DEBUNKING FALSE NEWS

Inside and Outside the Classroom*

VIBODH PARTHASARATHI
ANDREAS MATTSSON

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, believing it *should* be 'the truth' in a context when others don't really care about what is true or false. Admidst the intense use of digital media in the run-up to the Swedish national elections in 2018, right-wing candidates and their supporters have proclaimed themselves 'tellers of the real truth'—an euphemism for tellers of 'alternative facts'. Thus, in the digital politics characterising our times, '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, and Swedish and Indian media scholars and journalism teachers. This diverse group's mission was to monitor the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media during the 2018 Swedish national elections.

The first concern about 'fake' news is the very term—fake. Terming it 'fake' assumes, as in a painting, that 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 that there is no ambiguity about its veracity, at any level.

The more magnanimous define 'fake news' as 'fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent' (Lazer, et al., 2018). Journalists intervene in such debates by emphasising the distinction between reportage that is unverified, and that which is knowingly false. This definitional clarity is crucial as it brings us squarely to the realisation 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 subeditor, 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 because among the top fake-news stories circulated by the mainstream media that year, none concerned party politics (Jawed, 2018). The omnipresence of false news suggests, foremost, that in our times the business of truth seems to have fewer takers than that of falsity. Or to put it another way, the market—the proverbial arbitrator in 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' disregard for the fake news spread by its TV anchors and editors.[1] 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 (Vosoughi, et al., 2018: 1146–51).

Understanding the naiveté of misinformation—i.e., sharing untruth believing it to be true—and the deceit of disinformation—i.e., wilfully 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/disinformation. Despite varying motivations, emphases and methods adopted in such research, there is a broad consensus on falsity being the predominant character marking mis/disinformation—there is simply no semblance of truth to what actually happened or was said in most cases of 'false news'. It is the work of a devious, often even strategic, mindset.

About seven million Swedes were eligible to cast their vote on Sunday, 10 September 2018, less than the population of the city of New Delhi alone. This election was exceedingly important not only within the country, but also across Europe and the rest of 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 remarkably 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 over Sweden Democrats (SD), a party 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 redefinition of the criteria for awarding social welfare caught popular imagination inside and outside Sweden. To cap it all, the party has been championing the cause of a referendum to exit the European Union (EU), the so-called 'Sweexit'—a big concern across the continent, given elections to the European Parliament eight months after the Swedish elections. In fact, the very existence of a polarised political landscape in Sweden surprised many around the globe.

Ever since the last presidential election in the United States, there has been a growing worry worldwide about mis/disinformation, trolls and bots. This concern travelled across and up the Atlantic to Sweden. As in India, in Sweden too social media offers a wide platform for both politics and leisure. 'In the Swedish election, misinformation 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 2014 EU elections, Faktabaari aims to bring accuracy to public discussions, particularly on national and European elections. 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, a problem which the open society must find ways to deal with. Otherwise, there is a big risk that serious news agencies too will lose their creditability.[2] This trend was seen to be acutely enhanced in the run-up to the 2018 national elections. Fingers were pointed 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 this election, and a second-time voter, felt 'extremism is growing because we have the ability to hide behind our screens'.

Journalistic endeavours have striven for ways to monitor unverified and fake reportage, as also more general trends of mis/disinformation online, and not only during elections. This is most commonly reflected in the rapid emergence of fact-checking websites, such as Politifact in the United States, Faktiskt in Sweden, Faktabaari in neighbouring Finland, and Alt News and Fact Checker in India. Their monitoring of news outlets and social media has served as a public barometer, and often as an external corrector, of the fast-expanding market of false news. In terms of their personalities, fact-checking entities vary from crusaders—akin to journalists who wear their politics on their sleeve—to staid civil society groups, to those who waded into it as a commercial venture, akin to the news itself. At present, India seems to have spawned a mixture of these personalities. While Fact Checker is a vertical of a for-profit and largely bipartisan data journalism initiative, Alt News stems from a non-profit initiative and makes no bones about wearing its values on its sleeve.

The typical response time to 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 use of basic search functions to identify pictures before they are distorted, faces before they are morphed, utterances that are altered, and events far in time from those represented. While online, native-digital news sites are among the prime amplifiers of fact-checking initiatives, they sometimes present detailed accounts of the layers of

fact-checking. An apt recent illustration of this was the Alt News report systematically explaining the unravelling of the veracity of a tweet by ANI, India's leading private news agency, an alleged fatwa on the use of nail varnish by Muslim women.[3]

A plethora of fact-checking software for truth on social media and more widely in society has been developed by several of those concerned about the market. Most of these are open tools, downloadable from the Internet like any other 'free' software. Since guarding the market for truth is also somewhat a market, companies too have developed proprietary fact-checking software. 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, such as the eponymous Google News Lab, to familiarise journalists with digital tools to better help them verify the credibility of a source or 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 organisations, and educating users on finding and trusting news. All this suggests that the business of public-interest fact-checking has been rapidly formalised through the creation of international professional networks, organisational collaborations, and an emergent consensus on best practices. Florida-based Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network, set up in September 2015, formulated a code of principles to assess if news is fake,[4] a protocol used, amongst others, by Facebook in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections (Constine, 2016). 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).

The significant innovation across these initiatives is ensuring the process of fact-checking becomes real-time. Real-time fact-checking could impart 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 to elections, tends to have a much shorter shelf life than the market for falsity. This has become the nature of contemporary mediatised electoral politics—or rather mass media-induced mediated mass politics.

A real-time fact-checking endeavour would effectively become like a newsroom capable of debunking hearsay, opinion and 'news' a few minutes after it steals in or escalates on social media. During the 2018 Swedish elections, an international initiative set out to do exactly this: create a 'pop-up' newsroom in Stockholm to track the sources of mis/disinformation outside the mainstream media.[5]

The 'pop-up phenomenon' is itself 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, 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, Stockholm and Lund. Learning to use generic and customised digital tools, these students became the engine of this election-centred pop-up newsroom. They also published a daily newsletter on instances of debunking false news, which 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 pressures marking the business of 'constant news'. Prime among these are 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 the United States are sterling examples of hyper-competitive news landscapes. In June 2017, Fox News replaced its 'Fair and

Balanced' tagline with 'Most Watched, Most Trusted'. In Indian newspapers that have expanded online, the news apps, multimedia desk and audience engagement team pay special attention to Search, a major driver of traffic on their news sites (Aneez, et al., 2016: 30). 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, and particularly to the very virality of false news. 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 pressure of speed constantly, and to stop and verify information taken from social media (Aneez, et al., 2017).

The pop-up initiative to put an end to false news during the Swedish national elections represents a simultaneous innovation in media literacy and journalism pedagogy. This successful debunking of social media rumours could be further amplified by partnering with large, trusted news outlets. However, across countries we have observed that sometimes large and established news outlets are hesitant to partner fact-checking organisations, since it amounts to a tacit admission of flaws in their internal processes of verification and vetting. '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 additional monitoring of mis/disinformation 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 United States by Poynter revealed the divergence of views between journalism educators and journalism professionals. While 75 per cent of journalism educators believed a journalism degree is extremely important in order to understand the values of the profession, only 28 per cent of professionals shared this view (Poynter, 2013: 1; quoted in Heinderyckx, 2014). Big-ticket elections in 2019 in the EU and India offer fertile terrain to hone such innovations.

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NOTES

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4. See https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/.
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