Debunking False News : Inside and Outside the Classroom

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Debunking False News: Inside and Outside the Classroom
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The Swedish phrase "sanningssägare"---literally, "truth-tellers"---offers an intriguing window to the world of social media in our times. Lately, it has been absorbed by and used to describe a person who says something that they might think *should* be 'the truth' in a context when others don't really care about what is true or false. In digital on the digital spread of coverage from national elections, right-wing candidates and their supporters have proclaimed to be "tellers of the real truth" – an euphemism for tellers of "alternative facts". Thus, in the digital politics characterising our times, the word "sanningssägare" has been used frequently in tweets and posts to comments that are seen as "outspoken", "fabricated" or a combination of both.

Between 7 and 9 September 2018, a group of international media scholars and journalists gathered in a co-working space in the old dockyard of Hammarby in central Stockholm. Outnumbered by Swedish journalism students, the group consisted of Finnish fact-checkers, British and US media entrepreneurs, Swedish and Indian media scholars and journalism teachers. This diverse group's mission was to monitor the spread of mis-information and dis-information on social media during the Swedish national elections.

The first concern about fake news is the term itself. Terming it "fake" assumes, like in a painting, there exists somewhere an "original", and hence a true, version--- of which one or more versions are fake, or unsanctioned, or illegitimate renditions. It is more accurate to term this misleading practice as False News---so there is no ambiguity about its veracity, at any level. The more magnanimous define "fake news" to be "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (David et al 2018)[1.] Journalists intervene in such debates by emphasising the distinction between reportage that is unverified and that which is knowingly false. Definitional clarity is crucial as it brings us to squarely eye-ball that what we are dealing with is falsity, process or otherwise. We are not dealing with versions of reportage or opinion---yours, mine, or theirs---but plain and simple falsehood.

The second concern around False News is that it is not really a mistake--- either by a lowly paid reporter, a semi-skilled sub-editor, an overworked newsroom, or even a celebrity news anchor. False News is a business--- as much as it is politics. In India the situation in 2017 was markedly different as among the top 'Fake News' stories circulated by the mainstream media that year, none concerned party politics (Jawed 2018)[2]. The omnipresence of False News suggests, foremost, that in our times the business of truth seems to have few takers than that of falsity. Or to put it in another way, the market---the proverbial arbitrator in

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1   David M. J. Lazer et al. 'The science of fake news', *Science* 9 March 2018 http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1094

2   Sam Jawed, 'Top fake news stories circulated by Indian media in 2017', *AltNews* 2 January 2018 https://www.altnews.in/top-fake-news-stories-circulated-indian-media-2017/

our times--- for falsity is far more dynamic than the market for truth. India Today fired one of its digital journalists following her criticism on Twitter of the media organisation's promoters ignoring fake news spread by its TV anchors and editors (The News Minute 2018)[3]. Research has found false information on Twitter to be typically retweeted by many more people and much more rapidly than true information; this is more so when it comes to digital utterances around the theme of party politics (Vosoughietal 2018)[4].

Understanding the naivete of mis-information, i.e. sharing untruth believing it to be true, and the deceit of dis-information, i.e. will-fully circulating falsehood, has become an endeavour spilling across academic disciplines. Over the last five years, scholars from media studies, information sciences, public policy, political science and strategic studies have been engaging with the idea and practice of mis/dis-information. Despite their varying motivations, emphases, and methods adopted in such research, there is broadly a consensus on falsity being the predominant character marking mis/disinformation; there is just no semblance to what actually happened or was said in most cases of "false news". It is the work of a devious, often even a strategic mindset.

Around 7 million Swedes were eligible to cast their ballot on Sunday, 10th September, less than as many in the city of New Delhi alone. The Swedish elections of 2018 were exceedingly important not only within the country but across Europe and the world. Within Sweden, these elections are perceived as a tussle to retain the country's character, and image, as an open society. For Europe, the results in Sweden could influence the nature and direction of the vocal debate across the continent on policies and decisions on immigration. And globally, the interest in these elections stemmed from Sweden being widely seen as one of the last bastions of social welfare in an era of aggressive neo-liberalism. Among policy circles in India, the impression of Sweden has long been that of a terribly transparent polity; its public broadcaster is particularly known for its history of demanding facts and explanations from the very government that funds it.

In the months preceding September, the focus of attention had hovered around the Sweden Democrats (SD), with roots in the country's Far-Right and Neo-Nazi movement. The SD's challenge to the consensus on abortion in Swedish society, its explicit desire to reduce immigration, and redefining the criteria for awarding social welfare caught popular imagination inside and outside Sweden. To cap it all, they have been championing the cause of a referendum to exit the European Union, the so called "Sweexit"--- a big concern across the continent given the elections to European Parliament 8 months after the Swedish elections. In fact, the very existence of a polarized political landscape of Sweden surprised many around the globe.

Since the last US election, there has been a growing worry worldwide about mis/dis information, trolls, and bots. This concern travelled across and up the Atlantic to Sweden.

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3   'DailyO editor fired over tweet criticising hate-mongering and fake news', 14 February 2018. https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/dailyo-editor-fired-over-tweet-criticising-hate-mongering-and-fake-news-76440
4   S. Vosoughietal, Science 359, 1146 (2018)

Like in India, in Sweden too social media has offered a plentiful platform for both politics and leisure. "In the Swedish election mis-information is something that can lead to dis-information if there is something completely false going on and it spins in the direction that is harmful for the public", says Mikko Salo from the Finnish fact-checking initiative, Faktabaari. Launched during the European Union elections of 2014, Faktabaari aims to bring accuracy to public discussions particularly around national and European elections. Seeing itself as a journalistic service, it uses social media for both collecting and distributing factual information.

The Special Counsel for Media Policy in Sweden stated in 2016 that disinformation is "a threat to Swedish citizens' right to find correct information and qualitative news reports in which the open society must find ways to deal with. Otherwise, there is a big risk that also serious news agencies will lose their creditability (En gränsöverskridande mediepolitik: för upplysning, engagemang och ansvar: slutbetänkande, 2016)[5]. This trend was seen to acutely enhance in the run-up towards the 2018 national elections. Fingers were pointing at websites in Sweden websites which intentionally created and actively circulated such false content. Emma Nilsson, journalism student at Lund University, part of the contingent of students tracking misinformation and disinformation during the elections of September 2018 and a second time voter felt "extremism is growing because we have the ability to hide behind our screens".

Journalistic endeavours have strived for ways to monitor unverified and fake reportage, as also more general trends of mis- and dis- information online. And not only during elections This is most commonly reflected in the rapid emergence of fact-checking websites, such as Politifact in the US, Faktiskt in Sweden, Faktabaari in neighbouring Finland, or Altnews and Fact Checker in India. Their monitoring of news outlets and social media have served as a public barometer, and often an external corrector, on the fast expanding market of false news. In terms of their personality, fact-checking entities vary from being crusaders, akin to journalists who wear their politics on their sleeves, to the staid civil society groups, to those who waded into it as a commercial venture, akin to news itself. As of date, India seems to have spawned a mixture of these personalities of fact-checking organisations; while *Fact Checker* is a vertical of a for-profit and largely bi-partisan data journalism initiative, *Altnews* stems from a non-profit initiative makes no bones about wearing its values on its sleeve.

The typical response time to bust false news by fact-checking sites tends to vary from a few hours to as much as a day. Fact-checkers employ methods that are a mix of textbook journalism---multiple sources, verification and cross-checking--- and astute usage of basic search functions to identify pictures before they are distorted, faces before they are morphed, utterances that are altered, events far in time from that represented. While online, native-digital news sites are among the prime amplifiers of fact-checking initiatives, sometimes they

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5   En gränsöverskridande mediepolitik: för upplysning, engagemang och ansvar: slutbetänkande *(Translated:* A cross-border media policy: for enlightenment, engagement and responsibility: the final report*).* 2016. Statens offentliga utredningar. Wolters Kluwer, Stockholm.

are present detailed accounts of the layers of fact-checking. An apt recent illustration of this was the *Alt News* report systematically explaining its unravelling the veracity of a tweet in by ANI, India's leading private news agency, an alleged fatwa on the use of nailpolish by Muslim women (Alt News 2018)[6].

A plethora of fact-checking software have been developed by a range of those concerned about the market for truth, on the social media and more widely in society. Most of these are open tools, downloadable from the internet like any other "free" software. Since guarding the market for truth is somewhat also a market, companies have also developed proprietary fact-checking software as well. This apart, leading technology players on the internet have ventured to work closely with news outlets to tackle the challenge of mis/disinformation. In India, newspapers and native-digital news organisations have conducted workshops in partnership with arms of technology majors, like the eponymous Google News Lab, to familiarise journalists with digital tools to better help them verify the credibility of a source, or of an image circulating online. On its part, Facebook has initiated the Journalism Project by which it intends to tackle fake news through deeper collaboration with news organisation and educating users on finding and trusting news. All this suggests that the business of public interest fact fact-checking has got rapidly formalised, through the creation of international professional networks, organisational collaborations, and emergebt consensus on best practices. The Florida-based Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network, set up in September 2015, formulated code of principles to assess if news are fake[7]---a protocol used amongst others by Facebook in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections (Constine 2016)[8]. Clearly this is one of the ways in which journalism is seeking to win back the trust of its readers, as also echoed in a recent study on journalism in neighbouring Pakistan (Siddiqui 2018)[9].

The significant innovation across these initiatives is in ensuring the process of fact-checking becomes real-time. Real-time fact-checking could impart the much needed contra-circulation, so as to safeguard the market for truth in the digital world. For, the market for truth on social media, especially in the build up towards elections, tends to have a much shorter shelf-life than the market for falsity. This has become the nature of contemporary massified electoral politics--- or rather mass media induced mediated mass politics. A real-time fact-checking endeavour would effectively become like a newsroom; it would become capable of debunking hearsay, opinion, and "news" a few minutes after it creeped in or escalated on social media.

6   'Alt News investigation: The making of a fatwa story', *AltNews* 9 November 2018 https://www.altnews.in/alt-news-investigation-the-making-of-a-fatwa-story/
7   See https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/
8   Constine, Josh, "Facebook Now Flags and Down-Ranks Fake News with Help from Outside Fact Checkers", TechCrunch, https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/15/facebook-now-flags-and-down-ranks-fake-news-with-help- from-outside-fact-checkers/.
9   Siddiqui, Maleeha Hamid. 2018. 'Showing the way: How big Pakistani media groups are leading the surge in data journalism', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford

During the Swedish elections of 2018, an international initiative set out to do exactly this: create a 'pop-up' newsroom in Stockholm to track the sources of mis and dis-information outside the mainstream media[10].

The 'pop-up phenomenon' itself is one of the many by products of the social media revolution spawned by the internet. It is the ability to create a temporary (work)space outside its conventional locale and place such while ensuring its takers have immediate information and access to it. Instances of pop-up activities range from restaurants/meals by celebrity chefs, to flash-mobs (a seemingly sudden gathering in a public place to dance or other bodily/performative activities), to open-door gatherings for writing software (or their more organised version, hackathons). Common to all such disparate 'pop-up' experiences is a sense of instant gratification, which is very much a product, and driver, of the highly mobile urbanism of our times.

In the pop-up newsroom created during the Swedish elections, the workflows and key journalistic processes (viz. monitoring, investigation, and publishing) were designed by the participants. Most significantly, these participants were students from journalism programmes at three prestigious Swedish universities, Södertörn University, Stockholm University, and Lund University. Learning to use generic and customised digital tools, these journalism students became the engine of this election-centred pop-up newsroom. They also published a daily newsletter on instances of debunking false news that was addressed to Swedish and international news organisations. Combining their professional aspirations, news values, and digital capabilities these students found pathways to productively deal with journalistic challenges in a real-time environment at an important political moment in Sweden.

Initiatives at building real-time pop up newsrooms could learn from the experience of news outlets where misinformation is associated with the pressures marking the business 'constant news'. Prime among these are the challenges arising from the pressures of velocity--- i.e. the speed of work-flows in news-making driven by expectations in hyper-competitive media markets. India and Apart from India, the USA are sterling example of hyper-competitive news landscapes. In June 2017, Fox News replaced its "Fair and Balanced" tagline with that of "Most Watched, Most Trusted." When the news apps and multimedia desks of Indian newspapers which expanded online attend to search, a major driver of traffic for their sites, their efforts were geared towards quality of content, user experience, and speed (Annez et al 2016)[11]. As journalists and reporters pick up stories and sources criss-crossing various social media platforms, including for reasons of velocity, the newsroom becomes vulnerable--- both, to unreliable sources circulating online, but also to the very virality of false news in particular. Not surprisingly, in a subsequent study just a year later, realising the geometrically growing numbers of unsubstantiated claims on social media, journalists in digital newsrooms in India have realised the importance of not being under the

10   See the self-introduction video, Pop-Up Newsroom: Riksdagsvalet 2018, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oNSfWLLyCo
11   Aneez, Z., S. Chattapadhyay, S., Parthasarathi, V., Kleis Nielsen, R. 2016. *Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition: Dainik Jagran, Hindustan Times, and Malayalam Manorama,* Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford and Centre for Intenet and Society, Bangalore, University of Oxford

pressure of speed constantly, and to stop and verify information taken from social media (Aneez et al 2017)[12].

The pop-up initiative to bust false news during the Swedish national elections represents an innovation simultaneously in media literacy and journalism pedagogy. Their successful debunking of social media rumours could get further amplified by partnering large, trusted news outlets. However, across countries we have observed that sometime large and established news outlets are hesitant to partner fact-checking organisations, since it amounts to a tacit admission of their internal processes of verification and vetting being weak. "I see that we maybe could approach smaller and more local media outlets who are not working with these kinds of tools. There is probably room for collaborations", says Linus Svensson, journalism student at Södertörn University participating in the Swedish pop-up newsroom, also a second time voter. At the same time, a more rounded approach to media governance could be achieved by additionally monitoring mis- and dis- information by mainstream news outlets. This may open up challenges inherent in scientific collaboration from the perspectives of industry and academia. For instance, a survey in the USA by Poynter revealed how views diverge between journalism educators and journalism professionals. While 75% of journalism educators believed a journalism degree is extremely important in order to understand the values of the profession, only 28% of professionals shared this view (Poynter 2013)[13]. Big-ticket elections in 2019 in the European Union and in India offer a fertile terrain to hone such innovations.

Contributors

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12   Aneez, Z., S. Chattapadhyay, S., Parthasarathi, V., Kleis Nielsen, R. 2017. *Indian news media and the production of news in the age of social discovery*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford and Centre for Intenet and Society, Bangalore, University of Oxford

13   Poynter, 2013: 1

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