The Construction of the LVU Influence Operation
A Narrative Case Study on Influence Operations

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Abstract
The thesis aims to give readers a more precise knowledge of how narratives in the information environment, mainly social media platforms, can be created and structured by agents of influence operations to subvert and influence a target audience. As a case study, the thesis focuses on the influence agent “Shuoun Islamiya”, as the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency pointed out, to be the initiator of the influence operation targeting Swedish Social Services and the LVU-act. The research in this paper explores the narratives used by the agent to reveal three central narratives propagated by Shuoun Islamiya: Sweden as a fascist state, Swedish authorities as abusive towards children, and depicting Swedish authorities as targeting Muslim families in particular. The findings suggest that these narratives are strategically designed to weaken the existing narrative of Sweden as a democratic state and evoke strong emotions in the targeted audience to align with the influence agent's objectives. Construction of these narratives involves setting up antagonistic actors, portraying the Swedish state and the social services as villains who unfairly and systematically target families of immigrant and Muslim backgrounds. The families are, on the other hand, depicted as helpless victims, emphasising a conflict between the state and the families by using provocative and inflammatory language related to allegations of child kidnapping and abuse carried out by Swedish authorities. These narratives are conveyed mainly through social media platforms, showing a strong visual component in which non-related visually evocative images are often used to elicit emotional responses from the target audience. Further, results show how non-state actors can influence a sizable audience and take advantage of the digital information environment, combining false and misleading content taken out of context. Moreover, the analysis highlights potential security implications, including the risk of undermining social trust and cohesion. The study emphasises the need for a critical mindset among information consumers. It suggests avenues for future research, including examining other actors and assessing a potentially more profound impact of the influence operation.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Problem

In the fall of 2020, the Swedish government presented the defence bill for 2021–25. Under the appropriate name, "The Total Defence Bill", a return to a nationally adapted defence was proposed, focusing on the Swedish total defence and its reconstruction. The bill justified this with the assessment that the security situation in Sweden's immediate area had deteriorated in recent years with a focus on Russia's political orientation and increased Russian military capability.¹ In addition to expanding the Swedish military defensive capabilities, the need for a so-called 'psychological defence' was also presented as part of the overall defence structure. Adapted to today's social conditions, a psychological defence was considered to strengthen and preserve the Swedish society's free exchange of knowledge and information, which in turn was considered to enhance the resilience of the society and the population's will to defend itself (försvarsviljan).² In order to secure these assignments, the establishment of a new government agency was proposed; the Psychological Defence Agency (MPF). In January 2022, the new agency saw the light of day. The official mission of the agency is to:

“Identify, analyse, prevent, and counter foreign malign information influence activities and other disinformation directed at Sweden or at Swedish interests. This could include attempts from foreign actors to weaken national resilience and the population’s will to defend the country, or malign influence aimed at changing people’s perceptions or influencing behaviours and the decision-making in society”.³

While often packed together with other terms such as information warfare, hybrid threats and psychological warfare, the essence of influence activities concerns subverting public opinion through propaganda and disinformation conducted by state and non-state actors.⁴ Although the spread of disinformation is hardly new, the cost, time, and risk of employing tools related to spreading information has been significantly lowered with the advancement of consuming information digitally. Anyone with a phone and an internet connection could essentially reach millions of interpreters without factoring in most spatial and temporal hindrances. Whereas influence activities of violent extremists, such as those of Al-Qa’ida,

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¹ Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30, Totalförsvaret 2021–2025, p. 59
² Ibid, p. 130
⁴ See Wanless & Pamment (2019) for more in-depth discussions concerning the definition of influence
ISIS, and white supremacy movements, have dominated security discourse since 2001, many democracies now seem more concerned with state-based opponents’ propaganda and disinformation campaigns. This change in focus is most often attributed to the influence activities of Russia and China. Russia, in particular, has been the subject of many case studies describing the use of disinformation and propaganda to influence public opinion, from election interference and armed conflict to vaccine debates. Since state actors often enjoy a greater capacity and capability to use such techniques, they are unsurprisingly the primary focus of case studies. Despite the significant differences between the influence activities of state and non-state adversaries that target democracies, there is, as Ingram suggests, an overarching strategic logic behind these activities that may help to understand these security challenges. These include everything from extremist recruitment attempts to supremacy movements.

As such, this thesis will apply a strategic narrative framework for understanding the structure used in influence activities. This is done by combining the frameworks of Wardle and Derkhans with the strategic narrative of Miskimmon and Pammet. Using this combined narrative approach, this thesis will explore the narratives used and the structure behind them concerning the influence operation of the Swedish act for Care of Young People (LVU).

In a comment to the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet regarding the LVU-disinformation campaign, the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the campaign targeted the Swedish rule of law, authorities, and the foundation of democracy. Antagonistic narratives, such as in the LVU case, risk creating polarization and distrust towards authorities by influencing public opinion based on falsehoods and misunderstandings. These phenomena of anti-democratic influence activities also risk causing more direct security challenges when ‘alternative narratives’ promote extremism or even violence. This thesis will, therefore, use the LVU-influence campaign as a case for exploring how non-state actors construct narratives used in anti-democratic influence activities. Thus, the thesis attempts to provide a deeper understanding of these activities.

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7 Irina Khaldarova & Mervi Pantti (2016) *Fake News The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict,* Journalism Practice, 10:7
understanding of how agents of influence activities construct their narratives in ways that may harm democratic societies. Using a case study designed around a single influence agent, the thesis explores and breaks down Shuoun Islamiya's messages, which has been attributed as the initial instigator of the influence activities related to the Swedish Social Services and LVU.

1.1. Case Background
While MPF saw the light of day in January of 2022, so too did a hashtag on the social media platform Twitter. Under the parole #Boycott_Sweden, tweets claiming that Swedish authorities kidnapped migrant children and purposely targeted Muslim families started spreading. Stories of children being put under conditions of torture, the jailing of objecting parents, supposed footage of children being kidnapped and demands for justice aimed at Swedish authorities were spread under the Boycott_Sweden hashtag together with an array of other hashtags such as #StopStealingOurChildren and #Sweden_is_facist_country, among others. Continuing into February of 2022, on the 7\textsuperscript{th} a protest was held outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm. Between 50 and 100 protestors gathered to demonstrate against the act of Care of Young Persons (LVU-act).\textsuperscript{11} The act gives Swedish social services the power to protect children and young people under the age of 21; in severe cases, it allows for the decision to take a child away from their family. However, according to the LVU-act, it must always be based on prerequisites related to the significant risk of harm to the child’s health or development.\textsuperscript{12} These are based on three prerequisites:

- There must be misconduct that is connected to the young person's home environment according to § 2 LVU (the so-called environmental cases) and/or to the young person's own behaviour according to § 3 LVU (the so-called behavioural cases),
- The misbehaviour must mean that there is a tangible risk that the young person's health or development will be damaged,
- And that necessary care cannot be provided voluntarily.\textsuperscript{13}

According to the newly established Psychological Defence Agency (MPF), the social media activity and subsequent protest was the result of an organized and ongoing

\textsuperscript{11} Törnqvist, Hanna & Al-Khameesi, Nahritha (2022-02-07) Nätkampanj mot Sverige oroar: ”Vill skapa polarisering”. Svenska Dagbladet https://www.svd.se/a/v5dk04/desinformationskampanj-mot-sverige-i-sociala-medier - accessed 2022-10-05
influence operation (påverkanskampanj) based on spreading disinformation about Swedish authorities kidnapping Muslim children using the LVU-act.\(^\text{14}\) This is not the first case of disinformation related to the Social Services and LVU. Previous research shows that such types of disinformation have been around longer than the more organised LVU-influence operation. For several years, there has been a negative image of Social Services as a threat.\(^\text{15}\) MPF stated that the origins of the organised information influence activities could be traced back to an Arab-speaking website known as Shuoun Islamiya (Islamic Affairs) publishing video clips claiming to portray Swedish authorities' abuse of power when enforcing the LVU-act. Further, according to MPF, actors linked to violent extremism were behind the operation, with videos and comments containing threats of violence and terror attacks against Sweden. The purpose of said influence operation and the spread of disinformation is, according to MPF, to create polarization and create a false narrative about Swedish authorities targeting and abusing certain groups in society.\(^\text{16}\) MPF would go on to describe the case as the largest influence operation that Sweden had ever seen.\(^\text{17}\)

### 1.2. Aim and Research Questions

This thesis aims to provide a deeper understanding of the narratives spread by the influence agent in this particular case, and how agents of influence activities can construct their narratives in ways that may harm democratic societies more broadly. Focusing on the narrative aspect of influence activities, the thesis aims to break down the strategy used by agents in terms of visual and narrative understanding. Using a case study designed around a single non-state influence agent, the thesis explores the narrative structure and strategic logic behind the influence activities related to Swedish Social services and the LVU-act. The research questions are:

- What narratives have the influence agent used in the influence operation?
- How has the influence agent constructed the narratives?

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\(^{15}\) Ranstorp, Magnus & Ahlerup, Linda (2022) "Salafism och salafistisk jihadism 2.0," CTTS Swedish Defence University, on behalf of MPF, p. 52

\(^{16}\) MPF cited in Svenska Dagbladet, Törnqvist & Al-Khameesi (2022-02-07) Svenska Dagbladet – accessed 2022-10-05

2. Theory and Previous Research
This section presents the theoretical framework used for understanding influence activities through a narrative approach and previous research on the subject.

2.1. Defining Information Influence Activities
Many definitions describe coercive influence activities through false or manipulated information, from the classic term propaganda to military terms such as information warfare and psychological operations, to terms such as 'fake news' and information disorder. Unfortunately, there is little consistency in the usage of these terms, especially in media coverage of the topic. These inconsistencies also make it challenging to begin a literary overview of previous research on the subject since researchers, government agencies and think tanks more often than not use different terms to describe mostly similar phenomena. Therefore, it is necessary to start this chapter by pinning down the definition used in this study before moving forward.

As Wanless & Pamment points out, the number of overlapping terms is indicative of a weak understanding of the field. Seeing as information and its consumption is fundamental to democracy, which is a system that derives its legitimacy from the notion that citizens are making informed decisions of their own free will, more effort must be put into the terminology of how information is used to influence targets. This study shares Wanless & Pamment's view on the importance of using precise terminology and putting more effort into understanding how information is used to influence an audience. As such, to avoid confusion, this study will follow a clear language following Wanless & Pamment's suggestion of ruling out certain terminology on the basis of being too vague or too one-dimensional.

The study bases its definition on the Swedish Contingency Agency (MSB) to clearly define influence operations. MSB defines influence operations as a set of coordinated information influence activities conducted by foreign adversaries. These activities involve promoting misleading or inaccurate information aimed at influencing the perceptions, opinions, behaviour, and decisions of target groups consisting of all, or part of the Swedish population as well as the opinion of decisions taken in other countries that might affect Swedish security or interests.

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20 Ibid
21 Swedish Contingency Agency (2019), Countering information influence activities, p. 7
In order to use consistent terminology, this study will refer to the method of using misleading or false information to influence targets as *disinformation*. Further, MSB views influence operations as part of a hierarchy of illegitimate (although not necessarily illegal) activities conducted by foreign powers: consisting of influence activities (single use of influence activities), influence operations (multiple coordinated influence activities), and influence campaigns (multiple coordinated operations across the hybrid spectrum).22

In other words, this study will use influence activities to describe a foreign agent's singular or specific disinformation attempts. When several activities are put into the context as part of overarching strategic logic bound together by a narrative to influence the target audience, the activities are part of a more extensive *influence operation*.

### 2.1.1. The (Dis)information Component

As previously mentioned, free access to information to and from governmental sources, organisations, activists, and individuals are all cornerstones of an open democracy, allowing for informed debates and decisions. Disinformation subverts this exchange by deliberately constructing and spreading false information. A prevalent misconception revolves around the idea that disinformation solely consists of false information, but that is not the whole of it. Disinformation frequently intertwines genuine information with falsehoods, presenting accurate facts in a misleading context by, for example, spreading intentionally mislabelled authentic images. The crucial aspect lies not in assessing the truthfulness of an individual image or text but in comprehending its role within a broader influence operation.23

Consequences of disinformation can affect several levels of democratic societies, depending on the intent of the agent’s strategic goal. Ingram contends that many state and non-state actors engage in harmful anti-democratic influence activities to undermine social trust, trust in institutions and experts, and trust in democratic values among the target populations. These activities often depend on disinformation, which can have two significant consequences.

First, because these influence operations drive psycho-social processes, target audiences may be more vulnerable to polarising narratives from non-state actors (such as violent extremists) and state actors. Second, as a result of these dynamics, target populations may show increased participation in anti-democratic activities, ranging from attitudinal support for authoritarian forms of government to, at the most extreme end, engaging in violent acts.

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motivated by political motives (terrorism) or in support of a foreign authoritarian power.\textsuperscript{24}

Disinformation can also have serious consequences beyond the information exchange. The predominant discourse surrounding disinformation in the United States and Europe has primarily focused on political messaging, that, while concerning from a democratic standpoint, might not provoke physical violence. However, in various regions across the globe, disinformation targeting individuals based on their religious, ethnic, or racial backgrounds has had severe consequences, leading to acts of violence. One noteworthy instance occurred during the two-day riots in Mandalay, Myanmar's second-largest city, in July 2014. An unfounded rumour circulated on Facebook, alleging that a Muslim tea shop owner had sexually assaulted a Buddhist employee, triggering an eruption of violence. A mob of nearly 500 individuals unleashed chaos upon the city, instilling lasting fear among its Muslim residents. Tragically, the riot resulted in the deaths of two individuals, one Buddhist and one Muslim.\textsuperscript{25}

Wardle and Derakhshan suggest there are three elements for understanding how disinformation is created, spread and interpreted. The first refers to the agents behind the activities. The Agents are involved in all three phases of the information chain, from creation to the distribution. Both the motivations and characteristics of agents can vary from phase to phase. Agents like intelligence services, political parties, and news organisations can be official. They can also be unofficial, like groups of citizens or agents working individually or in longstanding tightly-organised organisations.\textsuperscript{26}

The second phase of the process involves disseminating messages by the agents. They may be disseminated by agents directly via rumours, speeches, in text formats such as newspaper or pamphlets, or audio-visual formats through images, videos, and edited audio clips. Misinformation and disinformation is frequently spread via audio-visual formats; this is significant because automatic text analysis technology differs greatly from that of still and moving picture analysis technology.\textsuperscript{27}

The third phase involves the interpretation of the messages by the audience. An audience is composed of individuals who interpret information based on their socio-cultural status, political beliefs, and personal experiences. The information we consume and the ways in which we make sense of it are heavily influenced by our self-identity and the groups we

\textsuperscript{24} Ingram, Haroro J. (2020), The Strategic Logic of State and Non-State Malign 'Influence Activities', RUSI Journal, 165:1, p. 12

\textsuperscript{25} Wardle, Claire & Derakshan, Hossein (2017) Information Disorder: Towards an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking. Published by the Council of Europe, p. 41

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, p. 25

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p. 26
identify with. In today's world, where our likes, comments, and shares are visible to our social connections, these "social" and performative forces are more influential than ever.\textsuperscript{28}

2.1.2. The Digital Component

Using the information environment for malicious activities is not a new phenomenon. As previously pointed out, state and non-state actors have used this for centuries in attempts to influence their targets. Rapidly evolving technological advances in communications and increased connectivity to online sources have drastically altered how individuals engage in the public information environment and, in turn, become influenced by it. Steele points out that the internet, in particular, has accelerated the dissemination of information so much that information remains slightly 'ahead' of powers attempting to classify and regiment it.\textsuperscript{29} The increased reach and availability of communication technologies allow nongovernmental groups to organise and communicate their positions on issues related to foreign (as well as domestic) policies. In this sense, technology has empowered additional actors.\textsuperscript{30}

As the number of people who use and consume digital information continues to increase, a cunning agent can gain enhanced means of influencing opinions around the world by combining tech-enabled formats of persuasive content, automated dissemination, and audience engagement to reach and influence the opinions of others. These tools include the use of social media platforms to produce persuasive content, as well as garner audience engagement to said content.\textsuperscript{31}

Previous research of influence activities and disinformation has pointed out a phenomenon known as \textit{participatory propaganda}. Closely related to traditional propaganda, participatory propaganda refers to a modernised influence technique built on the intent to get the target audience to actively engage in the spread of persuasive communications to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour of a target audience.\textsuperscript{32} With the internet and social media, the traditional separation between "the propagandist" and "target audience" is rapidly blurring, with the latter beginning to play a more significant role in

\textsuperscript{28} Wardle & Derakshan (2017), p. 27
\textsuperscript{29} Steele. (2010). \textit{Defacing power: the aesthetics of insecurity in global politics}. University of Michigan Press, p. 52
\textsuperscript{31} Wanless & Berk (2021) \textit{Participatory Propaganda: The Engagement of Audiences in the Spread of Persuasive Communications} in Social Media and Social Order. De Gruyter, p. 111
\textsuperscript{32} Wanless & Berk (2021), p. 113
spreading propagandistic content and influencing others through personal networks. As such social media allows actors to target trust in social order rooted in the democratic debate because the social basis of trust in networks is used by participatory propagandists to mask the false basis of claims, resulting in systematically distorted public communication.

Another crucial aspect is the challenge posed by social networks, as they create difficulty for individuals in assessing the credibility of any given message. This is because content from vastly different sources, such as legitimate news sites and conspiracy websites, can appear strikingly similar in format and presentation. Consequently, people increasingly rely on their friends and family members to navigate through the vast information landscape. As Messing and Westwood have argued, social media has brought forth two notable effects: firstly, by aggregating stories from various sources, the emphasis shifts towards the narrative itself rather than its origin; secondly, endorsements and recommendations from social connections play a pivotal role in guiding readership, as opposed to relying on traditional gatekeepers or long-standing reading habits.

In the case of Sweden, for example, being a highly digitalised nation, it becomes a prime subject for conducting digital influence operations and, therefore, a prime subject for case studies. It is estimated that 9 out of 10 Swedes use the internet daily. Further, 9 of 10 Swedish internet users also consume news digitally; 7 out of 10 use digital newspapers as a news source, and about 5 out of 10 consume news on social media.

2.2. Previous Research on Influence Activities
The following section presents some of the previous research on influence activities and disinformation. While the research on these fields is vast, it can be difficult to assess since, as previously explained, the terms used to describe these phenomena are often confusingly used depending on the researcher and agencies using them. As such, this thesis does not attempt to give an exhaustive report on this literature. Instead, the following section on previous research will focus on the impact of influence activities, as these are the common unifiers that connect the different terms. Based on Ingram’s model of the strategic logic of influence agents, the previous research will focus on the impact of various levels of trust.

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33 Wanless & Berk (2021), p. 112
34 Ibid, p. 7-9
37 The Swedish Internet Foundation (2021). Svenskarna och internet 2021, p. 4
38 Ibid, p. 240
2.2.1. Social Trust

To do unto others as you would have them do unto you, also known as the 'Golden Rule', is perhaps one of the most fundamental cornerstones of reciprocal ethics. Essentially, the golden rule touches upon the importance of trusting other people's integrity and reliability, as they would of you. Social trust refers to this essence and its importance in democratic societies for creating cohesiveness and stable political systems. For example, in terms of crisis management, populations have to rely on government support to various degrees, but also themselves and other individuals to manage and recover from crises. An already established social trust helps facilitate that collective response as reciprocal aid between citizens is already an expected action within the society.

Established social trust is sometimes referred to as 'social capital' (the value of social relations/networks within and between groups), which is an essential factor of democratic societies. For instance, this can reduce the enforcement costs of maintaining collective solutions. The greater the social capital, the less the need for intrusive and expensive monitoring and punishment mechanisms. Rothstein has done significant research into this subject, investigating the connection between trust, social capital, and the operation of democratic institutions. He argues that social trust is essential for the success of democratic societies and the provision of public benefits and that societies with greater levels of trust tend to have more efficient and effective public institutions, lower levels of corruption, and greater social cohesion. This is also exemplified by the willingness to pay taxes, as research summarised by Scholz and Lubell explains: "Citizens will meet obligations to the collective despite the temptation to free ride as long as they trust other citizens and political leaders to keep up their side of the social contract".

Previous research shows how state and non-state actors use anti-democratic influence activities to erode social trust in target populations. For example, Hellman's research into Russian portrayal of the Swedish Covid-19 crisis management shows how Russian state media created narratives of conflicting social trust by pitting groups of Swedes and immigrants against immigrants.

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39 Ingram (2020), p. 17
against each other. Reports in the Russian state-controlled news site Sputnik claimed that immigrants created problems for the crisis management, as they were depicted as strongly overrepresented among infected and not having the means to protect themselves. The reporting shows open confrontations between groups of Swedes and immigrants without presenting different explanatory factors, each of which might be correct. However, when added together and built into the narrative, it serves the objectives of the influence agent by portraying Sweden and Swedish interests as incompatible with those of immigrants and asylum seekers.\(^{44}\)

Besides disinformation, another example of more hands-on influence activities targeting social trust occurred when a Russian news crew turned up in Rinkeby, a suburb of Stockholm with a sizable Muslim immigrant population, offering cash to residents willing to stage a riot for their cameras. While this was an attempt to create a narrative of crime linked to Muslim immigration, a legitimate Danish radio news crew stumbled on the scene and covered the Russian news team's failed efforts to orchestrate a make-believe riot.\(^{45}\)

Another example by Ranstorp et al. shows that in some areas of Sweden with low social trust (known in Sweden as 'särskilt utsatta områden'), religious fundamentalism is taught in so-called 'Quoran Schools'. Analysis of the material used in said schools shows how books instruct Muslims not to be integrated into Swedish society or to respect its laws and regulations. Instead, Sweden and the Swedes are seen as unfaithful to a social system that contrasts with that of 'proper' religious living.\(^{46}\)

### 2.2.2. Trust in authorities/expertise

Besides 'horizontal trust', trust between citizens and social groups within a society, there is also the 'vertical trust' factor between the population and the governing authorities. Achieving and maintaining a high level of citizen trust is essential for democratic governance and creating public legitimacy.\(^{47}\) Returning to the use of crisis management as example; the public's perceptions of social risks are influenced by various factors, such as their confidence and trust in the government and its capacity to prevent and handle crises. If the government is not competent and efficient, the population is more likely to feel threatened by the potential crisis outcomes. They would also feel that they have to invest efforts in protecting themselves. If the

\(^{44}\) Hellman, Maria (2021) Infodemin under pandemin – Rysk informationspåverkan mot Sverige. Statsvetenskaplig tidsskrift - Argang 123, p. 459


\(^{46}\) Ranstorp, Magnus et.al (2018) Mellan salafism och salafistiskt jihadism: Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället. CATS SDU, p. 155

government is credible and trustworthy, the people's perceptions of the crisis will become less critical.\textsuperscript{48} The same could be said for relaying information; if citizens do not trust authorities and experts, they are more likely to accept alternative information from other potentially antagonistic sources, such as disinformation or outright conspiracies. Violent extremists often warn their supporters to trust mainstream media and authorities, instead promoting their own information channels.\textsuperscript{49}

A case study on social trust among foreign-born individuals in Denmark demonstrated the interconnectedness between social trust and trust in authorities. The study suggests that social trust may increase as a result of trust in state institutions. This suggest, among other things, that the higher degree of perceived trust in institutions, such as the just actions of enforcement agencies and the judiciary system, impacts the perceived trust between citizens.\textsuperscript{50}

State and non-state influence activities target trust in authorities and experts in democracies. For example, previous research has shown that during the Covid-19 pandemic, Russian state media reported on Swedish crisis management and leadership as indecisive and absent in the wake of spiralling death tolls. Portraying Sweden in near-apocalyptic terms with parallels to the Spanish flu; the blame was put on Swedish authorities for not taking the pandemic seriously, and the Russian reporting amplified health experts' disagreement surrounding 'herd immunity' with the intent to infect millions of citizens purposely.\textsuperscript{51} The Russian reporting works in tandem with social media activity. With the intent to seek controversy, Russian reporters picked out particular social media posts confirming the narrative of their reporting, portraying disagreement between Swedish citizens and Swedish authorities, such as government officials and experts, as common opinion.\textsuperscript{52}

Similarly, disinformation narratives can gain traction on social media. An Australian study examined a narrative of a supposed US Covid-19 vaccine trial conducted on Ukrainian volunteers, including soldiers, in Kharkiv (controlled by the Ukrainian Government). According to the press release, five of the 15 patients who received the trial vaccine were killed, including four Ukrainian soldiers. The press release was published the day

\textsuperscript{48} Ma and Christensen (2019), p. 386  
\textsuperscript{49} Ingram (2021), p. 18–19  
\textsuperscript{50} Nannestad, P. et al. (2014) Do Institutions or Culture Determine the Level of Social Trust? The Natural Experiment of Migration from Non-western to Western Countries. Journal of ethnic and migration studies. 40 (4), 544–565  
\textsuperscript{51} Hellman (2021), p. 455-456  
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p. 458
after Russia announced plans to produce its own vaccine in a matter of weeks. The alleged Ukrainian vaccine trial never happened, but this disinformation narrative, which has anti-American and anti-Ukrainian Government undertones, has achieved widespread dissemination in multiple languages and across various communities, including a prominent Australian anti-vaccination Facebook group.\(^\text{53}\)

Lack of trust in authorities and experts also contributes to the development of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories seek to explain the fundamental causes of significant social and political events and situations by asserting the existence of secret plots involving two or more powerful actors. Conspiracy theories are typically associated with the covert actions of governments, but can implicate any perceived powerful and malevolent group.\(^\text{54}\)

2.2.3. Trust in Democracy

Just as social trust and trust in authorities/experts reflect the subjective perceptions of the target population, so too does trust in democracy. Democracy is based on legitimacy, from the notion that voters are making informed decisions out of their own free will, to the trust in and reliability in the democratic process as a system. As such, the ability to make informed decisions thus becomes a critical infrastructure in a democratic system. The use of information to influence people ultimately calls into question a target audience's ability to be reasonably informed.\(^\text{55}\) Declining trust in the democratic system and its institutions also erodes the credibility of official information, creating the threat of alternative sources of information with potential security risks.

A case study by Wanless and Berk shows how social media users are "drawn into and participating in the creation and spread of persuasive messaging," something they call an "enhanced form of propaganda" that is increasingly invasive. The authors examined the 2016 US presidential campaign's use of numerous social media platforms. They discovered that the political messaging that was conveyed was significantly impacted by the employment of participatory propaganda techniques. These included the capacity to produce false or unsupported communications as well as the capacity to give those who had been concealed legitimacy. The authors noted that the use of social media platforms can present threats to the democratic process. It enables propagandists to conceal their motives and actions, leading to


\(^\text{54}\) Douglas, K. M. et al. (2019) Understanding Conspiracy Theories. Political psychology. 40 (S1), p.4

\(^\text{55}\) Wanless & Pamment (2019), p. 8
consistently skewed public communications.\textsuperscript{56}

An extensive study on the same subject by Allcott and Gentzkow highlights the use of social media to spread false or misleading information in relation to the 2016 US presidential election. Due to their algorithms that prioritise engagement and ubiquitous content, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter played a pivotal role in the propagation of disinformation. Inadvertently, the algorithms can amplify false information, leading to its widespread dissemination. The algorithms used by social media platforms can create echo chambers and filter bubbles in which individuals are predominantly exposed to content that supports their existing beliefs. This can contribute to the propagation of inaccurate information and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints.\textsuperscript{57}

2.2.4. Influence operations by non-state actors

Notably, most of the above-presented research primarily focuses on state actors. However, the rise of new political actors on the international stage, such as NGOs, citizen activists, transnational social movements, and terrorist groups, has garnered attention. These actors can digitally disseminate their narratives to a global audience through social media and other global communication networks.\textsuperscript{58}

For example, The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how a private political consulting firm obtained and misused Facebook user data for political advertising during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and other campaigns worldwide. This incident highlighted how non-state actors could exploit personal information to conduct targeted influence operations.\textsuperscript{59}

In addition, various extremist organisations, such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and al-Qaeda, have employed influence operations to recruit members, spread their ideologies, and incite violence. These groups have utilised social media, online forums, and propaganda videos to disseminate their messages and radicalise individuals.\textsuperscript{60}

There is, however, relatively sparse research on non-state actors attempting

\textsuperscript{56} Herbert, David & Fisher-Hörem, Stefan (2021). *Introduction: How Do Social Media Change Social Order? The Deep Datafication of Society from Global to Local Scales (and Back Again)* in Social Media and Social Order, De Gruyter, p. 8


\textsuperscript{60} See for example Mahood, & Rane, H. (2017). *Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda*. Journal of International Communication, 23:1
influence activities targeted towards Sweden. Perhaps the foremost research on this field is Ranstorp's, which has focused on extremist environments in Sweden. Ranstorp's research focuses on understanding the motivations, behaviours, and tactics of terrorist organisations and individuals. He has examined the dynamics of jihadist movements, including Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other extremist groups. His work involves analysing their recruitment strategies, radicalisation processes, and operational methods.61

This research does not specifically focus on influence operations or specific agents' construction of them, but rather extremist environments more broadly. That is where this study hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of the research field by breaking down the construction of the narratives used in the case of the LVU-influence operations. It is also worth noting that research in this field is ongoing, and new instances of non-state actors engaging in influence operations continue to emerge. Understanding these tactics and their implications is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate the spread of disinformation, protect democratic processes, and safeguard the integrity of public discourse.

2.3. Narrative Framework for Understanding Influence Activities
When exploring the construction of influence activities by using messages of disinformation to influence target audiences, one may approach from a narrative understanding. Narratives are a form of storytelling that shapes how people think and perceive an issue. They are often composed of many messages or statements that, when taken together, help tell a particular story.62

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As Freedman puts it, the concept of narratives can be understood as compelling storylines that can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn. These inferences can have direct security consequences if malign intent is behind them. If used successfully, narratives can undermine the perception of security by pitting political, social and cultural identities against one another. This is because narratives are compelling stories and constructed to speak to their target audience's understanding of the world. As Somers explains, it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identity.

The narratives are, as such, designed to be relatable and compelling to a target audience. They can be used to unify groups with different beliefs and interests, and as a result, narratives can be powerful tools for influencing others. Still, they can also be used to spread misleading or deceptive information. This is also an important factor of societal trust as people tend to find information shared from their personal social network more credible than others. Actors behind influence activities can use this to their advantage when constructing messages, purposely eliciting an emotional response from the target audience by portraying a narrative wherein the social group and identity are under threat by an external actor. As such, narratives do not necessarily have to be based on facts; instead, they may rely on appeals to emotion or on questionable historical analogies and metaphors that speak to the target audience of the narrative. In this sense, narratives are not random or spontaneous but carefully designed or nurtured to shape how people respond to events. They are strategic because they are deliberately constructed or reinforced from existing ideas and thoughts in order to influence the responses of others.

2.3.1. Strategic Narratives

Strategic narratives are defined by Miskimmon et al. as distinguished by a particular structure through which sense is achieved. This structure is comprised of actors, events, plot and time, and setting and space. As Miskimmon et al. explain, the point of strategic narratives is to influence the behaviour of others. From a political view, strategic narratives can be

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64 Giannapalous et.al. (2021) The Landscape of Hybrid Threats. European Union and Hybrid CoE, p. 32
66 Pamment (2021), p. 12
67 Wanless & Berk (2021), p. 111
68 Freedman (2006), p. 23
69 Ibid, p. 22
70 Ibid, p. 5-6
71 Miskimmon et.al (2013), p. 2
understood as means for actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors and to achieve political objectives.\textsuperscript{72}

In previous research, strategic narratives have been used to analyse how state actors use narratives to impact international relations, such as seeking to influence the development of policies, such as in international arms control negotiations or in challenging opponents in armed conflict; and strategic narratives of identity and the international system, which are central to how political actors seek to protect their identity in international affairs.\textsuperscript{73}

State- and non-state actors use various strategies when crafting narratives about the "other" for their own gain, often to the detriment of the group being narrated. Some common tactics include exaggerating the differences between the narrating group and the "other," depicting the "other" as a threat or enemy, and using emotional appeals to stir up fear or hatred of the "other" group. Using these strategies, states and other actors may manipulate public opinion and gain support for their actions or policies.\textsuperscript{74} One may also explore the agent's strategic logic by analysing the narrative. For example, in a study published in 2021, Wagnsson & Barzanje analysed the Russian state-controlled news platform Sputnik and the narrative used in reports about Sweden. The study identified three strategies/logics used by Russia with the intent to destabilise or harm the Swedish state. These strategies are designed to damage the country's status and capabilities and induce seemingly desirable behaviours. The authors describe the Russian approach to narration as antagonistic, citing military and security doctrines, a readiness to use information strategically, and prior research indicating a negative slant towards other countries.\textsuperscript{75}

Previous research on strategic narratives has mainly focused on state actors and the process by which government-produced stories lead to change in the real world. However, the rise of new political actors on the international stage, such as NGOs, citizen activists, transnational social movements, and terrorist groups, has garnered attention. These actors can disseminate their narratives to global audiences through the internet, social media, and global communication networks.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} Miskimmon et.al (2013), p. 2
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p. 2, 12-13
The Swedish agencies MSB and MPF also use Strategic Narratives as part of their vocabulary to explain how agents of influence operations use storytelling to achieve their goals. For example, it is possible to use disinformation about certain ethnic or religious groups that fits into people's preconceived notions about these groups and the existing narrative. The discussion can be then influenced in three ways: by highlighting parts of the existing narrative; by suppressing other narratives, and by making new connections to unrelated events to distract.\(^\text{77}\)

In identifying the narrative construction of these influence activities, one can break down the narratives in terms of their strategic logic. Pamment et al. suggest categorizations based on positive or constructive strategies: establishing a coherent narrative on a general societal level or with selected target audiences. This means that the influence operations' narrative directly correlates with, or complements existing widely accepted narratives. Negative or disruptive strategies: attempt to prevent the emergence of a coherent narrative or try to weaken or destroy an existing narrative, again either on general societal level or with selected target audiences. Attacks on narratives are normally conducted by selecting contested themes such as, e.g. crime or immigration. Oblique strategies: Diverts attention from a particular issue or argument by distracting the conversation. In this regard, humour, memes or conspiracy theories are often used.\(^\text{78}\)

### 2.3.2. Visuals, Formats and Sources

As scholars of visuals have shown; the way we understand imagery fundamentally differs from how we understand the written text. As Postman explains, while the written language derives from context, when removed from that context, the meaning of the text gets distorted as the reader is deprived of what happened before and after. Conversely, images do not require a context; their ‘vocabulary’ is limited to the concrete representation of its documents. Unlike text, images do not present an idea or concept about the world; instead, we need to apply language to convert the image to an idea.\(^\text{79}\)

Our brains process images at an incredible speed when compared with text; as a result, our critical reasoning skills are less likely to engage with what we're seeing.\(^\text{80}\) While we need time to process the information we are seeing before making an action, we are constantly

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\(^{77}\) MSB & MPF & Medieinstitutet Fojo (2022) *Att möta informationspåverkan – Handbok för journalister*. MSB1889 p. 13


bombarded with further information, which impacts the speed of reasoning for said information. Postman again refers to this as the ‘information-action-ratio’. In short, he claims there has always been a bigger input of information in relation to the expected output of actions to this information. But with technological evolutions, this input has ballooned far beyond what is reasonable for anyone to have time to conclude the action.\textsuperscript{81} Although this concept was written as a critique relating to media consumption in America during the 1980s (particularly that of television consumption), it also captures the issues of today’s information environment of how we rapidly consume information via images on online platforms.

Visuals can be far more persuasive than other forms of communication, making them more powerful vehicles for disinformation. In addition, over the past couple of years, we’ve been confronted with the technological implications whereby relatively limited audio or video clips of someone can act as very powerful ‘training data’ allowing for the creation of completely fabricated audio or video files, making it appear that someone has said something that they have not.\textsuperscript{82}

This is perhaps more relevant now than ever as Artificial Intelligence tools for creating images rapidly advance and become more sophisticated. Being able to fact-check the sources of the information one is consuming is therefore also becoming even more critical. Using Twitter as an example, the social media platform combines written text with the ability to post still and moving audio-visual images. Determining whether the text, image and audio are factual is no easy task, especially when considering the sheer amount of information one is exposed to a good example of the information-action-ratio. Putting the Twitter post in their context is also an important part of this, especially in terms of narratives. Consequently, rather than recovering pre-existing stories, readers must use individual tweets as material for narrative interpretations. Narrative on Twitter is thus intrinsically dynamic and dependent on reader interpretation for its very existence, making it impossible to speak of stable narratives, independent of their reception by readers, on the site.\textsuperscript{83}

As such, the visuals, format and sources intertwine when the agent of influence operations construct and spread their narratives.

\textsuperscript{81} Postman (1985), p. 68-69  
\textsuperscript{82} Wardle & Derakshan (2017), p. 39  
3. Methodology

3.1. Design Strategy

A design strategy based on case studies focuses on the occurrence of a particular phenomenon to provide an exhaustive account of events, relations, experiences, or processes that occur in the specific case. Often used in small-scale qualitative studies, a case study is characterised by an in-depth analysis that describes the complexity of a case in detail. As a design, case studies are suitable when aiming to provide not only the context to *how* a phenomenon is detailed, but also the context as to *why* the phenomenon occurs.\(^84\)

For example, a case study can show that a particular area of a city is more prone to crime than others. This result may be interesting in itself, but the strength of case studies is the researcher's opportunity to study the relations and processes behind the case that can *explain* the crime situation.\(^85\) In other words, a researcher would use a case study design to cover contextual conditions since these are highly relevant to the study of the phenomenon in question. This means that case studies are inherently holistic in design since case studies allow an in-depth focus on a "case" and to retain a holistic and real-world perspective, such as in studying individual life cycles, small group behaviour, organisational and managerial processes, neighbourhood change, and international relations for example.\(^86\)

This design also brings with it some complications. As Seawright points out, the chosen case is asked to perform a heroic role: to stand for several cases that are often much larger than the case itself, raising the problem of case selection.\(^87\) As such, generalisation from a small number of case studies can be considered excessively difficult or problematic regarding inference; therefore, it's crucial to differentiate between analytical generalisations and statistical generalisations as two distinct sorts of generalisations.\(^88\) In most types of quantitative studies, statistical generalisation is arguably the most prevalent, relying on specific mathematical precepts and statistical hypotheses wherein the outcome of a number of samples is permitted to reflect the full population if the criteria for statistical significance is reached.\(^89\)

Analytical generalisation is more often used to explain why and how something happens within the analysed theoretical framework rather than function as representing the full

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\(^85\) Ibid, p. 87


\(^88\) Yin (2014), p. 15

\(^89\) Ibid
population. From this perspective, the findings from a case study should be considered as part of an ongoing theory development wherein the analysed samples can be used as a point of departure for future research within that theory, and from this analytical point of view that the findings from case studies could be generalised.

Which brings us to this thesis. The main purpose of using a case study design in this thesis is to discover information that can be used to understand the underlying narrative construction within the framework of the observed case. The selected case in this study is, as MPF claims, an example of a successful influence operation. MPF has also identified the timeframe and the initial actor behind the influence activities. As such, analysing the case in terms of its construction can provide potentially valuable information in three different ways: for what the information says in itself, for what it suggests in terms of new avenues of research, and for what it explains in terms of how aspects of the case are connected. Another strength of case studies is that the design allows for the use of different and combined research methods to achieve a holistic understanding of the case; this thesis uses narrative and visual analysis.

To summarise, this study considers the LVU-influence operation as a specific successful case of said phenomena, making it an interesting subject for a case study. But, as previously explained, influence operations consist of several organised cases of influence activities. As such, the so-called units of analysis are made up of a number of activities, such as messages (or sub-narratives). Therefore, this thesis will use the timeframe of December 2021 until December 2022, focusing on Shuoun Islamiya's activities, as was identified by MPF as the initial actor behind the influence operation. The goal is to explain the various narratives used in the influence operation that has been spread concerning the Swedish social services and the LVU-act, and to break down the construction of these narratives.

3.1.1. Narrative Analysis
The narrative analytical method used in this thesis operationalises the theoretical framework of a narrative understanding of influence operations, as presented in chapter 2.3. As such, understanding of strategic narratives in influence operations is based on Miskimmon's and Pammet's work. Connecting the narratives to influence operations is done based on the work of Wardle & Derakshan and Wagnsson & Barzanje. Here, the main subject is the central narratives used by the agent, that is, the overarching story told during the period studied.

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90 Denscombe (2018), p. 94
91 Ibid, p. 94
92 Denscombe (2018), p. 88
93 Ibid
When conducting a narrative analysis, one can approach the material by posing questions such as what stories are being told, and how they are being expressed. In the case of this study, we are interested in learning the content of the stories told within the narratives found used by the influence agent concerning Swedish authorities and the LVU-act. Analysing the narrative then becomes a task of analysing the messages in different formats, such as texts, videos, and pictures, as one tries to extract the story that is trying to convey.

As the study aims to provide an analysis of influence activities based on a strategic narrative framework, the operationalisation must incorporate central aspects of both narrative structures and the medium through which it is disseminated. This is done by combining Wardle and Derkhan's framework on disinformation together with the aforementioned strategic narrative analysis of Miskimmon and Pammet. To do this, the analysis first begins by providing a brief overview of the influence activities. This is done to provide the context of the influence operation by asking who the agent behind the activities is, when it happened and how it attempted to reach the audience, providing the context for the subsequent narrative analysis. The narrative analysis is then structured into three parts: the central narrative, the actors in the narrative, and the problem/conflicts narrated. These parts involve identifying the key themes and messages conveyed in the material, the main actors, and the 'plot' presented by the narrator regarding problems/conflicts.

This is operationalised by identifying and analysing the narrative structure, including actors, events, plot and time, setting and space, to understand their construction and purpose. Further, the narratives are categorised based on their strategic logic: positive/constructive, negative/disruptive, or oblique/diverting strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operationalisation of Strategic Narratives</th>
<th>Coding Schedule</th>
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<tr>
<td>Narrative Categories</td>
<td>Indicators</td>
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</table>
| Central Narratives | • Narrative Overview  
• Themes  
• Sub-narratives | - What are the central messages of the narratives?  
- What themes can be identified within the messages?  
- What sub-narratives can be identified? |

94 Wagnsson & Barzanje (2019), p. 242
Images play an essential part in the creation of narratives. As Bleiker poignantly explains, images are now produced and circulated in ever faster and more complex ways in the context of rapidly changing ways of media consumption; thus, understanding images' political nature and impact can be challenging.\textsuperscript{95} While images may, by definition, work differently than words, they too tell a story that adds emotion and elicits reactions to the narrative it's a part of. This is particularly true in influence activities, as what makes a message more appealing and thus more likely to be consumed, processed and shared widely are the provocation of an emotional response, a powerful visual component, a strong narrative, and its repeatability.\textsuperscript{96}

Those agents who construct influence activities understand this formula and apply it to the images used to support the narrative; thus, identifying these visual characteristics becomes an integral part of understanding the construction of the activities.\textsuperscript{97}

Visual data can comprise found images (e.g. family photo albums), researcher-
created images (e.g. images taken by researchers), respondent-created data (e.g. images taken by respondents) and representations (e.g. graphical representations of data). In the case of this study, we are mostly interested in found images, e.g. images that the influence actor used to spread the narrative of the influence activities. Whether or not the agent has created these images or simply helped spread them is not the primary concern. Instead, we are interested in the visual data provided by the images in three ways: the production of the images, the content of the images, and how the audiences can interpret them.

First is the production of the image, understanding how images – still or moving – are taken: not only what technical processes and choices are involved, but also what political and ethical consequences follow. On the technical aspect, we are interested in how the images were taken or created regarding their reliability. This involves analysing the image's origins and whether the image has retroactively been manipulated or taken out of context by using Google Reverse image search, for example. On the ethical aspect, this involves asking what or whom the images portray. While this is perhaps more relevant for those engaged in photojournalism or research-created images, this study does touch upon situations wherein individuals, often children, are portrayed in distressed situations. This thesis will not include images of children or families that have been subject to the LVU-act to ensure the anonymity of these individuals.

Second, understanding what the images portray in terms of their actual content. Investigating how images interact with other mediums and objects such as cultural or religious symbols and other factors, is imperative to understanding the construction of the narrative behind the influence activities. This provides data in two meaningful ways: the information the images convey in terms of what is said or written in them and the implied communications conveyed through symbols or evocative imagery, for example.

In the case of this study, we are primarily interested in researching the production and content of the images, as the researching the impact of the images would require a different set of methods (for example, interviews), which falls outside the scope of this study.

100 Bleiker (2015), p. 877
101 Wardle & Derakshan (2017), p. 40
102 See for example Barbie Zelizer, About to Die: How News Images Move the Public, Oxford University Press, for an interesting discussion on the topic.
103 Bleiker (2015), p. 878
104 Denscombe (2017), p. 332
As such, the visual analysis is operationalised by examining Visuals, Formats, and Sources: the use of visuals (images, audio-visual content) in influence activities; different formats or mediums used to disseminate narratives (e.g., social media, online articles) and their impact. Identify and assess the sources of narratives, including determining the origins of the image production, the sources cited in the narratives, and the sources' validity level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operationalisation of Visual Analysis</th>
<th>Coding Schedule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Categories</strong></td>
<td>Questions posed to the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visuals</td>
<td>- Whom or what do the images portray?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How are the subjects portrayed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Does the narrator use any rhetorical or visual techniques to reach the audience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What kind of imagery is portrayed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrayal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical/Visual technique</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>- Through which kind of form does the narrator present the messages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- What platforms does the narrator use to spread the images?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual format</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>- Can the origin of the image be determined?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of images</td>
<td>- How does the narrator cite and use sources for the messages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cited sources</td>
<td>- Are the sources factual, misrepresented or fabricated?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of validity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Material
The material used for analysing the influence activities' overview is based on material from MPF and news sites reporting on the case. This provides the contextual overview for moving on to the strategic narrative analysis of the messages by Shuoun Islamiya that MPF points out as being the initial instigator of the influence activities.

The primary material for analysis consists of open-source data from social media posts made by the Shuoun Islamiya on different platforms. This consists of both text and audio-visual materials on the platform's website and social media accounts. The analysis has covered all posts made by the platform dealing with Sweden and LVU that were posted between December 28th 2021, and December 28th 2022. The period was chosen to include a year after what MPF deemed was the start date of the influence activities to analyse the progress of the construction of these activities over a longer timeframe. This is done by manually scraping the platforms using keywords such as Sweden (السويد), social services (الخدمات الاجتماعية), children
طفال, kidnapping (الخطف) etc. in both English and Arabic on the platform and accounts linked to Shuoun Islamiya. Posts in which Sweden is named but not further described or mentioned have been excluded. Translation of texts from Arabic into English was primarily made using automatic translation software; the translated texts were then checked by an Arabic speaker who assisted in finding any translation errors. Translation of audio and video primarily focused on titles and the use of visual imagery, but some instances of particularly viral videos had translations already performed by news media, which has been included in the analysis. This is not ideal, but it is necessary considering the number of videos consisting of several days' worth of content, which would require a massively time-consuming effort of transcribing and translation, which the thesis' timeframe could not support.

Twitter, in particular, has served as the platform for gathering data. This is for two reasons: Shuoun Islamiya is primarily active on Twitter and YouTube. While Twitter provides a basic (but serviceable without the use of API accesses) function for searching past tweets using keywords found in the content of the posts, YouTube's search function is more limited as the primary content is found in video format, meaning that keyword relies on the titles used for the videos.

3.4. Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations
When performing a qualitative study, several challenges must be addressed. Challenges with qualitative data and research more generally include factors such as reflexivity and ethical considerations related to the material. Reflexivity refers to a researcher's active consideration and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and assumptions about the particular circumstances being researched can impact the results. This means that all researcher carries biases that are predisposed by one's own use of language based on culture, social setting, and personal experiences. Being aware and upfront with this throughout the research can increase the study's trustworthiness by allowing the reader transparency between the researcher and the research material. One way of doing this is by closely following the boundaries presented by the design strategy and offering the study's limitations.

Among the ethical challenges of this study, perhaps the most noteworthy is the risk of furthering the narratives used in the influence activities. By providing an analysis of the narratives used by the influence agent, the thesis accounts for content used within these, risking the reproduction of said content. Throughout the study, the author remains aware of this risk,

106 Denscombe (2017), p. 127
repeatedly reminding the reader of the coercive nature of disinformation concerning influence activities and the emotional and evocative strategy used in the narratives. The author also makes the judgment that in order to understand how such influence activities are constructed, one must account for and illustrate the use of the content; as such, the potential knowledge produced and the application in other such cases is deemed worth the risk. It can not be emphasised enough, as described by MPF, that this is a case consisting of an agent's coercive attempts to influence a foreign population; it is not a case of regular democratic debate.

Another challenge related to this is the portrayal of individuals, often children, in relation to LVU. This includes children and families that have been subject to replacement under the LVU-act. Among the challenges raised by qualitative research, especially with a visual component, anonymity has been identified as one of the more prominent. As such, the author has taken great care to anonymise any images or other identifiable information related to these individuals.

4. Analysis
The following chapter is structured to first give an overview of the origin of the influence operation and the agent behind it. Following that is a narrative- and visual analysis of the central messages spread by the agent, which is then used to present the results of the study's research questions.

4.1. Overview of the LVU Influence Operation
On the 9th of February 2022, MPF issued a memorandum designated to Swedish authorities informing them of an ongoing influence operation (påverkanskampanj) aimed against Sweden. The memo tells that on December 28, 2021, a platform under the name Shuoun Islamiya or شؤون إسلامية in Arabic (translated in English to Islamic Affairs) launched influence activities with a series of videos on YouTube called "What happens to children in Sweden" in Arabic on the platform's YouTube-channel in which the Swedish state is systematically alleged to kidnap Muslim children with the support of LVU:

"On December 28, 2021, the Shuoun Islamiya platform launched the influence operation *What is happening to children in Sweden* on its Arabic-language YouTube channel [...] A consistent narrative is that the children are placed in family homes to be secularised and sexually exploited [...] The rate of spread has quickly escalated and the messages have been reinforced and are now being

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107 Wiles et.al. (2012), p. 41
spread further by a number of Arab media houses and actors with international reach. The campaign is also growing in discussion-forums and comment fields.\(^{108}\)

The activities went viral on January 19, whereupon Shuoun Islamiya called on Muslims all over the world to use the hashtag #Sweden_is_a_fascist_state and attack the social media accounts and channels that counter their claims. MPF assessed that the spread of the rumours and the misleading narrative could have serious consequences for the goals of society’s safety. In a short time, the narrative developed from solely being about incorrect claims about how the social service treats Muslims to Sweden waging a war against Islam.\(^{109}\)

Shuoun Islamiya is described as an Islamist platform driven by an Egyptian blogger named Moustafa El-Sharqawy that consists of a website and social media channels on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.\(^{110}\) As of this writing, the YouTube channel has 795 000 followers, 237 000 followers on Twitter, 515 000 followers on Facebook and 27 000 followers on Instagram.\(^{111}\) According to Shuoun Islamiyah’s own website, the platform is an awareness channel to spread Muslim issues and news around the world and confront campaigns that aim to distort the image of Islam.\(^{112}\) Much of the content posted on the platform consists of reports of resentment and critique on various phenomena occurring in the Western world that the platform claim goes against Islam. Sweden is a recurring topic, and among other things, the fact that trans women can become ministers and that children receive sex education is highlighted.\(^{113}\)

According to an investigation in the Swedish newspaper Expressen by investigative journalist Kassem Hamadé, El-Sharqawy previously ran another site called Shuounarabia, which he used to spread violent propaganda sympathetic to IS and al-Qaeda during the Syrian Civil War. The investigation also shows that El-Sharqawy is an Egyptian national, but that in 2017, he applied for asylum in Sweden without success. His current

\(^{108}\) MPF Memorandum (2022-02-09) Särskild Orientering: Påverkanskampanj mot Sverige. Authors translation

\(^{109}\) Ibid


\(^{111}\) Numbers gathered from Socialblade.com on 2023-01-02

\(^{112}\) Shuoun Islamiya, https://shuounislamiya.com/%d9%85%d9%86-%d9%86%d8%ad%d9%86%d8%9f – accessed 2022-12-12

\(^{113}\) Sundén, Jesper (2022-02-11) Startskottet för stormen mot socialtjänsten. Svenska Dagbladet https://www.svd.se/a/x8zdqV/hans-video-anvands-i-kampanjen-mot-socialtjansten - accessed 2022-12-05
whereabouts are unconfirmed. Expressen reports that since the start of Shuoun Islamiya, El-Sharqawy has spread Islamist propaganda from different parts of the world, focusing on France, the USA, Norway and Sweden. At the beginning of December 2021, he intensified his messages about Sweden.114

During 2022, El-Sharqawy (here on referred to as under the platform Shuoun Islamiya) increasingly posted reports about Sweden on the topic of what the platform claims are recurring events of the Swedish state kidnapping Muslim children. As of this writing, 74 videos in the series called "What happens to children in Sweden" have been posted with several videos reaching well over 100 000 views. These videos first went viral in January of 2022 and again in February of the same year. This is also mirrored in the audience interaction when looking into the analytics of the platform's different social media channels:

![YouTube Analytical History for Islamic Affairs](image)

*Figure 2. Monthly gained video views and subscribers on Shuoun Islamiyah's YouTube channel. Source: Socialblade.com, 2023-01-02*

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Both the view- and follower count on YouTube saw a peak coinciding with the influence operation and its virality peaking in February of 2022. This is also shown in a peak of followers on Shuoun Islamiyah's Twitter:

The February peaks also coincided with several demonstrations held against LVU and the social services around Sweden. On February 7th, around 200 protesters gathered outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm to protest the social services and the use of LVU. The demonstrations also reached international notice as the Qatar-based Al Jazeera's Twitter account, with 17.7 million followers, using the hashtag #StopKidnapping_OurChildren wrote that it happened in solidarity with some Arab families who claim that Swedish authorities are imprisoning their children because of their living conditions, "according to tweeters". Similar demonstrations were held in Gothenburg on the 17th of February with around 400 protesters, and then again in Malmö on the 19th of February with around 200 protesters.

While the intensity of posts from Shuoun Islamiya regarding LVU and Sweden fluctuates throughout 2022, it never fully stops. After the peak in February, the influence activities once again increased in intensity in April, this time concerning the Danish-Swedish provocateur Rasmus Paludan and his burning of the Quran during Ramadan. While the Quran fluctuates throughout 2022, it never fully stops. After the peak in February, the influence activities once again increased in intensity in April, this time concerning the Danish-Swedish provocateur Rasmus Paludan and his burning of the Quran during Ramadan. While the

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116 Al Jazeera (2022-02-04) "Title of an Arab campaign in solidarity [...]". Twitter, https://twitter.com/AJArabic/status/1489660023479455745 - accessed 2022-11-13
burning is a separate issue from that of LVU, it is lifted into the broader narrative of Swedish authorities targeting Muslims and acting oppressive. Shuoun Islamiya, for example, posted tweets and videos calling the Swedish government "sponsors of hate" for allowing and protecting Paludan during the Quran burnings.¹¹⁹

The narrative used in the influence activities has since continued to gain an audience, and other actors with links to violent and anti-democratic values have used the narrative spread by Shuoun Islamiya to incite against Sweden as the disinformation about the social services has become widespread in the Muslim world.¹²⁰ Besides being picked up by other influence agents and protestors, the Nuance Party (Partiet Nyans) also picked up the narrative. Established in 2019, the political party claims to have three central policy issues: islamophobia, integration and housing shortage. In addition to this, questions related to LVU have been a central part of their political platform.¹²¹ During the 2022 Swedish parliamentary election, the Nuance Party used parts of the narrative portrayed by Shuoun Islamiya about LVU in their election campaign, accusing the Swedish social services of abuse of power.¹²²

In this sense, Shuoun Islamiyah's influence operation can be considered a successful attempt to reach an audience as the narrative was adopted and further repeated by agents outside of Sweden and within.

4.2. Central Narrative 1: Sweden is a fascist state
4.2.1. Narrative structure
Actors

In this narrative, and indeed the entire overarching narrative, the Swedish authorities, but especially the Swedish Social Services and the social workers, are the key actors. Characterised as villains, the Social Services are described as antagonists breaking up families without due cause. One article on the Shuoun Islamiya website, dated the 14th of January 2022, describes how a father was living with his family in "security, peace and harmony, when suddenly, without warning, the social gang [social services] entered and kidnapped his children under the

pretext that he was not qualified to take care of them"\textsuperscript{123} Swedish social services are continuously described as a 'gang' or criminals as exemplified by a Twitter post on Shuoun Islamiya's account:

"Have you seen a gang like this?! They confiscate his children, then when he thinks of retrieving them, he is imprisoned and pays compensation! This madness is happening in a country called Sweden! #Sweden_is_a_facist_state.\textsuperscript{124}

This is again exemplified in the following tweet:

"The Swedish authorities kidnapped this man's son 11 years ago, and now he does not know him. He did not allow him to see him or talk to him, and now if he met him on the street, he does not know him! What crime is greater than this heinous crime, the Swedish social mafia and the child kidnapping

#Sweden_is_a_facist_state #StopKidnappingOurChildren\textsuperscript{125}

On the other side, the key actors are the families who are portrayed as victims of the Swedish state who not only unjustly take away their children but also punish the parents if they try to resist. Parents are portrayed as helpless under the Swedish state, as the aforementioned article goes on to warn the readers that regardless of the reasons: "...if this terrorist organisation decides to kidnap your children, any attempt to resist or attack them means losing your children and not seeing them, perhaps forever!"\textsuperscript{126} The futility of resisting is further accented as the article describes how the lawyer that the father hired "manipulated that case" so that the social services won the court ruling, placing the children in a foster home. This, the narrator claims, made the father go "insane", which led to him insulting and threatening the lawyer and social service workers, resulting in him being sentenced to imprisonment and fines. This creates a clear moral framework for the narrative and encourages the audience to view the families as innocent victims whom an oppressive and unjust system has wronged.

**Events/Conflict**

The narrative of Sweden as a fascist state is primarily contemporary and future-oriented as it focuses on events taking place today with warnings of a deteriorating future situation. As such, the narrative refers to the laws of Sweden as unjust and even criminal with reference to the

\textsuperscript{123} Shuoun Islamiya (2022-01-14) Death and destruction of homes... A painful story of a man whose children were kidnapped and imprisoned in Sweden. https://shuounislamiya.com/5314 - accessed 2022-12-12
\textsuperscript{124} Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-02) "Have you seen a gang like this?! [...]". Twitter https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1488669855226089476 - accessed 2022-12-16
\textsuperscript{125} Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-23) "The Swedish authorities kidnapped this man's son 11 years ago[...]". Twitter https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1496460023849189376 - accessed 2022-12-12
LVU-act. Even if the law is not on the side of the state, the narrative drives the theory that the state will nevertheless kidnap children and hinder the parents from meeting them since the Social Services, the Courts and the Police 'conspire together'. For example, setting the conflict of the story in a "peaceful, secure and harmonious" home, unjustly interrupted by the "terrorist" authorities, paints a picture of a man whose children were kidnapped by social services and moreover jailed for trying to protect them. The message targets families, particularly those of immigrant background, issuing warnings to said audience that they should be afraid and not trust the Swedish authorities as they can kidnap children without legal cause based on their ethnic or religious background. The narrator goes on to claim that this incident and others reveal the extent of injustice and criminality that occurs against families in Sweden, that the man "lost his children and was imprisoned, and will have to pay huge sums of money to those who kidnapped his children and conspired against him":

"The incident was published in the Swedish press, and perhaps if I had heard it years ago, I would not have believed it, but what I heard during the past months makes me believe what is much more amazing than that! […] This incident and others reveal the extent of injustice and criminality that occurs against families in Sweden"127

The problems depicted in the messages suggest that the legal system in Sweden is unfair and biased when enforcing the LVU-act. Through this, social services are portrayed as either criminal or actively working against the families, further reinforcing the idea that the parents are victims of an unjust system and encouraging the audience to view the legal system as corrupt or unreliable. Furthermore, the narrator's message is likely intended to evoke strong emotions in the audience and encourage them to view the situation in a way that supports the narrative of the Swedish state as oppressive and fascist. For example, depicting the parents and children as being in distress further emphasises the audience's emotional response.

Using this narrative, Shuoun Islamiya also promoted several demonstrations against the Social Services. For example, the day before the February 7th protest in Stockholm, Shuoun Islamiya posted a tweet calling for people to gather outside the Swedish parliament to "condemn the kidnapping of thousands of children from their families without due cause."128

Another example happened in the latter half of March of the same year when Shuoun Islamiya

128 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-06) "Our children are in danger in the hands of the Swedish social services [...]". Twitter, https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1490446518104752128 - accessed 2022-12-11
promoted a sit-down protest in Stockholm led by protesters against the Swedish social services by live-streaming it and interviewing participants.129

4.2.2. Visuals, Format and Sources
The message of Sweden being a fascist state is conveyed through text, videos and audio, often combined. For example, Shuoun Islamiya commonly makes use of videos depicting children and parents under emotional distress. This further accentuates the narrative of Swedish authorities as villainous. There are several examples of videos of Swedish police supposedly enforcing the LVU-act posted by Shuoun Islamiya as alleged evidence of police brutality. Notably, sources are rarely cited for these messages outside of Shuoun Islamiya itself. For example, a tweet from Shuoun Islamiya went viral on January 19 with the text:

"A Syrian family fled the war to Sweden in search of safety, and 8 months after their arrival, the authorities kidnapped their four children and did not allow them to see them until now except through electronic photos! Years later, the mother gave birth to a new baby, so they kidnapped him from the hospital 5 minutes after his birth! What is this immorality and criminality?"130

The same post shows a video of the supposed parents of the children in distress shouting outside a social services office, claiming that the children were taken under false pretences. However, when Swedish Television (SVT) went through the court rulings related to the case of the parents shown in the video, they found several testimonies that the children had been subject to violence in the home and did not wish for further contact with their family.131

Interestingly, in the replies to the post, the official Swedish government-managed Twitter account in Arabic staffed by the Swedish Institute agency, tried to address the concerns:

"All children in Sweden have the right to a safe childhood. The state does not want a child to be separated from his family. This happens if it is proven that there is a danger to the child. The final decision regarding children is not in the hands of social services but rather in the hands of the judiciary. This does not mean that communication with the parents is cut off, and there are cases in which children return to their families."132

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132 Sweden_AR (2022-01-20) “All children in Sweden have the right to a safe childhood [...]” Twitter https://twitter.com/Sweden_AR/status/1484110190551212033 - accessed 2022-12-16
Using children as a visual and emotional trigger seems to be a central part of the narrative construction. Most messages used by Shuoun Islamiya related to this narrative make use of dramatic titles such as "The story of the suffering of...and the kidnapping of 5 children!" and "The most dangerous call from Sweden about child abduction," together with provocative visuals as exemplified by the images below used by Shuoun Islamiya both on Twitter and YouTube. When the messages that make up the narrative are based on emotional appeal, rather than factual events, the narrator can use this to his advantage.

Image 1. – Image used by Shuoun Islamiya. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8vCkKz1I2U. A reverse Google image search shows that the original unedited picture is a commonly found stock photo.


134 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-01-25) The most dangerous connection from Sweden around the kidnapping of children. YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0sozRPGsV0 – accessed 2022-12-17
Problematically, when analysing the messages, the visuals used and their sources, most are based on either no source at all or, at best, supposed anecdotes with little to no verification. For example, a post by Shuoun Islamiya on Twitter under the hashtag #Sweden_is_a_facist state that supposedly depicts "a distressed child of immigrants after the Swedish government kidnapped him from his family" became viral. Pictures of the child were later used on placards during protests against LVU in Malmö as reported by SVT. However, SVT could also report that the child pictured was removed from his family since several members of the family, including the parents, were convicted criminals, and as such, the environment for upbringing was considered harmful. This information is omitted from any messages spread by Shuoun Islamiya, most likely since it does not serve the narrative; instead, the Swedish state is depicted as criminals for 'kidnapping' the child without any cause.

4.3. Central Narrative 2: Swedish authorities abuse children

4.3.1. Narrative Structure

Actors

In this narrative theme, the social services are once again a key actor, but compared to the previous theme, where they were depicted more as a criminal gang under a fascist state, they are now depicted in more active, sinister terms. Here, the social services are depicted as a tool for kidnapping children into trafficking and slave labour. Furthermore, compared to the previous theme, the children, rather than the whole family, become the other key actor of the narrative. For example, Shuoun Islamiya claims that most children being adopted by same-sex

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135 Renman (2022-03-01) SVT Nyheter
parents are children taken by Social Services, implying that children with same-sex parents are victims of kidnapping:

"[...] adoption of children among homosexuals is primarily a victim of children born in Sweden to immigrant families (including Arab and Muslim families), and these are mainly children kidnapped from their biological parents by the Department of Social Affairs known as the Swedish Social."\(^{136}\)

Immigrant parents are continually urged to avoid or relocate from Sweden. In a Twitter post with an attached video of Sheikh Othman Al-Khamees from Kuwait, Shuoun Islamiya shares Al-Khamees comments on the Swedish Social services, urging Muslims to care for their children and relocate to countries such as Turkey in order to safeguard their families from government intrusion and kidnapping.\(^{137}\)

**Events/Conflict**

The conflicts in this theme are primarily focused on what happens after the children have been 'kidnapped' by the social services. Perhaps the most sinister problem depicted within these messages is the claim that Swedish authorities actively engage in human trafficking. Here the social services are depicted as a tool for kidnapping children into trafficking and slave labour as seen in an article posted on the Shuoun Islamiya website on the 20\(^{th}\) of January 2022 titled:

"Politician and former member of the Swedish parliament: Sweden is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and social services exploits children sexually."\(^{138}\)

The article goes on to cite several passages from a book written by the alleged parliamentary politician called Ove Svidén, claiming that the Social Services in Sweden are trafficking children and profits from sexual exploitation and that the administrative courts and police transportation service facilitate this activity. Svidén claims that the number of kidnapped children in Sweden is around 28,000 yearly and that these children are often sold to paedophiles, used as unpaid labour, or used as 'guinea pigs' in the pharmaceutical industry. He

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\(^{138}\) Shuoun Islamiya (2022-01-20) Politician and former member of the Swedish parliament: Sweden is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and social media exploits children sexually. https://shuounislamiya.com/5334 - Accessed 2022-12-16
also asserts that the municipalities profit from this child trafficking and that social services, the police, and the judiciary are involved in and profit from this activity.\footnote{Shuoun Islamiya (2022-01-20)}

Shuoun Islamiya uses Svidén's narrative when discussing foster parents and family homes, regularly posting videos and tweets encouraging people to rise to retrieve their children from care homes. In a Twitter post with an accompanying video of protesters outside a social service office in Gothenburg, Shuoun Islamiya claims:

"This is a beginning, and God willing, with time, people will be encouraged to go out and demand their rights and expose this terrorist institution (the social).\footnote{Shuoun Islamiya (2022-01-12)}"

The portrayal of the social services as a "terrorist institution" is repeatedly used in this context.\footnote{See for example “Live in front of the Swedish capital [..]”. Twitter, https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1490667151057125376 - accessed 2022-12-14}

4.3.2. Visuals, Format and Sources
Regarding the message of a claimed state-wide systematic child abuse, as mentioned, Shuoun Islamiya cites that the information comes from a former Swedish member of parliament called Ove Svidén. However, as information of whom have been former members of parliament are, of course, public information it does not take much to check whether a person with that name served as a member of parliament. As it turns out, Ove Svidén never did. In fact, while he did campaign for parliament for the Swedish Center Party in the 2006 and 2010 elections, he was ousted from the party in 2010 after Swedish Television (SVT) revealed that he ran a website spreading conspiracy theories. Among other things, the conspiracy theories were about financial families being behind the Estonia disaster and the murder of Anna Lindh, and that Jews were behind the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 and the Holocaust. This is also where he posted his theories on the Social Services and LVU, with a focus on extensive municipal human trafficking where children in care were sold to paedophiles and for organ sales.\footnote{Petterson, Mikeal Grill (2022-02-12) Sparkades efter konspirationsteorier – nu används han som “expert” i kampanjen. SVT Nyheter. “https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/svensk-konspirationsteoretiker-anvands-som-expert-i-lvu-kampanjen-efter-sin-dod-i-kampanjen-mot-socialtjansten - accessed 2022-12-14}

Looking into the book that Shuoun Islamiya cites, its content consists of compilations of different statements and blog posts from the aforementioned website that,
according to Svidén himself, points to a state-wide conspiracy theory regarding child trafficking.\textsuperscript{143} Notably, the book provides no sources outside the author's own statements. As such, there is little to no evidence to back up the claims made in the book.

While Svidén passed in 2020, his name, video interviews, blog posts (the website has since shut down) and book have been used as 'evidence' in the ongoing influence activities related to LVU where Svidén is presented as a prominent 'expert' on the topic.\textsuperscript{144} On several occasions, Shuoun Islamiya cites Svidén and his book when spreading disinformation related to LVU.\textsuperscript{145} The book has since been translated into English and Arabic. On May 11\textsuperscript{th} Shuoun Islamiya posted an article on their website promoting the Arabic translation of the book (together with a familiar image) combined with the cover of the Arabic-version featuring a picture of Svidén:

"[The book] is considered one of the most important books on the issue of child abduction in Sweden by the Swedish Social Affairs Department known as "Social". It is the issue that occupied Arab and international public opinion during the recent period due to the kidnapping of thousands of Arab and Muslim children in the Scandinavian countries."\textsuperscript{146}

The day before a demonstration outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm, Shuoun Islamiya made use of this when posting what looks like a child's drawing, depicting sadden children

\textsuperscript{143} Svidén, Ove (2013) \textit{LVU Profitable Municipal Kidnapping in Sweden}. Self-Published
\textsuperscript{144} Petterson (2022-02-12) SVT Nyheter
\textsuperscript{145} See for example: https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1484890147087077378 and https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1419026352607746
waving for help from inside a building named "Socialstyrelsen". Together with the hashtag #StopKidnappingOurChildren (#أوقفوا_خطف_أطفالنا) the message enforces the central narrative of the Swedish state as oppressive and fascist in their handling of children through the Social Services. Other images of a family with a crossed-out Swedish flag is used to warn families of the situation in Sweden. In a video titled; "Story of a woman who migrated from Sweden.. Save your children before death!", an interview with a supposed mother who fled Sweden is portrayed.

Image 5. - Image used by Shuoun Islamiya together with a tweet calling people to join the protest outside the Swedish parliament on the 7th of February 2022. Source: https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1490446518104752128 - Accessed 2022-12-11.

Image 6. - Image used in a video titled “Story of a woman who migrated from Sweden.. Save your children before death!” uploaded on Shuoun Islamiya’s YouTube channel. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEsCD6ODR_I – accessed 2022-12-18

147 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-06) “Our children are in danger in the hands of the Swedish social services [...]”. Twitter, https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1490446518104752128 - accessed 2022-12-11

4.4. Central Narrative 3: Swedish authorities target Muslims

4.4.1. Narrative Structure

Actors

In this narrative, the primary actors are no longer the social services against families. Rather, the narratives take a broader approach, depicting the Swedish government and the Swedish society as a whole, as a racist and anti-Muslim. While the social services and LVU are still central to this narrative, they are more depicted as tools the Swedish state uses to target Muslims. This is for example narrated by Shuoun Islamiya in that Swedish authorities specifically target Muslims with laws and regulations, for example in a tweet referring to a preschool in Lund that stopped serving vegan food to small children:

"In Sweden, children under the age of three can no longer have vegetarian food in kindergarten! The message reached the parents this week amidst the astonishment of Muslims! It is known that Muslim families tell kindergartens not to feed their children any foods that contain pork or meat that is not halal! Who is the target of this decision?!"¹⁴⁹

Children and parents also take on a more secondary role, instead an increased focus is put on Muslims more broadly as victims of an anti-Muslim Swedish state. This part of the narrative also coincides with Rasmus Paludan's burning of the Quran during the holy period of Ramadan in which the Swedish government is depicted by Shuoun Islamiya as "sponsors of hate" for allowing Paludan to do this while protestors of LVU were allegedly dispersed.¹⁵⁰

Events/Conflicts

A recurring conflict being narrated is that the Swedish state is targeting children in Muslim families with the intention of forcibly converting them to Christianity. In a post by Shuoun Islamiya, the case of a Syrian man whose children were placed in foster care in Sweden is mentioned. The post alleges that the purpose of this action was to forcibly convert the children to Christianity.¹⁵¹ This narrative also gained international spread, for example at the end of November 2022, Libya's highest imam, Mufti Sadiq Al-Gharyani, gave a speech in which he

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¹⁴⁹ Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-19) “In Sweden, children under the age of three [...]”. Twitter, https://twitter.com/ShuounIslamiya/status/1495086384159543302 - accessed 2022-12-21


¹⁵¹ Shuoun Islamiya (2022-02-18) They kidnapped his daughters, so he decided to expose them.. An Iranian exposes Sweden with documents and evidence. https://shuounislamiya.com/5447 - accessed 2022-12-18
criticises Sweden and claimed that the social service kidnaps Muslim children for converting them to Christianity:

"Don't let them take your children and convert them to Christianity. The Muslims are not allowed to remain in that country."

Shuoun Islamiya cited this speech on Twitter, stating:

"Two weeks ago, a speech was published by Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghariani, the Mufti of Libya, in which he criticised the Swedish social practices against immigrants, calling on Muslims there to defend their rights or to leave without having to. I watched his speech in full, and I testify that the man said a word of truth and advised Muslims, and I have evidence for every word he said against the Social Services."

In the same thread, Shuoun Islamiya also calls out Romdane Boussaidi, chairman of the Islamic Association in Malmö, for being an "agent" of Swedish authorities. The reason seems to be that SVT Nyheter Skåne played the video of the Libyan imam's speech for Boussaidi who stated that he thinks that the whole speech is based on misinformation about how Muslims live in Sweden. Shuoun Islamiya writes a reply that indicates an aggressive shift in tone when the narrative is being challenged:

"I challenge Romdane to confront me, and I will teach him a lesson that he will not forget, and I will prove that he lies to please the infidels, and I have every word that Sheikh Al-Gharyani said as evidence from their media, and I say to the Muslims in Sweden: These agents are more dangerous to you than the infidels, and their cartoon institutions are based on intelligence funds or your donations, so beware of giving them your money."

In addition to the continued villainising towards social services and other authorities, a conflict between Swedish laws is portrayed as incompatible with 'proper' Islamic upbringing is narrated. For example, in a Twitter post by Shuoun Islamiya referring to gun violence in Sweden, the narrator warns that Swedish laws are corrupting the youth, which will lead to further violence in the future:

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153 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-12-11) "Two weeks ago, a speech was published by Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghariani [...]". Twitter https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/16017299131484777441 - accessed 2022-12-19
154 Tuma (2022-12-10) SVT Nyheter
155 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-12-11) "I challenge Ramadan to confront me [...]". Twitter https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1601732269089075201 - accessed 2022-12-19
"This is a natural result of Swedish laws that prevent the family from raising children in a correct way and allow young people to rebel. Social children and youth are a time bomb that will explode in the future, and Sweden will pay dearly for this social experiment, and it will not be able to fix what it spoiled for generations to come!"  

This problem seems to be connected to the Swedish stance on Sharia law and the criminalisation of honour-related crimes. Honour-related crimes are defined by the Swedish police as crimes committed in whole or in part to preserve or restore the reputation of a person or family, kindred or other similar group based on a notion of honour, exemplified by deprivation of liberty, coercion, marriage coercion, child marriage, misleading marriage trips, threats, offensive photography, molestation, assault, and murder, all with the motive being honour-related. While these laws are in place to protect and enforce the rights of people living under honour-related oppression, Shuoun Islamiya depicts the laws as a problem for Muslim parents trying to raise their children:

"The State of Sweden is upset that some girls keep their virginity. Through the next campaign, it aims to educate girls about the right to sex and control over the body and not the need to preserve virginity. These ideas are considered dangerous to society and fall under the culture of honor that may lead to the imprisonment of the girl's father or mother if they control her."  

Related to this narrative, Shuoun Islamiya also brings up adoption by same-sex partners as something problematic:

"Ethnic Swedes have full awareness about the dangers of raising children in a homosexual family of the same sex, and therefore it is difficult for the Swedish social to give their children who were forcibly removed from them to homosexuals under the pretext of 'the best interest of children'."  

Shuoun Islamiya goes on to claim that children of Muslims and immigrants are "kidnapped" by Swedish authorities and given to homosexual partners, citing an article by Aftonbladet interviewing same-sex parents. The newspaper Sydsvenskan also reported that the same-sex

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156 Shuoun Islamiya (2022-12-19) “This is a natural result of Swedish laws [...]”. Twitter https://twitter.com/Shuounislamiya/status/1604761324956790784 - accessed 2022-12-20
160 The article in question Wigen, Malin (2022-11-05) "Det går alldeles utmärkt att vara pappa, pappa och döttrar". Aftonbladet, https://www.aftonbladet.se/family/a/9zz5qM/pappapappadotter-sa-blev-vitvabarnsforaldrar - accessed 2022-12-18
parents cited in the article received hateful and homophobic comments as a result of Shuoun Islamia's video on the topic. In the same article, Sydvenskan also reported that in a telephone interview with Shuoun Islamiya earlier that year, he stated:

"Social services kidnap Muslim children who are then raped and abused in care homes."  

Another event related to the narrative of Sweden targeting Muslims has to do with Rasmus Paludan and his burning of the Quran. While protected under the laws of freedom of expression and of police protection, Paludan would on repeated occasions during the holy period of Ramadan burn the Quran in select places around Sweden. Although, as previously mentioned, the provocative burnings by Paludan were not an event initially related to the LVU-influence operation, it was lifted into this context by Shuoun Islamiya, among others. Connecting the event with the broader conflict of Sweden targeting Muslims, Shuo

This narrative is also picked up by the Nuance Party, stating that:

"During the Muslim holy month, a foreign preacher of hate is granted permission to carry out atrocities directed at Muslims with reference to freedom of expression, even though this is in fact a crime (hate against a ethnic group). At the same time as this preacher of hate is granted a permit, the police use a completely different yardstick in their actions against LVU-affected parents who are on hunger strike at Sergels torg in Stockholm. The other week, the parents were pulled over by the police for absolutely no reason, even though they received an approved permit. We have noted this!"

162 Ibid, authors translation
163 Ståhle, Mathias & Högfeldt Ahmadi, Farida (2023-04-01) "Skrek att det var det bästa som hänt". Svenska Dagbladet, https://www.svd.se/a/Q7aMmW/svd-atervander-till-orebro-ett-ar-etfter-paskkravallerna - accessed 2023-04-10
In response to the Swedish police protecting Paludan, Shuoun Islamiya would also join in on the already active hashtag #Boycott_Swedish_Products (#مقاطعة_المنتجات_السويدية#), calling on Muslims all over the world to stop buying and using Swedish products.  

4.4.2. Visuals, Format and Sources

As with the previous narrative, Shuoun Islamiya makes use of text, video and audio when spreading the message of alleged Muslim targeting by the Swedish state. These often consist of interviews on Shuoun Islamiya’s YouTube channel with alleged parents, children and social workers admitting to the various cases of abuse and issuing warnings to Muslims immigrating to Sweden. Reoccurring cited evidence for the supposed incompatibility between Muslims and Sweden is the stance on honour-related oppression. For example, Shuoun Islamiya calls out the Swedish awareness campaign for honour-related oppression as something problematic:

"After the recent issuance of the Honor Code in Sweden, official Swedish accounts publish (awareness) campaigns for Arab girls and young men, inciting them to rebel if the family prevents them from befriending the opposite sex or committing adultery until after marriage!"  

The narrator refers to a Facebook post by the county administrative board of Östergötland (Länsstyrelsen Östergötland) informing that in Sweden, children are not allowed to marry and that honour-related oppression (hedersförtryck) is a crime, which applies to everyone, even if you come from another country and regardless of your religion. The awareness campaign refers to that on 1 June 2022, a law was introduced in Sweden giving a new criminal designation to honour-related oppression. Potential examples of these acts are forced marriage, child marriage, and deprivation of liberty such as systematically preventing people to go out with friends in a way that is considered age-appropriate, not being allowed to visit leisure parks, cinemas or cafes, not being allowed to participate in all lessons at school or being forced to dress in a certain way.  

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169 The information is part of a joint agency campaign against honour-related violence and oppression, see for example: https://fb.watch/hvJCg9B9oq/
Besides images of and videos of children and parents, Shuoun Islamiya also uses images related to boycotting Swedish products for allowing Paludan to burn the Quran. The calls for a boycott of Swedish products seem to have gained widespread notice with a tweet by Al Jazeera posted on the 18th of April 2022, calling for people to use the hashtag #Boycott_Swedish_Products in response to the Quran burning. The tweet contains an image of well-known Swedish brands such as Ikea and Spotify together with the aforementioned hashtag. Shuoun Islamiya referred to this campaign in a tweet of an image of Ikea, stating:

"A campaign to boycott Swedish products was launched after the repeated burning of the Noble Qur'an under the protection of the Swedish police. The hashtag is currently active in the Arab countries #مقاطعة_السويد Will you participate in the boycott?".  

A reoccurring visual theme related to the Quran burnings and the call for the boycott of Swedish products are depictions of burning Swedish flags. In a tweet by Shuoin Islmaiya referring to the Swedish police "protecting the extremist Rasmus Paludan" an image of a burning Swedish flag together with a portrait of what seems to be the Swedish controversial artist and satirist

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Lars Vilks, known for his depictions of the prophet Muhammed among other things. A reverse Google Image Search shows that the image's origin goes back to a protest in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2010 in response to Lars Vilks' drawing of the prophet Muhammed as a 'roundabout dog' (rondellhund).

Other examples of using flames in images pertain to the violent clashes between protesters of Paludan and the Swedish police, wherein Shuoun Islamiya tweeted images of burning Swedish police vans and images with the #boycott_swedish_products.

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4.5. Discussion

4.5.1. What Narratives have been spread?

As presented in the analysis, three central narratives were indicated. First, the narrative portraying Sweden as a fascist state. This narrative is centred on several sub-narratives of supposed abuse of power from the Swedish state. These can be summarised as follows: Swedish authorities kidnap children, Swedish authorities oppress parents, and the LVU-act is used without due cause. The sub-narratives are often intertwined, with the most driving part being that Swedish authorities kidnap children from their families using the LVU-act. Notably, this narrative is present one way or another in most posts by Shuoun Islamiya on the topic of Sweden. This is portrayed in different ways, from dramatically written scenes describing how Social Services, without warning, forcibly break up families to videos of parents begging for the return of their children. It is argued that the Swedish authorities systematically do this without due cause, purposely targeting immigrant families and Muslims in particular.

Second, the narrative portraying Swedish authorities as abusive towards children. A recurring message within the main narrative is the claim that Swedish authorities not only kidnap children but also abuse them. The sub-narratives are focused on this alleged abuse, describing scenes where Swedish social services mistreat children, and offering conspiracy theories of Swedish authorities knowingly partaking in human trafficking of these children. Perhaps the most striking of these claims of abuses is that Swedish authorities engage in child trade and sex trafficking. In addition, Shuoun Islamiya narrates the situation of the children being put into foster homes as victims of the state and abused by the foster parents. This 'abuse' is described in several ways, from being forcefully converted to Christianity, to foster parents using children as forced labour.

Third, the narrative portrays Swedish authorities as targeting Muslims. This narrative is primarily centred around Sweden as a supposed anti-Muslim nation. This is narrated via the notion that Sweden is an Islamophobic and unreliable nation where the Muslims living in the country should fear Swedish laws and reforms that systematically target Muslims and promotes islamophobia. The sub-narratives making up this central can be summarised as portraying: the forcible conversion of Muslim children to Christianity, the supposed opposition between Swedish laws and Islam, adaptation by same-sex parents, and the police protection of Rasmus Paludan.

In terms of strategic narratives, all the central narratives point toward the influence agent applying a negative or disruptive strategy (as discussed in chap. 2.3.1.), which Pamment refers to as the narrator trying to establish a coherent narrative by attempting to
weaken or destroy existing narrative by attacks on selected contested themes.\textsuperscript{175} In this case, the narrator contests Sweden's existing narrative as a democratic state by claiming it to be a fascist, abusive and anti-Muslim. Shuoun Islamiya selectively highlights themes related to 'kidnappings' under LVU. This narrative is also expanded upon by, for example, intertwining sub-narrative focused on religion, portraying forcible conversion as one reason behind the 'kidnappings' where Muslim families are targets. Moreover, Shuoun Islamiya expands upon this disruptive strategy by intertwining sub-narratives focused on religion. Portraying the "kidnappings" as a means of forcibly converting Muslim families or Swedish laws targeting Muslims. Additionally, conspiracy theories surrounding sex trafficking are incorporated into the narrative, further amplifying the narrative's negative portrayal of Swedish society. Overall, the strategic narratives constructed by Shuoun Islamiya revolve around themes of injustice and oppression against Muslims. The narrative portrays families as victims of an unfair system, with the legal and social service systems being depicted as corrupt and biased. The intention behind this narrative is likely to evoke strong emotions in the readers and encourage them to adopt a perspective that aligns with the influence agent's own.

4.5.2. How were the Narratives constructed? 
Regarding the narrative construction, key findings in the narrative categories of actors, events and conflicts are indicated from the analysis. First, the narrator sets up key antagonistic actors for the narratives: on the one hand, the Swedish state, more generally, refers to the authorities and the Swedish jurisdiction; on the other, the social services and their workers. As to the Swedish state, the narrator depicts it as villainous by using language that paints the authorities as "corrupt", "unjust", and "immoral". The government and society are depicted as racist and anti-Muslim, pointing to what the narrator refers to as targeted attempts to silence protestors of LVU while offering police protection to islamophobes. The Social Services are depicted as carrying out this injustice by portraying them as villains targeting immigrant and Muslim families by enforcing LVU to systematically "kidnap" their children without due cause. This is done through the use of language that demonises and vilifies the social services and their workers by repeatedly referring to them as the "social gang", "criminals" and "terrorists". Juxtaposed to this is the characterisation of the families as helpless victims who are wronged by an oppressive and unjust system, as the Swedish state not only arbitrarily takes away the parents' children but also punishes them if they attempt to fight back. The narrator emphasises the futility of resistance by depicting the parents' struggles against a system that actively

\textsuperscript{175} Pamment (2018), p. 24
conspires against them. Muslim families in particular are depicted as targeted by the Swedish state both in the legislature and in the enforcement of the law. This sets the stage for a strong moral context for the events to take place and invites the audience to sympathise with the families portrayed as unjustly oppressed innocent victims.

Second, the actions of the Swedish authorities in supposedly kidnapping children and hindering parents from seeing them, and on the other, the children's situation after being kidnapped. The conflict presented sets the Swedish authorities and the families against each other by portraying the authorities as either acting outside the bounds of the law and/or using the law to use their power to harm families willingly. Symptomatic for both messages is the depiction of the Swedish state as targeting Muslim families, which the narrator depicts as being oppressed by the state. Even if the law is not on the side of the state, the narrative drives the theory that the state will still kidnap children and hinder the parents from meeting them because the Social Services, the Courts, and the Police all conspire together. For instance, the narrator often sets the events in chronological order that first depicts the "harmonious" setting of the families, which is unjustly interrupted by the "terrorist" authorities. The narrator then depicts the parent's struggle with the authorities and the judiciary system when resisting the "kidnapping", which the narrator claims is hopeless, often leading to the parents being punished and psychologically hurt by the ordeal. Following that are the claims of abuse that the children are subject to after the authorities have enforced the LVU-act. These range from forced conversion to human trafficking. The overarching message being that the Swedish authorities systematically and knowingly abuse the children either to harm them or to make a profit of their abuse.

As to the format used, the narrator relies on text, video and audio to reach the audience. The messages are presented in such a way as to elicit an emotional response from the audience, particularly those of immigrant and Muslim background, issuing a warning to said audience that they should be afraid of the Swedish authorities and not trust them because the authorities can kidnap children for no apparent reason. In text, this is done by using provocative and inflammatory language to describe Sweden and its authorities as corrupt, criminal, and abusive, while the families' situations are described as oppressed, suffering and abused. This language is likely designed to create fear, mistrust, and outrage, intended to present the authorities as villains engaged in a campaign of persecution against Muslims, and to portray children as the innocent victims of this campaign. The video and audio format further accentuates this by exploiting the emotional distress of the families concerned with videos and interviews of crying children and parents. Shuoun Islamiya uses emotional appeal as a
rhetorical technique to reach the target audience. Building the narratives around compelling stories and constructing them to speak to the target audience's understanding of the world. So, when the narrative uses messages of children and families being 'terrorised' by the state, this speaks to an audience that perhaps already has little trust in authorities. As Somers explains, it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identity. When the narrative says that your children are being taken because you belong to a certain group, like ethnic or religious, then this makes for a compelling story.

Concerning the sources, the narrator uses a mixture of false and misleading content together with pure fabrications to create messages of disinformation. While several of the cases that the narrator uses to exemplify the unwarranted use of the LVU-act are based on real cases, the narrator repeatedly omits important details, creating a false context. There are also sources cited that are based on fabrications and conspiracy theories without any sources to back them up. Most prominent of these is the book by Svidén claiming a state-wide conspiracy of child trafficking.

4.5.3. Potential Security Implications
The analysis clearly shows how the agent repeatedly depicts immigrants and Muslims as systematically targeted and oppressed by the Swedish state. This risks having a detrimental effect on social trust since it could lead to making these groups fearful and distrustful of society. That could harm social cohesion and the government's ability to serve and protect these communities from disinformation effectively. As such, people affected by the disinformation may choose to get their information from other sources, such as within their cultural or religious contexts. This is also an important factor of societal trust as people tend to find information shared from their personal social networks more credible than others. This could be a concerning development if the disinformation becomes a generally accepted narrative that is shared by influential members within these cultural and religious contexts. In a sense, the agents behind influence activities seek to use this to their advantage when constructing messages, purposely eliciting an emotional response from the target audience.

The fact that the disinformation has resonated with some people may have to do with the agent using unfortunate cases from reality, setting them in a context that portrays a narrative wherein the social group and identity are under threat by an external actor, in this

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177 Wanless & Berk (2021), p. 111
case, the Swedish state. With the combination of conspiracy theories feeding into the narrative, this risks creating insular groups and communities, echoing the narrative as the truth. It is, therefore important for the Swedish authorities to provide clear and truthful information to members within the affected communities to counter the narratives based on disinformation.

It can be difficult for authorities to successfully reach the public with information if the public does not trust the authorities sharing the information. This seems to be one of the strategic goals for the agent, as the narrative repeatedly depicts the Swedish authorities as corrupt and unjust. From an influence standpoint, it makes sense to counter official information that contradicts that of the agent's by simply labelling it as coming from the ‘oppressors’. This comes down to something of a competition of trust. Those with a previously established trust in authorities and experts are probably more likely to seek and consume official information. Likewise, those with a previously established low trust in authorities and experts are more likely to disregard that information in favour of other alternative sources. For example, if you have migrated or fled from an oppressive or corrupt state with low public trust, you would most likely have a valid scepticism for authorities. Trust is not something gained overnight; it takes time and effort from both sides. What the narrative about the Swedish authorities and LVU risks doing is hindering that trust-building process, which hurts both the democratic foundation of society but also the affected people. For example, the disinformation could contribute to parents being reluctant to seek help even though their children would need it, fearing that the authorities would abuse their power.

This could also be considered one of the strategic logics behind the influence activities as agents often warn supporters to trust mainstream media and authorities, instead of promoting their own information channels. A possible motivation is to hinder the integration and trust with society since, according to the agent's view, Swedish laws and values are not compatible with the agent's view on Islam. This is evident when analysing how Shuoun Islamiya reports on Swedish laws on honour-related oppression as something problematic that prohibits a proper Islamic upbringing.

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178 Ingram (2021), p. 18–19
5. Conclusion

This final section concludes the thesis by returning to the research questions and connecting the results to the thesis limitations and potential for future research.

The thesis attempts to provide a deeper understanding of how agents of influence activities construct their narratives in ways that may harm democratic societies. Using a case study designed around a single influence agent, the thesis explores Shuoun Islamiya's messages, which have been attributed as the initial instigator of the influence activities related to Swedish Social Services and LVU.

The first research question posed by the thesis is: *What narratives have the influence agent used in the influence operation?* Using strategic narrative analysis, the findings show that the agent portrays the Swedish state and the Social Services as villains who are targeting immigrant and Muslim families by enforcing LVU to systematically "kidnap" their children. The analysis reveals three central narratives propagated by the influence agent, Shuoun Islamiya. Firstly, the narrative portrays Sweden as a fascist state, which is supported by sub-narratives highlighting Swedish authorities' alleged abuse of power. This includes claims of children being kidnapped, parents being oppressed, and the misuse of the LVU-act. The narrative emphasises the notion that the authorities specifically target immigrant and Muslim families. Secondly, there is the narrative depicting Swedish authorities as abusive towards children, with sub-narratives focusing on alleged mistreatment and conspiracy theories surrounding human trafficking. The claim is made that Swedish authorities engage in child trade and sex trafficking. Thirdly, there is the narrative presenting Swedish authorities as targeting Muslims, with sub-narratives involving the forcible conversion of Muslim children, perceived opposition between Swedish laws and Islam, and the protection of Islamophobic individuals by the police. Overall, these narratives are constructed to apply a negative or disruptive strategy, aiming to weaken or destroy the existing narrative of Sweden as a democratic state. The intention is likely to evoke strong emotions in readers and encourage them to adopt a perspective that aligns with the influence agent's strategic objectives.

The second research question posed by the thesis: *How were the Narratives constructed?* The construction of the narratives involves several key elements. Firstly, the narrator sets up antagonistic actors, these include the Swedish state, authorities, and social services, portraying them as corrupt, unjust, racist, and anti-Muslim. These actors are depicted as villains, while the families affected by alleged injustice are portrayed as helpless victims. The conflicts presented revolve around the supposed kidnapping of children and the subsequent mistreatment and abuse they face. The narratives consistently emphasise the Swedish state's
supposed targeting of Muslim families and immigrants. The format used to convey these narratives includes text, video, and audio, aiming to elicit emotional responses from the audience, particularly those from immigrant and Muslim backgrounds. The language employed is provocative and inflammatory, demonising the Swedish authorities and portraying families as oppressed and abused. The use of emotional appeal and storytelling techniques helps resonate with the target audience's worldview and experiences. In terms of sources, the narrator combines false and misleading content with fabrications to create messages of disinformation. Real cases are often used but with crucial details omitted, presenting a distorted context. Additionally, fabricated sources and conspiracy theories, such as the book alleging a state-wide child trafficking conspiracy, are incorporated into the narratives.

The analysis of these narratives highlights some potential security implications. Repeatedly depicting immigrants and Muslims as systematically targeted and oppressed by the Swedish state risks undermining social trust and cohesion. It may make affected communities fearful and distrustful of society, seeking information from alternative sources.

The findings also show the potential power of individual non-state actors to reach a large audience and take advantage of pre-existing vulnerabilities within democracies while also risking creating new vulnerabilities over time by hindering trust-building processes. It is therefore important to approach this issue with a clear and analytical mindset for all information consumers, especially digitally, to develop a sound source critical mindset to more effectively face challenges to democracies around the world related to disinformation and malign influence operations.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research
It is important to note that several more proponents are active in the influence activities related to the Swedish social services and LVU. This thesis does not attempt to make all-encompassing conclusions about all these agents engaged in influence activities. Rather, the focus is on (as deemed by MPF) the initial influence agent behind the activities. That said, several other agents would make for interesting future research, comparing these using the same type of narrative construction as the ones found in this study. One limitation of the analysis is the lack of broader context or counterarguments to the presented narrative. Assessing the impact of the influence operation is challenging without a comprehensive examination of the audience, specific cases, and alternative viewpoints. While this thesis discusses the impact in terms of potential security implications, further research is required to assess the actual impact.

It is also important to note that the narrative behind the influence activities are
very much ongoing. Although the intensity of these activities has varied from the peak in February of 2022, several events in 2023 (such as the continued Quran burnings by Rasmus Paludan, and the mock hanging of a doll depicting Turkish president Erdogan) have further fueled and been incorporated as part of the narrative. As such, there are potential future research opportunities concerning a more long-term study of the narratives found in this thesis. Hopefully, this thesis could serve as a starting point for such research for future students of influence operations.
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