Boring
RTL	45.1	51.2	14.6	56.7	20.1	3	12.2
HRT	0	1.8	5.5	59.1	1.8	22	42.7

Source: Own elaboration. Note: The total exceeds 100% because multiple responses were allowed

The results presented in Table 7 demonstrate notable differences in how respondents perceive the style of the two evening news programs RTL Direkt and Dnevnik 3 (HRT). RTL Direkt is predominantly perceived by respondents as Dynamic (51.2%) and Entertaining (45.1%). These findings suggest that RTL Direkt combines informative content with a lively, engaging presentation style, which may appeal more strongly to a younger audience. On the other hand, Dnevnik 3 (HRT) is most frequently perceived as Dry (22%) and Boring (42.7%). These perceptions indicate that while the program fulfills its informational function, its traditional and formal presentation style may be less appealing to younger viewers. The comparative analysis may indicate that RTL Direkt is perceived as both informative and engaging, which likely contributes to its appeal among younger audiences. In contrast, Dnevnik 3 (HRT), while also seen as informative, is characterized as less dynamic and more monotonous. These distinctions in perceived style could significantly impact viewing preferences and habits among the younger demographic.

The study's findings indicate that RTL Direkt's program incorporates a higher degree of emotionalization and entertainment elements than HRT's Dnevnik 3. Specifically, 36% of respondents associated RTL with emotional storytelling, and 51.2% noted the presence of entertainment components. This aligns with Brosius's (1993)

assertion that emotional content in television news significantly affects audience engagement and perception.

Table 8. The content elements associated with RTL Direkt and Dnevnik 3 (HRT)

Content elements	RTL (%)	HRT (%)
Emotionalisation	36	11
Information	32.3	53.7
Personalisation	32.3	6.7
Simplification of Topics	45.1	7.9
Visual Atracctivness	30.5	7.3
Entertainment elements	51.2	1.2
Soft News	16.5	8.5
Relevance	17.7	45.7

Source: Own elaboration. Note: The total exceeds 100% because multiple responses were allowed

Moreover, the inclusion of humor, satire, and informal presentation styles in RTL's format supports Holbert's (2005) typology, which emphasizes the blending of entertainment and political information in infotainment. The data also show that RTL programming is characterized by topic simplification (45.1%) and personalization (32.3%), which aligns with Savolainen's (2022) conceptualization of infotainment as a hybrid format that prioritizes accessible, relatable content to attract viewers. Boukes et al. (2021) further argue that such personalized, simplified news content fosters greater audience interactivity, as reflected in higher viewing rates for RTL (89.7%) than for HRT (38.4%).

On the other hand, HRT's Dnevnik 3 was perceived as more informative (53.7%) and relevant (45.7%), with a lower presence of entertainment elements (1.2%) and emotionalization (11%). This supports Lycarião's (2024) findings on the fragmentation of the public sphere, where traditional news formats maintain a focus on factual reporting and contextual depth, appealing to audiences seeking more in-depth information. The lower percentages of visual attractiveness and simplification also align with North's (2014) analysis of "hard news" as less sensational and more focused on objective reporting, often associated with traditional news outlets.

Finally, the higher reliance on social media and portals as news sources (86% and 50.6% respectively) noted in the survey suggests an audience shift towards formats that combine entertainment with information delivery, which Dai and Wang (2023) found to enhance viewer attention and engagement in online video infotainment content.

When comparing the content analysis results (Table 1) with the survey findings (Table 7), several key observations emerge. While the content analysis shows that HRT features more news stories that evoke emotions, survey respondents associate RTL with a higher degree of emotionalization (36%) than HRT (11%). This suggests that although HRT includes more emotionally charged stories, RTL's emotional presentation has a stronger, more memorable impact on the audience. Both the content analysis and the survey agree that HRT provides more in-depth and socially relevant information. Survey data further highlight that the audience perceives HRT as significantly more informative, whereas RTL is seen as offering less in-depth content. Regarding personalization, the content analysis finds that both programs use it to a similar extent, but survey respondents perceive RTL as much more personalized.

This discrepancy may be explained by RTL's use of humor and a casual tone, which likely enhances the impression of personalization. The content analysis reveals a similar level of topic simplification in both programs, yet the survey indicates that the audience perceives RTL's news as much more simplified. This may be due to RTL's stronger incorporation of humor and entertainment, which contribute to this perception. Both datasets clearly show that RTL employs significantly more visual elements than HRT, which is strongly reflected in audience perceptions.

The content analysis and survey both confirm that RTL contains substantially more entertainment elements than HRT, with the audience recognizing this difference even more strongly. While the content analysis shows a smaller difference in the amount of "soft" news between the two, the survey suggests that RTL is perceived as a substantially larger source of "soft" news. Finally, both the content analysis and survey data indicate that HRT broadcasts significantly more relevant and socially important news than RTL. In summary, comparing content analysis results with survey responses reveals interesting contrasts between editorial practices and audience perceptions, highlighting how different presentation styles influence viewer experience and interpretation.

Table 9. Elements that increases the desire to watch the program

The desire to watch the program increases:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
Infotainment	3%	4.3%	25%	36%	31.7%	3.89	1.00
A professional tone of the host	9.1%	19.5%	28 %	25 %	18.3 %	3.24	1.22
Inclusion of humorous comments	1.8%	3.7%	18.9%	38.4%	37.2%	4.05	0.93
Dynamic and dramatic music	7.3%	9.1%	36.6%	32.3%	14.6%	3.38	1.07

Source: Own elaboration

The results shown in Table 9 indicate different levels of influence of individual content and presentation elements of television shows on the respondents' desire to watch them. Humorous comments were most positively rated by respondents, with an average rating of 4.05 and the lowest standard deviation (SD = 0.93), indicating a high degree of agreement and relative homogeneity of responses. Almost 76% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that humor increases their desire to watch the show. This suggests that humor and an informal approach are important motivational factors for younger audiences.

Infotainment also shows a positive influence with an average rating of 3.89. More than 67% of respondents agree (36%) or strongly agree (31.7%) that this format increases their motivation to watch. This confirms that the combination of information and entertainment stimulates young people's interest in informative content, consistent with theoretical assumptions about the popularity of infotainment among younger demographic groups. Although dynamic music received a slightly lower average rating (3.38), nearly half of the respondents still showed a positive tendency towards it. The relatively high standard deviation (SD = 1.07) indicates diversity of opinion within the sample, suggesting that music has a subjective effect: for some, it enhances the experience and interest, while others may perceive it as overbearing or inappropriate in the context of informative programs.

The professional and serious tone of the presenter records the lowest average score (3.24) and the highest standard deviation (SD = 1.22), indicating the highest disagreement among respondents. Only 43.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that a serious tone increases their desire to watch. In contrast, almost 29% of respondents disagreed with this statement. These results suggest that traditional, formal presentation styles resonate less with younger audiences, who clearly prefer a more relaxed, personalized approach. Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The sample is not representative, with a strong overrepresentation of female respondents and students.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data and subjective perceptions may affect the reliability of the findings. The content analysis was conducted on a limited number of episodes within a specific timeframe, which may not fully capture the overall editorial strategies of the analyzed programs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how infotainment elements shape the perception and consumption of television news among younger audiences by comparing two Croatian programs: *RTL Direkt*, an infotainment-oriented format, and Dnevnik 3 HRT, a traditional, formal news program. These findings demonstrate how

presentation styles, operationalized through infotainment-related elements, systematically shape audience perception across both programs.

Using a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis and survey data, the findings reveal several important patterns that contribute to the understanding of contemporary news consumption and align with established theoretical frameworks. The content analysis indicated that *Dnevnik 3 HRT* contained a slightly higher number of emotionally charged news items (41) than RTL (35). However, survey respondents predominantly associated *RTL Direkt* with emotionalization (36%), while only 11% associated HRT with the same characteristic. This discrepancy suggests a distinction between the presence of emotional content and its perceived impact. As Brosius (1993) argues, audience perception is shaped not merely by the presence of emotional elements but by how they are framed and presented. RTL's use of dynamic visuals, sensational language, and dramatic music likely intensifies emotional resonance, making such content more salient to viewers, even when it is not more frequent. This supports the notion that form is as influential as content in shaping audience perception, consistent with Holbert's (2005) argument that infotainment enhances engagement through emotional storytelling. Accordingly, even when traditional news includes emotional reporting, infotainment formats amplify its visibility through stylistic framing, thereby boosting audience recall.

Both the content analysis and survey findings indicate that *Dnevnik 3 HRT* is perceived as delivering more in-depth and socially relevant information. In the content analysis, HRT scored higher on information depth (21 vs. RTL's 18) and relevance (45 vs. 30). Survey respondents confirmed this pattern, rating HRT significantly higher on informativeness (53.7%) and societal relevance (45.7%). These findings are consistent with previous research (North, 2014; Lycarião, 2024), which emphasizes the continued importance of traditional news outlets in sustaining democratic discourse through factual, contextualized, and analytically rich reporting.

However, this informational strength appears to come at the expense of reduced engagement among younger audiences, who increasingly prefer shorter, visually dynamic, and emotionally engaging formats, as reflected in RTL's substantially higher viewing rates (89.7% compared to HRT's 38.4%). *RTL Direkt* was also perceived more strongly in terms of personalization (32.3%) and content simplification (45.1%), despite the content analysis showing relatively similar levels of personalization in both programs. This suggests that RTL's stylistic choices, particularly its informal tone, anecdotal storytelling, and use of humor, amplify the perception of personalization. This aligns with Savolainen's (2022) argument that infotainment prioritizes accessibility and relatability over analytical depth.

Similarly, although both programs demonstrated comparable levels of topic simplification in the content analysis, survey respondents perceived RTL

as significantly more simplified. This perception is likely reinforced by humor, informal language, and narrative compression, which make complex issues appear more accessible. These findings are consistent with Boukes et al. (2021), who argue that personalized and simplified formats increase audience engagement, particularly in fragmented digital media environments.

Both datasets also confirm that RTL Direkt relies substantially more on visual and entertainment elements (visual attractiveness: 42 vs. 14; entertainment: 34 vs. 6). This difference is even more pronounced in audience perception, with 51.2% of respondents associating RTL with entertainment, compared to only 1.2% for HRT. The structured segments in RTL, which often incorporate satire and humor, reflect findings by Dai and Wang (2023) regarding infotainment's effectiveness in sustaining attention in digital video environments. In this context, humor, music, and sarcasm function not merely as stylistic additions but as strategic tools for maintaining engagement and managing emotional response in an increasingly saturated media environment.

Although both programs include "soft news," their editorial priorities differ significantly. HRT remains primarily focused on "hard news" topics such as politics, security, and economics, while RTL incorporates a higher proportion of lifestyle and entertainment content (7 vs. 2 soft news items). Survey findings reinforce this distinction: 16.5% of respondents associate RTL with soft news, compared to 8.5% for HRT. This aligns with Holbert (2005) and Boukes et al. (2021), who conceptualize infotainment as a hybrid genre that blends informational and entertainment logics to broaden audience appeal.

However, it also raises concerns regarding the potential displacement of public-interest journalism if audiences increasingly prioritize entertainment value over informational depth. The survey further indicates a strong preference for digital news sources among young people: 86% report using social media, and 50.6% rely on online news portals. This reflects a broader structural shift in news consumption and supports Dai and Wang's (2023) argument that infotainment is particularly effective in digital environments characterized by brevity, interactivity, and emotional appeal. RTL's format, which closely mirrors social media aesthetics, appears especially well-adapted to these evolving consumption habits.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. The sample is not fully representative of the broader population, with a strong overrepresentation of female respondents and students. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported perceptions rather than controlled exposure limits the ability to directly link program content to audience interpretation. Respondents were not required to watch specific episodes prior to participation, meaning that responses reflect general impressions rather than experimentally standardized viewing conditions. Finally, the content analysis was conducted on a limited number of episodes within a short time frame, which may not fully capture

longer-term editorial patterns. Based on the combined findings, the study offers indicative answers to the three research questions, revealing consistent patterns in how younger audiences engage with different news formats. Specifically, (1) tThe findings suggest that infotainment significantly shapes audience perceptions, particularly by enhancing emotional engagement, perceived clarity, and overall appeal; (2) The results indicate a clear preference for commercial, infotainment-oriented formats, with 89.7% of respondents reporting viewership of *RTL Direkt*, compared to 38.4% for *Dnevnik 3 HRT*; (3) The findings suggest a stronger inclination toward infotainment-based content. Both datasets indicate that *RTL Direkt*'s use of visuals, humor, dramatization, and personalized storytelling resonates more strongly with younger audiences than the formal and fact-driven approach of HRT.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on infotainment by providing empirical evidence from the Croatian media context. The findings demonstrate that infotainment strategies, such as emotional storytelling, personalization, visual enhancement, and humor, function not merely as stylistic devices but as meaningful mechanisms that shape audience perception and engagement, particularly among younger viewers. At the same time, the study highlights the continued relevance of traditional journalism, as represented by HRT, in delivering factual, contextualized, and socially significant information. These findings suggest that a balanced media environment may be more effective than a strictly polarized one, combining informational depth with engaging presentation to sustain both attention and democratic value.

The study also identifies several underexplored dynamics within the Croatian media landscape. One key insight is that perceived emotionalization and infotainment style exert a stronger influence on audience interpretation than the actual frequency of such elements in the content. In other words, how news is presented appears to matter more than how often specific stylistic features occur. Within the Croatian context, this is particularly relevant given the coexistence of public service and commercial broadcasters, which operate under distinct editorial logics. Comparing these two models provides a clearer understanding of how global infotainment trends are locally adapted within a small media system.

Finally, the research points to a broader generational shift toward infotainment-oriented consumption patterns, even when audiences recognize traditional journalism as more informative and socially relevant. The strong preference for *RTL Direkt* (89.7%), despite acknowledged informational advantages of *Dnevnik 3 HRT*, illustrates a clear paradox in contemporary media consumption: perceived quality and actual preference do not always align. This suggests that the experiential dimension of news – how it feels, sounds, and appears – may, in some cases, outweigh its informational depth in shaping audience behavior.

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The Role of Listening-based Government Communication in Developing Collaborative Governance: A Case Study in the Basque Country

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Abstract: This study introduces a novel link between organizational listening and collaborative governance, reframing government communication as a dynamic driver of democratic engagement. Using an in-depth case study in the Basque Country (Spain), it investigates how structured listening practices within government organizations can foster more effective collaboration with citizens. Thematic analysis of qualitative data from policymakers reveals that active participation in collaborative governance transforms how officials interpret and respond to public feedback, bridging the gap between institutional and citizen perspectives. The research highlights how a shared commitment to listening not only enhances mutual understanding but also encourages adaptive, joint policy development. By situating this inquiry within a real-world collaborative governance initiative, the manuscript offers actionable insights for policymakers aiming to embed meaningful listening at the core of democratic decision-making processes.

Keywords: Government communication; Public sector communication; Collaborative governance; Listening; Organizational listening.

INTRODUCTION

Faced with what many researchers refer to as a "democratic deficit" (Norris, 2011) and even a "crisis of democracy" (Przeworski, 2019; Van der Meer, 2017) caused by low public trust in government, polarization, and the continuing marginalization of many groups (Garland, 2021; Uslaner, 2018), progressive democratic governments are looking for ways in which to rebuild trust, maintain legitimacy, and foster social equity. Collaborative governance has emerged as an approach in the face of such democratic challenges (Emerson et al., 2012; Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Christensen, 2024), and is defined as:

> "A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets." (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544)

While engagement with stakeholders and citizens is a fundamental tenet of how democratic governments function in an effective *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989), and deliberation has been widely advocated to achieve informed public input, collaborative governance formalizes identification by a "sponsor" (e.g., a civic organization, agency, or foundation) of problems to be fixed or issues to be addressed.

Consequently, collaborative governance is grounded in and dependent on communication between government and a range of non-state actors. Specifically, this involves what is referred to and studied as *public communication* (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021; Rice & Atkin, 2013), *government communication* (Howlett, 2009; Sanders & Canel, 2013), and *public sector communication* (Delli Carpini, 2020; Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

Furthermore, this study is informed by the growing body of literature on *organizational listening (Dobson, 2014; Macnamara, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2024), given that key components of communication, such as engagement and dialogue,* are meaningless without listening. As Michael Delli Carpini says in relation to public sector communication:

> "Public sector communications become more democratic as citizens move from passive givers and receivers of information to active and authoritative participants in the selection of public issues to address, the debate over and selection of solutions to public problems, the implementation of chosen solutions, and the assessment and reconsideration of these solutions." (Delli Carpini, 2020, p. 41)

For citizens to become active and authoritative participants in a democratic public sphere as described by Delli Carpini, there need to be "institutional structures that allow citizens to be information producers" (Delli Carpini, 2020, p. 33) and for their voices to be listened to openly, inclusively, ethically, and effectively (Macnamara, 2016, 2019, 2024).

This study examines one such institutional structure. While many recent studies have theorized the adoption of an "architecture of listening" (Macnamara, 2013, 2024, pp. 234–257) in engagements between organizations and the public, only a few have explored the practices of organizational listening and the extent to which they can contribute to collaborative governance leading to positive social and political change.

This research taps into that vacuum and explores a novel connection between collaborative governance and listening-based communication. It does so by presenting a qualitative case study focused on the Basque Country. The study was possible because a public authority within the provincial government of Gipuzkoa (the capital of which is San Sebastian in Northern Spain) decided to undertake a systematic process of listening to society to improve how it was implementing a collaborative governance program to engage stakeholders in policymaking. Etorkizuna Eraikiz ("building our future" in Basque) is a pioneering initiative designed to foster collaborative governance through participatory and listening-based communication strategies. Its context arises from a regional commitment to democratic innovation, where public institutions actively engage citizens, stakeholders, and experts in shaping policy directions. The project's background is rooted in the recognition that traditional top-down governance models often fail to capture diverse perspectives and build trust (Barandiarán, Murphy, & Canel, 2022; Barandiarán, Canel, & Bouckaert, 2023); instead, Etorkizuna Eraikiz seeks to bridge this gap by creating platforms for open dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. This provided a great opportunity to explore what really happens when policymakers put into practice normative assumptions about listening.

This research addresses the following research question: *What ways do policymakers' experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices, and what role does this listening-based communication play in developing collaborative governance*?

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the theoretical framework outlines the concepts of collaborative governance and organizational listening. Second, the context is presented, followed by the methodology. Based on the findings of the case study analysis, the discussion section highlights the key implications for the theory and practice of organizational listening in public sector organizations.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Interactions between public and private organizations are inherent to the concept and practice of collaborative governance. In this regard, Sirianni (2010) defines collaborative governance as the context in which public administrators interact with society as a whole to stimulate collective deliberation processes to identify priorities and develop lines of action to address a range of situations, based on the inherent strengths of communities and individuals.

Key features of collaborative governance found in a number of different sources (Barandiaran et al., 2023) make it possible to connect this concept with communication research and practice: collaborative governance entails a public body directly engaging non-state stakeholders in a formal, consensual, deliberative, collective decision-making process, involving new governance structures and transcending the boundaries of levels of government, and the public, private, and civic spheres, in order to achieve common goals and carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished. As a preliminary point, communication is needed to articulate interactions among the different actors involved, to elicit shared meanings in defining problems and solutions, and to define common goals.

ORGANIZATIONAL LISTENING

While interpersonal listening has long been studied across disciplines, organizational listening beyond dyadic communication has received systematic attention only in recent years (Barbour, 2017; Dobson, 2014; Lewis, 2020; Macnamara, 2013, 2019, 2024). Research has repeatedly shown that public sector organizations struggle to listen effectively, particularly to disadvantaged or critical voices, often prioritizing information dissemination or strategic persuasion over engagement (Dreher, 2009; Macnamara, 2017). Despite a growing normative literature on organizational listening, empirical studies examining how listening is practiced, learned, and embedded within public institutions remain limited.

This study examined listening practices through a major case study that placed society at the core of public policy via collaborative governance, in which government, communities, and the private sector work together to develop policies (Barandiaran et al., 2023). This research draws upon Macnamara's work on listening and from a number of other studies in this emerging field, including those carried out by Canel et al. (2022), Kang and Moon (2023), Lewis (2020), Qin and Men (2021), Reinikainen et al. (2020), and Yip and Fisher (2022). It uses Macnamara's definition of organizational listening as:

> "… the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policymakers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider, and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means." (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5191)

This research also uses Macnamara's "Seven Canons of Listening": (1) *recognizing* others' right to speak; (2) *acknowledging* what others say; (3) *paying attention* to what others say; (4) *interpreting* what others say fairly; (5) *understanding* others' perspectives; (6) *considering* what others say, and (7) *responding* in an appropriate way (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 41–43). Macnamara noted that response does not necessarily involve agreement but must include consideration and some form of response.

Finally, in examining organizational listening practices, this study also draws on the eight elements of Macnamara's *architecture of listening,* in which he stressed that organizational listening needs to be designed into an organization, starting with (1) a *culture* that is open to listening and (2) avoiding the *politics of listening,* which leads to selective listening. With these in place, organizations need to (3) develop *policies* for listening, (4) *systems* for listening such as structures and processes, supported by (5) *technologies* for listening, (6) *resources* for listening with (7) *skills* for listening at scale and through mediated means, and finally (8) *articulation* of what is learned to senior decision makers and policymakers (Macnamara, 2016, pp. 247–273; Macnamara, 2024, p. 256).

LISTENING AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

There is extensive literature relating listening to the enhancement of democracies, and, more specifically, to deliberative theories that regard listening as a condition of deliberative democracy (see, for instance, Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017). Moreover, studies on public leadership (Ospina, 2016; Crosby & Bryson, 2017) highlight the normative idea that public leaders should develop listening skills for building common spaces in which to respond to citizens' demands. Democracy means paying attention (Bellah et al., 1991, p. 254), and hence developing democracy entails engaging in active listening and deliberation that involve diverse, representative actors in a participatory process.

Delving deeper into the relationship between listening and collaborative governance reveals three major points of connection. Firstly, listening facilitates co-creation, and co-creation is at the heart of collaborative governance: it opens the conversation to collaboration. Secondly, public sector organizations have

a responsibility to represent and act in accordance with public opinion, and "to do so requires active attentive listening" (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5184). Finally, listening is also important for engaging citizens in the deliberation processes that underpin collaborative governance (Dobson, 2014; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017), as the actors involved need to move beyond the passive role of being recipients of information and merely making sense of data. Listening for collaborative governance may require creating spaces with communication geared towards fostering dense interactions and relationships from which shared meanings about problems and solutions emerge.

THE CASE: THE *ETORKIZUNA ERAIKIZ* COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PROGRAM

The Basque Country, and Gipuzkoa in particular, possesses a distinctive political and institutional landscape within Spain that is crucial to understanding the development and impact of initiatives like *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. The Basque Autonomous Community enjoys a high degree of self-government, enshrined in the Statute of Autonomy of 1979, which grants extensive legislative, fiscal, and executive powers to its institutions. The Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa) operates as a central actor within this system, holding significant authority over areas such as taxation, social policy, and economic development. This unique arrangement, rooted in the historical "fueros" (local laws and privileges) and reinforced by strong regional identity and traditions of participatory governance, fosters a political culture that emphasizes collaboration, consensus-building, and civic engagement. In Gipuzkoa, the interplay between local institutions and an active civil society has historically enabled innovative approaches to governance, paving the way for experimental and inclusive projects like *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*. This context not only shapes the program's ambition for collaborative policy-making but also underpins its legitimacy and capacity to mobilize diverse stakeholders, making the Gipuzkoa setting particularly fertile ground for pioneering models of open and deliberative governance.

The collaborative governance program *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* consisted of several projects in which public authorities and citizens, represented by business, societal, educational, and civic organizations, engaged in listening and experimentation sessions to define both the province's agenda and the implementation of solutions to public problems.

The project was officially launched in May 2016 and, since its inception, has involved more than 1,400 organizations with 68,000 beneficiaries. By 2023, a total of 150 experiments had been funded, from which 11 strategies and reference centers

were established with their own structures and dynamics, involving actors from different sectors of society, with a focus on critical areas such as cybersecurity, mobility, climate change, and aging. Direct communication and participation channels were also established with the public (open and cross-border budgets), along with a 'think tank' in which societal organizations representative of the public policy ecosystems were involved. This 'think tank' served as a space for reflection and debate on the threats, challenges, and solutions facing Gipuzkoa, and its work had real implications for policymaking (Barandiarán et al., 2023).

Analysis of this government program showed that developing collaborative governance entails significant changes to governance structures and procedures (Canel, Luoma-aho, & Barandiarán, 2020). In terms of communication, research has shown that developing collaborative governance leads public authorities to interact more frequently with stakeholders, transforming an initial 'selling' approach to communication into a 'listening' and learning approach. Therefore, the role of communication within a collaborative governance program became more about inviting people to act together and take joint action than about one-way communication. This led the researchers to conclude that collaborative governance is, in itself, communication (Muñoa, 2023), and if so, the development and implementation of governmental programs of collaborative governance require specific listening organizational structures, tools, and attitudes.

The assumption underlying this research is that collaborative governance involves building relationships at the heart of management, and relationships cannot be built without listening-based communication (Canel et al., 2022). This article explores and reports on a systematic listening process conducted with policymakers to improve their listening skills and better develop a collaborative governance program. The listening process was put in place throughout the government's term of office between May 2019 and May 2023, and researchers collected data to track the evolution of policymakers' attitudes towards and reflections on listening.

METHODOLOGY APPROACH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This manuscript adopts a case study methodology to explore the dynamics of collaborative governance and listeningbased communication within the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* initiative in the Basque Country. The case study approach is well-suited to examining complex, contextdependent phenomena; it enables theory development, refinement, or extension through close engagement with empirical reality; and allows for indepth analysis of processes, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with a specific reality (Merrian, 1988), in this case, a regional project. By centering the research on *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* as an illustrative case,

the study generates nuanced insights into how participatory practices and the institutionalization of listening contribute to democratic innovation.

The methodological design was guided by principles of case study research, emphasizing both the depth and transferability of insights. Findings from Etorkizuna Eraikiz are discussed in relation to their theoretical and practical implications for collaborative governance, with attention to the potential lessons for similar initiatives in other contexts. This methodological framing ensures that the study not only advances understanding of the phenomenon under investigation but also offers actionable knowledge for practitioners and policymakers.

Among its unique features, Etorkizuna Eraikiz stands out for institutionalizing listening practices within its participatory mechanisms—such as deliberative forums and collaborative workshops—where participants' voices are systematically integrated into decision-making processes. This approach exemplifies listening-based communication as central to collaborative governance, enabling mutual understanding, co-creation of solutions, and shared ownership of outcomes. As an exemplary case, Etorkizuna Eraikiz illustrates how attentive communication can transform institutional relationships and foster more inclusive, responsive governance models, offering valuable lessons for similar initiatives worldwide.

This research explores a novel connection between communication and collaborative governance, and is guided by the following research question: *What ways do policymakers' experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices, and what do these practices tell about the role of listening-based communication in developing collaborative governance*?

To help policymakers develop listening skills and promote a culture of listening that includes the "Seven Canons of Listening" (Macnamara, 2016, 2024), a listening process was devised that involved collaborative reflection on feedback from society. The listening process was introduced during the 2019–2023 term of government and consisted of six sessions that ran from March 2021 to February 2023. For each session:

a) Prior to the face-to-face meeting, policymakers were surveyed about what they thought citizens' responses had been in relation to various issues regarding social trends and behaviors that relate to public policies. These public opinion data were taken from the *Sociómetro*, an entity attached to the Provincial Council that regularly collects feedback from citizens.
b) At the face-to-face meeting, data were presented on the differences between the responses that policymakers assume citizens will give and citizens' actual responses.
c) At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to provide qualitative responses to questions aimed at triggering reflections on the concept, practice, purpose, and contribution of listening for policy-making.

Therefore, the data for analysis include:

1. Quantitative data comparing citizens' responses on certain social issues (such as the consequences of the pandemic and public and social policies) and public sector organizations (their performance and trust in them), and policymakers' assumptions about citizens' responses. Citizens' response data were collected by the *Sociometro* (N=1,200 citizens from Gipuzkoa via telephone). For policymakers' responses, a specific sheet was sent to participants, including selected items from the citizens' survey, and they were asked what they thought citizens had responded to (N=18; the panel ran for 6 sessions). We are aware that this N for policymakers was insufficient for a consistent quantitative analysis, and, in this regard, we want to stress that these data were used merely to show policymakers the gap between their responses and citizens' responses and to subsequently trigger discussion and reflection.
2. Qualitative data, including reflective responses to questions from two questionnaires. The first questionnaire looked at the gap between policymakers' responses and citizens' responses with questions such as:

    - What surprised you and why?
    - What do these data tell you about civil society?
    - What do these data tell you about you as a politician/policymaker?

Participants discussed responses to these questions in groups.

The second questionnaire was distributed at the end of the session to collect data on what policymakers had learned from the session and the listening process, focusing on the concept, practice, purpose, and contribution of listening to policymaking. Questions included:

- What do you know today about civil society that you did not know before?
- Are you able to identify the implications of what you learned today as part of your work as a policymaker?
- Why is it important for you to collect feedback from citizens?
- What is the hardest thing for you to make sense of in the citizens' feedback data?
- What value do you place on the opinion of Gipuzkoan citizens to help you do your job better and why?
- To what extent is this listening process helping you learn more about citizens?

It was decided to bring an emic perspective to the fore by making use of grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Therefore, the core of the data was the qualitative responses given by participants when trying to make sense of feedback from society about public issues and policies. These qualitative data were thematically analyzed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data", and despite the wide discussion on its strengths and weaknesses (Braun & Clarke, 2006), there is agreement that it is a useful method for qualitative analysis of diverse data. Thematic analysis is not 'wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) criteria for high-quality thematic analysis—and drawing on concrete applications such as Fay (2011)—we undertook the following steps. First, the data were read and reread to conduct open coding of participants' responses. Recurring patterns in the data were used to identify themes. Finally, axial coding was applied to explore connections between categories and to merge those with overlapping conceptual content.

FINDINGS

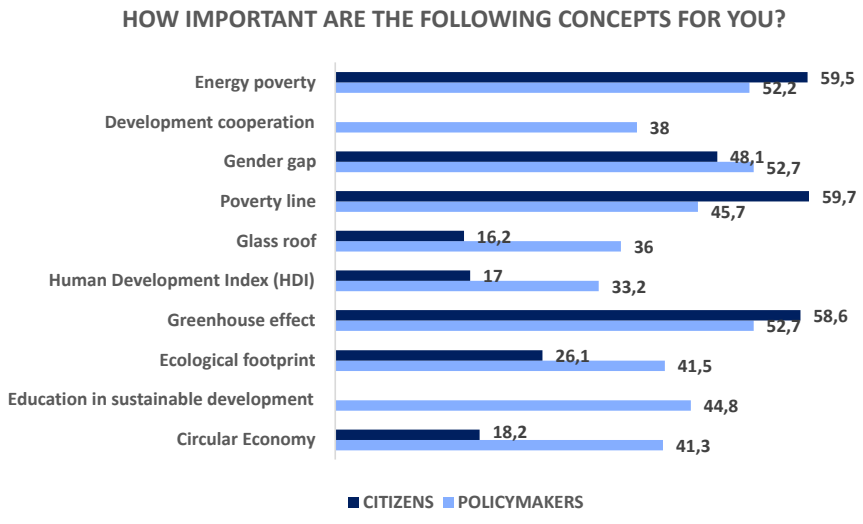
The presentation of findings has been arranged in line with the logic of the data collection. Firstly, certain quantitative data are included to illustrate the gap that emerged from comparing policymakers' and citizens' responses. As mentioned earlier, these data are being reported to show what informed participants' qualitative reflections, based on the understanding that the goal of this research is not to gauge the size of the gap, but to explore policymakers' attitudes towards it. After introducing the gap, the findings evidenced in the qualitative data representing policy makers' reflections –the core of this research data– are reported.

BECOMING AWARE OF THE GAP BETWEEN "US-THE POLITICIANS" AND "THEM-THE CITIZENS"

At the face-to-face session, participants were shown data demonstrating the existence of a gap regarding several issues related to citizens' behaviors and attitudes towards public policies. The first session included several items on the changes caused by the pandemic. On the whole, data show that policymakers thought that citizens had changed more as a result of the pandemic than they actually had changed. The gap is particularly apparent in their priorities regarding social issues: the data show that policymakers are not aware of citizens' priorities in terms of social and public policies. Specifically, participants were asked what they thought citizens' concerns were regarding several social issues. Figure

2 represents the percentage of those whose responses were "important" and "very important".

Figure 1. Importance attached to social issues

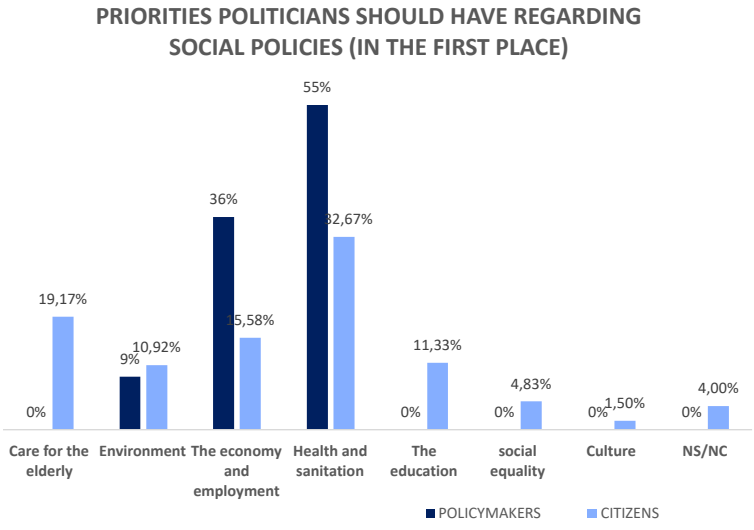


Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 shows that, except for the gender gap, where responses are closer, there is a significant gap across all other social issues. Policymakers underestimate citizens´ concerns about the poverty line and about energy poverty. Interestingly, when policymakers overestimate citizens' concerns, that is when the issues assessed are expressed in technical language (e.g., glass roof, ecological footprint, human development index): it may be the case that citizens are not as knowledgeable about these technical concepts as policymakers think they are. The largest gaps can be seen in the importance given to cooperation on development (where policymakers believe that the importance given by citizens is 38%) and education for sustainable development (44.8%), where, in fact, the importance reported by citizens was zero.

Data were also collected on the priorities that citizens think politicians should have, and again, data show there is a gap between these responses and what policymakers thought citizens would respond.

Figure 2. A gap regarding the priorities that politicians should have



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 2 shows that policymakers are unaware of the priorities citizens feel they should have. There is, on the one hand, an overestimation with regard to "the economy and employment", and "health and sanitation": policymakers believe that these issues are perceived as being twice as important as citizens actually perceive them to be. At the other extreme, there are social issues which policymakers believe citizens do not perceive as important, where they actually do: "care for older people" (19.17%) and "education" (11.3%).

After presenting data on the gap, participants were first asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire about the meaning of the data, then to discuss in groups what the data meant, and finally to complete a second qualitative questionnaire to capture their reflections on listening.

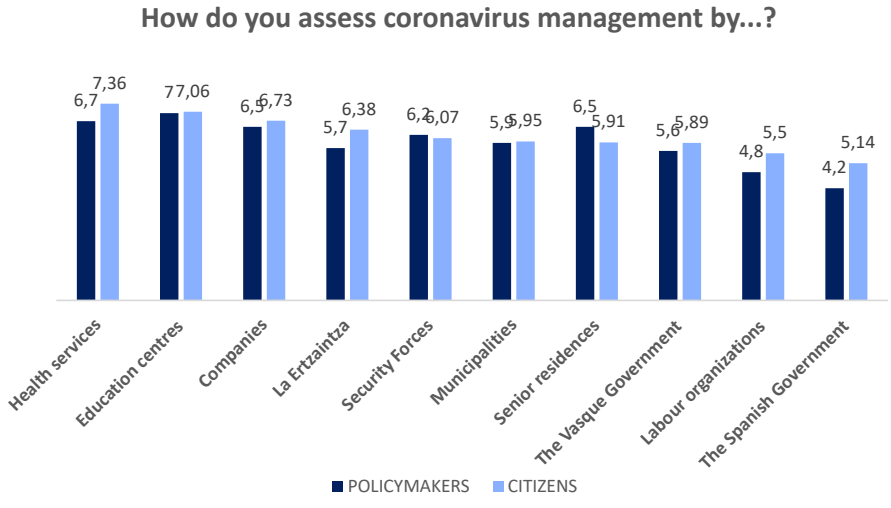
Analysis of the qualitative data yields an emerging recurrent category of awareness of a gap that participants did not expect. It seems that reflecting on this gap made policymakers feel out of touch with citizens and more aware of the need to collect and consider citizens' feedback. The following quote is one example of many others referring to this awareness:

> "*This kind of information is essential to bring about a straightforward dialogue with Gipuzkoa's citizenry (…) it is necessary to conduct an analysis of this information, to make sense of it properly*".

THE SURPRISE OF A LESS HOSTILE AND MORE POSITIVE CIVIL SOCIETY THAN EXPECTED

Data were collected during the pandemic about how citizens were behaving in terms of resilience, and also about complying with hygiene measures and social distancing to prevent them from catching the virus. Citizens were also asked to assess how different entities were performing in dealing with the coronavirus crisis. The quantitative data (see Figure 3, which shows mean scores on a scale of 1 to 10) indicate that policymakers expected citizens to be slightly more negative.

Figure 3. Comparative assessments of organizational management of the pandemic



Source: Own elaboration

Strikingly, for almost all of the entities included in this item, citizens were slightly more positive than policymakers expected about how different organizations performed.

The analysis of the qualitative data collected from policymakers' response to the question of 'What has surprised you today?' shows a common recurrent of positive surprise, as is shown in the following excerpts:

> "*It surprises me that assessments* [about institutions' performance] *were not as adverse as I imagined*";
> "[I was surprised by] *society's high level of self-criticism and self-blame for the pandemic*".

Of particular interest were the positive categorizations that policymakers attributed to civil society, thereby acknowledging the gap between themselves and citizens, as the following excerpts show: "*Society is more mature than I thought.*" "*We always believe society is more vulnerable to surrounding influences than it actually is.*" "*Disaffection is not as widespread as I thought*".

This pleasant surprise about society is remarkable, bearing in mind that the listening process was carried out as part of a collaborative governance program, through which policymakers were attempting to engage civil society. A recurrent semantic code emerges from the data about the listening process of help to become more aware of the high capital they have in the citizens they want to engage with, as the following excerpt shows: "*I believe it is useful to home in on the fact that this ‚black box' which is society, is showing signs of life*". Engaging becomes easier for a public sector organization when it is made explicit that the other side trusts it. The following excerpt provides a good end to this section about this positive surprise: "*They* [citizens] *trust us more than we think. We must gain greater knowledge if we are to get it right. We must boost our ability to empathize with people's feelings*".

LEARNING TO LISTEN THROUGHOUT THE LISTENING PROCESS

Across successive sessions, policymakers perceived a gradual convergence between their assessments and citizens' views, which they attributed to repeated engagement with feedback and collective reflection. Participants described the listening process as a learning experience that enhanced their understanding of citizens' needs, expectations, and perceptions of public action. This learning was not limited to acquiring information; it also involved developing greater attentiveness to how citizen feedback should be interpreted and used. As awareness of the gap increased, so did policymakers' recognition of listening as a necessary condition for exercising public responsibility more effectively.

The following are some of the excerpts:

> "*We have improved in terms of putting ourselves in the shoes of the people of Gipuzkoa. The gaps are now considerably smaller*";
> "*We are moving closer to what citizens really think*".

This closeness to citizens' perceptions led participants to positively appraise the listening process through which they learned about citizens' needs and expectations. More specifically, the listening process was categorized as being useful when it came to exercising public responsibilities, as these excerpts show:

"*These sessions have shown me how citizens perceive certain realities to which we would otherwise have no access.*"
"*These sessions have given me great insights into society*".

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE? THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING TO IMPROVE POLICYMAKING.

As mentioned earlier, the listening process analyzed was conducted within a collaborative governance program to better understand those whom policymakers sought to engage and collaborate with. What do the data tell us about policymakers' willingness to give a response through policymaking?

While policymakers expressed a strong normative commitment to listening and its relevance for democratic governance, concrete links between listening and policy change remained uneven. Participants emphasized the importance of integrating citizen feedback into policymaking, but often struggled to articulate specific policy implications beyond communication practices. The most tangible examples emerged from the communication department, where listening-informed messaging strategies oriented toward empathy, transparency, and trust. Overall, the findings indicate that listening was widely valued as a democratic and relational practice, but its translation into systematic policy responses remained a continuing challenge within the collaborative governance process.

DISCUSSION

This research explored the experiences and lessons of public leaders participating in a collaborative governance process, focusing on how a listening process implemented within that framework contributes to the development of collaborative governance.

In what ways do policymakers' experiences and interpretations of citizen feedback shape organizational listening practices?

The listening process implemented exposed participants to a range of data depicting a gap between citizens' opinions and judgments about social issues, public policies, and the performance of public sector institutions, and policymakers' expectations of them. In doing so, the process held political leaders up to a mirror, revealing the extent to which they were sympathetic to and in tune with those with whom they wanted to collaborate. Policymakers' engagement with citizen feedback was shown to trigger new awareness of gaps between institutional and public perspectives, encourage the development of shared values around listening, and, to some extent, facilitate adaptive approaches to joint decision-making.

Taken together, these findings extend scholarship on organizational listening by showing how participation in collaborative governance shapes policymakers' listening orientations and practices. Interpreted through Macnamara's Seven Canons of Listening, sustained engagement with citizen feedback fostered recognition, acknowledgment, and reflexive attention rather than procedural compliance. In contrast to prior studies documenting selective or instrumental listening in public sector organizations (Macnamara, 2017), exposure to discrepancies between policymakers' assumptions and citizens' expressed views prompted reflexivity and a shared sense of responsibility for informational gaps. The collaborative governance setting provided the cultural conditions for cultivating an "architecture of listening" (Macnamara, 2013, 2024), even in the absence of fully developed listening infrastructures, suggesting that collaborative policymaking can function as a generative context for embedding listeningbased communication within public institutions. This response aligns with deliberative accounts that conceptualize listening as a democratic practice grounded in relational engagement (Dobson, 2014; Morrell, 2010).

The findings further indicate that engagement with citizen feedback strengthened policymakers' normative commitment to listening and reinforced its perceived value for democratic governance. Rather than being experienced as a formal requirement, listening was understood as a meaningful practice that legitimized investing time and resources despite organizational constraints. This provides empirical support for normative claims in the literature that listening is foundational to democratic governance (Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017; Ospina, 2016), while showing how such commitments emerge through collaborative policymaking processes.

This research explores a novel connection between listening-based communication and collaborative governance. The findings show that the shared normative approach to policymaking-oriented listening provides a cultural foundation for developing an effective architecture of listening. Even where institutional capacities are limited, collaborative policymaking enables mutual understanding and helps policymakers move beyond individual agendas to co-construct priorities with civil society.

The results also indicate that listening must be collaborative to be effective: collecting citizens' input alone is insufficient without joint reflection to interpret it.

Finally, collaborative governance initiatives create new opportunities for gathering listening data, to the extent that collaboration entails joint actions, and acting together provides knowledge in both directions.

This potential for listening data helps complement what has been found elsewhere regarding the role communication plays in collaborative governance (Muñoa, 2023). An analysis of the communications department of *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* showed that communication was focused more on inviting people to act

together and undertake joint actions than on one-way reporting on a project. The development of collaborative governance led public authorities to interact more frequently with stakeholders, and this dense interaction transformed an initial 'selling' communication attitude into a 'listening' attitude. The findings of this research show that acting together becomes a rich source of listening data, and if these listening data are interpreted collaboratively, they may form the basis for policymakers' openness to organizational change and adaptation to joint policymaking.

This study contributes to theory by establishing a novel empirical connection between listeningbased communication and collaborative governance, repositioning listening as a constitutive mechanism of collaboration rather than a normative prerequisite or supportive condition. While existing literature has emphasized the democratic value of listening (Morrell, 2010; Mansbridge & Latura, 2017) and identified organizational listening as an underdeveloped capacity in public institutions (Macnamara, 2013, 2016, 2019), empirical accounts of how listening is enacted, learned, and institutionalized within collaborative governance remain limited. By examining policymakers' lived experiences of interpreting citizen feedback, this research shows how listening practices are shaped through collaborative sensemaking processes embedded in policymaking itself. In doing so, it extends organizational listening theory by demonstrating that listening orientations are not merely individual competencies or cultural dispositions, but relational and processual accomplishments produced through structured interaction.

The study also shows that listeningbased communication supports collaborative governance only when citizen input is collectively interpreted. Collecting feedback alone proved insufficient; collaborative reflection was necessary to make sense of citizens' perspectives and translate them into shared understandings. This highlights sensemaking as a core listening competence within collaborative governance, reinforcing recent work on collaborative governance capacities (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019).

The implications of these findings must be understood through the logic of analytic generalization that underpins qualitative case study research. Drawing on an indepth examination of a listeningbased collaborative governance initiative in the Basque Country (the Gipuzkoa province), the study does not seek to generalize outcomes statistically, but to theorize mechanisms through which listeningbased communication can contribute to collaborative governance. In this case, listening emerges not as a discrete procedural step, but as a constitutive communicative practice through which shared meanings, reflexivity, and openness to institutional change may be produced. By foregrounding policymakers' situated experiences of engaging with citizen feedback, the case illustrates how

developing an "architecture of listening" may strengthen collaborative governance under specific institutional and political conditions.

At the same time, the findings are shaped by clear context dependencies that delimit their scope of inference. The case is embedded in a regional governance context characterized by a sustained commitment to democratic innovation, an existing collaborative governance program, and organizational arrangements that enable repeated interaction between policymakers and civil society actors. The listening process involved a bounded group of policymakers participating in a systematized and facilitated reflection on citizen feedback, and the qualitative design privileges depth of interpretation over representativeness. These features caution against assuming that similar listening processes would generate comparable effects in contexts marked by different administrative cultures, political incentives, power asymmetries, or levels of institutional trust.

Despite these constraints, the case offers analytically transferable insights that may inform theory and practice beyond the empirical setting studied. Rather than proposing direct replication, the findings identify mechanisms—such as the collective interpretation of citizen input, the emergence of shared normative orientations toward listening, and the embedding of listening within policymaking processes—that can be examined in other collaborative governance contexts. The value of the case lies in its capacity to specify how listeningbased communication operates within collaborative governance, and under what conditions it may foster reflexivity and adaptive capacity. Scholars and practitioners can use these insights as sensitizing concepts to assess whether and how similar mechanisms might be activated in other institutional settings, taking into account local governance traditions, organizational capacities, and stakeholder relationships. In this way, the study contributes to cumulative theory building while recognizing that the effects of listeningbased communication are contingent, contextbound, and subject to reexamination in each new case.

CONCLUSION

This study examined a previously underexplored connection between listeningbased government communication and the development of collaborative governance through an indepth case study of the *Etorkizuna Eraikiz* initiative in the Basque Country, and more specifically within the provincial government of Gipuzkoa. Situated in a regional context characterized by a sustained commitment to democratic innovation, strong public institutions, and an established collaborative governance program, the case provides a privileged empirical setting for exploring how organizational listening is enacted, learned, and valued by policymakers collaborating with civil society. Rather than treating listening

as an abstract democratic ideal, the study shows how listeningbased communication is experienced and interpreted by policymakers when it is embedded in concrete policymaking processes.

Findings indicate that, in the Gipuzkoa context studied, participation in a systematized listening process exposed policymakers to discrepancies between their assumptions and citizens' expressed views, triggering reflexivity and a reevaluation of their relationship with civil society. These experiences contributed to the emergence of a shared normative orientation toward listening, understood not merely as a procedural requirement but as a meaningful condition for democratic governance and effective collaboration. Within *Etorkizuna Eraikiz*, listeningbased communication supported collaborative governance by fostering shared understandings, reinforcing policymakers' willingness to engage with citizen input, and legitimizing the allocation of time and resources to listening activities despite organizational and political constraints.

At the same time, the conclusions drawn from this research are shaped by the specific institutional, cultural, and political conditions of Gipuzkoa. The presence of an existing collaborative governance framework, repeated interaction between policymakers and societal actors, and a political culture receptive to experimentation and reflexivity provided enabling conditions for the listening process analyzed. These contextual features caution against assuming that similar outcomes would automatically follow in settings marked by less familiarity with collaborative governance initiatives, weaker participatory traditions, or more adversarial relationships between government and civil society. The case, therefore, does not support claims of statistical generalization, but instead contributes through analytic generalization by specifying mechanisms—such as collective sensemaking, reflexive interpretation of citizen feedback, and the cultural grounding of an architecture of listening—that may be examined in other contexts.

Despite its contextspecific nature, the study offers lessons of broader relevance for scholars and practitioners interested in collaborative governance. It suggests that listeningbased communication is most likely to contribute to collaboration when it is integrated into policymaking processes, supported by opportunities for collective reflection, and embedded within organizational cultures that value openness and learning. For practitioners, the Basque case illustrates that developing collaborative governance is not only a matter of designing participatory structures, but also of cultivating listening collaborative capacities among policymakers themselves. For researchers, the study highlights the value of casebased inquiry for advancing theory on organizational listening by showing how listening operates as a relational and processual practice within collaborative governance arrangements.

In sum, this research contributes to debates on democratic governance by demonstrating how listeningbased communication functions in practice within the specific regional context of Gipuzkoa. By grounding its conclusions in the Basque case while articulating analytically transferable insights, the study advances understanding of how listening can support collaborative governance, while recognizing that its effects are contextbound and must be reexamined in each institutional setting.

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METHODS & CONCEPTS

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Detecting and Categorizing Islamophobic Hate Speech on Spanish Twitter/X: Discursive Patterns, Toxicity Scores, and BERT-Based Classification

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Abstract: Islamophobic hate speech on social media includes overt toxicity and contextual frames that associate Muslims with invasion, criminality, cultural threat, or racialized exclusion. This study examines 21,326 Spanish-language tweets about Islam and Muslims posted in Spain between 2010 and 2022. We combine human annotation, exploratory discursive coding, Perspective API scores, and a multilingual BERT classifier. Human coders classified 28.2% of tweets as Islamophobic hate speech. Explicit hostility was the most frequent pattern, followed by invasion, cultural threat, criminality, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic burden. Although hate-labeled tweets received significantly higher toxicity-related scores than non-hate tweets, many remained below a 0.70 high-probability threshold. The BERT classifier achieved 0.89 accuracy, 0.97 precision, 0.85 recall, and 0.91 F1 for the hate class. The findings show that generic toxicity measures capture overt aggression more effectively than contextual hostility, supporting target-specific, context-sensitive detection.

Keywords: Religion; Islamophobia; Hate speech; Toxicity; Stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

Islamophobic hate speech on social media is not limited to insults, profanity, or threats. It can also be expressed through frames that present Muslims as invaders, criminals, cultural threats, or racialized outsiders (Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2018; Vidgen & Yasseri, 2020). This distinction matters for automated detection because general toxicity systems are designed to recognize overt verbal aggression and may miss hostility that depends on context or group-based framing (Lees et al., 2022; Wulczyn et al., 2017). Social media facilitates the rapid circulation of discriminatory discourse and connects anti-Muslim hostility with wider debates about migration, security, national identity, and European values. In Spain, online conversations about Islam frequently associate religious identity with migration, terrorism, cultural difference, and political conflict (Alcántara-Plá & Ruiz-Sánchez, 2017; Fuentes-Lara & Arcila-Calderón, 2023; González-Baquero et al., 2023; Zamora Medina et al., 2021). Twitter/X is not representative of Spanish public opinion, but its open structure and historical availability through the API make it a useful setting for examining public platform discourse at scale.

This study analyzes 21,326 Spanish-language tweets about Islam and Muslims published in Spain between 2010 and 2022. It makes three contributions. First, it estimates the prevalence and temporal distribution of Islamophobic hate speech. Second, it describes recurrent and overlapping discursive patterns within the hateful subset. Third, it compares human annotation with a general toxicity-scoring system and a target-specific multilingual BERT classifier. The central premise is that computational architecture should follow the construct being measured: if Islamophobic hostility can be explicit or frame-based, its detection requires more than generic toxicity scores.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ISLAM AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN SPAIN: DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Islam is one of Spain's main minority religions. Muslims represent around 4% of the national population, slightly over two million people, and vary considerably in nationality, citizenship, migration history, ethnicity, religiosity, and generation. The largest Muslim populations are concentrated in Catalonia, Andalusia, Madrid, and the Valencian Community, while Ceuta and Melilla have the highest relative proportions (Comisión Islámica de España, 2022; Observatorio Andalusí, 2023). Despite this diversity, public and online discourse often reduces Muslims

to recurring associations with migration, terrorism, cultural difference, gender oppression, and incompatibility with Western or European values (Alcántara-Plá & Ruiz-Sánchez, 2017; Fuentes-Lara & Arcila-Calderón, 2023; González-Baquero et al., 2023; Zamora Medina et al., 2021). Spain's historical relationship with Islam, including memories of Al-Andalus and later national narratives, together with its proximity to North Africa and position as a southern European border country, also shapes contemporary debate (García Sanjuán, 2016, 2020; Ríos Saloma, 2008). These factors make narratives of invasion, cultural threat, security, and national identity especially salient.

ISLAMOPHOBIA, ANTI-MUSLIM RACISM, AND DISCURSIVE FRAMES OF HOSTILITY

Islamophobia is a contested but widely used concept for describing hostility, prejudice, discrimination, exclusion, or violence directed at Islam, Muslims, or people and practices perceived as Muslim. Although the term has earlier historical uses, its consolidation in public and academic debate is commonly associated with the Runnymede Trust's report Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All, which helped frame anti-Muslim hostility as a specific form of discrimination requiring social and political attention (Elahi & Khan, 2017; Gómez, 2021). In this article, Islamophobia is understood as a multidimensional form of anti-Muslim hostility that overlaps with racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, securitization and aporophobia, while retaining specific features linked to the stigmatization of Islam and "Muslimness".

Following Bleich's formulation, Islamophobia may be defined as indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims (Bleich, 2011, cited in Vidgen & Yasseri, 2020). However, for the purposes of this study, it is important to move beyond purely attitudinal definitions and consider how Islamophobia is expressed discursively. Islamophobic discourse does not only communicate negative evaluations of Islam or Muslims; it also constructs "Muslimness" through recurring associations with threat, foreignness, inferiority, violence, cultural incompatibility, and exclusion (Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2018; Meer, 2013; Taras, 2013; Zempi & Awan, 2019). Corpus-assisted discourse studies have also shown that media representations of Islam and Muslims are often organized around recurrent associations with conflict, threat, extremism, cultural difference, and national belonging. This literature is relevant because it treats anti-Muslim discourse not only as a set of isolated hostile expressions, but as a patterned discursive phenomenon shaped by repeated lexical, semantic, and narrative associations (Baker et al., 2013).

A central feature of contemporary Islamophobia is the racialization of religion: although Islam is a religion and not a race, Muslims are often treated in public

discourse as if they constituted a homogeneous, visible, inherited and culturally fixed group (Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2009; Taras, 2013). In this process, "Muslimness" becomes a social marker that can be attributed through names, appearance, clothing, language, nationality, ethnicity, migration background or perceived cultural practices, so that people may become targets of Islamophobic hostility not only because of their religious beliefs or practices, but also because they are perceived as Muslim. This logic also helps explain the different levels of explicitness through which Islamophobic discourse operates: some messages articulate anti-Muslim hostility through direct verbal aggression, including insults, threats, profanity, dehumanizing language or open calls for exclusion, while others do so through indirect, coded or frame-based forms that construct Muslims as a collective threat without necessarily relying on insults or profanity (Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2018; Vidgen & Yasseri, 2020). For this reason, the distinction between explicit hostility and frame-based hostility is central to this study: the former refers to messages in which the hateful orientation is linguistically direct, for example through derogation, threats, dehumanization or the rejection of Muslims as legitimate members of society; the latter refers to messages that articulate anti-Muslim meanings through broader interpretive frames, presenting Muslims as invaders, criminals, terrorists, welfare burdens, threats to Western identity or culturally incompatible subjects, even when they avoid overtly abusive vocabulary.

Several frames are especially relevant for this study. The first is invasion, in which Muslim presence is represented as a demographic, territorial, or cultural takeover. The language of invasion transforms migration and religious diversity into a threat to national continuity, European identity, or social cohesion, condensing demographic fear, cultural replacement, territorial anxiety, and political emergency (Gualda & Rebollo, 2020; Gorman & Culcasi, 2020). The second is securitization, in which Islam and Muslims are associated with terrorism, radicalization, violence or threats to national security. This discourse shifts the discussion from rights, citizenship, and coexistence to risk, surveillance, control, and emergency (Saeed, 2016; Awan & Zempi, 2016). A third frame is criminalization, which links Muslims or Muslim-coded migrants with delinquency, disorder, sexual violence, theft or social danger. Although it may overlap with securitization, criminalization refers more specifically to everyday insecurity and moral disorder rather than terrorism. This frame is supported by research showing how anti-Muslim discourse often connects Muslim identity with crime, deviance, sexual threat, and public disorder, especially when religion, migration, and racialized suspicion are combined in media or political narratives (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020; Awan, 2014).

A fourth frame is a cultural threat, in which Islam is represented as incompatible with Spanish, European, Western, secular, liberal, or democratic values.

This frame may appear in apparently civil or value-based language while still legitimizing exclusionary attitudes toward Muslims (Meer, 2013; Taras, 2013). A fifth frame concerns race and ethnicity, as Islamophobic discourse frequently racializes religion by linking Muslim identity to Arabness, Moroccanness, foreignness, migration status, skin color, or ethnic origin (Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2009; Taras, 2013). A sixth frame involves gender, in which women's rights, gender equality, the veil, sexuality or family norms are mobilized to portray Islam as inherently patriarchal, oppressive or incompatible with liberal values. Research on gendered Islamophobia has shown that visibly Muslim women are often positioned both as oppressed subjects and as symbolic markers of cultural threat (Perry, 2014; Hopkins, 2016; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2012, 2015). Finally, the socio-economic burden frame represents Muslims or Muslim-coded migrants as a cost to public services, welfare systems, employment, housing, or social order, connecting economic anxiety with cultural and racialized exclusion. This frame overlaps with broader research on anti-migrant hostility, welfare chauvinism, classed exclusion, and aporophobia, where racialized or migrant populations are represented as undeserving recipients of public resources or as economic threats to the majority group (Awan, 2014; Gorman & Culcasi, 2020).

These frames are analytically separable, but they often co-occur in real discourse. A single message may simultaneously represent Muslims as invaders, criminals, welfare burdens, and threats to Western values. For this reason, the present study treats the subcategories of Islamophobic discourse as non-mutually exclusive and exploratory. They are not intended as a definitive taxonomy of Islamophobia, but as an empirical tool for identifying recurrent discursive patterns within messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech. This distinction is important because the main binary classification, Islamophobic hate speech versus no Islamophobic hate speech, provides the strongest basis for quantitative inference, whereas the subcategories are used to describe internal variation within the hateful subset.

This conceptualization also has methodological implications. If Islamophobic discourse includes both explicit hostility and frame-based hostility, then generic toxicity detection may capture only part of the phenomenon. Messages containing insults, profanity, or direct threats may receive high toxicity scores, whereas messages organized around invasion, cultural threat, racialization, or securitization may be less likely to reach conventional toxicity thresholds. For this reason, the article examines not only whether messages are classified as Islamophobic hate speech, but also how toxicity scores vary across different exploratory discursive patterns.

HATE SPEECH, OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE, AND TOXICITY

Research on online hostility must distinguish hate speech from offensive language and toxicity. Hate speech targets individuals or groups based on protected or vulnerable characteristics and stigmatizes, threatens, devalues, or legitimizes their exclusion (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018; Schmidt & Wiegand, 2017). Offensive language is broader and may include insults or profanity without targeting a protected group. In computational moderation, toxicity refers to language likely to disrupt participation in an online discussion (Wulczyn et al., 2017). Perspective API estimates probabilities for toxicity, severe toxicity, identity attack, insult, profanity, and threat (Jigsaw, n.d.; Lees et al., 2022). These scores indicate similarity to previously annotated toxic language rather than directly measuring hate speech or Islamophobia. Here, Islamophobic hate speech comprises messages that stigmatize, threaten, or legitimize exclusion against Islam, Muslims, or people perceived as Muslim. Toxicity is treated as a separate linguistic attribute. Perspective API, therefore, assesses overlap with explicit toxic language, allowing us to test whether generic measures capture indirect, coded, or frame-based Islamophobic hostility.

AUTOMATED DETECTION OF ISLAMOPHOBIC HATE SPEECH

Automatic hate-speech detection has progressed from keyword lists and rule-based systems to supervised machine learning and Transformer models. Early methods identified explicit slurs but struggled with context, irony, coded language, negation, quotation, and counter-speech (Schmidt & Wiegand, 2017). Classifiers such as support vector machines and logistic regression improved detection using annotated examples yet remained dependent on surface lexical patterns and often missed implicit or target-specific hostility (Burnap & Williams, 2015; Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). Transformer-based models such as BERT address some of these limitations by capturing contextual relationships and adapting pretrained representations to particular tasks (Devlin et al., 2019; Mozafari et al., 2020). Monolingual and multilingual variants are especially useful for Spanish corpora grounded in specific cultural and political contexts (Cañete et al., 2023; Conneau et al., 2020).

Islamophobic hate speech remains challenging because its meaning can depend on local debates, migration narratives, or coded associations among Islam, race, security, and national identity. Anti-Muslim hostility is not always expressed through direct abuse (Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2018; Vidgen & Yasseri, 2020). General-purpose tools such as Perspective API measure toxicity, identity attacks, insults, profanity, and threats, but may overlook frame-based hostility involving invasion, cultural incompatibility, racialized suspicion, or securitization. Comparing these scores with human annotation and a target-specific

BERT classifier therefore tests whether generic toxicity measures are sufficient or specialized models provide more robust detection.

In this study, automated detection is approached in two complementary ways. First, Perspective API is used as an external scoring tool to assess the degree to which tweets classified by human coders as Islamophobic hate speech overlap with toxicity-related attributes. Second, a multilingual BERT-based classifier is trained and evaluated against the human-coded binary classification of Islamophobic hate versus non-hate messages, excluding discarded messages from training and evaluation. Because the subcategories of Islamophobic discourse showed lower intercoder reliability than the binary classification, the model is not trained to predict those exploratory subcategories. Instead, the classification task focuses on the more reliable main distinction between Islamophobic hate speech and non-Islamophobic content.

Based on this theoretical framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the prevalence and temporal evolution of Islamophobic hate speech in Spanish-language tweets about Islam and Muslims between 2010 and 2022?
- RQ2: What exploratory discursive patterns characterize tweets classified as Islamophobic hate speech, and how do these patterns co-occur?
- RQ3: To what extent do tweets classified as Islamophobic hate speech receive higher Perspective API toxicity-related scores than tweets classified as non-hate, and which exploratory subcategories are associated with higher toxicity scores?
- RQ4: How accurately can a multilingual BERT-based classifier detect Islamophobic hate speech compared with human annotation?

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

The corpus comprises 21,326 Spanish-language tweets about Islam and Muslims in Spain, posted between January 1, 2010, and December 31, 2022. Data were collected through Twitter API v2 using Python and Tweepy, with Boolean combinations of relevant keywords. The search was limited to tweets associated with Spain when location metadata were available. Retweets, replies, duplicates, link-only posts, and texts without analyzable content were excluded, while engagement metrics were retained. Because Twitter/X users are not representative of Spain's population, the corpus reflects platform discourse rather than public opinion.

HUMAN ANNOTATION, CATEGORIES, AND RELIABILITY

A manual content analysis classified each tweet as Islamophobic hate, non-hate, or discarded. Hate included messages attacking, stigmatizing, threatening, or legitimizing exclusion against Islam, Muslims, or perceived Muslims. Non-hate covered informational, neutral, supportive, or otherwise non-hateful content; discarded tweets were irrelevant or targeted other groups. Hate-labeled tweets were also assigned non-mutually exclusive exploratory categories: socioeconomic burden, criminality, terrorism, invasion, illegality, cultural threat, gender, race/ethnicity, classism/aporophobia, and explicit hostility. Seven trained external coders each annotated approximately 3,000 tweets using a detailed codebook and calibration exercises. An eighth coder independently reannotated 15% of every batch, creating a stratified validation subset. Krippendorff's α for the binary hate/non-hate distinction was .712, indicating acceptable reliability (Krippendorff, 2018). Reliability for the ten subcategories was lower, ranging from .50 to .66. Consequently, the binary classification supports quantitative inference and model evaluation, while subcategory findings are interpreted as exploratory.

PERSPECTIVE API TOXICITY SCORING

Perspective API measured overlap between human-coded Islamophobic hate and explicit toxic language; it was not used to detect Islamophobia directly. It returned probability scores from 0 to 1 for toxicity, severe toxicity,identity attack, insult, profanity, and threat. Discarded messages were excluded, and independent-samples *t* tests compared hate and non-hate tweets. Descriptive statistics for the hateful subset assessed scores at or above a conservative .70 threshold. This was an operational choice, not an API recommendation or universal boundary: Islamophobic messages may lack overt toxicity, while toxic messages are not necessarily Islamophobic.

MULTILINGUAL BERT-BASED CLASSIFICATION

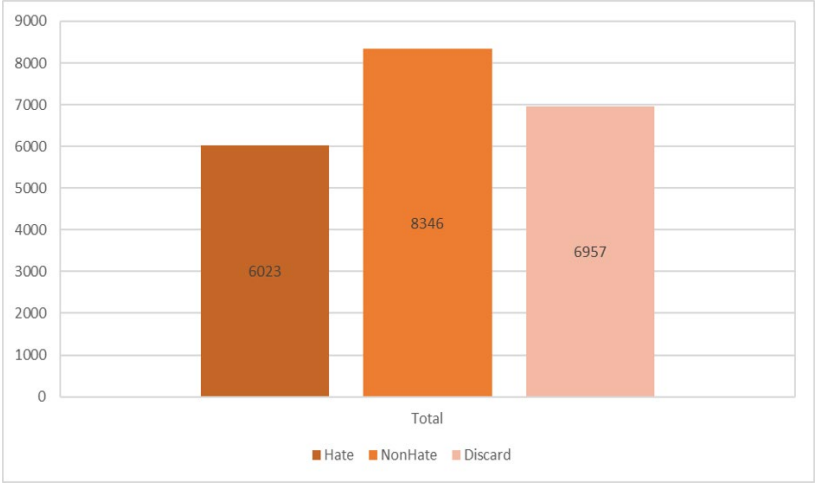
A multilingual BERT classifier (bert-base-multilingual-uncased) was fine-tuned on Spanish-language tweets using Hugging Face's TFBertForSequenceClassification, BertTokenizer, and BertConfig. The binary labels were 0 = Islamophobic hate and 1 = non-hate; discarded messages were excluded from training and evaluation. Performance was assessed against human annotations using accuracy, precision, recall, F1, macro and weighted averages, and class-level support. Because the exploratory subcategories had lower intercoder reliability, the model predicted only the more reliable binary distinction rather than individual discursive patterns.

RESULTS

FREQUENCY OF CLASSIFIED HATE SPEECH

The manual content analysis classified the corpus into three initial categories. Of the 21,326 tweets analyzed, 6,957 messages were discarded because they were not relevant to the object of study or did not specifically target Islam or Muslims, representing 32.6% of the corpus. A further 8,346 messages were classified as non-hate, representing 39.1% of the corpus. Finally, 6,023 messages were classified as Islamophobic hate speech, representing 28.2% of the total sample category (see Figure 1). Regarding the temporal evolution of Islamophobic hate speech, the highest number of hateful messages was identified in 2021, with 985 tweets, representing 16.35% of all messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech. This was followed by 2020, with 746 messages, and 2022, with 716 messages. These three years therefore concentrate a substantial proportion of the Islamophobic hate messages identified in the corpus. By contrast, the highest number of non-hate messages appeared in 2016, with 2,209 messages, representing 26.47% of the non-hate.

Figure 1. Frequency of tweets



Source: Own elaboration

Public engagement metrics also varied across the period studied. Tweets classified as Islamophobic hate speech reached their highest average number of likes in 2021 (M = 11.23), while the highest average number of retweets was observed in 2017 (M = 8.52). However, these averages should be interpreted with caution because engagement metrics were highly skewed. In 2021, likes showed a standard deviation of 88.11 and a maximum value of 1,387, while in 2017 retweets

showed a standard deviation of 46.3 and a maximum value of 576. These high standard deviations indicate that the averages were strongly influenced by a small number of highly visible tweets.

EXPLORATORY DISCURSIVE PATTERNS AND CATEGORY CO-OCCURRENCE

Within the subset of messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech, the study identified ten non-mutually exclusive exploratory subcategories. These categories should be interpreted as descriptive discursive patterns rather than as a definitive taxonomy of Islamophobia. The most frequent category was explicit hostility, with 2,448 messages, representing 40.64% of the Islamophobic hate subset. This was followed by invasion, with 1,165 messages (19.34%), cultural threat, with 979 messages (16.25%), criminality, with 961 messages (15.96%), race/ethnicity, with 926 messages (15.37%), and socio-economic burden, with 814 messages (13.52%). Other categories appeared less frequently but remained analytically relevant: terrorism, with 615 messages (10.21%); gender, with 409 messages (6.79%); classism/aporophobia, with 315 messages (5.23%); and illegality, with 267 messages (4.43%) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of messages classified in the exploratory categories of Islamophobic discourse.

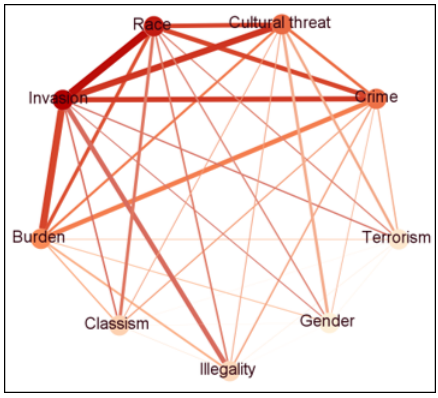
Years	Burden	Crime	Terrorism	Invasion	Illegality	Cultural threat	Gender	Race	Classism	Irrational	Total Hate
2010	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
2011	1	17	8	5	1	16	15	4	10	83	114
2012	10	38	15	11	3	24	10	10	30	208	241
2013	11	55	26	10	6	58	21	25	42	390	442
2014	20	51	56	32	10	72	44	27	43	352	522
2015	16	26	112	38	2	33	14	9	3	199	414
2016	14	7	73	73	1	52	32	22	11	172	349
2017	40	28	110	28	1	189	28	97	6	64	474
2018	51	47	41	39	10	76	30	60	0	91	342
2019	135	193	30	86	29	139	62	2	0	177	674
2020	166	125	64	339	47	121	63	197	34	221	746
2021	256	203	62	413	116	141	58	377	102	216	985
2022	94	171	18	91	41	58	32	96	34	271	716
Total	814	961	615	1165	267	979	409	926	315	2448	6023

Source: Own elaboration

Because the subcategories were coded as non-mutually exclusive, a single message could contain more than one discursive pattern. For this reason, we examined descriptive co-occurrence patterns among categories. The most frequent co-occurrence was invasion and race/ethnicity, with 254 messages coded in both categories. This was followed by socio-economic burden and invasion, with 234 shared messages, and cultural threat and invasion, with 209 shared messages. Other frequent overlaps included criminality and invasion, invasion and illegality, socio-economic burden and criminality, and criminality and race/ethnicity (see Figure 2).

These co-occurrences suggest that Islamophobic discourse often combines multiple frames within the same message. Invasion appears as a prominent frame in this corpus, frequently overlapping with race/ethnicity, socio-economic burden, cultural threat, criminality, and illegality. However, these results should be interpreted descriptively. They show patterns of overlap among exploratory categories, but they do not establish causal relationships or confirm a definitive structure of Islamophobic discourse.

Figure 2. *Co*-**occurrence patterns among exploratory categories of Islamophobic discourse.**



Source: Own elaboration

PERSPECTIVE API TOXICITY SCORES

To evaluate the relationship between human-coded Islamophobic hate speech and automated toxicity-related attributes, we compared Perspective API scores between messages classified as Islamophobic hate and messages classified as non-hate. Discarded messages were excluded from this analysis. Independent samples t-tests showed statistically significant differences across all six Perspective API attributes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive API Perspective attributes in the hate/non-hate categories

Attribute	Hate	N	M	D.st	D Cohen
TOXICITY	0	8178	.24	.214	1.269
	1	5928	.53	.242	
SEVERE_TOXICITY	0	8178	.07	.139	1.042
	1	5928	.27	.233	
IDENTITY_ATTACK	0	8178	.13	.151	1.025
	1	5928	.31	.197	
INSULT	0	8178	.20	.221	1.262
	1	5928	.50	.253	
PROFANITY	0	8178	.17	.269	0.808
	1	5928	.42	.345	
THREAT	0	8178	.03	.078	0.434
	1	5928	.08	.143	

Source: Own elaboration

Messages classified as Islamophobic hate scored higher than non-hate messages in toxicity, severe toxicity, identity attack, insult, profanity, and threat. For toxicity, hate messages obtained a mean score of 0.53 (SD = 0.242), compared with 0.24 (SD = 0.214) among non-hate messages, $t(14104) = -75.123$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.269$. For severe toxicity, hate messages also scored higher ($M = 0.27$, $SD = 0.233$) than non-hate messages ($M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.139$), $t(14104) = -65.114$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.042$. Similar differences were observed for identity attack, insult, profanity, and threat. Effect sizes ranged from moderate to large, with the smallest effect observed for threat ($d = 0.434$) and the largest effects observed for toxicity and insult.

However, the descriptive analysis of the hateful subset shows that most human-coded Islamophobic hate messages did not reach high-probability toxicity thresholds. Among messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech, toxicity had the highest mean score ($M = 0.526$, $SD = 0.242$), followed by insult ($M = 0.499$, $SD = 0.252$), profanity ($M = 0.421$, $SD = 0.344$), identity attack ($M = 0.308$, $SD = 0.197$), severe toxicity ($M = 0.274$, $SD = 0.233$), and threat ($M = 0.084$, $SD = 0.142$) (see Table 3).

The third quartile reached or approached the operational threshold of 0.70 only for toxicity ($Q3 = 0.736$), profanity ($Q3 = 0.784$), and insult ($Q3 = 0.699$). This indicates that only the upper segment of Islamophobic hate messages displayed high levels of explicit toxicity. Perspective API scores also varied across the exploratory subcategories of Islamophobic discourse. The highest toxicity-related scores were observed in explicit hostility, race/ethnicity, and classism/aporophobia. Explicit hostility obtained the highest mean scores for toxicity ($M = 0.666$), insult ($M =$

0.637), and profanity (M = 0.648). Race/ethnicity also showed relatively high scores for toxicity (M = 0.555) and insult (M = 0.536), while classism/aporophobia showed elevated scores for toxicity (M = 0.539), insult (M = 0.521), and profanity (M = 0.470). These results suggest that Perspective API is more sensitive to categories involving overt verbal aggression, insult, and profanity than to frame-based categories such as invasion, socio-economic burden, or illegality.

Table 3. API Perspective Attribute Descriptions in the Hate messages

		TOXICITY	S_TOXICITY	ID_ATTACK	INSULT	PROFANITY	THREAT
N	Valid	5919	5919	5919	5919	5919	5919
	Missing	104	104	104	104	104	104
M		.526	.274	.308	.499	.421	.084
SD		.242	.233	.197	.252	.344	.142
Mín		.002	.0001	.001	.006	.008	.005
Máx		.982	.993	.952	1	.985	.929
Perc.	25	.338	.023	.113	.307	.079	.010
	50	.507	.232	.288	.513	.321	.020
	75	.736	.458	.460	.699	.784	.073

Source: Own elaboration

Taken together, these findings answer RQ3 by showing that messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech receive significantly higher Perspective API scores than non-hate messages. At the same time, the fact that most Islamophobic hate messages do not reach high-probability toxicity thresholds supports the argument that generic toxicity scores capture explicit verbal aggression more effectively than indirect, coded, or frame-based Islamophobic hostility.

RESULTS OF THE BERT CLASSIFIER

To evaluate automatic detection of Islamophobic hate speech, we fine-tuned a multilingual BERT-based classifier on the human-coded binary labels. The test set included 2,873 messages, with moderate class imbalance: 1,844 messages classified as Islamophobic hate and 1,029 messages classified as non-hate. Discarded messages were excluded from training and evaluation. Under a 0.5 decision threshold, the model achieved an overall accuracy of 0.89. For the Islamophobic hate class, precision was 0.97, recall was 0.85, and F1-score was 0.91. For the non-hate class, precision was 0.78, recall was 0.96, and F1-score was 0.86. Macro-averaged precision, recall, and F1-score were 0.88, 0.90, and 0.88, respectively. Weighted averages were 0.90 for precision, 0.89 for recall, and 0.89 for F1-score (see Table 4).

Table 4. Model evaluation metrics for hate vs. non-hate.

Class	Precision	Recall	F1-score	Support
0 (hate)	0.97	0.85	0.91	1844
1 (non_hate)	0.78	0.96	0.86	1029
Accuracy			0.89	2873
Macro avg	0.88	0.90	0.88	2873
Weighted avg	0.90	0.89	0.89	2873

Source: Own elaboration

These results indicate that the classifier performed strongly in detecting Islamophobic hate speech compared with human annotation. The model was especially conservative when assigning the hate label: it achieved very high precision for Islamophobic hate, indicating a low false-positive rate, but this came at the cost of some false negatives, as reflected in a recall of 0.85. Conversely, the non-hate class showed very high recall but lower precision. Accordingly, RQ4 is answered as follows: the multilingual BERT-based classifier achieved strong out-of-sample performance in detecting Islamophobic hate speech, with high overall accuracy and particularly high precision for the hate class. This profile may be useful for monitoring tasks in which avoiding false accusations of hate speech is especially important. However, if the goal is to reduce missed hate cases, future implementations could calibrate the decision threshold using validation data and precision-recall curves or explore class weighting and additional balancing strategies.

DISCUSSION

This study examined Islamophobic hate speech in Spanish-language tweets about Islam and Muslims in Spain between 2010 and 2022. By combining human annotation, exploratory discursive categorization, Perspective API toxicity scores, and a multilingual BERT-based classifier, the article contributes to the analysis of Islamophobic hate speech in this corpus and to the discussion of methodological challenges involved in detecting it automatically. The results are consistent with the argument that Islamophobic hate speech cannot be reduced to overt toxicity. Some messages contain explicit insults, profanity, threats, or direct derogation, but others operate through frame-based forms of hostility that associate Islam and Muslims with invasion, cultural threat, criminality, racialization, gendered oppression, or socio-economic burden. This pattern aligns with previous research showing that anti-Muslim hostility may be expressed through both direct abuse and more indirect or contextual forms of Islamophobic

discourse (Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2018; Vidgen & Yasseri, 2020). The descriptive results show that 28.2% of the corpus was classified as Islamophobic hate speech. This proportion indicates that, within the keyword-based Twitter/X corpus analyzed, anti-Muslim hostility represented a substantial part of the conversation captured by the data collection strategy. Longitudinally, the highest number of Islamophobic hate messages appeared in 2021, followed by 2020 and 2022. This concentration suggests that the final years of the period studied were especially visible in the corpus, although the study does not claim that Twitter/X activity directly reflects public opinion in Spain. Rather, the corpus should be understood as a large-scale sample of public platform discourse about Islam and Muslims.

The analysis of exploratory subcategories provides further insight into the internal variation of Islamophobic hate speech. The most frequent pattern was explicit hostility, followed by invasion, cultural threat, criminality, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic burden. These findings are consistent with studies showing that Islamophobic discourse often combines direct verbal aggression with broader frames that construct Muslims as threatening, foreign, inferior, incompatible, or undeserving of equal belonging (Meer, 2013; Taras, 2013; Zempi & Awan, 2019). Importantly, the subcategories were not mutually exclusive. A single message could simultaneously represent Muslims as invaders, criminals, welfare burdens, and threats to Western values. The co-occurrence analysis therefore suggests that, in this corpus, Islamophobic discourse often operates through combinations of frames rather than through isolated themes.

Among these frames, invasion appears as a prominent pattern. It was one of the most frequent categories and one of the most common in co-occurrence with race/ethnicity, socio-economic burden, cultural threat, criminality, and illegality. This suggests that invasion may function, in this corpus, as a flexible interpretive frame capable of linking demographic fear, territorial anxiety, cultural replacement, and security concerns. This interpretation is consistent with research on invasion metaphors and anti-refugee or anti-Muslim discourse, where migration and religious diversity are represented as threats to national continuity or social cohesion (Gualda & Rebollo, 2020; Gorman & Culcasi, 2020). Race/ethnicity also plays an important role, as it points to the racialization of religion: Islam is treated not only as a religious identity, but as a visible, inherited, and culturally fixed marker associated with Arabness, Moroccanness, foreignness, migration status, skin colour, or ethnic origin. In this sense, the results are consistent with approaches that conceptualize Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism rather than as religious intolerance alone (Meer, 2013; Meer & Modood, 2009; Taras, 2013).

The findings also clarify the relationship between Islamophobic hate speech and toxicity. Perspective API scores were significantly higher among messages classified as Islamophobic hate speech than among non-hate messages across all

measured attributes. This indicates that human-coded Islamophobic hate speech often overlaps with toxicity-related language. However, the descriptive distribution of scores shows that most Islamophobic hate messages did not reach high-probability toxicity thresholds. Only the upper quartile reached or approached the operational threshold of 0.70 for toxicity, insult, and profanity. In this corpus, therefore, Perspective API scores appear more aligned with explicit verbal aggression than with coded, indirect, or frame-based hostility. This interpretation is consistent with the distinction between toxicity as an operational moderation category and hate speech as a target-specific form of discriminatory discourse (Wulczyn et al., 2017; Fortuna & Nunes, 2018; Schmidt & Wiegand, 2017).

This does not mean that Perspective API is ineffective. Rather, it suggests that generic toxicity scores should not be treated as stand-alone detectors of Islamophobic hate speech. Perspective API is useful for measuring the degree to which Islamophobic messages resemble language annotated as toxic, insulting, threatening, or identity-attacking. However, it may be less sensitive to hostile meanings that depend on context, racialization, securitization, cultural threat, or coded associations. The analysis by subcategory reinforces this interpretation. Explicit hostility obtained the highest mean scores for toxicity, insult, and profanity, followed by categories such as race/ethnicity and classism/aporophobia. By contrast, frame-based categories such as invasion, socio-economic burden, illegality, or cultural threat tended to produce lower toxicity scores, even though they were part of the human-coded Islamophobic hate subset. This pattern suggests that toxicity detection is more sensitive to surface-level verbal aggression than to discursive frames that legitimize exclusion without necessarily using abusive vocabulary.

The multilingual BERT-based classifier suggests a useful complementary approach for automatic detection. The model achieved an overall accuracy of 0.89 on the test set, with very high precision for the hate class (0.97) and strong F1 performance (0.91). This indicates that, in this test set, when the model classified a message as Islamophobic hate, it was rarely wrong. However, recall for the hate class was 0.85, meaning that some hateful messages were still missed. The model therefore behaves conservatively when assigning the hate label. This profile may be useful for monitoring contexts where false accusations of hate speech should be minimized, although future applications could calibrate the decision threshold to increase recall if the objective is to detect a larger proportion of hateful messages. These results are consistent with research showing the value of Transformer-based models for hate speech detection, while also confirming that model performance depends on the annotated corpus, the target category, and the evaluation setting (Devlin et al., 2019; Mozafari et al., 2020).

Taken together, the results support the value of combining human annotation, discursive categorization, toxicity scoring, and supervised classification. Human

annotation provides the reference classification for identifying Islamophobic hate speech. The exploratory subcategories describe internal variation within this discourse. Perspective API helps assess the overlap between Islamophobic hate and explicit toxic language. The multilingual BERT-based classifier shows that a target-specific model trained on human-coded data can perform well within this corpus. Each layer captures a different aspect of the phenomenon, and none should be treated as sufficient on its own.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that Islamophobic hate speech on Spanish Twitter/X is recurrent and diverse, combining explicit abuse with frames of invasion, cultural threat, criminality, racialization, gendered oppression, and socioeconomic burden. Generic toxicity measures capture only part of this phenomenon: Perspective API scores were higher for human-coded hate, yet many messages remained below high-probability thresholds. A multilingual BERT classifier performed strongly but assigned the hate label conservatively. These findings support context-sensitive definitions, reliable human annotation, and target-specific models. Future research should test this approach across platforms, multimodal content, and offline events.

Several limitations apply to this study. Twitter/X users are not representative of Spanish society, and platform features may shape the discourse observed. Keyword-based collection can miss-coded, visual, or unlisted content and retrieve irrelevant messages. Although binary annotation showed acceptable reliability, the exploratory subcategories were less reliable and should be treated descriptively rather than as a definitive taxonomy. Finally, Perspective API measures general toxicity rather than Islamophobic hate and may overlook contextual or frame-based hostility. The BERT classifier was trained and evaluated on this corpus, so its generalizability to other platforms, periods, countries, and varieties of Spanish remains to be tested.

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APPENDIX

OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF EXPLORATORY SUBCATEGORIES OF ISLAMOPHOBIC HATE SPEECH

This appendix provides the operational definitions used to identify the exploratory subcategories within messages previously classified as Islamophobic hate speech. These categories were coded as non-mutually exclusive labels. Therefore, a single message could be assigned to more than one subcategory when it articulated multiple forms of anti-Muslim hostility. The examples below are paraphrased and do not reproduce original user-generated content.

Exploratory subcategory	Operational definition	Main coding indicators	Paraphrased example
Socio-economic burden	Messages that represent Muslims or Muslim-coded migrants as an unfair economic cost, a burden on public resources, or undeserving beneficiaries of welfare, housing, employment, education, subsidies, or public assistance.	References to welfare abuse, public spending, jobs supposedly taken from natives, housing, or aid allegedly given preferentially to Muslims or Muslim-coded migrants, or claims that Muslims should not receive rights or resources.	The message claims that Muslim migrants receive public benefits while native citizens are neglected.
Criminality	Messages that associate Muslims or Muslim-coded people with crime, delinquency, theft, sexual violence, assault, disorder, drug trafficking, or everyday insecurity.	Generalization from alleged individual crimes to Muslims as a group, the association between Muslim identity and criminal behavior, calls for expulsion or punishment based on presumed criminality.	The message presents Muslims as naturally linked to theft, violence, or public disorder.
Terrorism	Messages that associate Islam, Muslims, or Muslim-coded people with terrorism, jihadism, radicalization, extremist violence, ISIS/Daesh, Al-Qaeda, bombings, attacks, or generalized security threats.	Use of terms such as jihad, jihadist, terrorist, ISIS/Daesh, Al-Qaeda, radical Islam, or claims that Muslims as a group support or embody terrorism.	The message generalizes terrorist violence to Muslims as a whole or treats Islam as inherently terrorist.
Invasion	Messages that represent Muslim presence, migration, religious visibility, or demographic change as a territorial, cultural, political, or civilizational takeover.	Language of invasion, replacement, occupation, Islamization, mass arrival, expulsion, border control, "go back" claims, or calls to remove Muslims from Spain or Europe.	The message frames Muslim migration as an invasion that threatens Spain or Europe.

Exploratory subcategory	Operational definition	Main coding indicators	Paraphrased example
Illegality	Messages that associate Muslims or Muslim-coded migrants with irregular migration, lack of documents, unlawful presence, or illegitimate residence.	References to undocumented status, illegal entry, border crossing, deportation, repatriation, papers, or the presumption that Muslim-coded migrants are in the country illegally.	The message assumes that a Muslim-coded person is undocumented and should be deported.
Cultural threat	Messages that represent Islam or Muslims as incompatible with Spanish, European, Western, secular, liberal, democratic, Christian, or national values.	Claims that Islam cannot coexist with democracy, freedom, secularism, gender equality, national identity, Christian tradition, or "Western" ways of life.	The message claims that Islam is incompatible with European values and should not be allowed in public life.
Gender	Messages that mobilize women's rights, the veil, burka, hijab, sexuality, family norms, feminism, or gender equality to portray Islam or Muslims as inherently oppressive, patriarchal, violent, or incompatible with liberal values.	References to Muslim women as passive victims, the veil as proof of oppression, Muslim men as inherently sexist, or accusations that feminists ignore Muslim misogyny.	The message presents Muslim women only as oppressed subjects and uses that claim to attack Islam or Muslims as a group.
Race/ethnicity	Messages that racialize Muslimness by linking Islam or Muslim identity to Arabness, Moroccanness, foreignness, skin color, ethnicity, ancestry, nationality, or inherited group traits.	Use of ethnicized or racialized labels, claims that Muslims are a fixed racial or ethnic group, references to blood, origin, skin color, Arabness, Moroccanness, or foreignness as markers of Muslim identity.	The message treats Muslims as a fixed foreign or ethnic group that can never belong to Spain.
Classism/ aporophobia	Messages that associate Muslims or Muslim-coded people with poverty, dirtiness, social inferiority, marginality, ignorance, lack of education, precarious work, or stigmatized lower-class status.	References to Muslims as poor, dirty, backward, uncivilized, socially inferior, undesirable, or associated with stigmatized occupations or spaces.	The message depicts Muslim-coded people as dirty, poor, socially inferior, or unworthy of equal treatment.
Explicit hostility	Messages that express direct verbal aggression against Islam, Muslims, or Muslim-coded people through insults, profanity, dehumanization, threats, violent wishes, or open calls for exclusion.	Direct insults, abusive language, threats, dehumanizing labels, calls to expel, harm, eliminate, silence, or exclude Muslims or Islam.	The message directly insults Muslims as a group and expresses a desire for their exclusion or harm.

Coding note: The subcategories are exploratory and descriptive. They should not be interpreted as a definitive taxonomy of Islamophobia. They were used to identify recurring discursive patterns within the subset of messages already classified as Islamophobic hate speech. Because the categories are non-mutually exclusive, coders could assign multiple labels to the same message when more than one frame or form of hostility was present.

INTERVIEW

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Why Journalism Still Matters: Interview with Professor Silvio Waisbord

Your new book (An Introduction to Journalism: Thinking Globally (Polity, 2025) makes the case for the continuing importance of journalism. At a moment defined by declining trust, platform dominance, and AI-generated content, what do you regard as the most serious challenges confronting journalism today — and why does it still matter?

Journalism confronts multiple challenges right now. One is primarily a problem of economic sustainability — the difficulty of finding a viable economic model in the digital economy. We know that funding for digital content is essentially monopolized by a few companies, and that makes it very difficult for journalism to sustain a viable funding model.

Related to that is the question of relevance, which I address in the last chapter of the book. Even journalism that can produce different kinds of news and has a more or less sustainable economic model still confronts the challenge of relevance — the risk that it simply does not matter to people. Increasingly, we see signs of journalism's diminished relevance. I would not be too dramatic and count it out; I think it still matters, for a number of reasons, and it is still relevant. But it is no longer the institution it was in the twentieth century.

That forces us, as researchers, to understand when and why journalism is still relevant, rather than making broad statements about whether journalism is or is not relevant. I don't think that is a very interesting way to frame the question. It is much more interesting to understand in what circumstances, for what publics, and for what reasons it matters what journalism covers — or fails to cover. There are no general answers to that question. What concerns me is that, for millions of people, journalism does not matter; it is not a relevant actor. It is not something they regularly check in order to understand what is going on in the world, to stay informed, or to stay entertained. Journalism has a hard time reaching publics that have effectively decided it is not relevant in their lives, with all kinds of consequences that we can discuss. So those are the two main challenges: the economic challenge and the challenge of social and political

relevance. Journalism has to find ways to remain relevant, and researchers have to understand why journalism matters.

You place economic sustainability at the center of the diagnosis. Why is the funding question so decisive — and is it indeed the most pressing of these challenges?

Advertisers have found many other platforms that are far more effective and more targeted for reaching consumers. And there is a limit to how much non-commercial funding — from the state or from philanthropy — can bankroll journalism, especially quality journalism.

At the global level, some news companies — the New York Times, the Guardian, the BBC — have a viable model and are likely to survive for the foreseeable future. But that funding model does not apply to most news organizations, because they have a very different scope and a very different readership. The situation at the global level is different from the national or the local level. News organizations need to figure out different models given the resources available to them, and given the overall collapse of the traditional funding model that existed for much of the twentieth century, whether public or private. There are probably more opportunities in wealthier countries, from either the private or the public sector, to fund different forms of journalism; in countries without significant resources, that is much more difficult.

When journalism is economically weaker, it is also easier to capture by private interests or by political and governmental interests. And when journalism is captured, it is more likely to be used as a megaphone or a propaganda tool than to be even a modestly autonomous or independent voice on the issues of the day.

How do you see artificial intelligence reshaping journalism — and should we be more concerned about its effect on how news is produced, or on how it is distributed and consumed?

There are different ways of looking at that question. One is the impact of AI on news production; the other is its impact on news distribution and news use. My main concern is news use. If people use generative AI to find out about the news, they are not likely to draw on a broad range of news sources. That is the fear many news organizations now have — the so-called zero-click phenomenon, in which people access news through a bot. They may not pay attention to the original source of the information, and they are less likely to click through to a journalistic organization's site. In some ways, this is part of journalism becoming even less visible in the eyes of audiences who use generative AI to find information every day.

There is a separate question about how AI affects news production — these are two parallel issues, and the challenges are different. But to emphasize the

point: AI primarily reinforces phenomena we have already seen — the concerns about news avoidance, about people not consuming news directly, about people getting news from non-journalistic sources. AI deepens the problems we have had for the last two decades.

Looking back across your career, which transformation in journalism or communication research has surprised you the most?

For me, it is the question of relevance — the fact that we are now questioning whether journalism matters at all. Consider this: a significant part of journalism research was built on the assumption that journalism matters. Research on framing, agenda setting, and gatekeeping — the premise was that journalism is important, and the question was to figure out how or why it is important, not whether it is relevant. In the twentieth century, the underlying premise was that journalism was unavoidable. Right now, we are, in some ways, no longer asking questions about framing or agenda setting; the question is whether it matters at all — how journalism covers, or fails to cover, a given story, and whether it gives voice to certain actors rather than others. If people ignore journalism, that research takes on a very different significance.

That is something I never thought would happen. I assumed that, for the rest of my life, journalism would be an important, relevant institution in public life, and that the question would always be the more nuanced one of how it matters. But now there are more apocalyptic voices saying that perhaps journalism does not matter, that it is not relevant. When I started doing research on journalism in the late 1980s, it never crossed anyone's mind that we would one day doubt whether journalism was relevant.

It may even amount to a paradigm shift. So much of journalism studies is anchored in the notion that journalism matters; if you take that away, you take away the relevance of the very questions that mattered precisely because we assumed it did — questions about objectivity in journalism, about advocacy, and so on. Right now, we are having a very different conversation.

If we can no longer take for granted that journalism matters, does that unsettle the conceptual and methodological foundations of the field? Are our established approaches still adequate to the questions we now face?

You cannot assume — that is exactly the point. I am skeptical of research on journalism or news that does not address the actual conditions of news use. You can run an experimental study on framing or agenda setting, but it is not clear that what holds in a controlled setting applies to the real world and to the way people actually encounter — or avoid — news. Once, we could assume that something like what happened in the experiment was probably happening in the real world too. Now, when we look at how people behave on their phones, it is very different

from a controlled experiment in which people are exposed to different frames and we measure, say, intermedia agenda setting.

So the challenge is to understand, under real-world conditions, how people engage with, disengage from, and avoid news. That is not only a methodological challenge; it is also a theoretical one. Increasingly, we need to bring it down to actual practice — both journalistic practice and the way audiences consume, fail to consume, or ignore news. That presents all kinds of challenges, because it is much more difficult to study.

I think we are at an impasse, trying to work out whether the methodologies we use are still the appropriate ones for the real-world challenges journalism faces. We can do content analysis — but if nobody is watching the news, what does that tell us?

We can still analyze media content, yet we often know very little about who produces or circulates it — especially online. What kind of research does this new environment demand?

What we need is more research that understands, for example, the lifespan of news stories — what happens, in the real world, to news stories on a given topic: how they are produced, how they circulate, how they are shared, commented on, and posted. That kind of more granular approach might give us a sense of how and when journalism is relevant — and when it is not. It forces us to address the more ontological challenges of what we do, because neither journalism nor news are static objects that you can simply manipulate and control. You can control them within a study, but that does not reflect what is happening in the real world.

Drawing on your experience leading the ICA, what are the principal challenges facing professional associations in communication and journalism today — and do you see meaningful differences between the younger and older generations of researchers?

With professional associations, the issue is partly this: what is methodologically possible may not be equally relevant in the real world of journalism. What we can do from a methodological perspective may ultimately not make a difference, because we are studying a phenomenon under our control, which is very different from the institution as it actually exists. But I remain convinced that professional associations need to nudge their members — researchers — to bridge, as much as possible, research and theoretical questions with actual practice. We cannot live in a world in which we care only about theory, or only about controlled situations, without understanding how quickly things are changing in the real world.

There are differences between the generations. Younger people are more likely to be digital natives in ways that my generation is not — even though

we continue to do research and remain embedded in the field. The question I keep asking is why our research is relevant: does it help us better understand what is happening in society, in the news industry, in journalistic practice? It is not just an intellectual pursuit, a passion for ideas; the question is whether it helps us understand the real world better. You can do very theoretical or abstract work, and that is fine, but it is not how I choose what to research. And associations need to push people to ask those questions, especially because much of what we do has direct implications for the actual practice of communication and journalism professionals. We are not divorced from practice. Other disciplines can perhaps afford purely theoretical work, because they lack such a strong connection to practice; we cannot, because we train the people who will become communication professionals and journalists. We need to work out whether the research we produce and the classes we teach help them better understand the environments they live in and the ones in which they are going to work.

The other task is bringing different perspectives together. Associations should be a meeting ground for people who would otherwise have no chance to talk to and learn from each other. We are not so different from most people — we live in our own bubbles of theory, methodology, epistemology, and topics. As much as associations support that specialized work, they also need to push us to step outside those bubbles: to listen to and meet researchers who take very different theoretical, methodological, and epistemological approaches. Associations are among the very few places that can actually do that, because we are usually very comfortable on our own islands of academic culture. I still value curiosity as a central intellectual disposition — the curiosity to ask about something we do not know much about, and to ask others: have you ever thought about this question, this topic? Professional associations, in different ways, need to provide spaces for that, for encountering new ideas on topics that are not immediately close to what we usually think about.

What positive vision would you offer for the future of media and communication research, and for its place in society?

For me, it is how dynamic everything is — that keeps me motivated. Things are changing so quickly that it affects our research, our teaching, our presentations. Everything we do sits at the intersection of technology, institutions, economics, and politics, and these four pillars are changing constantly. That constantly brings out new questions, and that is the positive side of it. It is a great time to be an intellectual and an academic and to think about these questions, because it is all work in progress. Everything we knew five, or even three, years ago is changing now. It keeps you on your feet; you cannot simply rely on old ideas. You are constantly challenged to rethink even your dearest assumptions.

That is very stimulating — sometimes too stimulating. As I said, I prize curiosity, and the question of whether there is something we are not thinking about is always interesting. To give an example: everything we knew about platforms over the last ten or fifteen years — their impact on news, on entertainment, on privacy, and on many other issues central to communication studies — we now have to rethink in light of generative AI, asking whether those conclusions still hold. That is exciting. It is a lot of work, but it is exciting.

And this has been the case almost from the beginning — even a century ago, in the 1920s, technology, economics, politics, and institutions were always changing. What has changed radically in the last two decades is the speed, and the simultaneous synergy of everything changing at once, around the world — not just within a single industry, from radio to television, or television to satellite. We are talking about major changes happening in a far more compressed period of time. It forces you to keep up with the reading and the research far more than before. I have to revise my lecture notes from last semester to see whether they still apply, because so much is changing. So you cannot run out of ideas: in our field, things are always coming at you, because you can always ask whether what you argued five or ten years ago still holds.

Silvio Waisbord was interviewed in May 2026
by Bartłomiej Łódzki

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Silvio Waisbord is a Professor at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. He is a past President of the International Communication Association (ICA). He is Editor of the *International Journal of Communication*. He is the author and editor of twenty books, as well as articles on journalism and politics, communication studies, media policy, and communication for social change. His most recent book is *Introduction to Journalism: Thinking Globally* (Polity). He served as Director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University (2020-2023). Also, he is the former Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Communication* and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*. Waisbord received a Licenciatura in Sociology from the Universidad de Buenos Aires and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of California, San Diego.

BOOK REVIEW

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NEIL THURMAN (2026). *MEDIA CHANGE: CONTEMPORARY CASES, CONSEQUENCES, AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS*, JOHN WILEY & SONS, PAGES: 272, ISBN: 978-1-394-29356-8

Neil Thurman's book *"Media Change: Contemporary Cases, Consequences, and Conceptualizations"* is an ambitious attempt to systematize knowledge about the evolution of the contemporary media landscape. Instead of succumbing to pervasive technological determinism, the author proposes a balanced view of media transformation, showing that such change is rarely entirely revolutionary. Thurman bases his analyses on an evolutionary model of media development, drawing on the concept of diffusion of innovations and biological metaphors of the life cycle (from birth through maturation to adaptation or extinction). An important element of his arguments is the original analytical framework of "The Six Rs", which posits that media processes constantly intertwine—new formats borrow from old forms, innovations face natural resistance, their implementation is sometimes slow, and the very direction of change is constantly modified by legal and economic regulations, which sometimes even leads to market reversals.

These theoretical foundations serve Thurman in conducting a meticulous analysis of a series of contemporary case studies. One of them is the phenomenon of media convergence, which the author examines using the example of the „live blog" format (live text coverage). This format fits perfectly into the routines of contemporary information consumers, especially those working in offices, offering them regular text updates that do not require playing a video or turning on the sound. The analysis reveals the dual nature of this form: on the one hand, live blogs increase journalistic transparency through numerous hyperlinks to sources, but on the other hand, they promote a culture of looser fact-checking, in which the speed of publication (often based on anonymous social media posts) takes precedence over reliability.

Another insightful research area is the evolution of television and video content consumption. Thurman successfully traces the development of technology from analog television and the first video recorders (which aroused the industry's fear of ad-skipping) to streaming platform giants like Netflix. Interestingly, the author's original research on viewer behavior (using the BBC Three VOD service as an example) clearly demonstrates that the promises of unlimited user agency on streaming platforms are greatly exaggerated and that viewers' choices

remain subject to rigorous structural constraints. It turns out that it is not necessarily numerous awards or the uniqueness of a program that determines its high viewership, but above all, the time of its availability on the platform and how effectively it is positioned and „nudged" in the service's digital interface.

An important point in Thurman's considerations is also the challenge of internet content regulation. The author focuses on the widely discussed problem, especially in democratic countries, of attempts to control minors' access to legal pornography. He points out that the global nature of the web and the ease of widespread use of technologies such as VPNs make traditionally imposed methods of censorship and technological age verification obligations exceptionally difficult to enforce, especially against entities hiding behind complex corporate structures outside a given country's jurisdiction.

The book smoothly transitions from regulatory disputes to purely economic issues, reliably analyzing the evolution of charging for online news. For decades, the press wandered—initial experiments with payments failed —until, due to the dramatic collapse of the advertising market after the burst of the dot-com bubble and, subsequently, the global financial crisis (2007-2009), publishers were forced to introduce strict paywalls. The author emphasizes that, despite this, globally, only an average of 16% of users still choose to pay for digital information. However, the research cited by Thurman reveals that publishers can influence this state of affairs by modifying the so-called teasers (text fragments visible to non-payers)—paradoxically, hiding short summaries and introductions behind the subscription wall works to the publishers' advantage and drives conversion noticeably more effectively than attaching cheap gifts to subscriptions.

Speaking of revenues, the huge analytics industry focused on audience measurement systems (readership and viewership) deserved special attention in the book. Thurman aptly defines media markets as dual-product marketplaces, in which viewers' attention, measured by specialized research systems, serves as direct currency in the advertising market. Today's multi-platform nature has spawned a widespread problem of duplicating audiences between print and websites, heavily distorting measurements. However, the most dangerous phenomenon in today's ecosystem is that new major players (such as YouTube or Facebook) reject objective auditing organizations and independently verify their own reach statistics, which increasingly outrages advertisers and creates the need for framework regulations in Europe, such as the European Media Freedom Act.

An integral part of the work is the examination of the progressing trend among prestigious publishing brands and broadcasters to abandon traditional paper media or typical linear broadcasting in favor of becoming „online-only" brands. While this type of transformation is dictated by sudden budgetary pressure and a dramatic drop in paper sales (a phenomenon highly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example), the author highlights clear differences

between media. Namely, giving up the print edition frees up substantial capital (previously absorbed by ink, paper, and logistics), whereas abandoning radio and television broadcasting (where distribution is negligibly cheap) saves public broadcasters' finances mainly through radical stripping, cuts, and reductions in the content and programming budget itself. Furthermore, working in „online-only" newsrooms inevitably ties journalists to their desks and does not always guarantee the seamless migration of existing, traditional readers to the web.

In the book's final structure, Thurman closes his comprehensive argument by examining the technological phenomena most strongly shaping the present and future of news production. The researcher touches on the threads of the growing use of automation and artificial intelligence, based on powerful generative models, in everyday editorial work. He notes changes in the field of news data gathering—traditional reporting work is increasingly subject to digital surveillance, using constant scanning and monitoring of global streams of social media posts. The publication concludes with an in-depth look at increasingly aggressive automated content personalization and its broad consequences, particularly highlighting the risk of creating deep social divisions as a result of ubiquitous filter bubbles and echo chambers.

"Media Change: Contemporary Cases, Consequences, and Conceptualizations" forms a coherent whole, successfully escaping naive technological enthusiasm. The book offers an insightful analysis of the processes taking place in the contemporary media landscape, while simultaneously providing researchers and students with useful intellectual tools to verify the myths surrounding alleged digital „revolutions".

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BOOK REVIEW

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AGNIESZKA ŁUKASIK-TURECKA & KRZYSZTOF JUREK (2025). *POSTRZEGANIE MEDIÓW SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH W KONTEKŚCIE POWSTAWANIA I ROZPRZESTRZENIANIA SIĘ PRZEKAZÓW DEZINFORMACYJNYCH* [*PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EMERGENCE AND SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION MESSAGES*]. ADAM MARSZAŁEK PUBLISHING HOUSE, TORUŃ, 109 PP. ISBN: 978-83-8415-095-5

The publication by Agnieszka Łukasik-Turecka and Krzysztof Jurek, titled *Postrzeganie mediów społecznościowych w kontekście powstawania i rozprzestrzeniania się przekazów dezinformacyjnych* [Perception of Social Media in the Context of the Emergence and Spread of Disinformation Messages], is part of the broader body of research on media literacy and the role of social media in the dissemination of disinformation. In my view, there are several reasons why this monograph is worth reading.

Firstly, the authors' academic achievements and educational backgrounds guarantee the book's high substantive quality. They are affiliated with the Faculty of Social and Technical Sciences at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Professor Agnieszka Łukasik-Turecka conducts research in the fields of social sciences, communication and media studies, political science, and public administration, whilst Dr. Krzysztof Jurek is a sociologist. Secondly, the publication's subject matter is highly topical and aligns with preparations to designate 2027 as the Year of Media Literacy. The book, therefore, reaches readers at a very opportune moment. The monograph by the Lublin-based researchers clearly highlights the issue of disinformation.

The authors have set themselves an ambitious goal: to analyze how Poles perceive social media as a space conducive to the spread of misleading content, and as a potential tool for protection against disinformation. Thirdly, the work's high methodological standards and its representative empirical findings are reasons the book is well worth reading. The content of the monograph fits within the contemporary context of media studies, including processes such as deep mediatization, digital thrownness, media consumption, and the era of algorithms and artificial intelligence. Fourthly, the authors analyze and interpret the relationships between the identified qualitative variables with appropriate rigor and objectivity. Furthermore, the value of the monograph is enhanced by the

authors' remarkable erudition, penetrating insight, and attention to proper Polish language usage.

It is worth noting that the monograph *Postrzeganie mediów społecznościowych w kontekście powstawania i rozprzestrzeniania się przekazów dezinformacyjnych*, published by Adam Marszałek Publishing House, has been reviewed by prominent experts in social science: Prof. Bartłomiej Biskup from the University of Warsaw and Prof. Robert Szwed from the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Their positive reviews may serve as an incentive to read the monograph by Łukasik-Turecka and Jurek.

The source material was collected between 2023 and 2024 by a group of researchers from Poland's leading academic institutions, through a survey using a questionnaire administered across all provinces. Respondents (N=1069) were selected using quota and stratification sampling. The use of IBM SPSS Statistics, the application of the chi-square test of independence, and (where a relationship between variables was demonstrated) the calculation of Cramer's V coefficient merit recognition. The authors of the monograph draw on the latest research by social scientists studying the phenomenon of disinformation – notable scholars include Katarzyna Bąkowicz, Magdalena Musiał-Karg, Raquel Recuero and Wiesława Załoga.

The book is relatively concise (109 pages in total), yet its structure is well-thought-out, logical, and coherent. The monograph consists of three chapters, a summary, a bibliography, and a list of tables, charts, and figures.

The first theoretical chapter, entitled 'Social media and their role in the creation and spread of disinformation' (pp. 5–16), discusses three key issues: the phenomenon of disinformation (including explanations of related terms such as misinformation, malicious information and fake news); the characteristics of disinformation processes on major social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram); the specific nature of disinformation on social media platforms.

Chapter Two (pp. 17–26) is devoted entirely to explaining methodological issues. The authors of the monograph demonstrate methodological self-awareness and an understanding of the importance of operationalization and conceptualization in research. This chapter specifies the research objective, methods, and procedures, as well as the characteristics of the study group (the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, their voting preferences, and their religiosity). A five-point Likert scale was used in the design of the questionnaire, whilst the quota sampling took into account two strata: place of residence by province and the urban-rural divide. Within each stratum, quotas were set for the age and gender of respondents so that the proportion of each variable in the sample corresponded to the proportion of each group in the entire adult population (data from the Central Statistical Office GUS as of 31 December 2022 was used).

Chapter Three (pp. 27–91) presents the results of the empirical research, together with statistical indicators: chi-square test of independence, degrees of freedom (df), significance level (p), and Cramer's V. The respondents' views presented in the monograph concerned the following topics: perceptions of social media in the context of disinformation; the social determinants of the perception of social media credibility in the context of disinformation; the influence of political views on the perception of social media credibility in the context of disinformation; the influence of socio-demographic and political factors on the perception of social media as a source of disinformation.

The statistical analysis by Łukasik-Turecka and Jurek offers valuable insights into the views of Polish respondents on issues relating to social media and the phenomenon of disinformation. It is noteworthy that the empirical findings show only a moderately negative view of these platforms among respondents, but a higher level of skepticism regarding the credibility of social media. The research highlights the fact that men are more likely than women to perceive social media as a space for misinformation, whilst women are more likely to engage in online social interactions.

Furthermore, young people's ambivalent attitude towards the credibility of social media has been noted: on the one hand, they can recognize manipulation; on the other, they are more susceptible to the information bubble effect and sensationalist content, which may limit their critical thinking. Higher education among respondents promotes greater awareness of the mechanisms of disinformation and a more critical attitude towards the credibility of social media. The research also demonstrated the influence of political preferences on the perception of social media as a space for false information: those with left-wing and centrist views were characterized by greater distrust of the content published there.

In order to better understand the respondents' answers, as well as the fairly significant proportion of 'hard to say' responses, I believe it would be necessary to conduct additional qualitative research, such as individual in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, which would provide a better understanding of the motivations and reasoning behind the responses. The numerical results from the statistical analysis, however important and necessary, should be treated as one of the stages preceding a qualitative exploration of social media perception in the context of disinformation. This observation does not detract from the book's substantive assessment, but rather points to additional ways of analyzing the subject matter addressed in the monograph. Moreover, the authors themselves acknowledge the limitations of the sources and methodology in the Summary, calling for further qualitative research. This demonstrates the authors' understanding of the complexity of disinformation processes in the contemporary context of ubiquitous social media (pp. 97–98).

In conclusion, the monograph *Postrzeganie mediów społecznościowych w kontekście powstawania i rozprzestrzeniania się przekazów dezinformacyjnych* deserves high praise for both its form and content. The issues addressed in the publication are undoubtedly topical and important. The book significantly enhances the cognitive value of research on perceptions of social media in Poland in the context of disinformation processes. The extensive empirical material can serve as a suitable basis for media scholars to conduct further analyses in the field of social media and the way they fulfill their informational function.

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MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY KAROL JAKUBOWICZ AWARD 2026: FIVE PUBLICATIONS NOMINATED

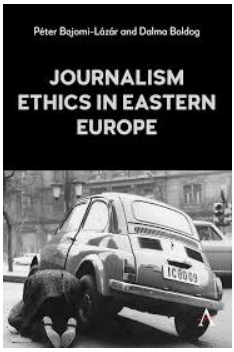
Five recent publications exploring the relationship between media and democracy have been nominated for the 2026 edition of the Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award.

The Selection Committee met on March 30, 2026, to review submissions for the 9th edition of the Award. Eligible publications were nominated by members of the Committee, editors and collaborators of the *Central European Journal of Communication* (CEJC), representatives of the International Association of Public Media Researchers (IAPMR), and previous Award recipients.

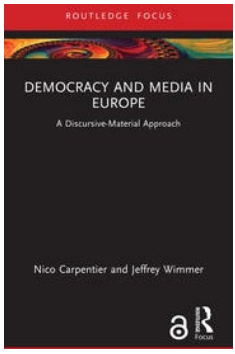
The evaluation process was guided by three key criteria:

1. methodological rigor,
2. contribution to the development of media and democracy research,
3. potential impact on media policy and democratic life.

Following this assessment, the Committee nominated the following publications:

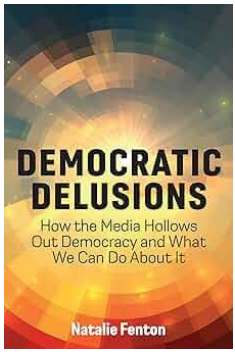


PÉTER BAJOMI-LÁZÁR & DALMA BOLDOG (2026). *JOURNALISM ETHICS IN EASTERN EUROPE*. ANTHEM PRESS.
Nominated for an in-depth and original analysis of ethical challenges in journalism in Eastern European countries in the context of media system transformation; the publication combines theoretical reflection with a comparative perspective, highlighting the importance of ethical standards for democracy and the protection of fundamental rights.



NICO CARPENTIER & JEFFREY WIMMER (2025). *DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA IN EUROPE: A DISCURSIVE-MATERIAL APPROACH*. TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

Nominated for its original theoretical contribution to research on the relationship between media and democracy through the integration of discursive and material perspectives; the publication offers a coherent analytical framework for examining the role of communication infrastructures in shaping pluralism, participation, and democratic resilience.



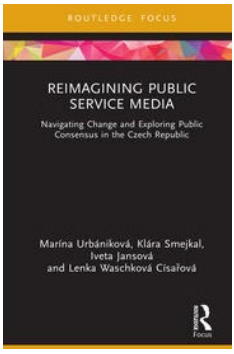
NATALIE FENTON (2025). *DEMOCRATIC DELUSIONS: HOW THE MEDIA HOLLOWS OUT DEMOCRACY AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT*. POLITY.

Nominated for the interdisciplinary and critical analysis of the relationship between media systems and contemporary democracy; the publication challenges dominant assumptions about the role of media in democratic societies and proposes alternative models of media organization and ownership, including the concept of Media Commons, pointing to directions for institutional reform and media policy.



FILIP TRBOJEVIĆ, PETER BERGLEZ, DINA VOZAB, MART OTS & ZRINJKA PERUŠKO (2025). *QUALITY OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA FREEDOM IN EUROPE: THE FSQCA APPROACH*. CENTRAL EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION, 18(1(39)), 29–50. HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.51480/1899-5101.18.1(39).686

Nominated for a comparative analysis of the relationship between journalistic quality and media freedom in Europe using the fsQCA method; the publication identifies key structural conditions supporting media freedom and points to new directions for research on media policy and journalistic professionalism.



MARÍNA URBÁNIKOVÁ, KLÁRA SMEJKAL, IVETA JANSOVÁ & LENKA WASCHKOVÁ CÍSAŘOVÁ (2026). ***REIMAGINING PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA: NAVIGATING CHANGE AND EXPLORING PUBLIC CONSENSUS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC.*** **ROUTLEDGE.**

Nominated for an empirical study of the role of public service media from the perspective of different stakeholder groups and an attempt to redefine their public value; the publication makes an important contribution to the debate on the future of public service media and their role in democratic societies.

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Established in 2018 by Małgorzata Semil-Jakubowicz and the Polish Communication Association, the Award commemorates the legacy of Dr Karol Jakubowicz, a leading scholar of media and democracy in Europe. The winner of the 2026 edition will be announced on April 28, marking the anniversary of his passing.

For more information, please visit the Polish Communication Association's website: https://www.ptks.pl/en/awards/the-media-and-democracy-karol-jakubowicz-award.

Dagmara Sidyk-Furman and Michał Głowacki
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

THE 17TH NATIONAL ACADEMIC CONFERENCE "CONTEMPORARY MEDIA: MEDIA EDUCATION". MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA UNIVERSITY, LUBLIN, POLAND, APRIL 16–17, 2026

Under the scholarly patronage of the Polish Communication Association (PTKS) and the Polish Media Education Association, the 17th National Academic Conference in the Contemporary Media series was held at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (Poland) on April 16–17, 2026. Organized by the UMCS Institute of Social Communication and Media Studies, this year's conference focused on "Media Education." The event was chaired by Professor Iwona Hofman and by Danuta Kępa-Figura, an Associate Professor at UMCS.

The conference brought together scholars representing more than twenty Polish universities and institutions, as well as participants from the University of Prešov. The program included 105 presentations delivered during three plenary sessions and twenty thematic panels. Five panels were held concurrently, while the overall structure of the conference was organized around six perspectives: didactic, social, institutional, journalistic, semiotic, and technological.

The first plenary session addressed the conceptual and interdisciplinary foundations of media education. Speakers discussed the definitions of media, information, and digital education, the changing boundaries of the field, and the well-being of digital media users. The second plenary session focused on the current state of media education in Poland and its place in school and university curricula. Of particular relevance to PTKS was the presentation on the Association's role in efforts to establish a Year of Media Education and on the scholarly and social recommendations formulated by Polish media researchers.

The didactic panels examined media competencies in school and higher education, teacher preparation, and the use of artificial intelligence in teaching. The social perspective covered media practices among different age groups, disinformation, digital inequalities, doomscrolling, and the relationship between media use and well-being. Institutional panels considered the roles of schools, libraries, nongovernmental organizations, cultural institutions, families, public service media, and local and regional media.

The journalistic perspective addressed the educational role of journalists, editors, and press officers, as well as the ethical and professional challenges of media work. Semiotic panels focused on multimodal media texts, credibility, data visualization, audio communication, advertising, and the role of values

in interpretation. The technological perspective included generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, digital accessibility, immersive media, and intelligent tools used in education and journalistic research.

The final plenary session broadened the discussion to cross-media and transmedia communication, polarization, declining trust, and the epistemic dimensions of experiencing information. Overall, the conference presented media education not as a narrow set of technical skills but as a complex process involving critical, interpretive, ethical, and social competencies. It also highlighted the importance of cooperation between academic institutions and scholarly associations, including PTKS, in shaping the future of media education.

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