

EU DISINFO LAB

Disinformation landscape in **SWEDEN**

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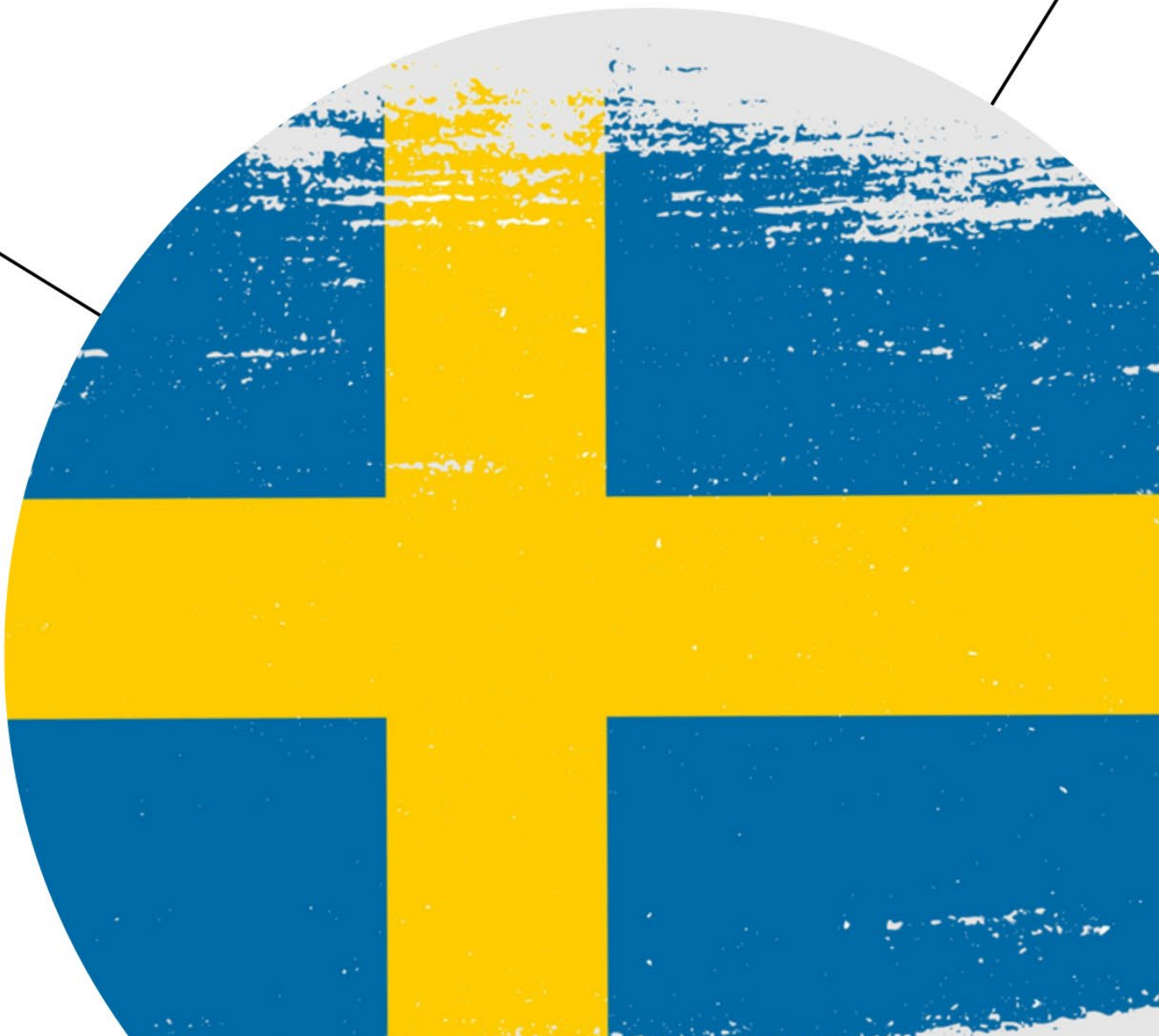


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INTRODUCTION

- While disinformation on several topics, such as climate change and the efficiency of vaccines, is present in the Swedish information landscape, the general population is not overly receptive to outright falsehoods. That is often explained through the fact that Swedes, compared to other populations, places high trust in authorities, science, and society. They are also generally well-educated with a high level of awareness about the need to not believe everything that is written or reproduced. This has led many analysts to conclude that Swedes have somewhat difficulty believing in detectable disinformation. However, high levels of social trust can allow disinformation actors to work systematically to build credibility on social media, making them appear trustworthy even when they make dubious statements.
- Disinformation is present in the Swedish information landscape less as clear narratives driven by well-identifiable actors, but rather as small fractions of discourses presented and shared both as misinformation and deliberate disinformation. As a result, it is difficult to clearly point out and prove that certain opinions contribute to a false or distorted information landscape, since many pieces of disinformation are embedded within legitimate democratic discourse and are often presented in isolation.
- We notice a significant number of suspected false accounts on different social media platforms posing as trustworthy actors. A typical example could be a man energetically discussing national security on LinkedIn and having hundreds of legitimate contacts, despite his professional background being unrelated to security. At the same time, a dormant Facebook account with the same name and photo shows a person with only a handful of contacts. The account is actively building trust and audience on one platform while displaying all the signs of inauthenticity on others. Another typical example involves a person who becomes highly engaged in a topic, such as Tesla cars or the benefits of yoga, sharing insights, offering advice, and actively participating in groups and communities. At some point, that account suddenly starts expressing unrelated opinions or promoting ideas or products disconnected from the original topic. If such accounts are indeed inauthentic, they may be strategically developed to serve a hidden purpose. Once they have gained a platform, audience and trust, they can be used to disseminate disinformation and push specific narratives. Meanwhile, such accounts focus on building trust, legitimacy and connections.
- Grievances and social problems in Swedish society have led to an increased distrust in public institutions and public actors. This distrust can escalate quickly when such grievances are exploited, especially if pieces of disinformation are already circulating and perceived as a normal part of the information environment. One such example is the campaign against Swedish social services in 2022-2023, which spread the false narrative that the Swedish social services systematically removed children from Muslim immigrant families. The resulting mistrust and anger towards the social services are still influencing the working conditions and safety of social workers.

EMBLEMATIC CASES AND TRENDS

As indicated in the introduction, there is dis- and misinformation in circulation in the Swedish information landscape, as they are across Europe. Several of these discourses could be labelled as parts of a normal and healthy democratic discussion, albeit carrying misinformation. Here we find examples of false information on for example renewable energy sources which are spread by, among others, some well known Swedish public figures. Such information is often checked and labelled as false by fact checkers and it generally does not spread beyond its intended audience, although it most likely shapes the opinions of the recipients. Nevertheless, holding, forming, and voicing personal beliefs is a fundamental democratic right, even though those beliefs are grounded in somewhat false facts, misunderstandings or strong critique against public authorities, science or otherwise facts.

There are few emblematic cases of disinformation in the Swedish information landscape, although the LVU campaign, as reported in the report on disinformation in Sweden from 2023, remains present and has effects with a lower intensity. Given its direct impact on society and trust in public institutions, it still requires monitoring and active management by authorities and related organisations. As such, it remains a topic of interest for the broader fact checking community.

Rapid technological developments, particularly in generative artificial intelligence and the possibility of monitoring our movements and neurological reactions, are raising concerns within the counter disinformation communities. Disinformation is pervasive, appearing also where we perhaps are not used to looking. The gaming industry, with its fast-evolving extended and virtual reality tools, motion-tracking sensors and much more, is not traditionally associated with disinformation or information operations. However, it is becoming an increasingly arena for actors seeking to shape opinions and worldviews. As a result, there is a growing reason to look forward, identifying emerging platforms, audiences, and (influential) actors in the evolving disinformation landscape.

LVU-CAMPAIGN: A PERSISTENT THREAT

- The LVU campaign is a disinformation campaign targeting the Swedish social services and their application of the Law on Special Provisions on the Care of Young People (LVU). The campaign falsely claims that social services systematically abuse LVU to forcibly take children into care, particularly those with foreign backgrounds and Muslim faith.
- The campaign began gaining attention in 2021 and escalated during 2022 and 2023. It has been spread through social media and other platforms, often supported by radical Islamist groups. These claims have fueled growing distrust of Swedish authorities, especially among immigrant communities and have created a significant security risk, according to the Swedish Security Service and the Swedish Defense University.
- The Swedish National Agency for Education reported that the LVU campaign has impacted the education system by creating anxiety among students, staff, and guardians. The disinformation has contributed to increased distrust of authorities and societal institutions, potentially leading to long-term consequences for the education system.
- One perhaps unexpected effect of this campaign has been a rapid spread to other Nordic countries, [such as Finland and Denmark](#). In Finland it is the same influencer behind the campaign as was identified in Sweden, while a different one is the main actor in Denmark.

- As a direct effect of the LVU campaign, the government has allocated funds over a four-year period to the National Board of Health and Welfare to be used to target and prevent disinformation directed at the social services and their work.

THE ROLE OF ONLINE GAMING IN DISINFORMATION AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

- As discussed above, there are several subtle ways of influencing public opinion and decision-makers than through false statements in social media where we might expect it the most. The arena of video games and online gaming is a perfect match for disseminating disinformation and conducting other types of [malign information operations](#). It has, for example, become a preferred sphere for terrorists to spread propaganda, and to recruit and radicalise followers.¹ It is also an arena which adults to a large extent do not frequent. This means that children, teenagers and young adults can be approached almost unnoticed.
- The gaming industry is the largest entertainment industry, and online gaming is at the forefront of technological advancements, influencing both military training and the application of AI on immersive internet platforms. This means that not only can vast amounts of data be extracted from the users, but subtle, personalised, messages can also be integrated into popular games. The development of smart devices in connection with extended reality and virtual reality means that for example gamers can be heavily monitored for biometric data and even potentially manipulated through [neurotechnology](#).
- Lately, Swedish analysts have highlighted the Chinese government's interest in using video games as a medium to promote Chinese culture and ideology globally, noting that Chinese companies are investing in the [gaming industry worldwide](#). This can be seen as a form of soft power, where cultural content is used to shape global perceptions and attitudes. In the context of information operations, this could lead to the spread of ideologically aligned content that supports the Chinese state's objectives. Companies such as Tencent and NetEase have emerged as key actors in the global gaming industry, actively buying gaming companies in Sweden and elsewhere. Four of Tencent's 20 largest known investments in the gaming industry are Swedish companies. The Swedish gaming industry is quite significant for a country of about 10 million inhabitants: it was Europe's third-largest host to game development studios in 2021 and holds a strong international presence. Games such as Candy Crush and Minecraft have been developed by Swedish companies in Sweden. Given the traditionally quite low foreign direct investment in Sweden, the Chinese ownership of large studios is [noteworthy](#).
- The concern is that games could not only contain politicised messages in the shape of choice of characters, environments, and storytelling, but also that gamers' biometric data could be scraped and used to influence them in different ways. While the least concerning outcome is that players are encouraged to buy extras, the technology to monitor and influence the wearers is being developed.² As such, online gaming should be included in the standard monitoring list of the disinformation and influence operation tracking community.

¹ Lakhani, Suraj, *"Video gaming and (violent) extremism: An exploration of the current landscape, trends, and threats"*, Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021

² Farahany, Nita A., *The Battle for Your Brain: Defending the right to think freely in the age of neurotechnology*, New York. St. Martin's Press

NARRATIVES

This section illustrates two types of narratives present in the Swedish information landscape. The first illustrates how social discontent and grievances, and the democratic debate surrounding them have a soft underbelly where disinformation can thrive. While the mere existence of disinformation does not necessarily mean it plays a major role in public debate, the actors spreading it (whether disinformation or simple misinformation, but with conviction and a dedicated following) are building their audience and platforms. This means that if the topic gets infected or attracts unwanted attention the playing field for false information is already laid, making it easier for covert information operations by disinformation opportunists whose aim is to sow discord and to disturb the democratic debate.

The second example of a disinformation-driven narrative shows how discourses from abroad are easily picked up, and perhaps in particular by children and teenagers. Swedes generally have a good command of English, even school children, which makes them vulnerable to disinformation from English language sources. If the topic is closely connected to their sphere of interests, such as music or gaming, it is quite likely that this disinformation will not be taken seriously, or go unnoticed by adults. The result could be that young people get a completely different, and somewhat distorted, view of reality and what is happening in the world around them.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENERGY POLITICS

- The current Swedish government, a centre-right coalition, has energy high on its political agenda. The energy situation in Sweden is complex with the country divided into four price zones, where most of the energy is produced in the north but consumed in the south. This is visible when it comes to the price of energy since the prices in the south can be many times higher than in the north. It is also clear that the weather has an impact on prices, as prices tend to fall, especially in the south, when the wind is strong and steady. The government has pronounced goals of increasing nuclear energy production to be able to compensate for the volatility of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power. At the same time, many large companies in the industrial sector are profiling themselves as “green” and have actively invested in renewable sources such as wind power.
- Since the turn towards nuclear power is a break with previous governments and their politics, the energy policies are debated in society and many citizens have strong opinions. This is even more so since the winter of 2023-2024 and again late autumn/early winter of 2024 brought energy prices to levels that were barely sustainable for a significant part of the population.
- Since public opinion is strong, and the effects of strategic choices by the government have direct effects on the economy of many families, there is room for disinformation. Among legitimate opinion makers arguing for renewable sources of energy, nuclear power, or the stability of fossil-based energy, we also find arguments claiming that renewable sources are bad for the environment, that wind turbines spread microplastics into the environment, that the turbines generate disturbing noise and more. Such claims have been met by facts by expert groups and scientists showing these [claims](#) to be [false](#). The effects of disinformation on renewable energy are that other sources, such as nuclear energy and fossil

fuels, are seen as better options for the environment, family budgets, and more, and would thus be the best political option. While that may be true, such a decision should not be based on disinformation about renewable sources.

- It should be said that while disinformation on this topic exists in the general debate on energy sources and how to keep costs at a reasonable level, it is not prevalent and not shaping the debate. However, there is an audience that is willing to discover an easy way to cheap energy, and that audience could fall prey to a determined disinformation campaign if disinformation actors would like to. This is an example of how the public debate on an important topic has both legitimate actors and arguments, including misinformation, but that there are also aspects of disinformation in the discourse that could be reproduced, used and spread broadly if there are actors with an interest to do so.

BEYONCÉ IS A SERIAL KILLER

- During the autumn of 2024, TikTok was filled with claims that the singer Beyoncé was a serial killer, and that Michael Jackson was one of her victims. The origins of this conspiracy theory lead back to the electoral campaign in the US, where Beyoncé openly supported the Democratic Party and Kamala Harris. Analysts point to a possible wish to smear Beyoncé to undermine her credibility and the possibility of attracting voters to the Democratic party. Another possible source of this claim could be the TV show “Swarms” which portrays a young woman devoted to a pop singer that strongly resembles Beyoncé in several ways. This fan becomes a serial killer trying to protect her heroine’s reputation.
- The narrative about Beyoncé took hold among Swedish youth during late September and early October with a large number of teenagers believing that the collective “evidence” indicating that Beyoncé is a serial killer was [true](#). This shows that the Swedish information landscape is wide open to English language news and influences, even among teenagers and children, and that it is very difficult to predict which type of information will have effect and take a hold. These statements (videos) were spread on platforms that are normally frequented by children and teenagers and less by adults. Platforms such as TikTok are often not taken seriously by adults and are as such not necessarily monitored by parents, teachers, and others for harmful content. Although TikTok is monitored by fact-checkers, disinformation and narratives that are attractive to children and teenagers are easily overlooked and not taken seriously. This means that there is a potential to influence the opinions and world views of young people and that it goes on almost unnoticed.

COMMUNITY

Sweden has quite a small community of fact-checkers and active anti-disinformation campaigners. The more noteworthy actors are listed below:

KÄLLKRITIKBYRÅN

- Källkritikbyrån is a journalistic initiative focusing on helping people become confident and aware internet users, systematically reviewing online claims and passing on the knowledge to the public.
- Källkritikbyrån is a part of Nordis - Nordic observatory for digital media and information disorders, a collaboration between fact-checkers and researchers in the Nordic countries. They are also (still) part of Meta's third-party fact-checking programme.

FAKTAJOURN-FOJO

- Faktajournalen is a project run by the Media Institute Fojo, an independent institute for media development at Linnaeus University in Kalmar. The Faktajournalen follows and reports on research and development of methods, tools and models for fact-checking and handling inaccuracies on the internet in Sweden and internationally.
- Faktajournalen also conducts dialogue with authorities, organisations and the media industry, supports individual media's initiatives to conduct fact-checking and arranges training for media actors.

MYNDIGHETEN FÖR PSYKOLOGISKT FÖRSVAR – PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE AGENCY

- The Psychological Defence Agency (Myndigheten för Psykologiskt Försvar, MPF), a government agency, was launched on 1 January 2022 to strengthen the population's ability to detect and resist malign influence campaigns and disinformation. As such it conducts studies and spreads information about disinformation, information operations and how to become a more informed citizen.
- The Agency also identifies, analyses, prevents, and counters foreign malign information influence activities and other disinformation directed at Sweden or at Swedish interests.

POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

- Sweden does not have laws against disinformation. Freedom of speech is strong and highly protected in the Constitution which gives the citizens far-reaching rights to express their views. However, there are laws against for example defamation, inciting ethnic hatred, agitation and sedition which could be applied against certain types of disinformation.
- In Sweden, there have however been government Agencies countering disinformation, propaganda and information operations in different shapes since at least the 1950's. The above-mentioned Psychological Defence Agency began its work in January 2022 with a clear mandate to identify and counter disinformation. Democratic principles forbid them, as a state agency, to monitor domestic actors, and they focus on foreign initiatives and campaigns.

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