

# Scandinavian political journalism in a time of fake news and disinformation

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## Abstract

Focusing on fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, this chapter addresses how the main actors in the political communication process (politicians, news media, and citizens) deal with the increasingly complex information environment in Scandinavia. In this chapter, we examine how politicians apply the term “fake news” in relation to both news media and political opponents. Additionally, we address how the news media deal with the challenge of fake news and disinformation, typically through verification and fact-checking. Lastly, we examine how citizens relate to fake news, employing data from the *Reuters Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2018) from the three Scandinavian countries: Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. This study demonstrates that we need new methods for digital source criticism, verification, and media literacy in an information environment suited to the information manipulation of text, icons, images, and video.

**Keywords:** fake news, disinformation, social media, political journalism, political communication

## Introduction

In April 2018, a seemingly mundane and perhaps even trivial event took place when the employment of Sólrún Rasmussen as a high-school teacher in Copenhagen ended. However, her marriage to Danish prime minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen – and in particular his participation as an assessor in a meeting with the principal of the school – made the event interesting to the news media. The Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet* covered the meeting, indicating that she had been fired and questioning whether the prime minister had mixed his private and professional roles (Østergaard & Mathiessen, 2018). In an exchange on Twitter, the prime minister took the issue with the news coverage in a noteworthy fashion:

My good friends at Ekstrabladet continue to surprise me with stories about my family and me. Had no idea my wife had been fired... #FakeNews #dkpol [translated]. (Rasmussen, 2018)

The tweet is interesting for two reasons. First, it created more confusion about what actually happened; no one was any wiser from reading the tweet, and the subsequent conversation on the social medium only made the fog around the course of events denser. Second, and most importantly in the context of this chapter, the prime minister used the hashtag #FakeNews, and in doing so, questioned the trustworthiness of the newspaper's coverage. This is particularly interesting since, in the Danish system, the prime minister also acts as the minister of the press. By using this hashtag, he joined ranks of those who dismiss unfavourable news coverage with a passing reference to how the content of the news media cannot be accepted at face value. "Fake news" is a central discursive marker in today's complicated relationship between politicians, news media, and citizens in Western democracies, and it is one that comes with a challenge to the foundation of democratic societies.

"Fake news" was the Collins Dictionary's 2017 Word of the Year. With a conceptual framework from discourse theory, the term has been called "a floating signifier" through which different discursive elements are "being mobilised as part of political struggles to hegemonise social reality" (Farkas & Schou, 2018: 299), and politicians around the world use it to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable. Politicians have appropriated the term as a weapon against the fourth estate and as an excuse to limit or censor free speech. Most famously, American president Donald Trump frequently labels media outlets such as CNN or *The New York Times* as offering fake news, criticising the watchdog function of the media in liberal democracy. As of 2 January 2020, Trump had tweeted 648 times about fake news in his 1,078 days as president, making it his third-most tweeted term, according to the online Trump Twitter Archive (2020).

While the related but distinct phenomena of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation are not new in and of themselves, one can argue that their urgency has increased in the digital communication environment. Digital technology has democratised the means of producing media content, and the Internet has connected its users to a potential mass audience, with great promise for public participation and emancipatory politics (Jenkins, 2006). The digital age, however, also provides new tools and infrastructure for the production, distribution, and amplification of falsehood in the public sphere. The algorithmic sorting in search engines, social media, and personalised media means that content that attracts and maintains audience attention will self-perpetuatingly propagate in and beyond sub-publics (Dijck et al., 2018). The consequence is that the content users engage with stands a good chance of proliferating online because it feeds into the psychological mechanisms of a confirmation

bias, where there is a tendency to search for, favour, and recall information affirming one's prior beliefs.

Focusing on fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, we address in this chapter how the main actors in the political communication process (politicians, news media, and citizens) deal with the increasingly complex information environment in Scandinavia. The Nordic region has been characterised by high social trust, also when it comes to news media, and particularly radio and television stations (Syvertsen et al., 2014). This has been expressed through some of the highest levels of trust in the world, high media literacy, and high voter turnout in the Nordic countries (Strömbäck et al., 2008). Nevertheless, various forms of manipulated and even entirely fake information in the digital public sphere add to an erosion of the common grounds by creating confusion and uncertainty about basic facts (Ipsos, 2017). We identify in this chapter how the main actors involved with fake news and political journalism – politicians, news media, and citizens – are dealing with public spheres polluted with manipulated and fake information in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. In order to establish a theoretical baseline for our discussion, the chapter first outlines the terms fake news, disinformation, and misinformation.

Second, we examine how politicians apply the term fake news, in relation to both news media and political opponents. Reviewing some examples from the Scandinavian countries, we discuss how political actors have dealt with the term as well as with the challenges raised by manipulated information. We look at examples of politicians accusing others (i.e., political opponents or news media) of producing fake news and politicians who are victims of fake news.

Third, we address how the news media deals with the challenges of fake news and disinformation, typically through verification and fact-checking. New media actors, often called “alternative media” or “hyperpartisan media” (Kalsnes & Larsson, 2019), are challenging the mainstream media's news values and ethics, often accusing mainstream media of being the “lying media” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2018: 6). Alternative or hyperpartisan media are also active in the three Scandinavian countries under scrutiny here.

Fourth, we examine how citizens relate to fake news, employing data from *Reuters Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2018) from the three Scandinavian countries. While politicians and the media often talk about fake news in terms of Russian propaganda or for-profit fabrications by Macedonian teenagers, it is clear that the concerns of citizens are very different, relating to different kinds of deceptions largely perpetrated by journalists, politicians, and advertisers. The Reuters data from the Scandinavian countries allow us to consider whether there are any clear empirical differences between the countries, in either attitude and experience with manipulated information, or trust towards different media outlets.

## The Scandinavian situation

Even though the debate about fake news, disinformation, and misinformation has mainly focused on the US and Russia, the three communicative phenomena are also present in Scandinavia: in Sweden, a local politician from the Swedish Social Democratic Party spread fake news aimed at Muslim voters about the Moderate Party and the Sweden Democrats (Lindquist, 2018); in Denmark, Mette Thiesen from the New Right has been accused of spreading fake news about “armed sharia guards” in Copenhagen (Shah, 2018); and in Norway, the national representative from the Progress Party, Mazyar Keshvari, accused *Aftenposten*, one of Norway’s biggest newspapers, of producing fake news (Mæland, 2017). By suggesting that news cannot be trusted and by labelling it as fake news, politicians deliberately undermine trust in journalism and news outlets, one of the core institutions in democratic nations based on free speech and a free press. By misappropriating the credibility of news, fake news might also undermine the legitimacy of journalism, especially in social media, where the actual source of information is often removed, or at least perceived only from a distance.

The news media, on the other side, have responded with increased scrutiny and fact-checking initiatives, not only of politicians’ claims (Graves, 2016), but also of viral content on social media. In August 2018, more than 150 fact-checking projects around the world were registered by Duke Reporters’ Lab (n.d.) at Duke University, the most comprehensive database for global fact-checking organisations. Five of these projects are based in Scandinavia: Faktisk (Norway), Faktisk (Sweden), Viralgranskaren (Sweden), Detektor (Denmark), and TjekDet (Denmark).

With Nordic countries being some of the most digitised countries in the world (Eurostat, 2019a), Nordic citizens have access to a digital marketplace of ideas characterised by vast amounts of information of all qualities. The Internet and social media platforms have enabled a digital public sphere that is more open and democratised than ever before. Nevertheless, as 30–40 per cent of Nordic citizens access news weekly on Facebook (Newman et al., 2018), they are also vulnerable to the spread of false and manipulated information. Social media platforms are “rigged to reward those who can manipulate human emotion and cognition to trigger the algorithms that pick winners and losers” (Silverman, 2017). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are also identified as places where people most frequently see false and manipulated information (Medietilsynet, 2017).

We will now establish a theoretical baseline for our discussion by outlining how we apply the term fake news and associated terms such as disinformation and misinformation. To give an overview of how the term fake news has been applied – within both the research literature and among political actors – we will differentiate between what we here call a theoretical approach and an

empirical approach. The theoretical approach addresses how the term fake news has been defined and applied in the research literature, and the empirical approach addresses how political actors have used the term in “the real world”, often with strategic intentions. As these approaches do not necessarily align, we have divided them into two separate parts.

### Theoretical approach:

#### Defining fake news, disinformation, and misinformation

Discussing the different phenomena that are used under the umbrella term of fake news, we draw a distinction between fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (alongside other studies, see, e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Fake news has been defined as “articles based on false information packaged to look like real news to deceive readers either for financial or ideological gain” (Tandoc et al., 2018: 674). Along the same lines, fake news has also been described as “information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts” (McGonagle, 2017: 203).

Fake news was previously applied as a term in the research literature to describe news parody or news satire such as *Rokokoposten* in Denmark or The Daily Show in the US (see, e.g., Russell, 2011), as well as native advertising, propaganda, manipulation, and fabrication (Tandoc et al., 2017). To distinguish the terms, researchers suggest differentiating between the degrees of falseness and the intention to deceive (Tandoc et al., 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While both news satire and content marketing have a high degree of facticity, the intention to deceive is different. News satire does not intend to deceive, and the audience normally knows that they are watching comedy (it should be noted that some people have problems differentiating between news satire and real news, according to Garret et al., 2019). Content marketing, on the other hand, looks like news but is actually advertisement, and the potential for deception is high.

We will also include the appearance of news as a way to differentiate between various types of problematic information. Fake news cannot be distinguished by its form alone, which has caused major concerns for news outlets in general, and for political news in particular, since it can undermine the trust in these outlets as independent institutions of society. Several of the most shared false stories in the American presidential election of 2016 appeared as news stories, but were completely false (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). The most shared fake story, “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement”, was originally published by a site called WTOE 5 News, and later copied by the now-defunct site called Ending the Fed. On other occasions, fake news is presented by fake organisations, such as Norsk Naturinformatikk

[Norwegian Nature Informatics], which was exposed by the Norwegian fact-checker Faktisk for producing a completely false story about the threat of giant jellyfish on the Norwegian coast (Skipshamn, 2018).

Recently, fake news has been described as “completely or partly false information, (often) appearing as news, and typically expressed as textual, visual or graphical content with an intention to mislead or confuse users” (Kalsnes, 2018: 6). It should be noted that the theoretical and rather prescriptive definitions mentioned above are rather different from the way that many have used the term fake news in reality, particularly political actors (to which we will soon return). The ambiguity of the term fake news has resulted in the rejection of the term altogether by many scholars, who have argued that it is inadequate and misleading to explain the complexity of the situation (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017).

The European Union report from the independent high-level expert group on fake news and online disinformation suggests using the term disinformation, which can be defined as “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (HLEG, 2018: 10). Disinformation is a fairly new term which first appeared in an English dictionary in the 1980s on the basis of the Russian word “dezinformatsiya” (Taylor, 2016). According to a defector from the Romanian secret police, Ion Mihai Pacepa, after World War II, Joseph Stalin constructed the word – defined in the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia in 1952 as the “dissemination (in the press, on the radio, etc.) of false reports intended to mislead public opinion” – and suggested that the Soviet Union was the target of such tactics from the West (Taylor, 2016). Disinformation is clearly similar to propaganda, which is defined as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett & O’Donell, 2012: 7). Examples of such disinformation in the Scandinavian countries include the creation of “cloaked Facebook pages”; that is, Facebook pages that imitate “the identity of a political opponent in order to spark hateful and aggressive reactions” (Farkas et al., 2018: 1850).

Misinformation, in contrast to disinformation, is understood as “misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognise it as such” (HLEG, 2018: 10). The intention to deceive is what distinguishes disinformation from misinformation (even if it can be difficult to analytically draw such a distinction, since intention is a notoriously slippery phenomenon in terms of empirical research).

To examine how these phenomena have been covered in the research literature, this chapter uses the terms fake news, disinformation, and misinformation to differentiate between various kinds of problematic information. Table 14.1 provides an overview of the definitions, differences, and similarities between the three concepts.

**Table 14.1** *Characteristics of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation*

	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Intention</b>	<b>Facticity</b>	<b>Appearance</b>
<b>Fake news</b>	“Articles based on false information packaged to look like real news to deceive readers either for financial or ideological gain” (Tandoc et al, 2018: 674).	Deception	False information appearing as facts	Resembles news
<b>Disinformation</b>	“False, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (HLEG, 2018: 10).	Deception	False information appearing as facts	Can take many forms, including the appearance of news
<b>Misinformation</b>	“Misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognize it as such” (HLEG, 2018: 10).  False information appearing as facts	Mistake	False information appearing as facts	Can take many forms, including the appearance of news

What is common for the three terms is that they challenge trust in information and, in this context, trust in news. Trust is often understood as “the confidence that a partner will not exploit the vulnerabilities of the other” (Gulati et al., 2000: 209), and trust is closely connected to news, since reporting is based on witnesses of accounts where most people are not present (Kalsnes & Krumsvik, 2019). The delivery of trustworthy information is at the core of the democratic objective of the news, constituting the very foundation of its claim to be an institution of democracy. Another more mundane but nonetheless important reason why media studies and the industry alike consider trust a central issue is that previous research has found that media trust is an important factor in news attention decisions (Williams, 2012); media users will probably pay more attention to news sources they deem credible than those they are sceptical of. Similarly, distrust in media can lead to inattention and the non-consumption of news (Kiouisis, 2001). We will return to this issue in greater detail later, but first, we examine the different ways the term fake news has been applied by Scandinavian politicians, as the use of the term by politicians has been of particular concern, since in several countries they have used it to target political opponents or media outlets they dislike.

## Empirical approach: Political actors' use of the term fake news

Politicians in several countries have used the term fake news to target political opponents or media outlets they dislike, and in authoritarian countries in particular, we often see draconian laws being introduced with extremely unclear definitions of what fake news means (Newman et al., 2018). Politicians in some countries are also attempting to seize this opportunity to undermine or control the media. American news users in particular are concerned about the use of the term fake news (e.g., by politicians) to discredit news media; no less than 53 per cent of the respondents in the 2018 Reuters report expressed concern about this type of behaviour (Newman et al., 2018). Concern is lower in Norway and Denmark, but still substantial. Here, 27 per cent of Norwegians (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018) and 29 per cent of Danes (Schröder et al., 2018) are concerned about the use of the term (e.g., by politicians) to discredit news media. The lower level of concern is probably to some extent the result of the higher degree of trust in society and its institutions found in these countries.

The reason we will look more closely into the way Scandinavian politicians apply the term fake news is that they have a unique position in society in general, but particularly in relation to news media – both journalists and politicians are engaged in the “negotiation of newsworthiness” (Cook, 1998: 90). The close but complex relationship between journalists and politicians is typical in many countries, including those in Scandinavia (Aelst & Aalberg, 2011). The relationship between politicians and journalists is characterised by mutual dependence:

The relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources. Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading. (Gans, 1980: 116)

Several studies have examined the relationship between news media consumption and political trust (e.g., Avery, 2009), and a longitudinal study from Sweden found a positive link between news media use and political trust (Strömbäck et al., 2016); thus, the mediation of politics is closely connected to the trust in those performing the politics. Fake news is therefore a challenge for both political and media institutions. One question is, however, how politicians use the term. It should be noted that the term fake news is used in a different way in this section about political actors, compared to the more theoretical definition introduced in the first part of the chapter. As mentioned earlier, this discrepancy between the theoretical definition and the “real world usage” is part of the characteristics and the challenge of the term – also in the way the term is applied in the news media. Building on a framework developed by



Kalsnes (2019: 89–94), we focus on four ways that fake news has been applied by Scandinavian politicians.

### *Politicians accusing political opponents of fake news*

In 2018, the Danish politician Mattias Tesfaye from the Social Democratic Party accused the Danish author Carsten Jensen of spreading fake news. Jensen wrote an op-ed in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, where he warned Swedish politicians and voters against following the Danes and capitulating to the right-wing Sweden Democrats. Jensen also argued that Denmark had become a country that would not accept foreigners. In an interview with the Danish newspaper *Ekstra Bladet*, Tesfaye asserted, “that is fake news! That is not something you can say as an accepted truth. There has never before been as many foreigners in Denmark as now [translated]” (Mortensen, 2018: para. 7–8).

### *Politicians accusing media of producing fake news*

In Norway, the national representative from the Progress Party, Mazyar Keshvari, accused the national daily *Aftenposten* of producing fake news in a story about immigration policy (Mæland, 2017). He argued in an op-ed that “people, thanks to social media, have woken up and revealed the news media’s systematic attempts to create opinions, attitudes, and reactions on false premises [translated]” (Keshvari, 2017: para. 15). Keshvari argued that media systematically, “through framing, speculation, comments and by selectively choosing information, create a false impression among readers [translated]” (para. 10).

### *Politicians as victims of fake news*

The Swedish government took serious precautions to protect the Swedish national election in 2018 from fake news and disinformation, mainly from Russia (Schori, 2018). Talks with established media and social media platforms took place before the election to fight and hinder the flow of fake news during the election campaign. It was particularly important to detect disinformation and increase the security around Swedish digital infrastructures. Leading up to the 2019 national election, Danish voters were warned about potential fake social media profiles of Danish politicians (Runge, 2019), a problem that had also been warned against in Norway in relation to the 2019 local election (Proactima, 2019). On a European level, both Denmark and Sweden also participate in and contribute to the European Union’s East StratCom Task Force, which is a strategic initiative formed in 2015 to counter Russian disinformation activities in Eastern Europe.

*Politicians warning against using the term fake news*

In 2017, former Norwegian Minister of Culture from the Conservative Party, Linda Cathrine Hofstad Helleland, warned other politicians against using the term fake news on news items or organisations they did not like. “One should be very careful to define fake news based on a dislike of the the premise or the framing of a story [translated]”, the minister said, arguing that politicians had a particular responsibility to choose their words carefully (Slydal-Jensen, 2017: para. 7–8).

## The news media

Just as administrative systems across the Scandinavian countries have taken steps to improve digital security, the media sector has implemented a number of initiatives to counter fake news, disinformation, and misinformation. On the basis of both a high level of education (Eurostat, 2019b) and the existence of strong public service media, the Scandinavian countries might be expected to be more resistant to the influence of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation than many other countries. Despite this, however, the discussion about fake news has not gone unnoticed by the media sector, which has responded through a number of strategic and editorial initiatives. Some of these initiatives aim at debunking false information while others are directed at increasing awareness of the value of high-quality information and improving levels of media literacy.

*Fact-checking*

At the activist end of the spectrum, the last decade has witnessed the rise of dedicated fact-checking formats. These fact-checkers are distinguished from traditional journalism in that they investigate claims that are already in the public domain rather than, as traditional journalistic procedure would do, before the claims are made public (Graves, 2016). As one columnist put it, the fact-checkers are “referee[s] in the mudslinging contest” of public political discussion (Poniewozik, 2012: para. 4), as they pass verdicts on the veracity of claims.

The underlying epistemological orientation of the wave of fact-checking initiatives resembles what Hammersley (1992) calls “subtle realism”: while accepting the premise that knowledge is socially constructed and communicated through the choices of involved actors, subtle realism insists on an underlying existence of objective facts that should not be subject to individual interpretations or social discussion. In this way, fact-checkers do not challenge the ontological premise that what is in the media is the result of human agency in the form of selection and framing, but rather insist that some things are true and others are not. In relation to this, an international study found that a sample

of mostly Norwegian journalists was ambivalent to such fact-checkers; on the one hand, fact-checking was considered a useful tool for improving quality in reporting, but on the other hand, there were reservations against relying on a single source to assess factuality (Brandtzaeg et al., 2018).

Fact-checking arrived in Scandinavia in 2005, when *Dagbladet* launched Faktasjekken. It was, however, not until the early 2010s that the movement accelerated as numerous fact-checkers emerged across Scandinavia, reflecting a broader international trend gaining momentum with, in particular, the success of the Pulitzer Prize winner PolitiFact. Table 14.2 provides an overview of the historical development and types of fact-checkers in Scandinavia.

**Table 14.2** *Fact-checkers in Scandinavia*

	Medium	Years	Organisation
<b>Norway</b>			
Faktasjekk	online	2005–2009	Dagbladet
Faktasjekk	online	2009–2013	Bergens Tidende
Faktisk.no	online	2017–	Dagbladet, VG, NRK, TV2 + Amedia, Polaris
Detektor	television	2017–2017	NRK
<b>Sweden</b>			
Faktakollen	online	2010–2010	SvD
Lögndetektorn	online	2010–2010	Aftonbladet
Detektor	radio	2012–2012	Sveriges Radio
Viralgranskaren	online	2014–	Metro
Faktisk.se	online	2018–2018	DN SR, SVT, SvD, KIT
#livekollen	online	2015–2015	SVT
<b>Denmark</b>			
Detektor	television	2011–	DR
Detektor	radio	2011–2014	DR
Tjek Det	online	2016–	Mandag Morgen

While these fact-checking initiatives share an ambition to separate fact from falsehood, their units of analysis differ; some control the truthfulness of selected claims in news items (e.g., the Norwegian Faktisk.no); some fact-check claims that “go viral” on social media (e.g., the Swedish Viralgranskaren); and some subject specific claims from policy-makers to scrutiny (e.g., the Danish edition of Detektor). The latter is the most prevalent and also the one that most explicitly connects the emergence of fact-checkers with the institutions of politics.

Many of these fact-checkers obviously predate the current discussion of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation that followed the Brexit referendum and the 2016 American presidential election, but they nonetheless share the ambition of sorting facts from falsehood. As Table 14.2 also shows, many of these initiatives exist within the context of legacy media organisations – which leads us to the question of how these organisations have dealt with the current issues of communicative pollution in the public sphere.

### *Legacy media*

While fact-checkers constitute tangible initiatives to separate facts from falsehood, the editorial legacy media has also used the fake-news crisis as an occasion to remind the public, as well as other stakeholders, that they are important. For a number of years, the “old” media organisations have experienced decreasing circulation figures, challenged business models, and increasing polarisation and mistrust from parts of the population. Legacy media have also been challenged and critiqued by a growing subset of hyperpartisan, alternative news sites in the Scandinavian countries (Heft et al., 2020; Ihlebæk & Nygaard, Chapter 13), such as *Samtiden* (Sweden), *Den Korte Avis* (Denmark), and *Resett* (Norway), that claim to offer “an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing, 2001: v). Research of various countries consistently shows that audiences who identify as right-leaning are typically deeply distrustful of the news in general and are therefore more likely to use alternative media (Newman et al., 2018). The alternative, hyperpartisan sites are known for challenging established news formats (i.e., the clear distinction between news and views; see Holt et al., 2019), which is a cornerstone of the legacy media’s claim to fact-based reporting (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Nevertheless, the fake-news crisis offers legacy media an opportunity to reassert their importance as an institution of democracy, emphasising the value of quality journalism and independent reporting that adheres to the professional and ethical standards of the “high modernism of journalism” (Hallin, 1992).

This opportunity has been seized. Protecting their position as a democratic institution, the editorial news media have responded to the fake-news crisis by publicly emphasising both the importance of independent, diverse, and high-quality journalism on the one hand and, on the other, how they themselves act as safeguards of such journalism. One problem is, however, that the practices of journalism have been somewhat weaponised and turned against journalism by political actors peddling claims of questionable truthfulness. If a politician makes a controversial claim, the journalistic instinct will be to report that claim; but, if the claim is false, the journalist must strike a delicate balance to not be criticised as biased.

Another concrete example is the campaign that TU (the trade organisation of the privately owned media in Sweden) launched in 2017. Under the heading “Ethics and credibility [translated]”, the organisation strategically communicated how editors and journalists work and signalled how they demonstrate higher editorial and ethical standards than the general public might think (TU Medier i Sverige, 2019).

A rather unorthodox and activist media initiative to counter fake news that also deserves mentioning is the Danish television programme *Ultra Snydt* (Rubin, 2018). Aimed at school children, the weekly programme imitates the

serious format of television news and presents its audiences with one true and one fabricated news story. Its ambition is to teach critical skills and prompt discussions about trust, journalism, and misinformation among young audiences, improving their media literacy. This example illustrates how, when it comes to the battle for the hearts and minds of the public, the legacy media will not just stand on the sidelines and report what goes on in the public sphere; rather, they pursue a more active approach and act accordingly.

Much of the news media's strategic positioning in response to the fake-news scare has, as a matter of fact, explicitly targeted young people and their media literacy. When Danish media company JP/Politikens Hus announced the launch of *Børneavisen* (a printed weekly newspaper for 9–12-year-olds) in 2018, editor-in-chief and director Louise Abildgaard Grøn asserted the following:

*Børneavisen* will guide the child by the hand in a world where information about societal issues increasingly takes place through social media, where fake news flourishes, and where children – through their use of social media – are presented with much that is difficult to sort through [translated]. (JP/ Pol, 2018: para. 5)

Striking a similar note, the Norwegian Media Authority produced and published materials for teachers “who want [...] to strengthen young people's critical understanding of the media and their skills in evaluating media content (source criticism) [translated]” (Medietilsynet, 2018: 2).

### News media use, trust, and concerns of fake news

Turning to the attitudes and experiences of citizens regarding fake news, manipulated information, and trust towards different media outlets in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, we use and present data from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman et al., 2018). This empirical material deals with news consumption, media trust, and views of fake news. The study was commissioned by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism to understand how news is being consumed in a range of countries. Research was conducted by YouGov, using an online questionnaire, at the end of January and beginning of February 2018. The data was weighted to targets based on census and industry-accepted data on age, gender, and region, to represent the total population of each country. The sample is reflective of the population that has access to the Internet, with the following sample sizes: Denmark ( $N = 2,025$ ); Norway ( $N = 2,027$ ); and Sweden ( $N = 2,016$ ).

First, we focus on media use in these Scandinavian countries, where the media environments are characterised by a mix of strong commercial and public service media (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Syvertsen et al., 2014). The main news

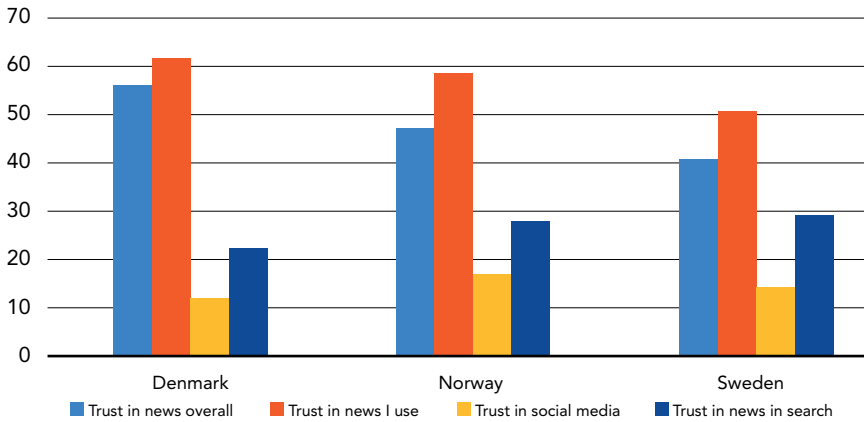
sources for Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes include public and commercial broadcasters such as DR, TV 2, NRK, and SVT, as well as national quality newspapers, national tabloids, and local press. Use of traditional sources such as print and television is declining, and online use remains high in Norway (87%) and Sweden (87%), although slightly decreasing in Denmark (82%) (Newman et al., 2018).

In all three countries, media consumption has thus become more and more digital as audiences move online. This development goes hand in hand with the use of smartphones – which is increasing – and the majority of audiences in these countries use their phones to access news (Newman et al., 2019). Digital platforms are playing an increasingly central role in news consumption. Most legacy media run their own websites and apps and additionally select news for distribution on third-party platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Audiences are thus able to consume a mix of news from commercial, public service, and other actors on their social media platforms.

In 2018, the top social media platform used for news consumption was Facebook, with 40 per cent of Norwegian, 36 per cent of Swedish, and 34 per cent of Danish users receiving news from the platform (Newman et al., 2018: 10). The rising political and public concern with digital dominance – and the dominance of particular companies – is thus a concern with user autonomy, user agency, and the power of platforms to impact opinions and decision-making through profiling, information control, and behavioural nudges (Kreiss, 2016; Tambini & Moore, 2018). There has been a lively debate since 2016 concerning the political and social implications of the size and dominance of two particular players: Facebook and Google. The debate has centred on issues such as fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and the influence of Google search results.

### *Trust in the media*

As Figure 14.1 shows, the public in the Scandinavian countries still express trust in legacy media, and in Denmark, the trust score for news in general has increased to 56 per cent (+ 6 percentage points since 2017, according to Newman et al, 2018: 74). This might come as no surprise after the legacy media seized the opportunity to reassert the importance of quality journalism and the need for source criticism following the fake-news debate. The trust scores are generally higher for quality news brands (both public service and commercial), lower for tabloids, and lowest for partisan sites such as *Den Korte Avis* in Denmark, *Human Rights Service* in Norway, and *Fria Tider* in Sweden. It appears that the public differentiates between competing sources of news and that trust is rooted in traditional media actors.

**Figure 14.1** Trust in news and social media (per cent)

Source: Newman et al., 2018

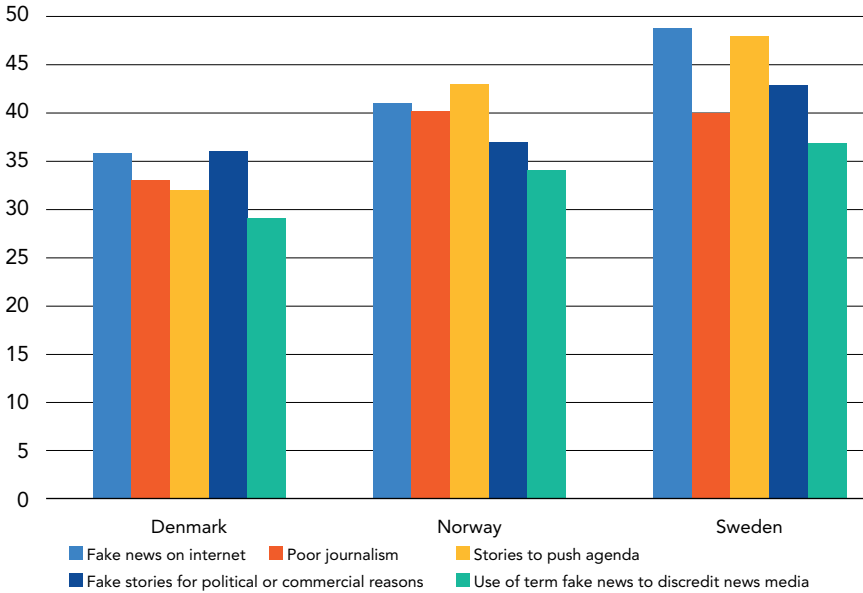
Trust scores are even higher for the news sources that individuals use themselves, suggesting two factors affecting these scores: first, people are critically assessing the news they consume; and second, people who use partisan sites find them more trustworthy than non-users. The ambition of many fact-checking initiatives is to raise awareness about fake news, disinformation, and misinformation and to increase critical skills and media literacy. It is not possible to disentangle whether these initiatives have had an effect on the public, but the data presented in the *Reuters Digital News Report* suggests that news consumers are aware of the need for media literacy in a digital media landscape. Amid discussions about social media polluted with manipulated and fake information, it is not surprising that the trust scores are significantly lower for news in social media and for news from searches using platforms like Google.

### *Public concern with fake news and misinformation*

In line with the low trust for news in social media and from search engines, the concern about what is real and what is fake in online news ranges from 36 per cent in Denmark to 49 per cent in Sweden (see Figure 14.2). The concern about fake news, disinformation, and misinformation made by journalists, politicians, and other actors to push an agenda either for political or commercial reasons differs to some extent depending on who is seen as the perpetrator. Overall concerns are lower in Denmark and highest in Sweden. Concern about stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda are highest in Norway (43%) and Sweden (48%), whereas in Denmark, the concern for stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons is highest (36%). Three to four out of ten people have concern for poor journalism,

defined as factual mistakes, dumbed-down stories, and misleading headlines or clickbait (Newman et al., 2018). It is clear that citizens across the three countries are aware of – and concerned about – various types of fake or manipulated information they can encounter, especially in an online environment.

**Figure 14.2** Concerns about fake news and poor journalism (per cent)



*Comments:* Respondents who are concerned (very and extremely concerned).

Q1: Please indicate your agreement with the following statement: “Thinking about online news, I am concerned about what is real and what is fake on the internet”.

Q2: To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the following: Poor journalism (factual mistakes, dumbed down stories, misleading headlines/clickbait).

Q3: To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the following: Stories that are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda.

Q4: To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the following: Stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons.

Q5: To what extent, if at all, are you concerned about the following: The use of the term fake news (e.g., by politicians, others) to discredit news media they don’t like.

*Source:* Newman et al., 2018

When asked if they had personal experience with fake stories, the numbers are lower; 24 per cent of the Danes, 33 per cent of the Norwegians, and 41 per cent of the Swedes said that they had encountered “stories where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda”, and even less encountered “stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons” (Danes, 9%; Norwegians, 14%; Swedes, 22%) (Newman et al., 2018). Self-reported survey results do not, however, tell us anything about people’s actual ability to recognise



factual news stories or opinion pieces that reflect the beliefs, values, or reasons of whoever expresses them. A recent study by Nygren and Guath (2019) shows that Swedish youth have a hard time determining the trustworthiness of factual, biased, and false information online. The inability to determine credibility is partly explained by a mindset of overconfidence and ignorance, enhancing confirmation bias. In other words, the lack of knowledge in a domain results in overconfidence in one's own ability and the incapacity to judge the performance of others. Finally, the study concludes that it is important to learn critical evaluation to support a critical and constructive treatment of digital news.

When it comes to ways of preventing the spread of fake news, the overwhelming majority of people expect social networking sites, journalists, and politicians to be responsible. Across the three countries, the majority of respondents agree with the statements that social media sites, media, journalists, and the government should do more to make it easier to separate what is real and fake on the Internet (Newman et al., 2018). So far, many different actors have initiated fact-checking, information about how to identify fake news for audiences, new rules and regulation on social media platforms, and so forth. The awareness of the existence and concern for the effects of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in digital media seems to be relatively high among the Scandinavian public, but the ability to handle this media environment is still under-researched.

## Conclusion

The phenomenon of fake news has a long history, but the expansion of its politically oriented incarnation is nevertheless recent. Despite high levels of trust in societal institutions and the media – and despite traditionally solid politics and media institutions – none of the Scandinavian countries are spared from worry about manipulated and false information. Fake news, disinformation, and misinformation have created concerns about what is real and what is fake online – in Scandinavia as elsewhere. Citizens are most concerned with fake news in Sweden (49%), followed by Norway (41%), then Denmark (36%) (Newman et al., 2018).

Scandinavian politicians have been both accusers and victims of fake news. The temptation to accuse the media of producing fake news when the framing disfavours the politician may be hard to resist, as we can see from the examples in this chapter. Many political actors also express concern about fake news and depict themselves as victims accused by political opponents. However, there are also examples of politicians warning against the use of the term fake news based on whether someone likes the framing of a story or not, as it may lead to reduced trust in editorial media in general.

Legacy media has seized the opportunity to assert their own role as guardians of quality journalism and source criticism, and the many fact-checking initiatives appearing in Scandinavia are a response to the chaotic digital information ecosystem. Paradoxically, however, legacy media might simultaneously serve as an amplification and reverberation channel for fake news narratives as they cover fake news and movements that challenge the established information order. The increase in the number of fact-checking organisations has thus raised questions about how they function and what kind of corrections of disinformation and misinformation work best and why. Clearly, both media and political actors, as well as the public, are concerned about the impact of fake news and manipulated information; but, we are still not entirely sure of its scale. We also know that an overwhelming majority of people expect social networking sites, journalists, and politicians to do their share to make it easier to separate what is real and fake online.

We need more research on the scale and scope of the problem of false and manipulated information to address different types of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in Scandinavia. We also need to know more about how people differentiate between different types of information online (in line with, e.g., Nielsen & Graves, 2017) and about people's actual abilities to recognise factual news stories compared to opinions that reflect the beliefs, values, or motivations of the author. The potential to produce and disseminate false information through social media has motivated many different actors to engage in the discussion about the role and the impact of fake news and disinformation.

The ease of information manipulation in texts, icons, images, videos, and sounds have increased the need for new methods to track and detect information manipulation. We also need new methods for digital source criticism, verification, and media literacy in an information environment suited to the digital manipulation of voice and video (so-called deep fakes). From this perspective, it is worrying that a number of studies argue that citizens overvalue their ability to determine the credibility of digital news (see, e.g., Nygren & Guath, 2019). It is also of concern that news users spread fake news and information manipulation even though they know it is fake, because they want to incite the spread of misinformation, to "call out" the stories as fake, for the amusement value, or for some other reason (Barthel et al., 2016). With the rapid development of deep fakes, the issue of media literacy and source criticism becomes even more important for future democratic public discussions.

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