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Identifying and Understanding Anti-Immigration Disinformation

A case study of the 2018 Swedish national elections

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand to what extent and how anti-immigration disinformation was utilised in Swedish online news media before the 2018 Swedish national elections. Disinformation is intentionally misleading or false information that benefits the creator and aims to influence how people think, feel and act regarding a certain issue. The analytical framework used in this study was based on theory and previous research. Disinformation can adopt different strategies: *constructive, disruptive* or *distractive*. Research also suggests that disinformation can be categorized into different types: *fabrication, manipulation, misappropriation, propaganda, satire* and *parody*. This study analyzed 123 articles from different online news media from ten days before the election up until election day. Using qualitative content analysis this study showed that 20 percent of the articles contained anti-immigration disinformation. All of those articles were found in far-right online news media where almost 50 percent of the published articles during the examined time period contained disinformation. All different types were found, but misappropriation, fabrication and propaganda were most common. About half of the articles containing disinformation used a constructive strategy and about one third used a disruptive strategy. A bit more than one third of the articles had a combination of two or more types and strategies. The results indicate that disinformation can indeed constitute a problem, especially for those who seek information on far-right platforms. This study unveils a polarized debate on immigration with a lion's share of the disinformation coming from far-right online news media, while the mainstream media only publish very few critical articles on immigration. As research shows that a negative framing of immigration can affect attitudes, and by extension voting behaviour, further research to examine the effects of anti-immigration disinformation on voter behaviour and election results is needed. Especially in light of a diminished trust in democratic institutions, a growing demand for populism and increasing support for anti-immigration parties.

Keywords: disinformation, immigration, immigrants, elections, media, far-right, populism, polarization

Introduction

You look at what is happening last night in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers. They're having problems like they never thought possible.

Donald Trump, 18 February 2017

It turned out that this comment, which confused a lot of people since nothing particular happened in Sweden on the referred to night, was based on an interview on Fox news where a filmmaker named Ami Horowitz, who had shot a documentary on the subject, said that Sweden was facing an unprecedented crime wave caused by Muslims and immigrants. Horowitz's claims in his film and following interviews turned out to be strongly biased and even dismissed as nonsense. Nonetheless, a Russian news crew turned up in a Swedish suburb bribing citizens to stage a riot in order to support the story. Unfortunately, a real Danish radio news crew happened to be recording nearby and caught the Russian fake news team filming their make-believe riot. Meanwhile in the US, Fox News invited "Swedish defense and national security adviser" Nils Bilt who confirmed in his interview the grave situation in Sweden concerning immigration and crime. Only, it turned out Nils Bilt was actually former convict Nils Tolling who had no connection whatsoever to the Swedish military or security sector (Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p.123). The Washington Post columnist Anne Applebaum summarized: "A fake film inspired the president to cite an imaginary crisis, the existence of which was confirmed by a fake expert – and which now inspired another television team to try to create a real crisis using real people (in a neighborhood crawling with both real and fake journalists) to make it all seem true." (Applebaum, 2017, The Washington Post).

Disinformation is intentionally misleading or false information that benefits the creator somehow (Weedon et al., 2017, p.5). The goal of disinformation is to influence how people think, feel and act regarding a certain issue. Often but not always occurring before, during or after elections to undermine peoples' confidence in authorities and government, increase divergence between groups and decrease cohesion in society in order to influence it more easily and enhance one's own agenda (MSB, 2018, p.11).

Research indicates that the international smear campaign up to the 2018 national Swedish elections has been extensive (Colliver et al., 2018, p.34). Using narrative warfare and disinformation campaigns online, foreign powers and international far-right movements have tried to portray Sweden as a country in crisis verging on civil and ethnic war. Due to accepting more immigrants per capita than any other OECD country the past years Sweden has become an easy target for the promotion of anti-immigrant agendas (ibid, p.10).

But it is not only foreign actors that use information influence techniques like disinformation to undermine democracy and influence elections. What about when the source of false and misleading information is in fact domestic? Hedman et al. (2018, p.2) states that Swedes shared more fake news on Twitter during the election than any other European election studied and that eight out of ten sources had Swedish origin. Another study indicated Swedish far-right was especially active spreading anti-immigration sentiments during the election in 2018 (Colliver et al., 2018, p.14-16).

While only 47 percent of the electorate retrieved political information online during the election in 2014, 71 percent used online sources to find political information before the election in 2018 (The Internet Foundation, 2018, p.3). Polls have revealed that questions regarding refugees and immigration were amongst the top three most important political topics to voters during the election in 2018 (DN, 2018). And while by no means conclusive, it is puzzling that 50 percent (66 percent among young people) of all internet users think they can determine whether information online is true or false (The Internet Foundation, 2018, p.37) but at the same time, as accounted for above, Swedes shared more fake news during the last election than any other European country studied (Hedman et al., p.5).

The purpose of this study is therefore to understand to what extent and how anti-immigration disinformation was utilised in Swedish online news media before the 2018 Swedish national elections.

Contribution

While previous research on the Swedish national elections in 2018 has looked at international information influence campaigns (Colliver et al., 2018), misleading, deceptive and incorrect information shared over Twitter (Hedman et al., 2018) and the far-rights usage of automated bots on Twitter (Fernquist et al., 2018) there is a lack of studies on how disinformation was utilised in Swedish online news media before the election. As far-right politics and populism are on the rise (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017, p.6, Wirz et al., 2018, p.497) and research shows that anti-immigration discourse effects voting behaviour (Eberl et al., 2018, p.218, Fryberg et al., 2012, p.98) is therefore the purpose of this study to look closer at this issue.

On the 20th May 2019 the director general of the Swedish Contingencies Agency (MSB) visited the Swedish news show Nyhetsmorgon to discuss the topic "Security in the EU-election - the risk that lies are spread is increasing". At the end of the clip, Eliasson states that "We identify and counteract information influence *from foreign powers*, the Swedish free and open debate we should of course not meddle in at all[1]" (Nyhetsmorgon, 2019). The

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[1] "Vi identifierar och möter informationspåverkan från främmande makt. Den fria åsiktsbildningen i Sverige ska vi naturligtvis inte lägga oss i på något sätt alls, utan det är utländsk påverkan."

initiative faktiskt.se, which was an effort by the joint media to counter and debunk disinformation, was dropped at the end of 2018 after criticism directed at its objectivity (Medievärlden, 2018 & Aftonbladet, 2018). The contribution of this study is therefore to look at the *domestic* disinformation appearing in Swedish online news media that neither authorities nor media seem to focus on countering. So, while previous studies on disinformation during the Swedish 2018 national elections have either dealt with illegitimate influence from foreign influence, or influence on social media, the contribution of this study is to conduct a study that focuses on anti-immigration disinformation in Swedish online news media.

Lastly, as Pamment et al. (2018, p.11) point out, it is difficult to detect illegitimate influence, like disinformation, because of its deceptive nature. But one must also be cautious not to shout "fake news" in vain, as that also may undermine the legitimate and democratic debate. While criticism is directed towards those who spread a falsely negative image of immigration and immigrants, there are also those who criticize the media for spreading a skewed image, covering up the *real* problems related to large immigration flows. The fake news debate is sometimes exploited by the centre of the political spectrum to discredit negative (but true) information about immigration and immigrants thus contributing to further polarization in society. This study can therefore also make a contribution in understanding to what extent disinformation on immigration actually was spread before the election.

The questions that this study aims to answer is *to what extent and how did anti-immigrant disinformation occur in Swedish online news media in the run up to the Swedish national elections in 2018?*

Theory and previous Research

This section will discuss the theories and previous research that make up the basis for the analytical framework used to answer the research question as well as to give context for the discussion. First, previous research and theory on populism and polarization will be accounted for to provide a theoretical background for the study. Second, in order to identify *the extent* to which anti-immigration disinformation occurred in the run up to the 2018 Swedish elections, previous discourse on immigration will be considered followed by an account of media framing. After that, theory and methods in order to operationalize and identify disinformation will be presented. To obtain an understanding as to *how* anti-immigration disinformation occurred in the run up to the 2018 Swedish national elections, theory on illegitimate influence, persuasion and narratives will be discussed to provide a theoretical background. Subsequently theory on strategies used for the analytical framework will be accounted for. Finally an account of previous research on disinformation during the 2018 Swedish national elections will be presented.

Populism

This antagonism between the political elite and the people is a key element in populism and it is often illustrated by an us versus them argument. Us, or the in-group, is the people and the like-minded populist politicians. Them, or the out group, is the political elite currently running the government, mainstream media or minority groups like immigrants or followers of a certain religion. In other words, the populist ideology is defined by a very distinct social structure that consists of two groups - one good and one bad. Common exclusionist messages in populist communication are opinion majority claims, anti-media rethorics, social exclusion, restrictions on the press and anti-immigrant sentiments (Schulz et al., p.5, Wirz, 2018, p.498, Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p. 131).

Looking at European and US elections the past decade the demand for populist parties is growing more and more. Today populist parties win a substantial share of the votes in many Western countries and how they affect liberal democracy is intensively debated in the media and amongst scholars (Schulz et al., 2018, p.2, Wirz et al., 2018, p.497). Populist supporters can be found on the streets demonstrating, but more frequently debated today: on online platforms discussing. They often demonstrate their perceived majority status and behave hostile toward mainstream media and politicians. Research indicates that as a populist's attitudes strengthen, he or she becomes more likely to think that his or her opinion is similar to public opinion, feeling a sense of false consensus. Studies also show that their perception of the mainstream media becomes more and more hostile the stronger the populist attitudes become (Schulz, et al., 2018, p.17).

The success of right-wing populist parties is often attributed to their political communication but also how mainstream media help them spread their message. Populism often uses dramatic, emotional and absolutist language to spread its narratives, and studies show that in combination with anti-immigrant rhetoric messages following the above format (the good people and the corrupt elite/bad media/criminal immigrants etc) this type of communication can be very effective in persuading its audience (Wirz et al., 2018, p.498, Hameleers et al., 2016, p.890). Put together this contributes to the fact that populist communication can influence the perceived legitimacy of political actors, strengthen populist attitudes and reinforce negative stereotypes of immigrants (Wirz et al., 2018, p.500, Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009, p.517).

Polarization

Group polarization means that groups have a tendency to confirm and enhance pre-existing beliefs and ideas and promote a reluctance to disagree with the same (Palmertz, 2018, p.20). This mindset with members of so called in-groups can be beneficial, but also dangerous.

When the in-group identity makes it difficult to relate to members of an out-group the result is often conflict and lack of compassion. Polarization on the internet, and more recently on social media, is repeatedly debated. Today, it is very easy to find like-minded people and information that adheres to one's own beliefs. While this is sometimes a positive phenomena polarization also provides an opportunity for extremists and conspiracy theorists to find and communicate with peers as well as to spread disinformation to very susceptible audiences. This in turn can lead to isolation from the rest of society where more nuanced and truthful information that can challenge existing and ill-founded beliefs can be accessed. Research also shows that it is common for polarization to lead to pluralistic influence; to underestimate the group influences one's own behaviour and decisions and overestimate its effect on others (Palmertz, 2018, p.22).

There is evidence that suggests that polarization among the most politically involved is increasing, especially on issues like economy, culture and immigration (Prior, 2013, p.106). The proliferation of media outlets has made people more politically interested and the impact of partisan media on polarization has increased since readers easily can find a supply of information which goes along with what they want to hear rather than to challenge what they already believe (ibid, p.109).

Immigration Discourse

A literature review of the media coverage shows that discourse on the topic of immigration is diverse in the way that the visibility of immigration issues varies across time, media outlets, genres and between countries. Migrant groups are generally underrepresented in the discourse but when they are represented, they are often covered in an unfavorable way and framed as a threat to security, culture and economy. The differences in discourse are explained by which type of immigration is being discussed: regular or irregular (legal or illegal) and what type of migrant group is discussed (culturally close or remote). Real world events can shape the discourse short-time while changes in the political landscape tend to lead to more permanent shifts (Eberl et al., 2018, p.217).

Research shows that the framing and political inclination has a strong effect on the shaping of the immigration discourse in the media. The media coverage of immigration eventually influences both political attitudes and party preferences with the audience, especially when it provides more emotionally forcefull stories on immigration or when it frames immigration as a threat to the receiving community. When an audience is exposed to negative discourse that activates stereotypes of migrant groups repeatedly over time, it influences perceptions of political actors and in the end voting behaviour (Eberl et al., 2018, p.218, Burscher et al., 2015, p.66).

Political discourse on issues that have been connected to migration has been extensive the last decade. The debate has been about the Danish Mohammed caricatures, Swiss mosques, the burqa debates in France and Belgium, the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, the refugee crisis in 2015, and more recently the American debate on the wall and Trump's immigration policy (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017, p.5). Meanwhile there has been an uprise in far-right populist parties in Europe as well as in other parts of the world, many of which have built their politics on anti-immigration sentiments. These parties often offer no solution to the issues related to immigration but rather use the subject in a way to attain political power. The discursive strategies used often take a stance in securitization and protection culture using topics like border control, terrorism, crime, protection of women and critique towards multiculturalism (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017, p.6).

Media framing

The frames that the media use can have a significant effect on recipients attitudes, beliefs and behaviour. If immigrants are presented as a threat, people are more likely to adopt negative attitudes toward members of that group and to support politics that promise to exclude them from society (Fryberg et al., 2012, p 98). It has even been argued that the content of a message is less important than how it is framed and that a really efficient frame gets its effect from the audience and its cultural interpretation, norms and societal values (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p.19). The way in which the media frames arguments therefore has a real impact both on how political and social issues, such as immigration, are presented in the national debate, and how people respond to it (Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, p.776).

Disinformation can be easily identifiable falsehoods but it can also be strongly misleading stories where the author uses facts very selectively and frames them in a way which is misleading to the audience (Pamment et al., 2018, p. 28). Entman defines media framing as follows: "Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." (Entman, 1993, p.52). He suggest that a frame highlights some parts of an item or an event, thereby making that particular information more salient i.e. information adapted for an audience and that increases the probability that the recipient will receive the information, find it meaningful and remember it (ibid, p.53).

It is also important to point out that frames can be defined both by what the communicator leaves out as well as what they include. Leaving out problems, explanations, evaluations and recommendations can be just as powerful as what one highlights. Put more practically, framing entails choices of emphasis, wording, sources, how the text is organized, what perspectives are presented, what facts are used and how events, issues and agents are

connected in the message. Using these tools, news media gives an angle to a story that guides the audience about a certain issue, like for example immigration (ibid, p.53).

Defining and Identifying Disinformation

As the research accounted for above shows that discourse and how that discourse is framed often provides a negative image of immigration and that this has an effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the audience it is important to be able to identify what is true and legitimate information and what is disinformation:

"Deliberately false or manipulated information disseminated for the purpose of misleading people into opinions or behaviours that somehow serve the creator of that information." (MSB, 2018, p.45).

Bennet and Livingston (2018, p.127) argue that the public sphere in many countries have become divided and disrupted as democratic principles face growing challenges. It is in this context that an understanding of the communication process of spreading disinformation in democratic societies can be understood. The authors suggest that the before functioning system of authoritative information that came from social and political institutions and engaged a trusting public is now threatened. And that the reason for this is a breakdown of trust in the democratic institutions like the press and politics. In the mid to late 20th century the trust in public institutions was greater and public authorities had better control over public information. Today, the growing number of alternative information sources pumping out populist news has lead to an increasing number of citizens supporting movements and parties outside the centre, especially to the right. Within these radical movements supporters can reject institutions of politics and the press as well as the authorities speaking through them. Instead they can find alternative information and political leaders that explain why things (as they often feel) have gone so wrong in society (ibid, p.128).

How can one decide if strange or sensationalist stories are isolated moments of absurdity or chains of information flows aimed at spreading anti-immigrant propaganda and enforcing extreme right movements? Disinformation can be simulated news stories or documentary formats used to advance political goals (Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p.124). It can be false news, or subtle methods such as using false flags (pretending that someone else is responsible for an activity and doing so disguising the real source of responsibility). It can be feeding false quotes or stories to innocent intermediaries but also consciously amplifying biased or misleading information. It is important to note that disinformation is distinct from misinformation, which is the " […] inadvertent or unintentional spread of inaccurate information without malicious intent." (Weedon et al, 2017, p.5). Disinformation should also not be confused with the catch-all phrase fake news which has become a popular media reference. Fake news, in contrast to disinformation, are often isolated incidents of confusion

or falsehoods with financial interest or to attract clicks on social media. Disinformation describes a more systematic flow of information that seems authoritative and credible to those who consume it. Disinformation usually displays a deeper complexity aimed at trying to hurt political institutions and democratic values (Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p.124).

While fake news is a new expression, the spreading of false information disguised as legitimate with a deceptive agenda is not (Pamment et al., 2018, p.43). However, the media vulnerabilities that have come with the digitization of news has changed how disinformation is used. The digital environment that now have allow for ordinary people to reach mass audiences through online platforms. Before, only trained journalists had that power. It is not in and of itself a negative thing, but provides an opportunity for non-journalists to pass off false information as news without it having to pass through the same scrutiny as traditional journalism.

Disinformation is easily spread in the new online media environment as research before the 2016 U.S. presidential election showed. The top performing disinformation stories in the run up to the election generated more views, shares and likes than the real news stories by far. Recent studies suggest that disinformation is diffused farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than other types of information. The reason behind this seems to be that the audience perceives disinformation as novel and that it awakens feelings like fear, disgust and surprise. And as mentioned before about amplification and false information, disinformation can spread so widely or go "so viral" that it is perceived as real and newsworthy information leading to traditional and mainstream media picking it up and spreading it further (Pamment et al., 2018, p.44).

Operationalization of disinformation

For the purposes of this study the definition and operationalization of disinformation that will be used is: news articles with content that is verifiably and intentionally false or manipulated and could mislead the reader and benefit the creator (Pamment et al., 2018, p.43, MSB, 2018, p.25). The following forms of disinformation will be included:

Fabrication	News with no factual basis published in a style that makes it seem legitimate. The news often use pre-existing narratives and come from platforms that are either legitimate or have the appearance to be legitimate.
Manipulation	Visual information that aims at deceiving the audience or supporting a false narrative. Manipulation can range from photoshopped pictures to grossly manipulated audio- and video material.

Misappropriation	The usage of factually correct information on an unrelated matter to frame an issue, event or person in a deceptive way. This can be referencing sources that do not contain the alleged information, putting real information in a false context, using headlines, images or pictures that in fact have no connection to the described phenomena.
Propaganda	Information aimed at influencing the public perception or public opinion to benefit a public figure, organization or a government. Propaganda often has unconcealed purposes and focuses on grand strategic narratives.
Satire	Presenting information that ridicules, exposes or critiques individuals, narratives or opinions by using humor and exaggeration to deceive.
Parody	Using the absurdity of issues and highlighting them through making up false stories with vague feasibility. Parody often play with the fine line between what is possible and what is absurd making it hard to distinguish it from real information.

Table 1. Identifying types of disinformation (Pamment et al., 2018, p.44-46)

Disinformation can be strategically used by parties and politicians to build movements and further election goals. Through creating alternative information platforms they block the mainstream press and provide supporters with emotionally satisfying beliefs that suit their world view. Sometimes these platforms are organized by parties while in other cases they are run by far-right websites or social media groups. Most disinformation has an obscure origin but often passes through the gates of mainstream media which gives the message an amplifier effect as it is spread to larger audiences. Due to more effective press gatekeeping in the earlier media era many false stories were stopped, but today with infinite sources of information disinformation is much harder to control and mitigate (Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p.125).

It is not uncommon for disinformation to be mixed up with authentic news reports or events to make the information more credible and it is also often paired with attacks on the mainstream press. Although a healthy press system can absorb the once in a while official attack there is a problem when public information systems develop large networks that repeatedly amplify those attacks since it hurts their credibility. It is common for the far-right to conduct attacks and threat mainstream journalists making them more guarded when they make public statements, thus skewing the debate even more (ibid, p.126).

Illegitimate and legitimate use of Information Influence

While all parties on the political spectrum has been caught stretching the truth the far-right stands out in this regard mimicking journalistic formats to disseminate strategic disinformation. Even if there is a gray zone between free and open debate and illegitimate disinformation it is this type of strategic disinformation that separate the far-right from the more conservative or centre-right media. There is journalism, partisan journalism and then there is disinformation. The latter is often spread through different far-right websites and media platforms that distribute the disinformation in order to advance their own political agenda but also to destabilize opponents and institutions (Bennet & Livingston, p.125).

As opposed to legitimate ways of exercising information power, like for example through public relations, public affairs and lobbying, illegitimate influence, for example using disinformation, is illegitimate for several different reasons (Pamment et al., 2018, p.15). It aims at deceiving people as opposed to legitimate information which is open and transparent. While illegitimate influence tries to undermine or harm society to further own objectives legitimate influence tries to contribute to a constructive solution. Illegitimate influence harms society and hinders the functioning of societal institutions while the disruption resulting from legitimate influence is justified (for example, strikes or protests). Illegitimate influence tries to imitate established media and public engagement and exploit the trust people have for it. It takes advantage of vulnerabilities. While liberal societies have an open system to foster a healthy public debate, illegitimate influence takes advantage of that system to advance its own agenda. Illegitimate influence break the rules. Where open and free debate follow constructive rules influence activities break them (Pamment et al., 2018, p.16).

Figure 1. Continuum between legitimate, illegitimate and illegal influence (Pamment et al., 2018, p.17).

Legitimate and illegitimate influence overlap why it is important to thoroughly analyse a text in order to understand its purposes. Legitimate influence like journalism, public affairs, public diplomacy, lobbying and public relations must be able to exist in a democratic society. Disinformation and other illegitimate influence on the other hand mimics these to deceive the audience. To contrast, at the far end one can find illegal influence like for example threat, bribery or blackmail (ibid, p.17).

Narratives and Influence Strategies

When trying to understand disinformation and other types of illegitimate influence it is not only important to pay attention to the differences between legitimate and illegitimate types of influence but to also pay attention to narratives. A narrative is when facts (or false information disguised as facts) are used to support a story: "Narratives refer to the sequencing, structure, or organisation of signs, codes and events into a coherent order." (Pamment et al., 2018, p.27). Facts can be defined as verifiable representations of something. Statistical facts, for example, can be used both to support or undermine a narrative. A fact in itself has little bearing on a narrative but depending on how it is interpreted or framed - i.e. how meaning is attributed to the factual statement - it can support different narratives (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009, p.19). A burned car for example (verifiable fact), can be framed as both civil unrest or bad electrical wiring (narratives).

Narratives are not only defined and supported by facts but more importantly by the identity that they provide now and the vision they promise for our future. Religion and ideology are perfect examples. They are often not supported by factual statements but they provide a narrative that gives people a sense of identity (Christian) and make them feel like what they do now (follow the bible) will lead to a superior future (go to heaven). So when trying to identify illegitimate communication, both facts and how narratives provide a sense of identity and endpoint to its supporters can play a role (Pamment et al., 2018, p.29).

Because how people function cognitively, narratives once accepted can be very forceful due to the fact that they are self-stabilizing. Cognitive dissonance also plays a role: people tend to ignore input that contradicts already established narratives. Confirmation bias makes us uninterested in whether or not a story is true or false as long as it fits with our already established narrative (Palmertz, 2018, p.10). Social media has a reinforcing effect on these phenomena through personalized information flows, something often referred as filter bubbles or echo chambers (Faris et al., 2017, p.18).

The projection of a narrative can be used to shape issues or events in the public debate and in decision making. Used in an illegitimate way they can create confusion to what is really going on by using contradictions, misleading content, fabrications and lies. This creates distortion and makes it difficult for the audience to tell right from wrong and in doing so creating opportunities to come in with alternative narratives to change the debate (Elkjer Nissen, 2016, p.3).

Influence Strategies

There are a number of strategies that utilise narratives in different ways in order to conduct illegitimate influence like disinformation (Pamment, 2018, p.10). The strategies in themselves are not bad, they are simply different approaches of using information to achieve

an objective. However, when they are used to intentionally deceive they become an instrument for illegitimate influence and to understand them will give insight to their intention: "Disinformation can affect us in three different ways - by highlighting some aspect of an existing narrative, by suppressing some aspect of it, or by linking the narrative to unrelated events in order to distract." (MSB, 2018, p. 17). These strategies can be categorized after their aim: positive-constructive, negative-disruptive or oblique-distractive.

Influence strategies	Example	How?
Positive constructive	- Convincing target society that the new narrative is even more attractive, better, more prosperous than the existing one - "Highlighting an aspect of an already existing narrative: "This is true!""	Establishes a narrative that correlates with or complements existing, widely accepted narrative.
Negative disruptive	- Polarizing target society and trying to destroy the trust in target society's institutions - "Suppressing an aspect of an already existing narrative: "This is a lie!""	Attempts to weaken or destroy an already existing narrative or to prevent the emergence of a new coherent narrative.
Oblique distractive	- Dilute, flood and poison the information environment with alternative messages - "Linking the already existing narrative to something unrelated: "Look over here!"" - Drawing the spotlight away from disinformation to other issues in order to distract	Linking an established narrative to unrelated events or drawing the spotlight away from disinformation in order to distract.

Table 2. Influence strategies (Pamment et al., 2018, p.26, MSB, 2018, p.17)

A positive or constructive strategy uses narratives that correlate or complement existing and accepted narratives (Pamment et al.,2018, p.24). This means that the narrative of the disinformation agrees with or somehow complements a narrative that is widely accepted by the public. For example, a person spreading disinformation can make something up about immigrants that goes along well with what people already believe about them thus using a

narrative that correlates with an existing one, even though it might not be true (MSB, 2018, p.17). A constructive strategy can also support existing narratives through legitimizing false information or evidence or through replacing certain facts in a narrative with false but convincing information (Pamment et al., 2018, p.46)

Influence strategies with a negative aim tries to destroy or at least weaken a narrative that is coherent to an existing and widely accepted narrative. Or hinder the emergence of a new coherent narrative. When trying to destroy an existing narrative it is often done by selecting a theme, like immigration, and compete with the same theme in the attacked narrative (Pamment et al., 2018, p.24). To hinder the emergence of a coherent narrative, one disruptive tactic is to drown legitimate information with false information to the point where the legitimate information can no longer be found. Strategies with a negative aim can also weaken a narrative by simply removing facts that support the accepted narrative to make it less credible (Elkjer Nissen, 2016, p.4). A perfect example of undermining an existing narrative is when the tobacco industry in the 50's managed to undermine the narrative that said that smoking was dangerous and in doing so caused doubts whether cigarettes really did cause cancer (ibid, p.28).

Influence strategies with an oblique aim tries to draw attention in order to distract from key issues through diluting, flooding or poisoning the Internet environment with alternative messages (Pamment, 2018, p.24). This can for example include online rumor campaigns or circulating multiple different narratives about the event to confuse the audience as to what is true and what is not and in doing so undermining the credibility of more true or legitimate narratives (Elkjer Nissen, 2016, p.5-6).

These three strategies can be operated on different levels; on a general societal level where mass audiences or society as a whole is targeted, sociodemographic targeting i.e. targeting groups based on certain demographics like age, gender, education and interests or psychographic targeting where technology like artificial intelligence is used to target an individual (Pamment et al., 2018, p.25).

Persuasion

Disinformation aims to affect the opinions and/or behaviours of the audience so that it somehow serves the creator. In order to understand disinformation and other types of illegitimate influence it is therefore also sensible to account for some psychological theories that can help understand the mechanisms behind persuasion. Persuasion depends on the communicator, the message, the channel and the audience (Palmertz, 2018, p.25). If the person that conveys the message is considered an expert, is considered trustworthy, argues against his or her self-interests, is likable and or beautiful and communicates in a direct and confident manner the message is more likely to lead to some sort of action. The impact of the

message also depends on the audience, research shows (Ibid, p.26). If the recipient is uninterested or harbors attitudes that are based on emotions he or she is likely more susceptible to messages that adhere to those qualities. An analytical and well-educated recipient on the other hand is more likely affected by messages based on reason and logic. Messages associated with positive emotions are more likely to be accepted but research suggests that arousing fear can have a strong persuasive effect as well. In fact the stronger level of fear the message conveys, the greater the response. And when a message inflicts fear, it is more effective if the solution is to avoid a negative consequence rather than to promote a positive one. In other words if a message elicits fear and the recipient feels threatened and afraid but the communicator presents a solution that means avoiding those feelings the persuasive effect will be stronger (Ibid, p.28-29, Petty et al., 2009, p.3, 14).

Previous research on the 2018 national elections

During the election in 2014 only 47 percent of the Swedes retrieved political information online as opposed to the election in 2018 where a majority of 71 percent did so (The Internet Foundation, 2018, p.3). First time voters especially rely on web pages and social media as a source of information, 80 percent retrieve political information online and amongst those who consider themselves politically interested the percentage rises to 88 (ibid, p.7).

While the above report (ibid, p.37) also showed that 50 percent of Internet users think that they can determine if information online is true or false a report from the Oxford Internet Institute revealed that Sweden compared to all other European countries studied had a bigger problem with false or very sensationalized stories about immigration, the establishment or criminality. The report shows that compared to other countries, Sweden has a high consumption of junk news on social media (Hedman et al., 2018, p.4). Furthermore the report showed that only two out of ten sources had foreign origin meaning that the majority of junk news was actually produced in Sweden. Swedes are in other words both big consumers and producers of junk news. Their analysis suggests that despite efforts to prevent and combat misleading information in the run up to the national elections in 2018, Sweden still had a high volume of computational propaganda (ibid, p.5).

Another report on the foreign influence campaigns in the 2018 Swedish elections showed that it is not uncommon for international far-right activists to try influence voters through information influence like disinformation, misinformation and fake news (Colliver et al., p.5). The authors analysed how the international far-right and Russia would interfere in the election and try to push voters to vote for anti-immigrant nationalist parties. They found that both the far-right movements and Russian state sponsored media attempted to smear Sweden's reputation. Their research also showed that international and Swedish right-nationalist and far-right groups work together to try and portrait Sweden as a shattered country and that due to new technological tools that gives possibilities to amplify and target

content, disinformation and extremism online have increased rapidly (Colliver et al., 2018, p.17, 36).

The Swedish Defence Research Agency mapped how automated bots[2] on Twitter spread disinformation before the national elections in 2018 (Fernquist et al., 2018, p.1). Their research showed that automated bots that discussed Swedish politics and the 2018 election on Twitter increased to a large extent in the run up to the election. The bots also shared links to far-right media more than they did to mainstream media. The majority of accounts that were suspended by Twitter were accounts that shared nationalist and authoritarian views and it was 40 percent more likely that the bots expressed support for the far-right than the genuine accounts did (ibid, p.11-12).

Research Design

Research Design

This study will be conducted as a case study for several different reasons. The purpose of this study is to understand to what extent and how disinformation about immigration was utilised in Swedish online news media before the 2018 Swedish national elections. In other words this is a case of disinformation. More precisely, a most likely case for disinformation which utilises anti-immigrant discourse and which is studied in the context of Swedish online news media during the 2018 Swedish national elections. This study is descriptive, not causal, it aims for depth not breadth and internal comparability is more important than external representativeness. This requires an in-depth analysis in order to be able to fulfill the purpose and answer the research question. All factors put together, a case study seems the suitable choice (Gerring, 2004, p.352). Torell & Svensson (2007, p.82) state that a case study is fitting when the aim is to conduct a detailed analysis of a specific case and when an in-depth analysis of material is needed in order to respond to a research question which is of a descriptive character.

While it is difficult to generalize results to a larger population of cases when using a case study design (Bryman, 2012, p.69), that is not the purpose of this study. However, Gerring (2004, p.342) defines a case study as "...an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.". The results of this study will not be directly generalized to other cases but it could provide an in-depth knowledge of this particular case, the Swedish election, that can hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of similar cases. Bryman (2012, p.71) states that the motive of qualitative research doesn't necessarily need to provide general answers, scrutinizing a case can instead make an empirical

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[2] a software application that runs automated tasks (scripts) over the Internet

contribution that furthers the related field of research. This study aims to contribute to the field of illegitimate influence and disinformation in general and concerning immigration during elections in particular. Hopefully, while not generalizable, the results can contribute to the field of research on how anti-immigration disinformation is utilised, and especially how they occur during election campaigns. In extension this study could be used to help build theory on how disinformation about immigration affect voting behaviour and election results.

This study has a post-positivist approach which according to della porta and Keating (2008, p.23) means that social reality is constructed and reality is only imperfectly knowable and not easy to capture since we cannot be completely objective. The epistemological issues in post-positivist research are related to the relationship between the researcher and her object of study. Post-positivism claims that knowledge is political and influenced by the scholar but that the aim of the approach is not to search for causal laws but to interpret and understand (ibid, p.24).

Material

Mediearkivet

Mediearkivet is the Nordic countries largest digital archive. It gatherers news dating back to the 1980's from both print and online media as well as radio and tv. Mediearkivet covers sources from all of the Nordic countries as well as one hundred thousand articles from international media. Put together there are about one hundred million searchable articles and the research database is used by students, authors, researchers and journalists (Mediearkivet, 2018).

In order to find appropriate articles the extended search function was used and a number of keywords were put in namely: migrant, migrants, migration, migration politics, immigrant, immigrants, immigration, immigration politics, refugee, refugees, refugee crisis, refugee politics, unaccompanied refugee child, asylum seeker, asylum seekers, islam, islamist, islamic, muslim, muslims, afghan, afghani[3]. The choice of keywords have been selected on the basis of previous discourse on immigration as discussed in the theory section in this study. The search setting was put so as to only include articles that had these keywords in the headline or in the preamble in order to make sure that the article really was related to the discourse which this thesis aims to examine, namely immigration. There is of course a risk that the selected keywords have not captured all the articles about immigration during the targeted time period, and that incorporating more keywords could have affected the results of

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[3] The keywords that were used in the search were in Swedish: migrant migranter migration migrationspolitik immigrant immigranter immigration immigrationspolitik invandrare invandring invandringspolitik flykting flyktingar flyktingkrisen flyktingpolitik ensamkommande flyktingbarn asylsökande islam islamist islamisk islamistisk muslim muslimer muslimsk afghan afghaner afghanska

this study. However to widen the search further would have yielded too many results for the scope of this paper.

Research shows that in the 2014 national elections 59 percent of all Swedish voters decided who to vote for during the election campaign (during the elections in 2018 political parties could start their campaign approximately one month before the election) and 32 percent decided during the last week before the election (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2017, p.7). The timespan in the search was therefore put from ten days before the election up until the day of the election: 2018-08-30 to 2018-09-09. This would capture a time frame where many indecisive voters make their choice but at the same time yield a reasonable amount of articles that could be analysed within the scope and time frame of this study.

Image 1. Extended search used in the study

This search yielded articles from various online news media sources but as the search gave 1148 results, a selection was made to get a wide range of sources based on three factors: 1) number of readers, 2) ideological affiliation and 3) type of news site. The five most read news sites were selected: Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter, Svenska Dagbladet and Göteborgs-Posten (TU Medier i Sverige, 2017). as well as the most "immigration critical" news outlets (Nyheter idag, Samhällsnytt, Nya Tider and Fria Tider). These news outlets will be called "far-right" in this study, and the selection is based on the report "Det vita hatet: radikal nationalism i digitala miljöer" (Kaati et al., 2017). This selection entailed tabloids, newspapers and far-right news sites with ideological affiliations ranging from social democratic to far-right. In the end, the final number of articles with the right criteria was 123.

Nine of the articles were in fact video interviews, which were excluded. Most articles that were behind paywalls were readable through Mediearkivet, though subscriptions to access Svenska Dagbladet and Dagens Nyheter were purchased. A full list of the sources and number of articles from each source that was included in the analysis can be found in the coding sheet in Appendix 1.

Content Analysis

As the theoretical account above shows, disinformation can be deceptive and is not always easy to detect. Disinformation can be false, but also misleading. It depends on how the text is framed and what narratives are presented, how it persuades the audience and what context it provides. The research question of this study could not have been answered by only quantifying words, it requires qualitative reading and interpreting of the context in which the words or phenomena are addressed (Esaiasson, 2017, p.212).

In order to identify and understand the illegitimate use of influence through anti-immigrant disinformation this study will use qualitative content analysis to analyse online news articles. Qualitative content analysis is a suitable method for research that aim at shedding light on the essential content, like themes and categories, of the material and allow for the researcher to interpret its meaning and highlight key content in the data (Esaiasson, 2017, p.11). When analysing data using content analysis the researcher compares different elements in the text to be able to analyse them. To recognise patterns in the texts the researcher gets familiar with the data through reading and rereading the texts, then proceed to code and label the text in order to identify patterns that can be meaningful. This is followed by reviewing the patterns or themes so that they fit the data and lastly defining and naming them to create a coherent narrative. Quotes are often included from the texts, or in this case, articles (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p.7).

Two critiques in particular are usually highlighted concerning qualitative research: its inability to make claims beyond the material which is examined in the study (validity) and the risk of subjective interpretation i.e. that another researcher could interpret the material differently (reliability) (Bryman, 2012, p.306).

Good validity means that the study is examining what it claims to examine, i.e. if it answers the research question. To ensure that the question in answered it is of utmost importance that the operationalization reflects the theoretical definition (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p.58, Byman, 2012, p.170). In this study, the operationalizations are to some extent taken from or based on pre-established categories from previous research thus improving the validity. To ensure validity it is also possible to triangulate the results, through for example using different sources of data. This study would have benefitted from analysing posts in social media or articles from printed media, which could have yielded a more comprehensive understanding

of disinformation. However due to constraints in time and scope of this study it was not possible (ibid, p.198).

Good reliability refers to the consistency of measurement (Bryman, 2012, p.168). Basically it means that if the study is replicated, using the same material and operationalization, it should yield the same result. To ensure reliability it is therefore of importance for the author to clearly and systematically explain why and how interpretations are made. To increase the reliability of this study there is therefore an appendix (1) containing the coding from the analysis with quotes from the articles as well as other sources that have been used to fact check the content. With a more generous time frame and scope, this study would have benefitted from a test-retest, i.e. re analysing the material again after some time has passed. But most of all, it can not be emphasized enough that in order to draw more certain conclusions from this study, it would be very important to let another researcher replicate the findings, using the same material and operalizations to eliminate biased judgement (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p.65). Even though measures are taken to eliminate subjectivity (systematic approach of analysis, transparent account of process and results, operationalizations based on an existing theoretical framework and all conclusions are exemplified with quotes), this study deals with trying to grasp what is true, misleading and false, and the results should therefore be treated with caution in light of this circumstance.

Operationalization and Analytical framework

The research problem this study aimed to address was to what extent and how did anti-immigrant disinformation occur in Swedish online news media in the run up to the Swedish national elections in 2018. To answer a research question through content analysis Esaiasson et al. emphasizes that content analysis is not only about summarizing a text (2017, p.216). It requires that the research problem be transformed into concrete analytical questions based on clear operationalizations which can be used as a tool to assess the selected material:

To what extent did anti-immigration disinformation occur?		
Concept	**Operationalization**	**Question/s**
Anti-immigration article	The content of the article is about at least one of the keywords accounted for in the Material section and that content (1) portrays immigration or immigrants in a negative way and (2) the article aims at mediating that perspective to the readers	Is there *content* that portrays immigration or immigrants in a negative way? If yes, is the *aim of the article* to portray immigration or immigrants in a negative way?

Disinformation	Content that is verifiably and intentionally false or manipulated and could mislead the reader and somehow benefit the creator. (Pamment et al., 2018, p.43, p.44-46, MSB, 2018, p.25).	Is there content that is verifiably and intentionally false or manipulated? Could the content mislead the reader? Can the content somehow benefit the the newspaper?

How did anti-immigration disinformation occur?

Concept	Operationalization	Question

Disinformation types	- Fabrication
	  - News with no factual basis published in a style that makes it seem legitimate.
	- Manipulation
	  - Visual information that aims at deceiving the audience or supporting a false narrative.
	- Misappropriation
	  - The usage of factually correct information on an unrelated matter to frame an issue, event or person in a deceptive way.
	- Propaganda
	  - Information aimed at influencing the public perception or public opinion to benefit a public figure, organization or a government.
	- Satire
	  - Presenting information that ridicules, exposes or critiques individuals, narratives or opinions by using humor and exaggeration to deceive.
	- Parody
	  - Using the absurdity of issues and highlighting them through making up false stories with vague feasibility.
	(Pamment et al., 2018, p.43, p.44-46, MSB, 2018, p.25).
		Which type of disinformation is used and how?

Positive constructive strategy	Establishes a narrative that correlates with or complements existing, widely accepted narrative: "This is true!" (MSB, 2018, p.17)	Is the content positive constructive? If yes how so?
Negative disruptive strategy	Attempts to weaken or destroy an already existing narrative or to prevent the emergence of a new coherent narrative:"This is a lie!" (MSB, 2018, p.17)	Is the content negative disruptive? If yes how so?
Oblique distractive	Links an established narrative to unrelated events	Is the content oblique

| strategy | or draws the spotlight away from disinformation in order to distract: "Look over here!" (MSB, 2018, p.17) | distractive? If yes how so? |

Table 3. Operationalization and Analytical questions

The operationalizations and analytical framework that are used in this study to identify and understand disinformation, are partly based on the article "Countering Information Influence Activities - The state of the art" (commissioned by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and written by Pamment et al., 2018) and its sibling the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) handbook "Countering information influence activities : A handbook for communicators" (MSB, 2018). The latter is a practical handbook based on the theories from the aforementioned article, and written as a support for communicators specifically or others in general, to counter information influence in Sweden. In other words, this is the tool that Swedish authorities provide us with to be able to detect the use of illegitimate information influence. The authors make it clear that when using the handbook "It is not the role of the communicator to investigate whether foreign power is responsible for specific communication activities." (MSB, 2018, p.15). The handbook is therefore not intended to detect foreign involvement but rather focuses on illegitimate influence and how to counteract it. It therefore very useful for the purposes of this study: to identify and understand the use of disinformation (a type of information influence technique), in this case anti-immigration disinformation, in Swedish online news media. This study consequently has a contribution, to see how well the theories and tools provided to us by Swedish authorities work in practice. Though it is important to note that the authors point out that it is important to remember that while other types of illegitimate communication than information influence activities (like domestic disinformation) also take advantage of the generous rules that make up the basis for democratic debate, they do so to a less serious degree (i.e. no foreign power is involved) and to advance political, cultural or economic interests (Pamment et al., 2018, p.9).
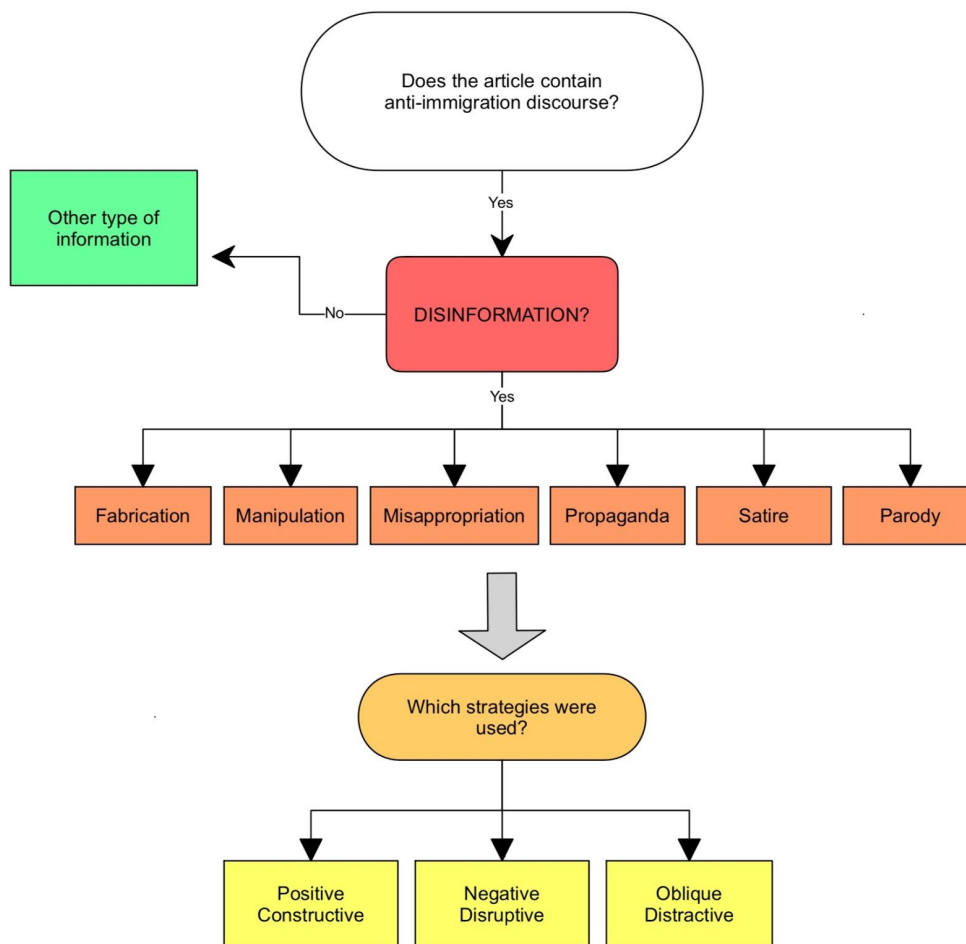
Figure 2 Analytical framework

In order to identify to which extent anti-immigration disinformation occurred the first consideration that will be made is whether or not the article has a topic that is relevant for this study, i.e. if the content is anti-immigration. If for some reason the article is not about the subject, it will be excluded. After identifying anti-immigration discourse a consideration of the aim of the article will be made. For example, if there is anti-immigration content in the form of a quote from a political debate, but the article itself is a review of the argumentative techniques used during a debate, the aim of the article is not to show a negative perspective of immigration and it will not be deemed as an "anti-immigrant article". If however the article contains anti-immigration quotes and the article is about far-right politics, the aim of the article might be to mediate a negative perspective of immigration and it will be deemed an "anti-immigrant article" and subjected to further analysis.

After considering the content and the aim of the article the next step will be to identify if there is any use of disinformation in the article. This requires looking at both what is being said, i.e. which are the facts presented, but also how it is being said, i.e. how the information is framed. To detect disinformation this will of course require fact checking to some extent. To determine whether the article might contain any false or manipulated information the

content will be read and reread and a fact check using the following steps will be performed (politifact.com, 2014):

- look for what other fact-checkers have said about the alleged story
- do a google search to find alternative sources and perspectives
- look for information from official sources, like for example government statements.

All alternative sources used to verify the content in the articles will be disclosed in the coding scheme. If the content is not considered to be disinformation according to the operationalization above, the assumption will be made that it is another type of information (like for example misinformation or just free and open debate). If however the article can be construed as containing disinformation, the next step is to try and understand how anti-immigration disinformation occurred through analysing which types were utilised (fabrication, manipulation, misappropriation, propaganda, satire, parody) and which strategies were applied - positive, negative or oblique. Finally the results and their implications will be discussed in relation to the theory and previous research accounted for above.

Delimitations

What is referred to as information influence *activities* or *operations* is distinct from other types of illegitimate communication in the way that it requires the instigator to be a *foreign power or its proxy*. Those types of activities or campaigns are *not* the target of this study. The target of this study is disinformation with Swedish origin, written or distributed by Swedish online news media. Information influence activities may be included in the study if a Swedish online news media has picked up a story that is of foreign origin, but that analysis lies outside the scope of this study.

While this study would have benefitted from increasing the number of articles included through extending the timeframe and search criteria, it is important to emphasize that the special nature of the object of study - what is true and what is false - was extremely time consuming. While content analysis of every article was performed, the analysis also required a quite extensive fact check from various different sources, rendering it unmanageable to include more than 123 articles.

Results and Discussion

Summary

The purpose of this study was to find out to what extent and how anti-immigration disinformation occurred in Swedish online news media in the run up to the 2018 Swedish

national elections. Out of all the articles analysed, 20 percent were identified as possibly containing anti-immigration disinformation. Results also show that all of those cases were found in far-right news media and that the most common types of disinformation is misappropriation, closely followed by fabrication. Half of the articles containing disinformation were construed as using a constructive strategy, while about one third used a disruptive one. A bit more than one third of the articles had a combination of two or more types and strategies.

Anti-immigration discourse and disinformation						
	Positive, neutral or unrelated articles	Anti-immigration content	Anti-immigration article	TOTAL	Disinformation	Disinformation in percent
Svenska Dagbladet	14	5	1	**20**	0	0%
Dagens Nyheter	5	5	2	**12**	0	0%
Expressen	6	4	3	**13**	0	0%
Aftonbladet	5	4	0	**9**	0	0%
Göteborgs-Posten	3	4	1	**8**	0	0%
MAINSTREAM MEDIA TOTAL	**33**	**22**	**7**	**62**	**0**	**0%**
Samhällsnytt	6	1	13	**20**	8	40%
Fria Tider	3	0	16	**19**	9	47%
Nya Tider	1	2	5	**8**	4	50%
Nyheter Idag	2	0	2	**4**	2	50%
FAR-RIGHT MEDIA TOTAL	**12**	**3**	**36**	**51**	**23**	**45%**
TOTAL	**45**	**25**	**43**	**113**	**23**	**20%**

Table 4. Identifying anti-immigration discourse and disinformation

Results show that out of all articles concerning immigration or immigrants in SVD, DN, Expressen, Aftonbladet, GP, Samhällsnytt, Fria Tider, Nya Tider and Nyheter Idag from ten days before the election up until the election day, 20 percent contained disinformation. All disinformation that was identified occurred in far-right news media, where about 45 percent of the total 51 articles analysed contained disinformation of different kinds. While mainstream media only published 7 articles that aimed at showing a negative perspective of immigration or immigrants, far-right media published 36 such articles. Mainstream media published 22 articles that had negative *content* about immigration or immigrants, like for example quotes from a debate with Sweden Democrats leader Jimmy Åkesson, but where the aim of the article was not to mediate a negative perspective of immigration or immigrants. Far-right media published only three such articles that only had negative content about immigration or immigrants but no aim to mediate a negative perspective.

Anti-immigration discourse

While both mainstream media and far-right media had a fair share of articles that had anti-immigrant *content*, the number of anti-immigrants *articles* (that the aim of the article was to mediate an anti-immigrant perspective) set them apart. A typical mainstream media article with anti-immigrant content, but not considered an anti-immigrant article, was an article with a quote that portrayed immigrants in a negative way, like from a debate or a policy suggestion, but where the aim of the article was to account for the context where that statement was made. The anti immigrant content could for example read: "– Vi måste ställa oss frågan: Varför är det så svårt för de här människorna att få jobb? Jo det är för att de inte är svenskar. De passar inte in i Sverige och då är det svårt att få jobb, sa Jimmie Åkesson. ", but the topic was "SVT tog efter partiledardebatten avstånd från Jimmie Åkesson uttalande i debatten mot Annie Lööf om invandrare och jobb och kallade det för "grovt generaliserande"" (Expressen, 2018). Articles of this kind were much more common in mainstream media compared to far-right media - 22 versus three. A result coherent to their political affiliation; when far right-media publishes anti-immigration content it is also almost always with the aim to mediate that perspective.

A typical anti-immigration article however could have a quote like "-I enskilda fall har även svenskar dömts för assistansrelaterade bidragsbrott. De stora härvorna har emellertid samtliga haft samma demografiska profil som i det aktuella fallet med så gott som uteslutande asylrelaterade utomvästliga invandrare som gärningspersoner." where the topic was "På fredagen föll den andra domen i Malmö tingsrätt (B 524-18) i en omfattande härva av fusk med assistansersättning bland invandrare i Malmö.". These types of articles, seven in mainstream media and 36 in far-right media, were coded as anti-immigrant articles and analysed further to identify possible disinformation.

While the majority of the articles published in far-right media were anti-immigrant (36 out of 51), only a minority of the total amount of anti-immigration articles could be found in mainstream media (7 out of 64). Reversely, 33 out of 64 mainstream articles were neutral or positive towards immigration while the corresponding number in far-right media was 12 out of 51. This result paints a picture of a polarized debate. Mainstream media writes very little about the negative aspects of immigration, a little bit about what negative things *others* say about immigration but mostly they publish positive or neutral articles on immigration. The Social Democratic independent Aftonbladet publishes no anti-immigrant articles at all. On the other hand, far-right media publishes a few neutral (but no positive) articles, like for example "Opinionsinstitut hävdar: Klimatet tar över invandringen som viktigaste valfrågan" (Samhällsnytt, 2018), very few articles that only have anti-immigrant content and a lot of anti-immigration articles. This means that an audience that reads mainstream media would

find an overwhelming positive or neutral angle on immigration, where an audience that reads far-right media would be subjected to a very negative view of immigration.

Disinformation

Content that is verifiably and intentionally false or manipulated and could mislead the reader and somehow benefit the creator. (Pamment et al., 2018, p.43)

Since all possible cases of disinformation were found in far-right news media and a common denominator for far-right news sites is that their aim is to promote a nationalistic ideology that strives to decrease immigration or assimilate immigrants (Kaati, et al., 2017, p.12) they would all benefit from publishing anti-immigrant content - true or false. The Oxford dictionary defines misleading as "giving the wrong idea or impression" while the Cambridge dictionary describes misleading as "causing someone to believe something which is not true". From the Oxford definition, which emanates from the sender, false or manipulated content would automatically be categorized as misleading. To verify however that content actually causes someone to believe something untrue, as per the Cambridge definition which emanates from the side of the recipient, is more difficult. However, as research shows that confirmation bias tends to make people believe what confirms pre-existing beliefs rather than what is true, it could be argued that readers that consume far-right news articles would be more willingly mislead even if the content is false or misleading (Palmertz, 2018, p.10). The time consuming work required in analysing whether or not an article contains falsehoods or manipulation, also speaks to the fact that the content in the articles could mislead the reader.

If the message actually *causes* someone to believe something which is not true can depend on how it is framed and how persuasive that framing is. A message that inflicts fear and offers a way to avoid that fear has a strong persuasive effect and can therefore have a very misleading effect on the reader (Palmertz, 2018, p.28-29). An example would be: *"Det gick vilt till när Alternativ för Sverige på torsdagseftermiddagen genomförde sitt torgmöte i Nyköping. Aggressiva invandrare genomförde ett mindre upplopp [...]"*. This message intends to paint immigrants as a threat to security, and offers an easy solution to avoid that threat: *"Ännu en missanpassad invandrare som ska få en enkelbiljett tillbaka till sitt hemland. Idag visade Nyköping EXAKT varför integration INTE fungerar och varför Sverige behöver en aktiv återvandringspolitik!"* (Fria Tider, 2018).

To verify intentionally false or manipulated information is very much possible, albeit associated with some difficulties. As mentioned before, objectively determining what is true and false, and also what is false and what is "just" misleading, should be subjected to criticism and questioning. The bias of the researcher should be eliminated through another researcher replicating this study, especially since it is concerned with a "hot political topic" as immigration. Furthermore, articles containing for example content based on deep fakes (manipulated audio-visual material that is basically indistinguishable from real material) or

major league fakery like creating facts that support a certain narrative (like the Russian fake news team attempted to do as described in the introduction) (Pamment et al., 2018, p.45), would not have been detected. To exemplify, the following article can be used: *"Igår presenterade Alternativ för Sverige sitt förslag att spara 200 miljarder kronor på att skicka hem invandrare som inte sköter sig. Samtidigt såg man i bakgrunden på partiets livesändning från Sergels torg hur en invandrare stal en parkerad cykel."* (Fria Tider, 2018).

The video in the article does in fact show a man in the background of the interview who appears to walk away with a locked bike in a suspicious way. But how can we know that the event is real? What if the instigator of the video payed someone to pretend to steal the bike as they were recording the interview? It is a very peculiar coincidence that while a representative from Alternative for Sweden talks about immigrants as criminals, and states that immigrants that commit crimes should be "sent home", a man who is (framed in the article as) an immigrant commits a crime. Bias and "fake real facts" are that have to be considered, and the identified number of cases with disinformation therefore has to be treated with a certain amount of scepticism - there could be more, and there could be less.

Some false and manipulated information however was unambiguous and very easy to identify. Just by looking at other news articles covering the same event, performing a google picture search, searching in official documents or checking previous fact checks, some content was obviously false. Like this article for example, where the author makes it very easy to identify disinformation: *"Enligt uppgift ska de tre männen ha försökt avbryta en pågående gruppvåldtäkt och sexuella trakasserier mot kvinnor. Tyska myndigheter har dock tillbakavisat de påståendena."* (Samhällsnytt, 2018). He or she basically makes a false statement, then proceeds to say that is is not true, and links to the correct information. Another article writes about how the newspaper Metro's fact checker "Viralgranskaren" debunks fake news about how much financial aid a refugee can get from the state, and then takes that information, manipulates it, and make it into fake news *again*: *"SVERIGE När Metros Viralgranskare tar sig an virala uppgifter om hur mycket bidragspengar invandrare kan få ut kommer man fram till att det är fake news. I själva verket kan en invandrare få ut flera tusen kronor mer än vad som påstås i sociala medier."*! (Nyheter Idag, 2018).

In order to identify, especially manipulated, disinformation it is very important to look at how the content is framed. The results from this study is coherent to previous research; immigration or immigrants are often framed as threats (Fryberg et al.., 2012, p 98), salience is given to all possible negative aspects of immigration or immigrants and positive aspects are left out (Entman, 1993, p.53):

"Den riksbekante talesmannen för så kallade "ensamkommande" afghaner, Arif Moradi, ska enligt uppgifter på Samhällsnytt ha gripits av polis under Alternativ för Sveriges valfinal i Kungsträdgården." (Fria Tider, 2018). The person is (wrongly) named a spokesperson for

immigrants, is framed as a threat though he was not arrested, only handcuffed. And the provocation of AfS is left out of the story.

"NYNÄSHAMN När SD:s ordförande i Nynäshamn Emilia Orpana stod och arbetade vid vallokalen i Ösmo i Nynäshamn på söndagsförmiddagen blev hon attackerad av två invandrare. " (Nyheter Idag, 2018). There is no evidence to support that the instigators were immigrants.

"Så kallade nyanlända invandrare är nu pass många av de kan komma att avgöra valet i flera kommuner." (Fria Tider, 2018) Very modified information where voting records show that in some small constituency districts (at most 1200 registered voters) there are about 18 percent of voters who have been in Sweden for at least three years, but are not yet citizens, that are therefore allowed to vote in municipal and district elections.

Disinformation Types

Types of disinformation						
	Samhällsnytt	Fria Tider	Nya Tider	Nyheter Idag	**TOTAL**	Percentage
Fabrication	5	9	3	0	**17**	39%
Manipulation	0	0	0	0	**0**	0%
Misappropriation	6	8	2	2	**18**	41%
Propaganda	0	5	1	1	**7**	16%
Satire	0	0	0	1	**1**	2%
Parody	0	1	0	0	**1**	2%
Combination*	4	8	3	1	**16**	36%
TOTAL	**11**	**23**	**6**	**4**	**44**	

Table 5. Understanding Disinformation - Types

To understand how anti-immigration disinformation occurred in online news media before the 2018 national elections this study examined the use of different disinformation types in the articles. Out of the total 23 articles with identified disinformation, 41 percent contained misappropriation, 39 percent contained fabrication, 16 percent contained propaganda, two percent contained satire and two percent contained parody, of which 36 percent of were used in combination.

Disinformation can take several different forms and shapes, and this study showed that three types were most common, namely misappropriation, fabrication and propaganda. Research shows that it is not uncommon for disinformation to be mixed up with authentic news reports or events to make the information more credible (Pamment et al., 2018, p.125) something that

seems to hold true also for this study. But not only are articles with disinformation mixed with articles with real news on the far-right news sites, the disinformation *in* articles is also mixed with real information and facts. In fact, some article had some some true facts, some fabricated facts, some misappropriation and some propaganda - all in the same article. To uncover and expose these types of articles proved quite difficult. One such example is the article *"Nya Tider i Syrien: Intervjuar soldater och civila, följer riksdagsman som vill diskutera återvandring"* (Nya Tider, 2018) which was published in several different versions on several different far-right online news sites before the election. The article is ambitious and contained what can be interpreted as a broad spectrum of different types of (dis)information:

True content: *"Mikael Jansson, riksdagsledamot och kandidat för AfS, reste till Syrien för att diskutera återvandring av syriska flyktingar från Sverige."*

Fabricated content: *"Nya Tider deltog i den officiella delegation från Sverige som denna vecka besökte Syrien [...]"* and *"Svaret han fick var att landet nu är säkert."* There was no official delegation, Jansson went to Syria on his own, accompanied by two reporters from Nya Tider and Syria is not considered safe.

Misappropriation: *"Förödelsen har i vissa stadsdelar utanför Damaskus varit total. Även inne i Damaskus föll terroristernas granater ned under kriget, även om huvudstaden i sig inte anfölls."*. True information but taken out of context, framing makes it seem like ISIS, and not at all the Syrian regime, was responsible for all the destruction during the war.

Propaganda: *"Mikael Jansson från Alternativ för Sverige (AfS), riksdagsledamot och medlem i försvarsutskottet, diskuterade möjligheten för återvandring med parlamentariker och religiösa ledare."* and *"Kör ut extremisterna, tillåt inga saudiskfinansierade moskéer i Sverige!"*, *"Om ni inte gör det, kommer terrorn även till er, vad budskapet."* Trying to influence public opinion to benefit AfS while alluding the grand narrative to "keep Sweden Swedish".

And last, but not unimportant in framing (Entman, 1993, p.53), content left out: the Syrian regime's oppression towards its own people, the al-Assad government's war crimes and violations of human rights (BBC, 2019), the role of Kurdish forces in liberating Syria from ISIS (Reuters, 2019).

This article encompasses in many ways how different types of disinformation can be combined to effect its readers, and also how difficult it can be to differentiate what it true, what is manipulated, what is false, what is political *and* what is left out from the. The study point towards a trend that neither fabricating facts not misappropriating them is a hindrance to be able to send out the desired message on immigration. Results also indicate that satire and parody is not so common in news article, maybe to try and give the source a more serious impression. Propaganda was mostly constructed to benefit Alternative for Sweden and

combining different types of disinformation seems a common way to try to confuse the reader.

Strategies

Strategies						
	Samhällsnytt	Fria Tider	Nya Tider	Nyheter Idag	**TOTAL**	Percentage
Positive Constructive Strategy	6	6	4	2	**18**	51%
Negative Disruptive Strategy	4	5	3	0	**12**	34%
Oblique Distractive Strategy	4	1	0	0	**5**	14%
Of which were combinations	6	4	3	0	**13**	37%
TOTAL	**14**	**12**	**7**	**2**	**35**	

T*able 6. Understanding Disinformation - Strategies*

To further understand how anti-immigration disinformation occurred in online news media before the 2018 national elections this study examined the use of different strategies in the articles. Out of the total 23 articles that contained possible disinformation, 51 percent can be interpreted as using a constructive strategy, 34 percent as using a disruptive strategy, and 14 percent as using a distractive strategy. Thirtyseven percent of the articles were interpreted as having a mix of different strategies.

Most strategies with a constructive aim identified in this study, supports or complements narratives that are coherent with previous populist and anti-immigration research: the mainstream media hides the truth, the political elite is corrupt (Schulz et al., p.5, Wirz, 2018, p.498, Bennet & Livingston, 2018, p. 131) and immigration and immigrants are a threat to our culture, security and economy (Eberl et al., 2018, p.217):

Samhällsnytt (2018): *"I sin reklam har assistansbolaget [...] byggt upp en fasad av att hjälpa och finnas till för svenskar med assistansbehov[...]. Bakom denna kuliss har företaget [...] ägnat sig åt att i stor skala lura det svenska samhället och de svenska skattebetalarna på stora belopp som skulle ha gått till barn med genuina assistansbehov."*

Fria tider (2018): *"Nasim Malik från Socialdemokraterna menar att det är extra viktigt att invandrare röstar, så att partier som representerar svenska etniska intressen, till exempel Alternativ för Sverige, inte får inflytande."*

Samhällsnytt (2018): *"– Hur fan kan man vilja ha kvar kriminella utlänningar i ett land, utbrast AfS-ledaren Gustav Kasselstrand efter att upploppet var ett faktum och han träffats av bland annat grus och spott."*

Nyheter idag (2018): *"Viralgranskaren har räknat på saken och kommit fram till att invandrarfamiljen skulle kunna få ut ännu mer pengar idag. Med alla olika sorters bidrag inräknade kan familjen få ut 24 175 kronor per månad, uppger Viralgranskaren."*

Samhällsnytt (2018): *"Sky intervjuade också invånare i staden som påpekade att de inte är rasister, bara rädda för den ökande faran och kriminaliteten och erkände även att "lögnmedia":s försök att "brännmärka dem som nazister" ökar föraktet mot media."*

On the other hand, results indicate that disruptive strategies often aimed at undermining more generally accepted narratives like the trust in societal institutions or processes: the police, the voting system or the asylum process, or the narrative that the far-right is racist:

Samhällsnytt (2018): *"Ett stort antal invandrare och vänsterextremister hade samlats för att störa och agera hotfullt. Antalet poliser var åter igen för få."*

Fria Tider (2018), *"– De har inte skyddsbehov. De har fått sin sak prövad en gång, två gånger, tre gånger. De är inte flyktingar, de ska inte vara här. [...] Kostnaden är minst sex miljarder för dessa 9.000 vuxna män, svarade han."*

Nya Tider (2018), *"Enligt Per Sefastsson, riksdagskandidat för AfS, var polisinsatsen klart underdimensionerad och polisen hade svårt att hålla de kaxiga invandrarna på behörigt avstånd."*

Samhällsnytt (2018), *"Enligt Christian Lindner, ledare för Freie Demokratische Partei, har debatten i landet blivit upphetsad under senare år på grund av vänsterns anklagelser om "rasism" för allt som har med kritik mot den höga invandringen att göra."*

Another common strategy was to attack the narrative that immigrants and refugees come to Sweden to seek protection from war and persecution, trying to convince the readers that the whole basis for asylum is a lie:

Fria Tider (2018):*"Biskopen avslutar med att skaka hand med Mikael Jansson, som besökte Syrien för att med egna ögon se hur säkert landet blivit och diskutera hur syrier i Sverige ska kunna återvända till hemlandet. "*

Samhällsnytt (2018): *"De påstår att de flyr från krig och nu gör de väsen av vart de ska?"*

The use of distractive strategies however was somewhat more diffuse to identify within the material used in this analysis. Pamment et al. describes a distractive strategy as "Linking an established narrative to unrelated events or drawing the spotlight away from disinformation in order to distract." (Pamment et al., 2018, p.26). While no links of existing narratives to unrelated events in a "look here" kind of approach could be identified there was however attempts to divert attention away from disinformation *within* the articles by using correct information mixed with false information. As research suggests and as mentioned above, false news are often mixed with real news to give legitimacy to the source (Pamment et al., 2018, p.125). The sources included in this study, of which all have about a fifty-fifty distribution between disinformation and real news, could therefore be construed as using an oblique strategy on the platform more so than in the actual articles.

Overall, the theoretical framework from the MSB handbook "Countering information influence activities - a handbook for communicators" was a useful tool to identify anti-immigration disinformation in online news media. However it could not capture major league fakery like for example "fake real facts". It was also difficult to identify the type *manipulation* (ranging from photoshopped pictures to manipulated audio- and video material). This would probably require some sort of technical assistance. Furthermore, distractive strategies were more ambiguous *within* articles than constructive and disruptive, but on the other hand useful to analyse the source itself.

Conclusions

While previous studies have looked at international influence or influence on social media before the Swedish 2018 national elections, this study contributed with an understanding of the extent and ways *domestic* disinformation occurred on online news media. It shows that disinformation can indeed constitute a problem, especially for those who seek information on far-right platforms. The results point towards a systematic use of anti-immigrant disinformation rather than isolated cases. It could therefore be argued that the results from this study merit a more ambitious approach from the government and the media in counteracting disinformation not only from foreign powers, but also from domestic sources.

The results from this study should be interpreted with caution, but they do point towards a polarized debate on immigration with at least (if not all) a lion's share of the disinformation

coming from far-right online news media. That almost fifty percent of the immigration related articles published in far-right online news media ten days before the election could be construed as disinformation, is bad enough. But it is probably worsened by the fact that there is a lack of nuanced and critical debate on immigration on mainstream media platforms where readers could be challenged with a critical, but *truthful*, perspective. A critique directed at the mainstream media is therefore justified as well.

It is in this polarized discrepancy that we can understand the occurrence of disinformation. In light of these results, in combination with research that shows that the influence of misleading information is very difficult to remove (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2011, p.1) it is crucial to be able to detect, understand and counteract disinformation in order to prevent its development and effects on society - regardless if the source is a foreign power or a domestic media platform.

As research shows that negative framing of immigration can affect attitudes, and by extension voting behaviour, further research to examine the effects of anti-immigration disinformation on voter behaviour and election results is needed, especially in light of a diminished trust in democratic institutions, a growing demand for populism and increasing support for anti-immigration parties.

While the free and open debate is a foundation for democracy that should be safeguarded and that it is impossible to dogmatically analyse a public debate where legitimate and illegitimate use of information influence overlap, there should nonetheless be a more ubiquitous discussion on the impact that disinformation, regardless the source, has on our society.

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