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# Coping with the Murder: The Impact of Ján Kuciak's Assassination on Slovak Investigative Journalists

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## ABSTRACT

In this contribution, using a case-study approach, we focus on the assassination of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée and explore the impact and consequences that it had on the community of investigative journalists in Slovakia. By conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with top investigative journalists ( $N = 12$ ), we seek to answer two questions: How have they coped with the murder of their colleague? And, how has this incident changed their everyday journalistic practices and routines when it comes to achieving and maintaining safety? We identified 12 coping actions which, based on their function, were organised into five higher order families of coping: emotional purging; sharing and support seeking; avoidance and displacement; defiance and defence; and spreading the legacy and giving meaning to the tragedy. Regarding safety and security practices, the journalists claim that their approach has fundamentally changed. A variety of measures to stay safe, both online and offline, were adopted both on the organisational and on the individual level. However, many of these measures are not used consistently, mostly because they are not deemed necessary when covering non-sensitive topics, but also because of their impracticality in everyday journalistic work, and sceptical and fatalistic approach of the journalists to safety.

## KEYWORDS

Coping mechanisms; safety and security practices; stress; trauma; violence against journalists; Ján Kuciak; Martina Kušnírová; murder; Slovakia

## Introduction

Journalism has never been a safe profession: all around the world, journalists are harassed, intimidated, attacked, beaten, kidnapped, and even murdered. Journalists' physical and psychological safety is a public concern because violence against them breeds fear and self-censorship (Chalaby 2000). When critical reporting is silenced and the freedom of expression is suppressed, the vital role of journalism in democracy — to maintain an informed citizenry — can no longer be fulfilled.

Between 1992 and 2020, 1,370 journalists were killed in the line of duty worldwide, most often in regional conflicts in countries like Iraq, Syria, the Philippines, and Somalia (CPJ 2020). Although the murder of a journalist is extraordinary in Europe, two such

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tragic incidents occurred in recent years. In 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia, a prominent anti-corruption blogger, was killed in Malta. Just a couple of months later, in 2018, the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, were murdered in their home in Slovakia.

These murders did not occur in dangerous regions or in war zones. Both shocked the public and the journalism communities. The journalists in these countries, besides coping with the usual stress of their daily work and the distress of reporting dramatic events (i.e., car accidents, crime, violence, suicide, natural disasters), had to cope with a fundamentally new and traumatic experience: the murder of one of their colleagues and friends.

In this contribution, using a case-study approach, we focus on the assassination of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in order to explore the impact and consequences that it had on the community of investigative journalists in Slovakia. More specifically, by conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with top Slovak investigative journalists, we seek to answer two questions: How have they coped with the murder of their colleague? And, how has this incident changed their everyday journalistic practices and routines when it comes to achieving and maintaining safety?

Both areas are understudied issues. First, the violent death of a co-worker and a fellow journalist is a major life event that considerably impacts psychological well-being and can contribute to a re-evaluation of professional and personal responsibilities, and lead to changes in daily practices (Novak and Davidson 2013). Journalists are often reluctant to talk about the emotional strain of their jobs, and many find it difficult to deal with their own emotions (Carter and Kodrich 2013). They use different coping strategies to manage the effects of stress and trauma (Seely 2019; Monteiro and Pinto 2017; Monteiro, Pinto and Roberto 2016; Novak and Davidson 2013; Soerjoatmodjo 2011; Buchanan and Keats 2011; Himmelstein and Faithorn 2002). However, the literature on stress, trauma, and coping in journalism mostly focuses on the effects of covering traumatic events within war/conflict/combat journalism (e.g., Feinstein, Osmann, and Patel 2018; Feinstein, Owen, and Blair 2002; Feinstein and Starr 2015), or domestic journalism (e.g., Carter and Kodrich 2013; Backholm and Björkqvist 2010; Newman, Simpson, and Handschuh 2003). Yet, stress and trauma may not only arise as results of covering wars and accidents. To the best of our knowledge, there is no research on how journalists cope with the stress of having a colleague and friend murdered.

Second, the killing of a fellow journalist also opens several important questions regarding safety and security. This possibly affects the way that journalists perceive risks and threats, and the extent to which they feel psychologically and physically safe in their jobs. On the institutional level, it may also lead news companies to take further steps to strengthen the safety infrastructure of newsrooms. Subsequently, it may affect the everyday practices and routines of the journalists (e.g., the way they communicate with their sources and colleagues, the way they store and secure their data, the practical safety measures taken to stay safe when reporting). Research suggests that journalists differ considerably in their security practices (Tsui and Lee 2019), many of them lack awareness of the security risks (Caliskan 2019), security is not something that they always consider necessary (McGregor and Watkins 2016; Henrichsen 2020), and they are reluctant to adapt their security practices to reflect new threats despite reports of the widespread interception of communications by governments and police (Bradshaw 2017). However, the assassination of a colleague could be a powerful impetus for

strengthening security and safety measures in newsrooms. But is this really the case within the Slovak investigative community? To what extent and how did the journalists adapt their security practices?

This paper is organised as follows: We briefly describe what we know so far about the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová and the investigation into their deaths (Section 2). We review the literature on stress, trauma, and coping mechanisms (Section 3) and journalism and safety (Section 4). We proceed with descriptions of the research methodology (Section 5). We add data analysis and interpretation (Section 6 focuses on coping mechanisms and Section 7 zeroes in on safety and security practices), and concluding remarks (Section 8).

## **Setting the Scene: Investigative Journalism in Slovakia and the Murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová**

Slovakia is a small country of just under 5.5 million people that is currently ranked 33rd out of 180 countries in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index (RSF 2020). Before the assassination of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová, Slovakia experienced an almost continuous rise in the RSF ranking: it worked its way up from 44th place in 2009 to 17th place in 2017 (ibid). In this respect, there was no indication that journalists in Slovakia could be in danger, so it was all the greater a shock when the murder happened.

Slovakia has a relatively limited media market. In fact, only a handful of media outlets produce what could be called investigative journalism. Investigative journalism is mainly the domain of the most widely read nationwide broadsheet daily *Sme* (We are); the nationwide broadsheet daily *Denník N* (Daily N); the online news portal *Aktuality.sk*, which was the most visited website in Slovakia in 2019; and, until the departure of key journalists in 2018, the weekly *Trend*. The community of investigative journalists is small so the journalists know each other well, and many of them are colleagues, ex-colleagues, and friends.

Ján Kuciak (born in 1990) worked as an investigative reporter for the news website *Aktuality.sk*, where he wrote about corruption and organised tax fraud that involved businesspeople close to the then-ruling Smer-SD political party. He and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were shot dead in February 2018 in their house near Bratislava. It was the first such targeted killing of a journalist in Slovak history and it sent shockwaves throughout the public and the journalistic community. The murders sparked the biggest mass protests since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 when more than 120,000 people gathered in various Slovak cities to demonstrate in March 2018. This led to a political crisis that culminated with the resignation of Prime Minister Robert Fico and his cabinet. The public blamed the ruling government for allowing such an appalling murder to happen and it was angry because of the investigative article on which Kuciak was working at the time of his death. The story, which was finished by Kuciak's colleagues less than two days after the murder, reported on suspected links between the Italian mafia and the Slovak government, potentially implicating PM Fico himself. The story was shared with other Slovak media outlets and the international media, and, in a display of solidarity, published simultaneously.

In September 2018, the police arrested several suspects and charged them with murder. As of September 2020, three were found guilty. Two, a former soldier and a

former policeman, were jailed for 23 and 25 years respectively for double homicide. A middleman cooperated with the police, acted as a witness, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison after striking a deal with prosecutors. The data collected by the police suggest that Kuciak and his fiancée were murdered for 50,000 euros.

Most importantly, the prosecution believes that the order to kill came from high-profile businessman Marian Kočner, a charge he denies. Kočner, currently in prison for forging promissory notes, has been involved with questionable businesses (e.g., suspected financial crimes or tax fraud,) for years. He was repeatedly the focus of Kuciak's investigative reporting. After a series of Kuciak's articles, prosecutors reopened a closed investigation of one of Kočner's cases, which angered Kočner. Back in 2017, Kuciak submitted a criminal complaint against Kočner for intimidation; however, the police dismissed it without even interviewing the businessman.

Kočner was known for disliking journalists; according to one witness, Kočner stated that killing one journalist would be enough to startle the others (Kellöová 2020). During the murder investigation, it turned out that Kočner was in active contact with several key political, police, and judicial figures (including top prosecutors and judges), who helped to make him virtually untouchable by the law. Moreover, according to the police, the personal information about Kuciak that was used by the murderers (e.g., address, daily routine, habits) came from the extensive and illegal surveillance of more than 30 high-profile Slovak journalists that had been ordered by Kočner and carried out by a group of mostly former secret service agents (Prušová 2019). Kočner, through his police contacts supplied the surveillants with personal information about the journalists, including their home addresses, the names of their children and other family members, and car license plates (International Press Institute 2019). This, besides the murder itself, was yet another reason for Slovak journalists to feel unsafe and in danger.

In the beginning of September 2020, Marian Kočner and his accomplice were acquitted of charges related to the murders as according to the court, it has not been proven that they had committed the crime. As of September 2020, the verdict is not valid yet, the prosecutor appealed, and the case will move to the Supreme Court.

Even though the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová seems to be linked to organised crime and corruption, in the preceding years, the international rankings did not indicate any serious problems in this regard. On the contrary; in the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International, Slovakia maintained a relatively stable, slightly improving score: it rose from 46 points (out of 100 possible) in 2012 to 50 points in 2017 (Transparency International 2017). This shows that even countries with stable or improving media freedom or perceived level of corruption are not immune to isolated brutal attacks organised by individuals whose interests were touched upon by journalists.

## **Coping with Stress and Trauma**

Traumatic events, such as the murder of a colleague, is a major stressor which adds significantly to the already high stress levels to which journalists are subjected in their everyday work. Journalists have to cope with a competitive environment, constant time pressure, multi-tasking, and fighting for exclusive stories (Monteiro and Pinto 2017). In addition, journalists deal with the stress that arises from witnessing and covering dramatic

events, such as car accidents, murders, burglaries, violent demonstrations, the abuse of children, natural disasters, executions, and wars (Smith et al. 2015; Monteiro and Pinto 2017). Another potential source of stress stems from the intimidation and harassment related to their work, and, in the worst case, violence.

Previous studies suggest that between 80% and 100% of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic event (Smith et al. 2015). Even though most journalists exhibit resilience, some may develop psychological problems, such as depression, substance abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Feinstein, Osmani, and Patel 2018; Backholm and Björkqvist 2012; Backholm and Björkqvist 2010; Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden 2003; Feinstein, Owen, and Blair 2002).

To process stressful and traumatic experiences, journalists use various coping strategies and mechanisms. Coping is a form of stress management (Englund 2018), and it can be defined as “cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person” (Lazarus 1991, 112). There are three common distinctions for coping mechanisms (Skinner et al. 2003). An often cited categorisation by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) distinguishes between *problem-focused coping* (i.e., rational reactions, such as seeking information, analysing problems, finding a feasible solution) and *emotion-focused coping* (i.e., positive or wishful thinking, self-control, talking to friends, dissociation, flight behaviour). The second distinction contrasts *approach* and *avoidance coping* mechanisms. The approach mechanism brings the individual into closer contact with the stressors; the avoidance mechanism helps them to withdraw (Skinner et al. 2003). Finally, *behavioural coping* refers to taking action and *cognitive coping* refers to various mental strategies (Latack and Havlovic 1992). As suggested by Skinner et al. (2003), these dimensions are not mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, and most ways of coping can serve multiple functions and fit into several categories.

Although the study of coping is fundamental to an understanding of how stress affects people (Skinner et al. 2003), the knowledge on how journalists deal with occupational stressors is still limited (Monteiro and Pinto 2017). To the best of our knowledge, previous research has only examined the coping mechanisms used by the journalists who cover and report on traumatic events (e.g., Seely 2019; Englund 2018; Monteiro and Pinto 2017; Jukes 2015; Novak and Davidson 2013; Buchanan and Keats 2011). However, with the rare exception of Soerjoatmodjo (2011), who focused on the resilience process of Indonesian journalists after a bomb attack on their newsroom, we do not know much about how journalists cope with stressful and traumatic situations when they themselves or their colleagues have been the targets of aggression, threats, intimidation, and violence.

Available studies suggest that journalists often resort to denial and avoidance strategies. They operate on “autopilot” and control their emotions and memories to distance themselves from the situation (Seely 2019; Jukes 2015; Buchanan and Keats 2011). This may be a consequence of the objectivity norm that suggests that journalists should remain unemotional, detached, and “check their feelings at the door” (Seely 2019; Jukes 2015; Beam and Spratt 2009). Another commonly used mechanism is to talk about the traumatic experiences with colleagues, family members, and friends (Seely 2019; Englund 2018; Novak and Davidson 2013; Soerjoatmodjo 2011; Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden 2003).

Protective factors for dealing with stress and trauma also appear to be respecting the purpose of their occupation, the sense of professional duty (i.e., to provide the public with timely and accurate information), and identifying with the professional role (Seely 2019; Novak and Davidson 2013; Soerjoatmodjo 2011). The list of coping mechanisms also includes substance use (Seely 2019; Buchanan and Keats 2011), the use of black humour, exercise and other physical activities, avoidance strategies at work, focusing on the technical and practical aspects (Buchanan and Keats 2011), and purging emotions, such as crying (Seely 2019).

In their study of Portuguese journalists, Monteiro and Pinto (2017) found that emotion-focused coping strategies were the most frequently mentioned, followed by problem-focused strategies, and denial and avoidance strategies. Less frequently journalists resorted to denial and avoidance, which could be considered to be an favourable result, given that, according to a meta-analysis by Littleton et al. (2007), there is a consistent association between avoidance coping strategies and psychological distress, which suggests that reliance on avoidance coping is maladaptive.

### Security and Safety Practices

One of the problem-focused coping mechanisms that could be utilised by journalists after they or their colleagues become the subject of threats, surveillance, or violence, is the strengthening of security and safety practices. Achieving and maintaining security in daily journalistic work, both online and offline, is vital, not only for the journalists themselves and their families, but also for their sources and for their ability to fulfil their journalistic mission. This task can be broken down into several areas. In the online world, it includes, e.g., protection of electronic communication, password protection of personal electronic devices, secure data storage, protection of internet activities, and secure data deletion (SSD 2019). In the offline world, risk-reducing strategies include physically mailing sensitive digital data, using code names in communication and notes, contacting sources through intermediaries, citing multiple sources to create plausible deniability, and a physical defence, like installing a home alarm system, using a physical safe, and shredding paper documents (McGregor et al. 2015).

Several recent studies (Caliskan 2019; McGregor and Watkins 2016; Pew Research Center 2015) found that even though journalists acknowledge the increased risk of being hacked or surveilled, most have not done much to change their security practices and many are not adopting more advanced security tools. This has several reasons. First, journalists seem to be convinced that digital security is not necessary in their daily journalistic work, and that they need to take more advanced security measures only when they handle sensitive materials – a mental model called “security by obscurity” (Henrichsen 2020; Tsui and Lee 2019; McGregor and Watkins 2016; Bradshaw 2017). Curiously, even major security-related events, like Edward Snowden’s revelations of the widespread interception of communications by the US government and its partners, did not prompt journalists to reinforce their security practices (Bradshaw 2017; McGregor and Watkins 2016). As put by Bradshaw (2017, 344), journalists exhibit “a fatalistic resignation to the fact that certain organisations would be able to access their communications regardless of anything that they did”.

Second, another reason for the reluctance to adopt more advanced security practices is that the journalist may have poor IT skills and an inadequate understanding of

technological communication systems, including a lack of understanding of the risks (Henrichsen 2020; Waters 2018; McGregor and Watkins 2016). From the perspective of journalists, security tools have usability issues and interfere with other aspects of their journalistic work (McGregor et al. 2015).

Lastly, journalists tend to delegate security practices to sources (Bradshaw 2017; McGregor et al. 2015).

## Method

This paper aims to explore the effects of the murder of the Slovak investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, upon the community of investigative journalists in Slovakia. We seek to answer two questions: How have they coped with the murder of their colleague? And, has this incident changed their everyday journalistic practices and routines when it comes to achieving and maintaining safety (and if so, how)?

To gain an in-depth picture of the journalists' unique experiences and perspectives, we opted for a qualitative data collection strategy. We conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the top Slovak investigative journalists. The semi-structured interview is "a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of pre-determined but open-ended questions" (Ayres 2008, 810). A written interview guide with a list of topics to be covered was developed in advance (the key topics included immediate reaction of the journalists to the murder, the coping strategies they used, and the changes in their journalistic practices and routines with the focus on security and safety).

In order to qualify as a participant in this study, journalists were required to be engaged in producing investigative content as either reporters or editors at the time of the murder (one participant was on parental leave when the murder happened), and to personally know Kuciak. An intentional sample was used based on the authors' knowledge of the Slovak media landscape. Given that the community of the Slovak investigative journalists is very limited in size, we invited all the top investigative journalists to participate in the research study. None of them declined the invitation. We entered the research field through the contacts of one of the authors with an investigative journalist who worked for the *Aktuality.sk* news portal. This journalist helped to establish contacts with other members of the newsroom. Eventually, information about the research study spread through the Slovak investigative community. This became obvious when the participants we later talked to already knew some of our intended questions.

All the participants ( $N = 12$ ) work (or worked at the time of the murder) as investigative reporters ( $N = 9$ ), editors in investigative teams ( $N = 2$ ), or as an editor-in-chief ( $N = 1$ ). Two of the participants left journalism a couple of months after the murder. All of the participants knew Kuciak personally and several were friends. They were either colleagues in the *Aktuality.sk* newsroom ( $N = 8$ ), or worked for other media outlets (the daily *Denník N*:  $N = 1$ ; the daily *Sme*:  $N = 1$ ; the weekly *Trend*:  $N = 2$ ), or collaborated with Kuciak on projects. The years of experience of the six female and six male participants ranged from two to more than 25 years (the average was 15 years; 7 out of 12 participants had more than 15 years of experience). Ages ranged from 30 to 45.

Once informed consent of the participants was obtained, interviews were conducted by one of the authors in a variety of locations (mostly in newsrooms, but also in

nearby cafés or at the participants' homes) from November 2019 to February 2020. The interviews ranged in length from 45 to 180 min (the average length was 50 min). Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, as was the data being used strictly for research purposes. To ensure better anonymity for the participants, the generic feminine pronoun is used throughout the text when referring to the participants.

The participants were informed in advance about the topic and the objectives of the study. They were also informed of their right to not answer sensitive questions and to withdraw from the study any time. This right has not been exercised by any of the participants. A number of participants were overcome by emotion at some point during the interview (e.g., openly cried, teared up, needed a break). This suggests that the murder of Kuciak and his fiancée was still a sensitive topic. However, the interviews ended calmly, with several participants thanking the interviewer for the opportunity to stop and reflect on what had happened.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using the Atlas.ti software kit. Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79), was used as the method to organise and describe the data set. The authors coded the interviews and consolidated codes into several content domains. We used a deductive approach (i.e., we coded strategies and practices encountered in the literature review) and an inductive approach (i.e., the codes emerged from the data).

## Work and Talk: Coping with the Murder of a Colleague

The interviews with the Slovak investigative journalists revealed that they used a variety of coping strategies to manage the impact of the murder of their colleague and his fiancée. As depicted in [Scheme 1](#), we distinguished 12 coping actions: working; crying; talking to colleagues; talking to family members; the support of other members of the media; the support of the publishing house; public support; physical activities and other hobbies; substance use; denial; the reassessment of personal priorities and the continuation of values; and faith and religion. Based on their function, these coping actions are organised within five inductively developed, higher order families of coping (Skinner et al. 2003): emotional purging; sharing and support seeking; avoidance and displacement; defiance and defence; and spreading the legacy of Kuciak and giving meaning to the tragedy. The remainder of this section presents individual coping actions and their relation to the higher order families of coping in the order of the frequency of their occurrence.

### Turning on Journalist Mode

The most frequently mentioned action that helped the participants to get through the challenging period was **intensive work** (the only journalist who did not raise this strategy was on parental leave at the time of the murder). The period of intensive work took several months: at first, the journalists had to quickly report on what happened and provide details about the victims and their personalities. Shortly thereafter, they had to complete Kuciak's unfinished investigative article. In the following months, besides their everyday work, the colleagues of Kuciak compiled a book about his and his fiancée's life. Later, the journalists had to report on how the investigation unfolded.



**Scheme 1.** Coping strategies and the higher order families of coping. Source: the authors.

Finally, at the time the interviews were conducted, they were covering the trials of the murder suspects. On top of it all, the journalists had to deal with a number of requests for interviews and discussions on both the national and international levels, which was a new experience for a lot of them.

The participants recounted that, after the initial shock (in some cases, this took just a couple of minutes, in other cases a couple of days), they “*turned on journalist mode*”, they immersed themselves in work, and “*worked like machines*” for a couple of weeks or even months. One of the participants described the moments immediately after she learned about the murder in the following words:

I had no words. I hung up the phone. I started writing an article immediately. [...] So, more or less, I somehow had to switch from that shock mode to the journalist mode in order to write about it immediately. [...] And I didn’t even have the time to process it somehow, because the day just started to fly by extremely quickly.

Nicole

We assume that immersion in work was such a frequently mentioned coping strategy because it fulfils several important functions: avoidance and displacement, defiance and defence, and spreading the legacy and giving meaning.

First, it serves as a powerful mechanism for the **avoidance** of negative emotions and thoughts and their **displacement**. The participants described that focusing on their jobs helped them to not think about what happened and to not feel the pain. They let themselves “*get overwhelmed by work*” so that they “*did not have the time to drown in grief*”.

Second, the participants perceived intensive work as a form of their collective **defiance and defiance**. According to the available information, it seems that the main motivation of the suspected mastermind behind the murder was to silence the probing journalists and their questions and articles. Some participants stated that they felt that they had to work even harder and more diligently than ever before in order to show that they would not be intimidated and silenced. They needed to demonstrate that they would not give up no matter the harm done to one of them:

We all leaned so hard on work. We said that we needed to do even more than before, because we were actually attacked by someone. So we have to answer.

Jane

The participants also recalled that they worked so hard because they felt an obligation to inform the public about what had happened, to reveal and report the truth about how corrupt the system was, and to hold those responsible to account. They referred to a sense of professional duty and professionalism as a mechanism that helped them to manage their emotional distress. Anger, one of the main emotions (together with grief and sadness), was often mentioned as an important factor that propelled the journalists to work hard. Juliet recalled:

[...] and this is another coping strategy, professionalism, that I will not say “Jano was murdered, ouch, ouch, ouch, how sad I am”, but I say “Jano was murdered, the bastards must go to jail. We need to work harder. We need to write everything we can about them, and they shall get what’s coming to them.”

Juliet

Third, intensive work served as a mechanism by which the journalists **spread the legacy** of Kuciak. For instance, several talked about the sense of duty that led them to work hard and continue the work he had begun. Others mentioned that they started to cooperate more with their colleagues from other media outlets because the spirit of sharing and collaboration was “*what Jano would really like*”. For his colleagues from the newsroom, working on the book about him and his fiancée helped them to cope with the distressing event because it was a way to keep the memory alive. Thus, by working and spreading the Kuciak legacy, the journalists tried to **give sense and meaning** to what had happened.

### ***Sharing and Support from Colleagues, Family Members, Publisher, and the Public***

Another frequently described coping mechanisms that were mentioned by almost all the participants was sharing the pain with their **colleagues** (including superiors) and drawing support from **family members**. The journalists worked in four different newsrooms, and three of them were described as workplaces with close, warm, and family-like relationships. Several stated that the trauma they had experienced brought them even more

together. As a cathartic moment, journalists from the Aktuality.sk news site often mentioned Kuciak's funeral. They travelled together in a bus booked by the publishing house, they cried together, and they reminisced about their murdered colleague.

For some, sharing and discussing the murder with their colleagues was more important in terms of coping than talking to their family members. They felt that, unlike their spouses, their colleagues actually "*experienced the same thing and know how it feels*". Others preferred talking to colleagues because they did not want to burden their families.

When you go through such trauma together, with a group of people, you will never forget it. That will stay in that relationship. [...] You don't even want to talk about it with anyone else, you want to talk about it with exactly the same people as you, who could actually have been in Kuciak's place as well, if Kočner had planned it differently.

Nicole

Besides talking to their colleagues from the newsroom and family members, two thirds of the participants also mentioned that **support and solidarity from their colleagues from other media** helped them to cope with the distress. The murder and the need to deal with it integrated and united the Slovak investigative community. The journalists became less competitive. They now share their information and help each other more often, and they are now better friends and more often in touch. They formed an investigative team (which also added reporters from abroad) that was named All for Jan and that published dozens of articles. The solidarity was also expressed by wearing a badge with Kuciak's picture and the words "All for Jan". Journalists from virtually all of Slovak media, as well as many members of public, wore the badge.

A quarter of participants stated that the **support of their publishing house** and the general support of the public helped them. Two publishing houses offered their employees significant support in terms of security and safety, and legal services. The journalists also appreciated the warm approach, the solidarity, and the support of their managers. In one case, the publisher provided the services of a psychologist. None of the participants mentioned using it, though some regretted it retrospectively in the interviews. When it comes to **public support**, the journalists appreciated that "*the murder of a journalist didn't leave anyone cold*", people "*woke up*" and "*found courage*", and organised mass demonstrations. The participants felt that the people stood behind them, thanks to which they "*did not feel alone*" and they knew that "*they were in it together with the whole country*".

All of the above — talking to colleagues and family members, the solidarity of other members of the media, the support of their publishing house, and public support — served a common function: to **share** the trauma and the pain with other (close) people and to draw strength from their **support**.

### ***Physical Activities and Other Hobbies, Substance use, and Denial***

Besides intensive work and talking to colleagues and family members, all the participants mentioned **physical activities and other hobbies** (in one form or another) as a coping action that helped them to relax and deal with the stress and trauma. Running, playing football, hiking, playing tennis, doing yoga, dancing, listening to music, and travelling were mentioned. The main function of this coping mechanism was to avoid thinking about what had happened. It allowed the journalists to mentally remove themselves

from the newsroom, de-stress, and think about different things. We named this higher order of coping: **avoidance and displacement**.

Other coping mechanisms whose function was avoidance and displacement were substance use and denial (in addition to intense work noted above). **Substance use** mostly took the form of drinking alcohol. It did not only fulfil the function of pain relief and dulling the pain, but it also served as an agent of socialisation that was closely linked to the support among colleagues. One third of the participants mentioned that in the aftermath of the murder, they went to pubs after work more often than before, reminisced about Kuciak, and discussed what had happened. **Denial** was mentioned just as frequently. The journalists explained that they actively tried to “*think of other things*”, “*drive away unpleasant thoughts*”, “*avoid thoughts of it*”, “*not dissect my feelings and emotions*”, and even to “*tell myself that (Ján) is not really dead*”.

### ***Crying (Purging Emotions)***

Apart from avoidance and denial, another way the journalists dealt with negative emotions was purging in the form of **crying**. More than four-fifths of the participants admitted that they cried after the murder, many of them repeatedly, both immediately after they learned about the assassination and several weeks and months later. Some started to cry in the course of the research interviews. The participants acknowledged crying not only in private, but also in public, mostly in front of their colleagues (or together with them). Crying, as a cathartic behaviour, served as a mechanism for **purging emotions** and, in some cases, as an integrative moment that strengthened solidarity among colleagues.

Reporter Kate recalled the moments after she learned of the double homicide:

[At first] I didn't really want to believe it. I thought they were kidding me, so I sat down at the computer, opened the Aktuality.sk website and there was an article that Jan had been murdered. And at that moment, I basically fell apart and I know I cried for a long time until a colleague, who was taking medication for depression, offered me lexaurin or something. Which calmed me down.

Kate

### ***Reassessment of Personal Priorities and Continuation of Values***

Lastly, the journalists tried to cope with the traumatic event by attempting to **give meaning** to it. Engaging in intensive work was a coping mechanism in itself, but it also served the purpose of **spreading Ján Kuciak's legacy** (e.g., by finishing his last article and publishing it simultaneously in various domestic and international media outlets, by describing his life and values in a book, by cooperating with other media in the spirit that he would have liked, by holding the powerful to account, by covering the investigation and the trial of the suspects). Almost half of the participants noted that the murder led them to **reassess their personal values and priorities** and that they actively tried to **spread the values of Ján Kuciak**.

For instance, Vanessa described how she tried to learn from the situation, how the murder made her reconsider the priorities of her life, and how sorry she was for not taking the time to go for a beer with Ján, as they had planned:

You reconsider your priorities. Since then I have been trying not to put things off when I have to meet someone, unlike with Ján and that beer that I had planned to have with him. [...] You realize that life has a beginning and an end, and you should not put things aside and be with your family. [...] I try more often to apologize when I do something to my family and to think about it. I've reorganised my priorities a lot.

Vanessa

Another mentioned that they think of Kuciak when they face a personal or professional dilemma, and the memory of him and his values helps them to make the right and brave decisions. Besides the re-evaluation of personal values and priorities, some participants explicitly mentioned that they tried to come to terms with what happened by attempting to live by the values that Kuciak stood for and spreading them further. For Camille, this was the most important coping mechanism:

What helps me the most [...] is to continue the legacy of the person who died. [...] So, hey, I think continuing the legacy is basically what, now I'm going to say it so exaggeratedly, what kind of leads us to that immortality, in quotes. Other people will continue what we did.

Camille

In a similar vein, Mary revealed that she transformed Kuciak *"into a moral authority, into a moral imperative"* that affects how she behaves. She feels as if Kuciak is still present, and this helps her to cope with his death.

[The best strategy is to] take from the person who left the best, to materialise it, and to carry it in yourself. [By doing this] you realize that, even if it sounds pathetic, that this person did not die, because you can spread who he was further on to some extent.

Mary

For other participants, the immortality motive sprang from their **faith and religious beliefs**, according to which life continues even after death. This belief, along with prayer, helped them to overcome the difficult period.

Finally, some participants tried to give meaning to the murder not only on a personal level, but also on a societal level. For instance, according to Vanessa, it was supposed to wake society and mobilise it to fight against corruption and other negative phenomena:

[...] things happen because they have to happen. In a way, I believe in this, that this was supposed to show us something. And the best we can do, journalists and society as a whole, is to not forget the event, because otherwise we will allow other villainous things to happen.

Vanessa

## Caution and Fatalism: Changes in Security Practices

Besides coping strategies, the second topic under scrutiny was the change in security and the safety practices of the journalists. Based on previous research, it seems that journalists are often reluctant to adapt their security practices to reflect new threats, despite reports of the widespread interception of communications by the government or police (Bradshaw 2017). However, a direct and brutal attack on a colleague and his partner can be a much more powerful impetus than the general awareness of abstract threats. In this

section, we focus on the extent to which the journalists feel safe after the murder of their colleague and the revelation that they were illegally surveilled. We then analyse the changes in security and safety practices that they undertook.

Almost all of the participants admitted that, at some point after the murder, they felt unsafe and in danger. Those who expressed these concerns mostly revealed that they were not as worried about themselves as they were of their family members, and that they felt guilty for exposing them to a potential danger (some mentioned that their partners and spouses blamed them for the additional danger). This is understandable, given that not only Kuciak himself was killed but his partner was also a victim. Nevertheless, no one admitted that they thought about leaving the profession because of safety concerns; on the contrary, they felt a commitment to continue.

The participants described various manifestations of fear and anxiety that they experienced, especially in the aftermath of the murder, like nightmares, sleep disorders, compulsive recurrent images of attacks on themselves or their friends and family, repeated urges to check that the doors and windows in their homes were locked, and panicked fear for their loved ones when they did not immediately answer the phone. Marion described how scared she felt the first night after she learned about the murder:

[And then] the shock and fear were actually overcome with sadness and I cried. I cried for about an hour and looked at the blinds. I imagined that someone was roping down from the roof of the house. That he would break the window and that he would shoot us all.

Marion

These expressions of fear and anxiety seemed to be most intense immediately after the murder. At present, the majority of the participants declare that they feel safe. However, several of them admitted that they had to "*rationaly convince themselves*" that they were not in danger. They mentioned the arrest of the suspects as an important moment in this respect. As part of their rational reasoning, they expressed the belief that the murder of journalists is extremely rare in Slovakia, and that now everybody sees that the killing of a journalist actually does not stop scrutiny and criticism. On the contrary, it strengthens it.

No one will ever do that again. It was investigated. Kočner's businesses are over. He's in jail and will be there for the rest of his life. No one will ever kill journalists again. [...] Kočner, who was probably behind the murder, made the biggest mistake of his life and no one will ever do anything like that again and I have nothing to fear.

Juliet

Besides rationalisation, some journalists also resorted to black humour and fatalism when dealing with the sense of danger. They pointed out that, in the end, there is nothing they can do because if someone decides to kill them, they will do it and there is no way to defend against it. For instance, Nicole said she is not afraid but she "*jokes quite often that they will kill me*" and that she is "*reconciled to faith*".

Given that a significant proportion of the participants expressed concerns about the safety of themselves and their families, it is not surprising that everyone stated that they changed their behaviour when it came to security and safety. Curiously, although the strengthening of security and safety practices could be one of the problem-focused mechanisms that the journalists used to cope with the stressful and traumatic event,

none of them indicated that it was helpful in managing their thoughts and emotions related to the murder.

The journalists declared that *“the approach to security has fundamentally changed”* and that they are *“definitely more careful”* than they were before the murder. This became evident not only at the individual level, but also at the organisational level (i.e., in the newsrooms). According to the participants, their sources also now approach security more carefully (e.g., use email encryption, more carefully choose a place for a personal meeting).

Regarding the organisational level, the participants from three out of the four newsrooms said that the police provided them with a panic button and that, for some time, some of them were personally protected by police officers (or that police patrols were reinforced around their places of residence). In the *Aktuality.sk* newsroom, the publisher arranged for security training for the staff that was led by a foreign security expert, who also checked on and set up security processes. The publisher also hired a private security company to guard the newsroom, and tightened entry control measures. A participant from a different newsroom also mentioned that their publisher offered her the services of a private security company, but she decided not to use them.

On the individual level, the majority of the participants mentioned four main changes in their security and safety practices. First, almost all of them declared that they were more careful when it came to their **personal safety in the offline world**. For instance, they watched to see whether they were being followed (either while walking or driving a car).

I definitely look around more often. I live on a pretty quiet street. So when I see a suspicious person there, I take a picture of him or something [laughs]. So, yes, I look more at the people around me. But I’m not a professional, so I can’t tell if someone is following me or not.

Nicole

Some participants also revealed that they had their offices, apartments, and cars checked for wiretapping devices. Other safety measures included instructing family members to use encrypted communication, warning family members to not post the photos of their children on social networks, carrying pepper spray at all times, being more careful to check whether the windows and doors are locked when leaving their homes, and taking different routes from home to work and back.

Second, the majority of the participants described that they started using various tools to **encrypt their communication**, or that they used these tools more often than before. Instead of SMS or Facebook Messenger, almost all of them now use the encrypted messaging service Signal. Significantly fewer participants use tools for email encryption (mostly ProtonMail).

Third, the journalists are more careful in their **contacts with (potential) sources**. They meet their sources face-to-face less often, especially when the person is a new contact and they do not yet know each other. They reject suspicious meeting proposals (e.g., when a source claims to have important information but is only willing to meet abroad). They are more cautious when choosing a meeting place (i.e., they meet in public places) and, in sensitive cases, they prefer not to go to meetings alone and bring another person.

Four, the majority of the participants noted that they are now more likely to resort to **face-to-face communication** rather than using phones or emails when they need to discuss sensitive topics with their colleagues or other actors.

Other safety measures were mentioned less often. In some newsrooms, journalists who work on sensitive topics can use a generic (editorial) email account that is shared by all of the reporters and sign emails with the name of the medium outlet so that respondents do not know who is asking the questions. Similarly, they can use a generic (editorial) cell phone so that the telephone number cannot be linked to a specific person. Some newsrooms have a rule that high-risk topics are covered in teams rather than by individual journalists, and they declare this approach publicly to make it clear that harming an individual will not stop the publication of the articles. Also, in some newsrooms, the journalists have the option to not sign their articles with their own name, but in the name of the medium (however, only one participant admitted using it).

Besides using tools to encrypt communication, other (and less often mentioned) changes in digital security and safety practices included disk encryption, the use of cloud storage for data so that it cannot be destroyed, the improvement of data backup security, the creation of stronger and safer passwords, having an extra secure computer that is kept offline, using USB sticks to transfer data instead of sending them via email, and entering sensitive articles into the content management system at the last possible moment.

Although the list of security and safety measures mentioned by the journalists may seem extensive and impressive, some participants openly pointed out that these changes have not been completely adopted. They were sceptical about whether they were really necessary and effective. For instance, Nicole refused a panic button offered by police because *“she would be dead by the time she pressed it”*. Similarly, Martha questioned the hiring of a private security company, saying that *“they would shoot us all here by the time they would come”*. Juliet refused to use the editorial phone instead of her private cell phone because *“if someone wants to kill me, it won’t help me that they don’t have my phone number”*. Besides scepticism and fatalism, other reasons for not adopting stricter safety and security practices, or for not using them consistently, were that they are time-consuming, impractical in everyday journalistic work, and not necessary because the majority of topics are not that sensitive. Thus, some participants concluded that *“the only measure that lasted is the encryption of communication”* and that *“nothing else lasted for more than two weeks”*.

## Concluding Remarks

This case-study, which was based on semi-structured interviews with top Slovak investigative journalists, sought to answer two questions: How have they coped with the murder of their colleague? And, how has this incident changed their everyday journalistic practices and routines when it comes to achieving and maintaining safety?

First, the Slovak investigative journalists used a variety of coping strategies to manage the impact of the murder of their colleague and his fiancée. We identified 12 coping actions which, based on their function, were organised into five inductively developed, higher order families of coping (Skinner et al. 2003): emotional purging; sharing and support seeking; avoidance and displacement; defiance and defence; and spreading the legacy of Kuciak and giving meaning to the tragedy.

The most frequently mentioned action that helped the participants to get through the challenging period was intensive work. In line with the findings of Seely (2019), Jukes (2015), and Buchanan and Keats (2011), our research suggests that focus on work (and

the journalistic need to stay detached in order to report the news) helps journalists to control their thoughts and emotions. The sense of purpose, professional duty, and a strong identification with the professional role are other factors that helped the journalists, as previously described by Seely (2019), Novak and Davidson (2013), and Soerjoatmodjo (2011). Besides intensive work, other frequently described coping mechanisms were sharing the pain and talking with colleagues (including superiors); drawing support from family members (in accordance with Seely 2019; Englund 2018; Novak and Davidson 2013; Soerjoatmodjo 2011; Pyevich, Newman, and Daleiden 2003); resorting to physical activities and other hobbies (as identified by Buchanan and Keats 2011); and crying (in line with Seely 2019). Our research also supports the findings of Seely (2019) and Buchanan and Keats (2011), according to which journalists are hesitant to seek psychological treatment. Even though the services of a psychologist were actively offered by the publisher of *Aktuality.sk*, none of the participants admitted to using it, even though some expressed that they should have.

While the majority of the coping actions had already been described in previous research which explored stress that resulted from reporting on traumatic events, some of the coping actions that we identified seem to be specific for coping with the stress that results from violence against journalists. In this respect, important mechanisms that helped the journalists to cope with the murder were: spreading the values that Kuciak stood for and giving meaning to the tragedy, mainly through intense work (e.g., by finishing his last article and publishing it simultaneously in various domestic and international media outlets, by describing his life and values in a book, by cooperating with other media in the spirit that he would have appreciated, by holding the powerful to account, by covering the investigation and the trial of the suspects) and by the reassessment of personal values and priorities.

Some coping strategies identified in the literature were not raised by our participants. The use of black humour, although normally widespread in the newsrooms according to the journalists we talked to, was largely avoided with respect to this case due to gravity of the event and the personal character of the loss. Also, avoidance strategies at work (Buchanan and Keats 2011) were not used; on the contrary, the journalists worked more than before because they understood it to be their duty towards the victims.

All in all, our findings seem to be in line with the research of Monteiro and Pinto (2017), according to which journalists use potentially maladaptive denial and avoidance strategies less frequently than emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies. However, this should be interpreted with caution, as we fully agree with Skinner et al. (2003) that the dimensions of coping are not mutually exclusive and that most ways of coping can serve multiple functions (see multiple purposes of intense work as a coping action).

The second overall question of this paper were changes in the safety and security practices of the journalists. The participants unanimously agreed that their approach to security and safety had fundamentally changed, although, rather surprisingly, nobody mentioned it as a coping mechanism that would help them to manage their thoughts and feelings after the murder. Almost all of the participants admitted that, at some point after the murder, they felt unsafe and in danger, and feared for themselves and their families. At present, the majority declares that they feel safe, but they had to use various techniques to combat the fear (e.g., rationalisation, black humour, fatalism).

Security and safety measures adopted on the organisational level included police protection, panic buttons, security training, checking and establishing security processes in the newsroom, hiring a private security company to guard the entry to the newsroom, and tightening entry control measures. On the individual level, we identified four major changes that were described by most of the participants: enhancing personal safety in the offline world; the encryption of communication (mostly for mobile phones, much less frequently emails); a more careful approach to (potential) sources; and resorting to face-to-face communication whenever possible. A variety of other measures to stay safe, both online and offline, were raised, although less frequently.

Thus, our findings go against the results of several recent studies (Caliskan 2019; McGregor and Watkins 2016; Pew Research Center 2015) that found that even though journalists acknowledge the increased risk of being hacked or surveilled, most have not done much to change their security practices and many have not adopted more advanced security tools. It is evident that a specific act of violence against a journalist is a much stronger impetus for improving safety and security practices than the abstract threat of being hacked and surveilled.

At the same time, despite the severity of this event, the journalists showed clear signs of a mental model called “security by obscurity” (Henrichsen 2020; Tsui and Lee 2019; McGregor and Watkins 2016; Bradshaw 2017). Some openly admitted that the changes they mentioned were not lasting, that they were not applied consistently, and that stricter safety and security measures are used only when dealing with sensitive data and topics. Other reasons for their reluctance to systematically use safety and security measures include issues with usability, interference with other aspects of their journalistic work (as identified by McGregor et al. 2015), and a significant amount of scepticism and fatalism that results in the attitude that what will happen will happen (as previously described by Bradshaw 2017). Unlike in previous research (Henrichsen 2020; Waters 2018; McGregor and Watkins 2016), no one mentioned poor IT skills as a barrier in this respect.

Besides adding to previous literature on the coping mechanisms and security and safety practices, our research shows how deep and pervasive the consequences of violence against a journalist can be, both in the private and the professional lives of fellow reporters. Although the Slovak investigative journalists showed remarkable resilience and courage in the aftermath of the murder of their colleague, their stories about how difficult it was (and still is) to cope with such an extreme event — including the stress, trauma, and fear they experienced — serve as a strong reminder for the need to effectively protect journalists.

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