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Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden

Maria Hellman

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book aims to explore the use of disinformation in international broadcasting of an authoritarian state, and asks what the Russian state media's narrative about Sweden is and how it is constructed in news coverage of Sputnik and RT 2019 to 2020. The question is answered by analyses of the projection of strategic narratives about Sweden in these media, and draws on narrative theory and method. Sweden is seen as a particularly suitable case for studying disinformation of Western liberal states by a hostile authoritarian state. The study builds on previous work by Charlotte Wagnsson and Costan Barzanje (2021) who analyzed Sputnik new narratives about Sweden between 2014 and 2018. They extracted six so-called subplots from the coverage and identified three antagonistic strategies for disinformation—suppression, destruction, and direction. This study seeks instead to identify the narratives about Sweden in a later time period and to deconstruct RT and Sputnik narratives in depth to reveal structures and storytelling techniques at the microlevel. By doing so our understanding of the construction of harmful narratives can be enhanced, and distinctions between disinformation by way of international news media and liberal journalism be made manifest.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first three chapters deal with key concepts and previous research about Russian disinformation in order to contextualize the Swedish case study. It is argued that disinformation should be seen as an everyday security practice. This part of the book also introduces the news organizations Sputnik and RT. A methods chapter

presenting framing and narrative analyses is followed by five empirical chapters—one chapter presenting results from the framing analysis and four chapters presenting results from the narrative analyses. The final chapter discusses the resulting master narrative about Sweden and the storytelling techniques identified in the analyses.

This first introductory chapter introduces the main arguments of the book about disinformation as an everyday practice, as well as the research question, which is empirical and seeks to address how Russian disinformation about Sweden is narratively constructed. Chapter 2 introduces the Russian state media organizations RT and Sputnik and describes how RT in particular became an international broadcaster. The chapter also presents the story telling techniques, which are found to be key to the narratives. The final section reviews research on audiences and what is known about the imprints of RT and Sputnik on target audiences. Sweden, it has been argued, has been especially hard hit by Russian disinformation, but it is far from the only country in Europe and North America to have experienced being targeted by disinformation. Chapter 3 examines studies on Russian disinformation directed against countries other than Sweden to put the Swedish case in context. There are significant similarities between the disinformation campaigns targeted at European states and the United States, but also important differences. Most of these studies center on election campaigns and crisis events, such as the downing of Flight MI17 or the so-called Skripal crisis, where a former Russian agent and his daughter living in the United Kingdom were poisoned, but some studies also address everyday disinformation. Chapter 4 outlines the methodologies used in the analyses: narrative analysis and framing analysis. The differences and similarities between the two methods are also discussed.

Chapter 5 is empirical and presents the results of the framing analyses. Framing is useful for systematizing and categorizing larger amounts of material and provides an opportunity to quantify some features to gain an overview and provide guidance on how to approach the in-depth narrative analysis. The empirical findings are thus presented first as a distribution of frames to provide a comprehensive view of how RT and Sputnik depict Sweden. This chapter also serves to provide an overview of the news coverage used for the narrative analysis.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 constitute the core of the empirical study. They outline the results of the narrative analysis. The four main narratives identified are analyzed and presented in greater depth. These chapters seek not merely to present the resulting narratives, but also to demonstrate how they were identified in and defined from the news material. In Chap. 10, the study concludes with a summary of the main findings by way of a master narrative. The storytelling techniques are also further elaborated in relation to the empirical findings. The aim is to show the journalistic style used by the Russian international news media, which distinguishes news considered part of everyday disinformation from news journalism.

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CHAPTER 1

Disinformation as a Security Problem

INTRODUCTION

The European Council announced a ban on the Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik in March 2022, just weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion has cost many thousands of lives, created millions of Ukrainian refugees, and caused enormous material damage, but also increased the disinformation activities of Russia in Ukraine and the rest of Europe. The two Russian state international media organizations, Sputnik and RT, have been pinpointed as key actors. In a press release announcing the ban, the Council of the European Union noted that:

the EU will urgently suspend the broadcasting activities of Sputnik and RT/Russia Today... in the EU or directed at the EU until the aggression to Ukraine is put to an end, and until the Russian Federation and its associated outlets cease to conduct disinformation and information manipulation actions against the EU and its member states. (Council of the European Union, 2022)

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, added that:

Systematic information manipulation and disinformation by the Kremlin is applied as an operational tool in its assault on Ukraine. It is also a significant

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and direct threat to the Union's public order and security. Today, we are taking an important step against Putin's manipulation operation and turning off the tap for Russian state-controlled media in the EU. We have already earlier put sanctions on leadership of RT, including the editor-in-chief Simonyan, and it is only logical to also target the activities the organisations have been conducting within our Union. (Council of the European Union, 2022)

Whereas most scholars of propaganda and disinformation would assert that the international broadcasters are used to further Russian strategic interests, many also argue that, to achieve these aims, Sputnik and RT use their news coverage to spread disinformation in order to inflict harm on Western and European societies. In its justification for the ban, the European Union states that Russia has undertaken what it refers to as "propaganda actions" through various state media outlets, and that "Such actions constitute a significant and direct threat to the Union's public order and security" and "are essential and instrumental in bringing forward and supporting the aggression against Ukraine, and for the destabilization of its neighboring countries". This book argues that such security threats are promoted through everyday disinformation by way of constant and continuous Russian news coverage intended to cause harm. Disinformation should therefore not be conceived as separate campaigns or a sudden crisis limited in time and spurred by critical, dramatic situations. It is an everyday practice that feeds on current political and social events, be they normal or extraordinary, and poses long-term rather than short-term security threats. Everyday disinformation describes a practice in which the stability of a society is shaken, its constitutional pillars are torn down and its legitimacy weakened. Among the tools used to accomplish this are international news media, which are constructed for practices of the everyday and have the capacity to produce harmful narratives as part of their strategic communications.

The reason for the EU ban is the use of disinformation by Russia in its attacks on Ukraine. Within that context, however, the EU includes the threat that RT and Sputnik pose to European states (Council of the European Union, 2022). The EU has since been joined in the blocking of RT and Sputnik by Google, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook (France24, 2022; RFE/RL, 2022).

Although censoring Russian state media outlets is an acute and dramatic measure that cuts to the core of EU norms and principles, scholars of propaganda and disinformation have for many years observed the manipulative and biased coverage of such media in providing international

or foreign audiences with denigrating messages about their own countries (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021; Hoyle et al., 2021; Chatterje-Doodly & Crilley, 2019; Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; Yablokov, 2015). These media are seen as active participants in information warfare, and as connected to Russia's military and security forces with the aim of destabilizing foreign (especially Western) societies by creating mistrust and hostility between the population, the government and state institutions. Moreover, this is an enduring and long-term threat. Official Russian security documents state that information is part of modern conflict (Russian Government, 2014), and recent National Security Strategies, which focus on information wars on a global level, are explicit in their views on information as a tool for national security (Russian Government, 2015; Russian Government, 2016; Russian Government, 2021).

This introductory chapter elaborates further on how disinformation poses a security threat by way of harmful narratives and describes the kinds of security problems disinformation might pose. It also discusses what is meant by disinformation and why the concept provides a useful avenue for exploring Russian activity.

DISINFORMATION AS A SECURITY THREAT

This book is situated at the interface between international relations, security studies, and journalism, media, and communication studies. It takes as its point of departure the notion that disinformation is a security threat to liberal democracies. As information and news reporting have taken on increasingly pertinent roles in security and defense politics, and as soft and sharp power strategies (Glazunova et al., 2022) become an increasingly integral part of national security strategies, use of the media as a weapon to weaken an adversary has come into sharper focus.

Disinformation does not target geographical borders or national sovereignty, but liberal democratic principles such as governance and the rule of law, as well as institutions, elections, and public trust in the government. The damage caused by disinformation therefore results in a weakening of democratic societies from within. It aims to slowly and gradually wear down social and political stability, and resilience. In this sense, it is an existential threat to the democratic nation state, but without militaristic features and without the aspect of surprise that characterizes a military intervention in a foreign country.

This disinformation is carried out by the use of multi-language international news channels that are controlled by the state. These media

organizations thus serve as tools for extending Russian power and influence over other states. In Russia, disinformation is widely perceived as an expression of a zero-sum game where the “insecurity of others makes Russia itself more secure” (Giles, 2019, p. 23, see also Hoyle et al., 2021, p. 2; Szostek, 2020, p. 2729). An information strategy that can achieve this involves constructing dominant discourses or master narratives about the West, and this is done through news journalism (Szostek, 2020, p. 2729).

Different terminology has been used to conceptualize and comprehend this type of threat. Wagnsson (2020) argues that while malign information influencing could be seen as a type of *soft power* in the sense that it is not using military capabilities and aims to “win hearts and minds”, it is different from *soft power* because it is centered on negative views of the target state and aims to denigrate and cause harm. She prefers the concept of *sharp power*, a term coined by Walker to refer to the ability to weaken an enemy by asserting control over its media, academic, publishing, and cultural institutions to inflict damage on them and their production of meaning and knowledge (Walker, 2018, p. 13). Pomerantsev argues that it is about confusing rather than convincing (Pomerantsev, 2015). In other words, it is not about imposing an ideological or political package of ideas on the enemy state, but encouraging doubt and mistrust in existing values and ideas, and in the institutions that maintain them, while also offering critical and skeptical audiences a platform where they can grow and amplify their discontent. In their study, Orttung and Nelson (2019, pp. 77–8) show how Russian disinformation makes use of the audience’s dissatisfaction with domestic media and offers an alternative, while Bennett and Livingstone (2018) highlight how Russian disinformation has gained inroads into target states by way of national media. Others refer to this as *weaponized information*, *information warfare*, or *information-psychological warfare* (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 12 with reference also to Giles, 2016). The latter term stresses the aim of steering not only information flows, but also people’s cognition and mindsets.

The threat therefore concerns people’s exposure to the misrepresentation of facts and to story constructions about the world intended to cause harm to society by twisting the truth, sowing mistrust in public institutions and exposing the negative consequences of societies run by “naïve liberal governments” or “incompetent elites”.

However, disinformation also aims to target deeper democratic competencies and alter people’s relationship with information and facts in

general, as well as their ability to interpret and capacity for critical thinking. It calls on citizens in the target country to mistrust the state, the government, and its institutions, and to be skeptical about all information. It is an attempt to break down faith and trust not just in the nation or the government, but in the very basis of rational and critical thinking, and to make people doubt their own ability to make sense of social reality or play a part in it (see Bjola & Papadakis, 2020, p. 2). Most scholars agree that the security threat that disinformation poses is long term and targets not so much a particular political outcome as a state's capacity for democratic governance. These operations, write Lemke and Habegger (2022), "penetrate the existing networks and erode relations of trust and authority over time...Contemporary [Russian] disinformation does not aim for a powerful political knockout blow. Rather, it is designed to gradually weaken an opponent's social and political mobilization capacity".

The role and significance assigned to international broadcasting in matters of security have undergone various changes in the past decade, especially with regard to Russia. However, the continuity in the use of information for security purposes going back to the Cold War and the Soviet era is worth noting. At that time, it was the Soviet intelligence agencies that were engaged in information operations to weaken the West. This involved leaking false information, spreading false rumors, and creating forgeries with the objective of furthering the Soviet Union's foreign policy goals. According to Rid (2020), present day Russian disinformation is linked historically to what were called active measures during the Cold War, a strategy of causing harm to foreign states by way of disinformation, which sought to erode the political system slowly and gradually in a way that made it difficult to identify or blame external actors. Then as well as now, Rid notes that the Russian strategy was to destabilize and delegitimize foreign political systems.

Just as scholars of propaganda see disinformation as a tool, so Rid argues that disinformation is the way in which active measures continue to be practiced, albeit spurred on by the internet. The internet has brought about changes to active measures by giving new tools to what Rid calls "old-school disinformation professionals" (Rid, 2020, p. 13). According to Rid, the consequences of active measures during the Cold War were similar to today's replacement of fact-based understandings with emotions, and the facilitation of a dichotomization between us and them (Rid, 2020, p. 11).

A further strategy of Soviet propaganda with some bearing on the disinformation of today is reflexive control. Doroshenko and Lukito (2021) explain that:

Reflexive control happens when the controlling actor presents an enemy with information that leads the enemy to a desired decision (Leonenko, 1995)....The chief task of reflexive control is to find and exploit weak links in information assessment during decision making. Russian disinformation strategies are not meant to just present falsehoods and confuse adversaries. Rather, the goal is to spread disinformation that would lead adversaries to make erroneous decisions favoring Russia, the controlling agent. (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021, p. 4665)

This was therefore a method of influencing the target actors' perceptions so that they became aligned with those of the controlling actor, resulting in actions beneficial to Russia (see Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 112, also citing Thomas, 2004). This strategy is similar to the "strategy of direction" discussed by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021), which they see as "a strategy of guiding the other away from an undesired posture, policy or behaviour, towards a preferred one through 'carrots' rather than 'sticks'" (2021, p. 251). Russia makes direction efforts to influence the Other to take a course of action that is advantageous to Russia by means of "tacit inducement" (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021, p. 251). A comparative study of the Nordic states particularly noted the direction of Sputnik coverage of Finland, in which Finland was depicted as a global player as a result of its special relationship with Russia (Deverell et al., 2021, p. 24).

However, there are also alternative views on how to assess Russia's state media and journalism, and the extent to which they deviate from liberal media cultures, as well as whether its journalistic style should be acknowledged as critical of investigative journalism that seeks to scrutinize power structures. The Russian state broadcaster, RT, is a good example of an international media institution that is talked of by some as a public diplomacy channel—or an expression of media globalization similar to the US CNN International—and by others as a weapon of disinformation used in Russia's information war against the West (see Szostek, 2020). Media scholars have until recently regarded RT as a channel that aims to defend national interests, territories, traditions, and identities (Widholm, 2016, p. 196). In this way, it has been argued that RT is similar to other international television channels. It also aims to be a "Russian voice in a global

media landscape”, which provides an alternative view on the world to that of Western broadcasters. However, a major critique of the channel is that it serves Putin’s interests through its propagandistic content (Widholm, 2016, p. 196). Widholm writes about this duality as a propaganda paradox: what is critical journalism to one is propaganda to another. He refers to the slogan “Question more”, launched by the channel in 2010, to stress its aim to challenge Western media (Widholm, 2016, p. 197).

At this time, however, there is little doubt about the antagonistic intentions of Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik. It was the Russian military invasion of Ukraine that led to the drastic censorship measures but the decision to ban the media outlets also highlights the significance the EU and other institutions, including global media platforms, now attribute to the role of disinformation. Media manipulation and disinformation strategies are now labelled “actions [that] constitute a significant and direct threat to the Union’s public order and security” and “essential and instrumental in bringing forward and supporting the aggression against Ukraine, and for the destabilization of its neighboring countries” (European Council statement cited by Cabrera Blazquez, 2022).

HOW DISINFORMATION HAS DENIGRATED SWEDEN

This study asks what disinformation about Sweden from Sputnik and RT looks like. It adopts a narrative approach, which means that I have sought to trace what stories were told and how. The study thus analyzes the narrative logic of the propaganda and disinformation narratives promulgated by Russian state-sponsored media platforms and aims to show how these media have sought to denigrate Sweden. The study builds on previous work by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021), which analyzes Sputnik news coverage about Sweden in 2014–2018. The current study employs the same method and analyzes coverage from July 2019 to January 2021. The news material analyzed also includes a small sample of RT television news and talk shows. Moreover, where the previous study included all news about Sweden during the chosen period, I focus attention on news about climate change, public health, gender, (anti-)liberal values, and culture. This enables me to undertake a more in-depth analysis and demonstrate in greater detail how the stories are constructed and the type of reporting that is being done. In so doing, special attention is paid to a number of different storytelling techniques, notably: (a) the narrative perspective from within (see also Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022); (b) the

instigation of polarization; (c) the overlap of narratives/topics; (d) misuse of key concepts and choice of words to name phenomena, confuse their meanings, use concepts inaccurately, and repetition of concepts with slight variations; (e) mockery by way of “citations”, “the so-called”; and (f) use of experts. These storytelling techniques are presented in Chap. 3 and discussed in Chap. 10 in connection with the harmful narratives identified in the analysis.

The similarities between the findings of the earlier Sputnik study and the present one are striking. Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) found that Sputnik depicted Sweden as a nation in decline with severe domestic problems, most notably regarding immigration and crime, along with increasing polarization between traditionalists and radicals. They identified six subplots that developed over time, starting with what they termed “The Conflict Torn Space” in 2014 which turned out to dominate the coverage over the four years studied. This plot described Sweden as “a polarized society and a state in continuous dispute with the outside world”. It is a plot which might also be used to describe the RT and Sputnik coverage between July 2019 and January 2021. In 2015, plots were added about “the invaded space” and “the unsafe space”, which are also reflected in findings in this current study, along with somewhat updated versions of “The (un)sexy space”, “The decadent space”, and “The ultra-modern space” (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021, p. 244). Wagnsson and Barzanje wrote how:

Sputnik reported in a strictly thematic way, narrating singular events, with no follow-ups, and every piece fitted nicely into one or more of the subplots....This makes Sputnik’s narrative of 2015–2018 appear to be not like traditional news media coverage driven by day-to-day events, but like a calculated campaign that included selective reporting on a number of particular pre-set themes. (2021, pp. 243–244)

The same can be said about the Sputnik and RT coverage in 2019 and 2020. The continuity in the news narratives between the two periods is striking.

A further similarity that is useful to highlight are the intersections between the narratives. Interconnections between narratives reinforce each individual narrative and add to the overall message that Sweden is in decline, experiencing liberal-extremist chaos, and has irresponsible leaders unable to navigate among Islamists, migrants, politicians, and radical

feminists, all of whom at one time or another have threatened to take over the country. Other studies of Russian state media coverage of Sweden have also found that migration and cultural tensions are defined as the cause of Sweden's decline (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019). Islamization and sexual crime have been added to this mix (Colliver et al., 2018, p. 14).

By analyzing the news coverage of Sputnik and RT, I show that narratives about Sweden disseminated to Swedish and English-speaking audiences between July 2019 and January 2021 are the same as those previously found in an earlier period, and set out to demonstrate how they are constructed in greater detail. I suggest storytelling techniques that might help to explain how these narratives were constructed. My analyses focus on news about climate change and the environment, public health, gender, culture (tradition and national heritage), and (anti-)liberalism. These are all areas where Sweden has long been known both domestically and internationally as united and strong, but also areas where I anticipated the Russian state media would seek to find fault and weakness, and to target issues sensitive to Swedish national identity and social stability, possibly giving rise to heated contestation.

The question asked was: What is the Russian state media's narrative about Sweden and how is it constructed? This question is answered by drawing on narrative theory and method. Russian news coverage is explored by identifying and analyzing news narratives for each of the themes. As noted above, there is a striking continuity over time in the narratives of the Sputnik coverage. Where Wagnsson and Barzanje used their six subplots to identify three antagonistic strategies for disinformation, this study instead deconstructs the narratives in depth and seeks to reveal the structures behind them at the microlevel. By doing so, our understanding of how harmful narratives are constructed should be enhanced.

I will now proceed to define the key concept disinformation, explain why it is a suitable concept in this study and how it relates to similar concepts in the field.

CHOICE OF CONCEPT FOR DEFINING THE CONSTRUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES

Harmful narratives serve as the object of study around which this book revolves. Analyzing harmful narratives reveals the processes used by a hostile foreign power to destabilize another state from within. As is shown in

the previous section, however, the terminology for describing these types of processes is not clear cut. The fields of communication studies and security and defence studies use different concepts, some of which stem from the Cold War while others that have gained prominence with the development of social media. What they all have in common, however, is their intention to capture the production and use of news and information for malign or harmful purposes to enhance state interests.

This book uses the term disinformation as its key concept, as defined by Bennett and Livingstone who write that disinformation:

involves the production and dissemination of intentionally distorted information for the purpose of deceiving an audience. Distortion might involve deliberate factual inaccuracies or amplified attention to persons, issues, events, or both. Some disinformation campaigns seek to exacerbate existing social and political fissures by mimicking social protest movements and radicalizing and amplifying their narratives. (Bennett & Livingstone, 2021, p. 35)

This is in line with how the European Commission has defined the types of threat aimed at European states. A 2018 report defines disinformation as including “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (European Commission, 2018, p. 3; De Cok Buning, 2018, p. 3). It also resonates with how various other scholars have talked about the distortion of information (see below).

We define it [disinformation] as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. The risk of harm includes threats to democratic political processes and values, which can specifically target a variety of sectors, such as health, science, education, finance and more. It is driven by the production and promotion of disinformation for economic gains or for political or ideological goals, but can be exacerbated by how different audiences and communities receive, engage, and amplify disinformation. (European Commission, 2018, p. 10)

The field is rich not just in concepts, but also in the meanings that are ascribed to these different concepts. Scholars of disinformation tend to agree with Freelon and Wells’s (2020, p. 145) criteria, where disinformation is considered to be deceptive, and to have the potential for harm and the intent to harm. Disinformation is considered a type of information

influencer. Information influencing, however, can also have benign intent and aim to persuade and convince a political opponent or an electorate of a certain view, ideology, or opinion. The type of information influencing dealt with in this study represents processes with a hostile intent that aim to weaken and undermine democratic systems. Wagnsson (2023a) talks about “malign information influence” to clarify this distinction.

Disinformation is thus a normative concept used to define a threat to democratic societies by way of communication and information flows. Most scholars use it to highlight lies and inaccurate statements, but there is a divide with the understanding of “inaccuracy” and therefore also regarding what disinformation actually entails. For Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), disinformation is understood as messages being intentionally constructed from false accounts aimed to deceive and mislead, or “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country” (2017, p. 21; See also Shu et al., 2020).

This, I argue, is too narrow an understanding of disinformation that creates difficulties in interpreting what is to be considered false. In addition, news stories that present accurate facts and figures, as well as true statements and accounts can also be constructed to distort the message and create incorrect interpretations. This is part of the deception strategies on which harmful news narratives are based. Disinformation is thus used in this study more broadly than merely referring to inaccurate information intended to mislead. The way in which the European Commission defines the concept is in line with such an interpretation, as are Bennett and Livingstone (2021, p. 35) when they write that disinformation also includes how the information is structured and how it is framed (see also Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2021).

DISINFORMATION IN RELATION TO OTHER CONCEPTS

Stringent use of concepts aims to bring clarity to the phenomena they depict. Nonetheless, disinformation must be discussed in relation to other concepts in the field, since disinformation as a concept and phenomenon shares features that overlap with other terms, such as “computational propaganda” (Wolley & Howard, 2018, p. 4), “digital propaganda” (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020), “rewired propaganda” (Oates, 2016) and “malign information influence” (Wagnsson, 2023a).

Fake News

There are also concepts that appear in the literature about information influencing that are unsuitable for a study about Russian disinformation by way of state news media. The concept of fake news is one such term. It has been used in both popular language and academia to denote verifiable falsehoods or fabrications. However, fake news is an inappropriate term for use in the context of this book, since it indicates that the information produced and disseminated in the format of news is false or inaccurate, which is rarely the case. Studies have shown (see Hellman, 2021; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021) that it is more common to find accurate events reported in a biased way that distorts the true meaning of a story or message. If the intended meaning is to refer to intentional inaccuracies or untrue statements, the term misinformation is more appropriate (see below).

Moreover, fake news is a problematic concept because it includes too broad a spectrum of incorrect messaging from honest mistakes by professional journalists to the fabrication of facts with an intention to influence election outcomes and political opinions (see Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 16; see also Tandoc et al., 2017). Fake news at times can also refer to “automated amplification techniques” (European Commission, 2018, p. 10), or the use of bots and other computer-generated data to disseminate massive amounts of information to dominate the media flow and influence populations in a certain direction. Fake news has also been used by politicians to accuse journalists of lying or reporting falsely, in order to undermine trust in the news media and to defend themselves from legitimate criticism. It has become a term used by various politicians to interfere with the “circulation of information and attack and undermine independent news media” (European Commission, 2018, p. 10; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 16; Haigh et al., 2018), and is also understood and used differently by scholars and politicians. Research has shown that people associate fake news with poor journalism or with “partisan political debate” (Nielsen & Graves, 2017), which are topics outside the scope of this study.

There might, however, be exceptional circumstances where the term is appropriate or to be preferred. In a study of the information warfare that preceded the Russian military invasion in Ukraine, Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) found what they refer to as narratives of allegedly fake news on the Russian state media Channel One. They describe the news coverage as fabricated and “a proxy for Russian strategic narratives”. The Channel

One news coverage between 1 December 2012 and 1 February 2015 is compared with the counternarratives produced by the organization StopFake in the same period. Given the appearance in the study of an organization named StopFake, and the fact that the researchers found 30 untrue stories debunked by StopFake in a cohort of around 300 stories, use of the term Fake news is unsurprising and perhaps called for. The authors write that “Fake news often takes the form of propaganda entertainment (kompromat), which is a combination of scandalous material, blame and denunciations, dramatic music and misleading images taken out of context” (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, p. 893 with reference to Oates, 2014). Nonetheless, the term is not appropriate for use here in the broader sense of the word.

Mal-information and Misinformation

Because they are only infrequently used in the scholarly debate, and rarely occur in political discourse in a distinctive way from disinformation, the terms *mal-information* and *misinformation* are also excluded from this study. Mal-information is “genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm” (Shu et al., 2020, pp. 2–3), which Wardle and Derakhshan list as harassment, leaks, and hate speech (2017, p. 5). There is nothing hidden in the exercise of mal-information; nor is it driven by an urge to deceive by tampering with a message’s content. One example of mal-information is when the emails of the then French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron were leaked just before the election day media blackout in France in 2017 (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 21). Malinformation has more similarities with sabotage than disinformation.

In contrast to disinformation, where there is intent to cause harm, misinformation involves unintentional falsehoods, “deceptive messages that may cause harm without the disseminator’s knowledge” (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Shu et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). Bjola and Papadakis (2020, p. 5) make a clear distinction between misinformation and disinformation based on intent. “Disinformation”, they say, “is used for deliberately propagated false information, in opposition to ‘misinformation’ which is unintentionally propagated false information...”. Instances of misinformation might be situations where public figures pass on rumors that are later found to be false. Because the questions explored in this book depart from an understanding of disinformation as a security threat, such unfortunate misunderstandings are beyond the scope of the study.

Propaganda

In contrast to fake news and misinformation, the term propaganda cannot so easily be dismissed. Considering and updating the term has value in that it draws attention to the historical continuity of the strategy of information influencing in security politics, as well as in war and conflict. Digital technology and global security dynamics have brought about major changes to the role of information but the characteristics of propaganda are not all new. Propaganda connects to disinformation and, despite being a concept mainly connected with conflicts of the past such as the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War, our understanding of propaganda has been continuously updated and revised over time (see e.g., Sorrels, 1983 on Soviet Cold War propaganda). The most recent of these attempts to reshape the concept is linked to the development of digital technology and social media. Even if propaganda is not the most appropriate term for the phenomenon of information influence studied in this book, for reasons which are explained below, relevant and significant contributions to the field have been made using variations of that concept and therefore deserve attention.

The works of Lasswell in the 1920s and 1930s are usually taken as the starting point for the history of propaganda as a scholarly subject. In light of the increasing interest in mass society, mass migration, mass communication, mass media, and so on, Lasswell asked how communication might play a part in the exercise of control over populations (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 24 with ref to Lasswell, 1927). According to Benkler et al. (2018), “Propaganda as a field was an application of the modernist commitment to expertise and scientific management, applied to the problem of managing a mass population in time of crisis” (25). In the same vein, Lippman (1922) spoke of the force or persuasion residing in mass communication as the “manufacture of consent”. He argued that it would be a tool made use of by democratic governments and change the nature of governance: “None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise” (Lippman (1922)[1997], p. 158).

Although a lot has changed since Lippman wrote his book, with regard to governance and political calculation, as well as the tools available for creating consent, the approach he takes to propaganda is still useful in that it addresses the issue of persuasion from a relatively neutral position,

acknowledging that it might be used within the confines of democratic principles as well as outside of these for undemocratic or malign purposes to control an emerging mass society. This is a view that has also been proposed by more recent scholars such as Philip Taylor (1992) and Jowett and O'Donnell (2019), who argue that the term propaganda does not in itself delineate any malicious or undermining strategy, but that convincing someone of the strength of one's argument and opinions is in fact a precondition for democracy itself. Taylor (1992) states that: "propaganda is a practical process of persuasion and, as a practical process, it is an inherently neutral concept".

Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) argue that there might be instances where controlling or manipulating a group of people could be beneficial both for the group forced into a belief and the wider public that reaps the consequences of this belief. One such example is the setting up of media institutions to promote liberal democratic values where such media is forbidden; another is when Voice of America sought to manipulate the understanding of US allies and the enemy during World War II. The intention was "to spread the contagion of fear among our enemies, but also to spread the contagion of hope, confidence and determination among our friends" (Shulman, 1997, p. 97 quoted in Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019, p. 11).

The term manufacturing consent was later picked up by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (in 1988), in their now classic book with that very title, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. However, they presented a decidedly critical perspective of the role the media plays, as serving as a propaganda tool for the powerful economic and political interests in society. Their use of the term propaganda is critical of commercial mass media, the concentration of media ownership, the links between elites and the media, and so on, as negative consequences of the neoliberalism that they strongly opposed. Democracy, they argued, is not supported by the mass media, but rather threatened by it (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

The classic propaganda concept differs from that of Herman and Chomsky's in that it focuses not on the neoliberal trends in society as threatening democracy, or on other critical perspectives on how mass media institutions in liberal democratic states are run or interact with political actors. Instead, its key component is persuasion, or even mass persuasion. Whereas Herman and Chomsky were critical of the concentration of media ownership and of the large media conglomerates becoming

major powerholders in the news media sector, and as a consequence gaining considerable political leverage, they were less concerned about the use of media by authoritarian regimes to weaken foreign states.

In their oft-cited book, Jowett and O'Donnell (2019, p. 6) define propaganda as “a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”. This definition supports what in this study is referred to as disinformation in several respects. First, it is deliberate and carefully planned and, as is argued further below, consists of strategic narratives. Jowett and O'Donnell also argue that the strategy involves promoting an ideology, but this might be less relevant today. (This is also further discussed below.) The definition further states that propaganda is systematic, and that it is precise and methodical and therefore different from strategic communication. Later works on propaganda also make this distinction between the use of strategic communication and disinformation, referring to these as tools used for persuasive purposes, whereas propaganda connotes the practice writ large (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). These formulations on shaping perceptions and manipulating cognitions represent perhaps the most important features of not just propaganda, but also disinformation—including engagement in these practices with specific intent. However, whereas the desired intent of the propagandist has tended to be looked at as ideologically driven, with the aim of strengthening the propagandist's relative position of power, this might also be less relevant today. Even if a great power such as Russia is striving to increase its weight internationally, this will not necessarily be done by impregnating target countries with the national conservative ideology of Putinism, and nor is the propagandist nation necessarily hailed in these communications either (Wagnsson, 2023b). Instead, the propagandist appears set on weakening and harming “the Other”.

Like Jowett and O'Donnell (1992), Briant talks about propaganda as “the deliberate manipulation of representations...producing an effect on the audience...that is desired by the propagandist” (Briant, 2014, p. 9). Some authors (Benkler et al., 2018) group together the terms disinformation and propaganda, and define them both as “manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve political ends” (p. 24); others refer to disinformation as a tool used in propaganda (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020). Most often the propagandist is a government or a regime and the propaganda is targeted at a foreign state. However, in recent years the concept has been opened up to include types of actors other than governments as

propagandists with the capacity to disseminate their messages to target audiences. This also means that messages are not necessarily constructed by government agencies, such as information bureaus or intelligence services, but by journalists in state media institutions, while public diplomacy activities have become difficult to distinguish from propaganda and psychological operations (see Szostek, 2020).

Staying with the classic definition of propaganda, various caveats have been added by scholars to take account of the major media developments of recent decades, in particular digital developments. Bjola and Papadakis (2020) thus talk about “digital propaganda”, which they call an umbrella label that includes terms such as *fake news*, *disinformation*, or *post-truth* (p. 4). Digital propaganda is defined as: “the use of digital technologies with the intention to deceive the public through the generation and dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information” (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020, p. 5). Digital propaganda appears almost identical to how Bennett and Livingstone (2021) define disinformation, except that the latter omits the term “digital technologies”. This difference in terminology, however, signals that Bjola and Papadakis (2020) are focused on the impact of the media technologies as well as the information itself. They make a point of distinguishing the “computational dimension”, by which they mean trolls and automated messaging, from the “content dimension” and argue that each requires different means of resilience. Wolley and Howard (2018, p. 4) stress the technological aspects more strongly, using the term “computational propaganda”, and refer in their work to “the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks”. However, by including the term “human curation”, a term which indicates that the production of propaganda is not entirely automated, but managed by human beings, they too think of information influencing as a combination of content and technology.

The role played by technological advances must not be understated. The manipulation of information using digital technology in combination with developments within AI is highly problematic not only because of its capacity to disseminate large amounts of information, the sources of which are impossible to verify or trace, but also because the deceptive messages are difficult to distinguish from true messages, and fabricated persons making statements or producing stories are difficult to distinguish from the accounts of real people (see Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020 on Deepfakes). Although there is general agreement in the field that the importance of

propaganda and disinformation as security measures is dependent on developments in digital technology, the “computational enhancements” that Walker and Ludwig (2017) talk about are not analyzed in this study. Instead, the analysis is centered on the “content dimension”, to use the vocabulary of Bjola and Papadakis (2020).

A further concept is “network propaganda” (Benkler et al., 2018). Here, propaganda is not dismissive of technology but nor is it centered on technology in itself, but instead on the networks and media ecosystems that the technology make possible, understood as “network architecture” (Benkler et al., 2018, pp. 33–34). Their study shows how propagandists make use of the same networks that used to serve as promoters of pluralism and facilitators of democratic participation, and how they use them for disinformation and propaganda. The understanding of the type of information involved, used, and disseminated in these networks is similar to the definitions of Bennett and Livingstone (2021).

Oates (2016) also revises propaganda terminology to conform with the digital age with the term *rewired propaganda*. She argues that the internet has opened up new possibilities for autocratic regimes to strengthen, and rewire, their propaganda as: “a commitment to disinformation and manipulation, when coupled with the affordances of the new digital age, give particular advantages to a repressive regime that can proactively shape the media narrative”. At the same time, however, efforts to control information flows have become more difficult (Oates, 2016, p. 399).

Oates talks about *rewired propaganda* as a “more dynamic conception of how information communication technology changes the media ecology in non-free states” (2016, p. 400). Technology has a bearing on content, she argues, and this in turn has consequences for the media system at large. Although her definition of propaganda is in line with my understanding of disinformation, and also shares a focus on international news coverage as its outlet, her study object is different in that she studies how the domestic media system of the propagandist, in this case Russian system, is affected by the turn to rewired propaganda. Rewired propaganda aims to stress the opportunities that new media technology offers autocratic states. Even if regime control over information has become a lot more problematic with the advent of developments in digital technology, Oates’ point is that the Russian regime has adapted to the new media environment, and that propaganda strategies are integrated with the internet and with social media strategies to maintain dominance over citizens and maintain legitimacy (Oates, 2016, p. 399; Oates 2021).

IN CONCLUSION

The various propaganda-related concepts, updated and revised to capture the dynamics of the current digital world, each have their contribution to make to the field. However, the term propaganda still carries connotations from the Cold War era and before that differ from how Russia and other states engage in disinformation today. The twenty-first century propagandist might still be a state or regime but whereas previously propaganda was produced and disseminated from a ministry or state department, such as for example the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment led by Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany, the information influencing of today is built into the news media ecology. As Wagnsson writes: “actors use new channels and normal media consumption patterns to reach citizens in other societies” (2023a, p. 1850). Propaganda is not the product of a ministry of information or some state bureaucracy, but of media staff working for the state—and at times Western journalists and others employed by the news organization. In other words, “international news outlets can be instrumentalized for geopolitical ends” (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 3).

Nor is today’s information influence enacted through a nationalist discourse glorifying and idealizing the propagandist home nation and political system in contrast to other state systems. The messaging of the Russian regime’s international broadcasting contains few depictions of Russia as popular or special, in contrast or compared to the target country. Instead, the strategy is to weaken and denigrate the target country with depictions of, for example, institutional deficiencies, government incompetence, and domestic conflict. The fact that the information is being produced and disseminated as news media by journalists in newsrooms makes it more difficult to distinguish this type of information from liberal journalism or public diplomacy. Like journalism in liberal democracies, communication is interactive and not linear. Propaganda does not have to be one-way, in a message distributed from a major power holder to a mass audience, but this is often what is associated with the term. This implies that there is a sender that produces information and messages with the intention to weaken the protagonist and strengthen the self, spreading the message to an audience that receives it in accordance with the intention of the sender. This is far from how mediated messages move in today’s fragmented media system, however, where audiences interact with content of their choosing, publish comments, and spread the news in their own networks (Szostek, 2020, p. 2730).

As noted above, Taylor (1992) is critical of the assignment of normative connotations to the concept of propaganda. He rejects the notion that propaganda is equivalent to disinformation and must be seen as a threat to security and liberal democratic systems. He argues that the term could be just as relevant in depictions of the propagation of a strengthened democracy, or freedom of opinion or resistance against anti-democratic forces, and so on. This is also what Wagnsson argues when adding the term *malign* to information influencing. Any well-functioning democracy must have political actors and citizens engaged in information influencing. It is when this turns malign that it becomes a threat.

Yet another reason for using the term disinformation rather than propaganda is that the former term signifies information used not necessarily to spread a denigrating message, but to distort and destroy the distinction between what is true and what is false (Wagnsson, 2023b, p. 651; Hellman, 2021), thereby dissolving trust in any source of information. Whereas propaganda is intended to “manipulate the views and attitudes of the target group in a pre-determined direction” (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020; see also Cull et al., 2003: xix; and Lasswell, 1927), that direction is more difficult to discern today, if it exists at all. A Kremlin insider quoted in Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014, p. 9) says that when the Soviets lied “they took care to prove [that] what they were doing was the ‘truth’”. This is different today: “now no one even tries proving the ‘truth’. You can say anything. Create realities”. Some would argue that direction or ideology has been replaced by the aim of installing disbelief and skepticism in people, to incapacitate them and leave them unable to make sense of the world, imposing on the target audience a sense that their society is lost to chaos (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020, p. 2).

This could be seen as a novel strategy of the use of propaganda but is better spoken of as disinformation. It indicates that the influence is neither primarily about imposing a positive image of the sender country as superior, nor simply about denigrating the target country, but disseminating messages and information in a way that prevents people from making sound interpretations, thinking critically, or trusting public institutions and one another. This is also the type of threat that the European Commission identifies in its report as disinformation.

In contrast to Shu et al. (2020) and Wardle and Derakshan (2017), disinformation in this study does not refer merely to inaccurate information and falsehoods, but also to information being distorted and intentionally constructed to deceive. Messages that are intentionally deceptive,

distorted, or misleading are also considered disinformation even when the separate pieces of information in the messages are accurate. It might be the structure of the messages, or the associations made between pieces of information within the message that give rise to the deceptive meanings. Such messages can be constructed by way of narratives where the format and structure are as important for the meaning making as the separate pieces of information. (Harmful narratives are discussed further in Chap. 3.) Disinformation is also often multilayered and contains statements with a variety of truth claims. Culloty and Suiter (2021, p. 6) argue that this means that making distinctions between true and false is of no importance. Bennett and Livingstone (2018, p. 124) make a similar distinction between disinformation and falsehood, arguing that disinformation is about “strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them”. Simple fact-checking is not sufficient since disinformation cuts deeper into political institutions and democratic values in complex ways.

This study treats disinformation as emanating from interacting nodes in a horizontal network enabled by the internet and with the use of social media, rather than as a hierarchal and vertical top-down structure where messages are produced and disseminated from a single center to a mass audience. Disinformation, digitally disseminated and dressed up as news coverage, would support such an understanding. It is a type of strategic communication that emerges from foreign state establishments, governments, regimes, or elites, targeted at a broad or mass audience. Disinformation flows therefore quickly become part of the news media system, and inform and interact with other nodes and actors in that system. The argument is that agents of disinformation such as the Russian state media contaminate the global news networks with a manipulated and fabricated news format intended for malign purposes.

Disinformation can thus be depicted as flows between nodes interacting more or less intensely and not always predictably, and similar to what Archetti (2018) talks about with regard to narratives with a malign intent. Disinformation is relationally constituted in social space, reflecting, amplifying, or weakening the links between the nodes and taking off in different or similar directions (see Archetti, 2018). She refers to these dynamics as “overlapping reflections in a hall of mirrors”, an image similar to the flows of disinformation, and one that reveals the difficulties of preventing these dynamics from doing harm. Disinformation flows know no borders and domestic groups might intentionally or accidentally amplify a foreign

message intended to harm another society, causing it to bounce against the side of a prism and disseminate its reflection to another node in the media system, and so on and so forth.

To sum up, this book uses the concept of disinformation in order to explore how the Russian state media has sought to weaken and denigrate a European state by way of international news reporting. This means that the study is limited to one dimension of the disinformation processes: the construction of the news narratives that make up the disinformation. Nonetheless, it is essential to state that the premise for the study lies in the understanding of disinformation as undertaken by news media organizations controlled by the Russian state; that disinformation involves distortions of statements and accounts as well as misleading information, which may or may not include inaccuracies, all of which are considered to pose threats to national security; and that, contrary to most understandings of propaganda, the objective is to cause domestic unrest and tension in the target state by instilling doubts about the authenticity of all information and sowing mistrust between citizens and the state.

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CHAPTER 2

The News Media Organizations RT and Sputnik and Their Audiences

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the two Russian state-affiliated news media organizations RT and Sputnik. They are both news media targeting international audiences. The Russian Federation has openly declared in its security doctrines that information is part of its security policy and a number of studies have found RT and Sputnik to be used for information influence activities in line with these doctrines (Wagnsson, 2023; Bradshaw et al., 2022; Russian Government, 2014, 2016, see also Chap. 1). RT began as an international 24/7 channel aimed at reporting about global events from a Russian perspective. Around 2008 the channel dropped its programming on Russian culture and became an outlet for the defense ministry, providing news about foreign countries. Sputnik has never been a public diplomacy outlet. Since its inception in 2014 it has consisted of a growing number of news websites producing news in different languages with an increasing popularity in several African states.

Although Sputnik and RT are media organizations that disseminate news their style of reporting deviates from their liberal journalism counterparts. It is rare that the news reports publish false information, but the messages of the news reports are often distorted. One way of explaining the distinctions between these media engaged in disinformation and liberal journalism is to look at how the news stories are constructed. Following

the presentation of the organisations and journalistic features of RT and Sputnik is therefore a discussion about storytelling techniques that contributes to defining disinformation in news coverage. Among these are for instance how multiple meanings are ascribed to concepts, how polarization between different actors are evoked, or how the veracity of a statement or fact might be questioned by the use of quotation marks or the phrase the so-called.

In a discussion of RT and Sputnik it must be asked who the audience is and what impact the news coverage might have on the audience. These are difficult questions, since statistics on these matters are difficult to verify and research on audience reception is complicated. Nevertheless, previous studies in the field have shown that Sputnik and RT, before being banned in Europe and the United States, were consumed by a variety of people and for the most part as two media among a number of other national and international news media outlets. However, studies have found large numbers of followers of RT on Twitter users even if these users seemed not to engage with RT news content (Crilley et al., 2022). In a Swedish study on the reception of news by Wagnsson (2023) it was found that RT and Sputnik were consumed by about 7% of the population with an overrepresentation of young, men, and supporters of non-parliamentarian parties and the right wing nationalist Sweden Democratic Party. Having studied also to what degree consumers shared their RT and Sputnik news, it makes sense to agree with Wagnsson that the consumers also are co-creators and disseminators of meaning and can “function as suitable vehicles for aiding the messenger in trying to polarize society, undermine democracy and even erode the national security interests of the target” (Wagnsson, 2023, p. 1863)

SPUTNIK AND RT

Founded in 2014, Sputnik was established by the Russian state news agency, *Rossiya Segodnya* (formerly *RIA Novosti*). Like RT, it was set up as a multimedia organization with several different language versions and social media platforms; also like RT, and other broadcasting organizations linked to authoritarian states, Sputnik sees itself as an alternative to established media outlets in the countries it targets (Müller & Schulz, 2021; Audinet, 2021). It comprises numerous news websites addressed to audiences around the world. The Swedish language version of Sputnik lasted only nine months in 2015–2016 (Larsson, 2016), but the French-speaking version has a longer history and is still fairly popular—not so much in

France but among French-speaking African diasporas for whom Sputnik has more content and a wider spread than RT (Limonier, 2019).

In its journalistic style, Sputnik has been described as having a more militant editorial line than RT (Limonier, 2019), but this study treats RT and Sputnik as similar news outlets. As a smaller news organization Sputnik addresses an international audience but customizes its output to the target audience (see storytelling techniques). In most respects Sputnik and RT appear to resemble each other with regard to their use of disinformation.

The broadcaster RT originated from Soviet-era APN—a press agency set up by the Soviet Union Journalists Union, the Soviet Union Writers Union, the Union of Soviet Societies of Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and the Znaniye Society. In 1990, President Mikhail Gorbachev replaced APN with *Information Agency Novosti*, which was in turn replaced just one year later by the Russian Information Agency (RIA *Novosti*), placed under the Press and Information Ministry. It was from this news agency that Russia Today, later renamed RT, was founded.

An oft-cited study (Elsawah & Howard, 2020) reveals RT's organizational behavior through in-depth interviews with staff members and gives a detailed account of the development of RT. At the start, the channel was housed in the same building as RIA *Novosti*, which was Russia's main news agency at the time (Elsawah & Howard, 2020, p. 629). It soon emerged as a state-owned broadcaster and in 2003 Putin appointed Svetlana Mironyuk head of RIA *Novosti* and its sister channel, Russia Today (Finn, 2008). She had good connections with Russian government ministries and the higher echelons of the administration, and managed to acquire capital and support for the network which grew and became increasingly influential. Mironyuk allowed a degree of openness in the programming even if the content of Russia Today contained little politics and mainly consisted of programs on culture, notably places and events that demonstrated the greatness of Russia (Osipova, 2016, pp. 348–349; Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, p. 24).

The first major shift in the profile of the channel came around the time of the Russia–Georgia conflict in 2008. It was argued that this change would enable the channel to reach out to a larger audience, not just people interested in Russia (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, p. 26). The channel dropped its programming on Russian culture and became an outlet for the defense ministry, providing news about foreign countries. Journalists employed at RT at the time have said that this was when the channel began to produce disinformation. The Russian government had

realized that “it could weaponize the channel to serve its political interests” (Elsawah & Howard, 2020, pp. 629–630).

Around this time, RT began to expand and add regional channels that addressed audiences in Arabic (in 2007) and Spanish (in 2009). The regionalized channel RT America was founded in 2010, followed by RT Deutsch and RT UK in 2014, and RT France in 2017. However, the English language RT International remained the channel’s flagship.

In December 2013, Putin unexpectedly replaced Mironyuk with a new editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan, and the media corporation was transformed from *Ria Novosti* to International Information Agency Russia Today. It has been argued that Simonyan had better connections in government while some have suggested that Mironyuk had run into conflicts with representatives of the Kremlin (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, p. 24).

Under Simonyan’s leadership, RT was relaunched and its output became less about Russia and Russian culture, and more about hardcore news with an international focus. Putin supported the rebranding, arguing that: “We wanted to break the monopoly of the Anglo-Saxon mass media in the global flow of information” (see Audinet, 2017). Audinet (2017) argues that Putin reorganized the channel following Russia’s war in Georgia because he saw the mainstream Western media outlets as one-sided. The idea then was to develop RT into an international channel that could provide “a different vision of events”, and to relativize the Western interpretation of events. This was also what was behind the RT slogan “Question more”, which was given further credibility when the channel recruited the US talk show host, Larry King, who in turn attracted a number of high-profile US and British politicians as guests (Richter, 2017, 44p). RT claimed to report what was ignored by mainstream media outlets, and this often involved questioning or challenging authority, be it hegemonic powers or more local powerholders, and adapting its messages according to the audience (see Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, p. 27; Mattelart, 2018). While the transformed channel aimed for a global audience and news coverage to be reckoned with, “a political requirement to broadcast news compatible with the national interest as perceived by the stakeholding state” remained (Audinet, 2017).

By 2017, RT comprised nine versions within its organizational structure, with news websites and broadcasts on YouTube and other platforms. Its budget of well over US\$ 300 million was on a par with the BBC at the time (Richter, 2017; figures from 2015 estimate the budget at US\$

376 million, Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 107 referring to Meduza project 2017). A study of RT YouTube videos (Orttung & Nelson, 2019) found that RT Arabic had the largest output by far of the foreign language RT channels: about a quarter of all videos shown were broadcast on RT Arabic. The Russian channel also had a large output of videos, at about 20% of the total number, whereas the RT flagship—its English language channel—had only 11% of the total number of videos broadcast and RT American just 8% (Orttung & Nelson, 2019, p. 82). The latter differed from the others in that 70% of its programming was on US themes (2019, p. 83).

The changes that RT underwent can be seen as a movement from what most scholars had seen as an international broadcaster used as an outlet for public diplomacy to a media institution increasingly centered on domestic issues and a populist, anti-establishment agenda (see e.g. Widholm, 2016; Yablokov, 2015, p. 305). Coverage of Russia promoted a positive image of the country, its moral righteousness and strength, but Orttung and Nelson (2019, p. 84) found that whenever there was a change in international or national mood on topics related to this positive image of Russia, coverage turned to other topics.

This pattern was applied when Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did not proceed as quickly and smoothly as anticipated. YouTube videos about Ukraine were dropped and replaced by stories on Russian historical war memories (p. 84). Similar RT editorial decisions could be found on its English language flagship regarding Russian involvement in Syria.

Following the 2016 US presidential election, when RT was found to have unlawfully meddled in the campaign by denigrating the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, the channel was labeled a “foreign agent” by the US intelligence services (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017 in Crilley et al., 2022). RT America was permanently closed in March 2022 after one of its major carriers was closed down. The production company behind RT America, T&R Productions, announced the closure as a result of “unforeseen business interruption events” (Darcy, 2022).

France, the UK and Germany have also acted against RT transgressions of media and press regulations. The UK regulatory body, Ofcom, took action on “impartiality breaches”, while in France RT's involvement in the Yellow Vest movement gave rise to legislative proposals to prevent future harmful media interference (Crilley et al., 2022).

In his critical study of the centenary RT project, #1917Live, Hutchings (2020) shows how the network used its negative international reputation

for being an unreliable and scandalous channel for propaganda purposes to promote the channel and its role as a counter-force to the Western hegemonic media sphere. By ascribing to itself pariah status, RT took a self-ironic approach to its reporting of a diverse mix of disruptive, scandalous, and outrageous stories while at the same time denying and affirming the atrocities committed during the Revolution. By presenting views that were highly controversial and non-controversial simultaneously, and allowing its output to float between fact and fiction, and past and present, it became impossible to distinguish truth from fantasy and perhaps humorous coverage from serious reporting. Lenin tweeted jokingly about Stalin's beard. Molotov complained that he missed key moments of the revolution while taking a nap. This "floating" between fact and fiction, as well as its educational ambition, were seen as impressive qualities of the project, which received international awards. RT thus presented itself both as a pioneer in the creation of a new media event, and as the *enfant terrible* among news organizations. In this way, it could not fail to be expected to be anything but horrific, incorrigible, and—to some—objectionable.

At the inception of Russia Today in 2005, the channel recruited young Russians who were fluent in English (Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022, p. 25), British editors and junior British journalists. The foreign recruits were important to the channel since the Russian staff had limited experience in journalism and tended to be linguists or diplomats' children fluent in English (see Bodner et al., 2017). While the editors assisted in the running of the channel, the young journalists worked with their Russian colleagues on writing programs under the leadership of editor-in-chief Simonyan. Among the staff there were also Western journalists who supported the underlying aims and mission of the channel (Elsawah & Howard, 2020, p. 629).

Early on, RT attracted journalists critical of mainstream Western media outlets and ownership, who saw in the channel an independent voice representing alternative views on world politics. Staff members considered themselves to be underdogs revealing information that the Western authorities were trying to keep secret from their citizens. The network has counted supporters among the European and US far-right and far-left but little is known about their role or capacity to disseminate narratives domestically or in their transnational networks through the media ecology. Yablokov writes:

A simultaneous adoption of arguments of left- and right-wing critics of the US gives RT leeway to adapt its narratives in relation to different audiences, thereby expanding its global influence. Moreover, the Kremlin's links to both right- and leftwing intellectuals in Europe and the US supplies RT with a range of public figures ready to justify Russia's policies to foreign audiences. (Yablokov, 2015, p. 306 referring to Orenstein, 2014)

The channel has also taken on the role of an underdog, going against mainstream media outlets, which tend to be owned by profit-making entities and Western dominated. The criticisms levelled at the RT journalists for serving as "Putin's mouthpiece" were used to strengthen the image of truth-seeking, hardworking reporters going against establishments and global elites in the service of ordinary people (see Widholm, 2016). Nonetheless, this positioning of RT by both the network itself and outside observers restricted its ability to perform the tasks it was set up to accomplish. Hutchings (2020) writes about how "RT's pride in its capacity to scandalize the established order, to disrupt the global media equilibrium, conflicts with the broadcaster's aspiration to be accepted within the media professional fold as a serious actor capable of rivalling the BBC or CNN" (Hutchings, 2020, p. 15). This was underlined by the resignations of some of the prominent Western journalists at the network following the shooting down of Flight MH17 and after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, despite being criticized, questioned, and accused by established Western or US media outlets, RT continued to seek out and tell alternative stories about the West and the world. In Yablokov's words, RT "challenges an elitist aspect of American politics through populist ideas vocalized by experts and show hosts" (Yablokov, 2015, p. 307). In a study exploring how journalists working in state-controlled media institutions across the world legitimize or justify their work and deal with state dependency, Wright et al. (2020) identified three legitimizing narratives employed in such media outlets. One of these narratives was termed "exclusionary", which referred to journalists defending what they termed their "truthful" work and contrasting it with "false" state propaganda. RT was referred to by several respondents, notably staff at the Chinese broadcaster CGTN, as a representative of such a channel, and it was claimed that what it produced should not be considered news (Wright et al., 2020, p. 616).

The rich and the powerful are said to manipulate those without means and power, and there is a lack of transparency and openness among elites

that is accepted by the Western media. In its US news coverage for example, RT uses experts and guests who emphasize this and confirm the suspicions that the US authorities manipulate the truth and keep the public in the dark. The establishment is usually represented by the mainstream media, Big Tech—the term used to refer to dominant and highly influential technology companies—celebrities and “Washington elites” (Moore & Colley, 2022).

With the help of these experts and guests, RT repeatedly reports that the US government says one thing but does another (Yablokov, 2015; see also Hellman’s analysis of Sputnik 2021). These experts, however, rarely appear in any other media. In RT America, which was suspended in 2022, it appeared to be a technique to verify these narratives by drawing on historical examples and using US experts and intellectuals already highly critical of the US establishment and whose voices were rarely allowed on mainstream media platforms. Instead, they were given a voice on RT (Yablokov, 2015, p. 309).

STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

As is discussed above, RT and Sputnik as news organizations are similar to other international broadcasters that emerged in the early 2000s with the aim of promoting favorable national images of the reporting country or framing events in accordance with their world view (see Widholm, 2016). They differ in their reporting style from other international broadcasters, however, and over time have come to disseminate news and information that scholars have found go beyond critical perspectives and instead disinform and denigrate foreign countries (Hutchings, 2020; Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019; Elswah & Howard, 2020). To better understand how this news journalism deviates from journalistic norms and practices in liberal democratic systems, a number of strategies are outlined below. These have been inductively identified from the news material and are illustrated further in the empirical chapters. I refer to them as *storytelling techniques*.

Domestication: An International News Channel Reporting as a Domestic News Channel

Despite the fact that both RT and Sputnik are international broadcasters with an outspoken aim to broadcast to a global audience, they adopt an insider perspective in much of their news coverage. This means that the

style of reporting often resembles that of domestic news media. The choice of topics are often domestic events in the target country and stories are presented as if RT and Sputnik were local or national news networks. An analysis by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) found that—apart from at the beginning of their time period, in 2014—Russia rarely appeared in the coverage. They talk about an absence of the “self” that:

makes the reporting look less like traditional foreign coverage and more like distanced and sober descriptions, based on a purportedly universally valid frame of reference that leaves little room for alternative interpretations. Moreover, there is no foreign or evil ‘other’ visible and no easily discernible intent to manipulate the reader, all of which may make the reader more susceptible to accepting the stories uncritically. (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021, p. 245)

The domestic perspective of the coverage is also noted by Moore and Colley (2022) in their comparative study of RT and CGTN (see also Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022; Hellman, 2021; Oates, 2021). They refer to this storytelling technique as “partisan parasite”, and also include in it politically biased reporting, where the channel openly supports a candidate running for office and broadcasts stories to the disadvantage of opponents (p. 18). Based on their analysis of RT coverage of the US presidential election, they describe domestic storytelling as:

parasitic in the sense that it deliberately seeks to imitate a domestic media outlet in another country’s media ecology. It functions like a brood parasite, such as a cuckoo. It enters the home of the host, adopts its character, style and mannerisms, hoping its output will be accepted and adopted as though it were one of the host’s own. (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 18)

The analogy with a cuckoo is also useful in that the domestic reporting style takes advantage of and feeds on national political cultural landmarks, as well as references to traditions and shared historical memories, and features well-known personalities or figures with whom the target audience might identify. This all makes the coverage appear to be taking an inside perspective and reflecting a complete and full understanding of the context of the news event. Moore and Colley argue that this is an efficient way in which to disguise the underlying propaganda purposes since the RT coverage appears similar to a domestic, in their case US, news source. The domestication of the news can be seen in the choice of topics and the

people included in the reports, so that for instance people who are less known internationally but well-known in a US context will feature in the news.

This domestication is accomplished in large part with the use of domestic sources, mainly from national and local news media. The content is translated, edited to varying degrees, and repackaged (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019). There are also examples found in Sputnik of European news coverage where local news articles have been translated and published unedited. The treatment of sources can be connected to the overall journalism, which contains very little reportage in the sense that a journalist has been dispatched to cover an event or carry out observations in the field.

In his study of nine weeks of RT coverage of the war in Ukraine in the summer of 2014, its political tensions and divergences, Widholm (2016) talks about the frequent use of *desk reporting*. This is news produced inside a news room using information from external sources, such as competitor national or international media, press conferences, press releases, and other planned events, none of which require observation in the field or journalists to take the initiative to cover stories based on their own insights or experiences. Because it is dependent on other media sources and political statements, this type of reporting tends to result in a journalism that uses formal language (Widholm, 2016). Widholm shows in his study that 92% of the RT coverage of Ukraine was desk-reporting, but the extent to which the language could be considered formal or official was more questionable and not made clear in the analysis. For a channel seeking to represent an alternative voice to the international news flows with the aim of projecting anti-establishment and sometimes populist values, and an aim to appear trustworthy and serious, an official tone might be counterproductive.

It is somewhat surprising that a channel such as RT, with such large resources at its disposal, should come to rely to such a high degree on other news sources for their news production. The media sources used in RT coverage were found to be a balance of Russian news media and international and Western sources (about 40% each). It is worth noting that one-fifth of the sources used came from social media, and Twitter dominated both text and footage (Widholm, 2016).

The equal share of sources used in the Ukraine case study was linked to how the stories were told but did not result in balanced coverage between differing viewpoints. On the contrary, the news coverage took the form of

oppositional analyses of stories published in Western media or told by US politicians. The RT stories projected “counter-perspectives” in defense of the Russian side. Both texts and visuals from Western sources were used to make clear how the Western news media in cooperation with Ukraine and the US had fabricated images and manipulated the truth, for example of the downing of flight MH17, to make it appear beyond doubt that Russia was to blame. RT referred to the Western reporting as “the latest masterpiece in the Ukrainian exercise in conspiracy theories” and Widholm concludes that this confirmed the view that RT is a political tool of the Kremlin (Widholm, 2016, p. 204). This is in line with what Simonyan—the editor-in-chief of RT since 2005, and *Rossiya Segodnya* (which owns Sputnik) since 2013—has been quoted as saying on numerous occasions.

The Instigation of Polarization

A second storytelling technique concerns journalistic work intended to instigate polarization, that is, reporting on events and situations in a way that is likely to provoke or to stress irreconcilable differences between groups and the opinions or values they represent. This is done by using strong language in the reports, framing problems as emotionally charged and projecting people expressing strong feelings. Storytelling that fuels polarization is also made easier by these media outlets choosing to report on contested and sensitive topics in the target countries. This is shown by the analyses of Cushman and Avramov (2021) of what they term “Kremlin-sponsored political warfare” with reference “to sexuality and gender-based narratives in Russian and pro-Russian disinformation campaigns targeting EU and EU aspiring members”. In their analyses of the EU versus Disinfo database—an EU-run database that monitors disinformation news and writes counter-stories—they show how sexuality and gender-based disinformation narratives are used to instigate basic emotions such as fear, anger, confusion, and disgust. The image of a promiscuous and decadent West is contrasted with Russia, which is talked of as a defender of traditional and Christian values (Cushman & Avramov, 2021, pp. 145–146). The use of visuals is a key part of this storytelling technique, especially since visuals have been shown to stir emotions and reinforce the audience’s sensemaking of or attraction to text or the spoken word (see e.g. Grigor (Khalдарova) & Pantti, 2021; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; also focusing on humor Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2021).

It should be noted that storytelling to induce polarization can be achieved by depicting both sides of an issue negatively, undermining each side's claims so that both are diminished or delegitimized. Bradshaw et al. (2022) talk about this as playing both sides. They write:

This strategy of playing both sides of an issue and creating or amplifying content designed to increase existing tensions appeared across a range of topics: funding for veterans versus support for refugees; pro- versus anti-police; pro- versus anti-immigration; Muslim pride on one page, anti-Muslim themes on another; pro-LGBT content on one Instagram account, traditional religious perspectives on another. (Bradshaw et al., 2022, p. 5, referring to Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2018; Riedel et al., 2021; US Department of Justice, 2018)

The Overlap of Narratives

Journalism is a practice that not only talks about events, but also aims to contextualize those events so they make sense and take on meaning. One way that this might be done is to relate stories to other recently reported events, topical issues or familiar narratives. However, this can also be used more strategically to influence audiences to make associations and connections between issues and problems, and solutions and responsibilities, which creates an impression of impending chaos and social disorder, and most importantly identifies scapegoats and designates blame to certain groups in society. The overlap between narratives might be made explicit or implicit, leaving more or less room for the audience to fill in the blanks and make sense of the content. This type of storytelling stresses dichotomies, as well as representations of a hostile other and of helpless victims. A news story narrated as a crime can for example be linked to a news narrative about immigration. A story about a shortage of women police officers might be contextualized by background facts about increased gang violence in the suburbs.

Misuse of or Giving Multiple Meanings to Key Concepts

Storytelling in which the use of concepts and terms to describe phenomena is inconsistent and unclear makes news stories subtly confusing. This can also be achieved by the journalist repeating concepts but assigning slight variations to their meaning or putting together quotes from experts

talking about related but not identical terms but drawing conclusions from them as if they were the same. The significance of key concepts varies depending on the topic but, for instance, the lack of precision is most obvious in medical reports or news based on official reports or scientific facts. This is a subtle storytelling technique that makes it difficult to demonstrate and assess.

Mockery by Way of “Citations” and the Expression “The So-called”

Mockery, humor, and satire have been found in several studies of RT in particular. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2021) talk about the blurring of news reporting and comedy, and argue that RT has a reporting style that uses humor and satire to legitimize Russian foreign policy (p. 269). They talk about an RT “locker room humor” (see also Moore & Colley, 2022). This attitude and tone of voice have been useful for RT to, as Hutchings (2020) writes, confront its “pariah status”, and is in line with an overall attitude of being the enfant terrible of the news media market and maintaining a distance from the mainstream media.

However, humor and satire can also infer a feeling of doubt and uncertainty, and give the impression that the world is an odd place where false cannot be distinguished from true, and where humor is a way for people to deal with these uncertainties. Humor as a storytelling technique can be explained as way to attract audiences, while satire is used to express anti-establishment sentiments and skepticism of democracy. Satire, write Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2021, p. 272 with reference to Stott, 2014, pp. 152–163), is “a form of humour that traditionally follows a bottom-up principle in which injustices are laid bare in ways that contest the positions of the powerful”, in other words “a tool of the powerless used to critique the powerful”. Mockery and satire can thus serve to strengthen the dichotomization between the people and the elite, and demonstrate an alignment between the broadcaster and the people. By siding with the audience, the broadcaster shows its support for the public and relates to the elite with suspicion and disbelief—and as deserving of mockery.

Mockery by way of citation and the oft-used term “the so-called” are storytelling techniques that do not add humor to the news coverage, but sow doubt. Formulations used by interviewees, public figures, experts or spokespersons are at times assigned epithets surrounded by quotation marks as if the channel is distancing itself from them or handing over responsibility for formulation to the individual. Herd immunity is a typical

example of this. Quotation marks were also used for terms and choices of words used by people referred to in the articles, instead of quoting a whole statement or a sentence from a statement. An ordinary word set in quotation marks is thus given a value-laden meaning that might give the impression that it is contested, while an unusual expression with little context given but set in quotation marks might signal irony or be seen as representing an oddity. Sweden's feminist foreign policy is an example of a term that was most often set in quotation marks when it appeared in the news. In a story on a Pride festival, the terms secular Muslim and Rainbow Muslims were said by an expert to be unique. The term Rainbow Muslims was put in quotes.

Added to this, the term "the so-called" is used to give the impression that nothing that is said or done can be trusted, or that sensemaking is contested and not generally shared. It labels a phenomenon, a strategy or an event in a way that makes it questionable or with the aim of hiding its true nature.

Use of Experts

The storytelling technique involving use of experts is not unique to authoritarian state-affiliated news media. On the contrary, it is part of the foundations of journalism to disseminate knowledge and information based on experts' insights that give credibility and weight to the news content. However, just as experts can be used to affirm arguments and facts, increase reliability and deepen understanding, they can also be exploited to aggravate disagreements, polarize debates, and amplify uncertainties about facts and knowledge, and question what it is possible to know. There have been cases where experts appearing on RT or Sputnik were misquoted or misrepresented. The role experts are made to play in the coverage and how they are defined and fit into the news narrative therefore illustrate the fine line between journalism and disinformation.

THE AUDIENCES FOR RT AND SPUTNIK

RT and Sputnik: Who Is Reading and Watching?

Audience research in media studies has gained increased attention in the past decade, but is still an under-researched area. Studying audiences' reception of mediated messages from meaning making to opinion

formation and dissemination, and then political or social action is highly complex. It is demanding in terms of time and resources, and studies are difficult to design. Audience interactivity, through comment fields, chat groups, tweets, and so on, has made audience views more accessible, but only a limited strata of news consumers actively engages with the content using these tools. Other sampling and analytical methods are needed to capture representative samples of audience reception of media content. Significant developments have been made in the field, however, as attention is paid to diverse and fragmented audiences, the meaning making of producers and consumers, engagement and disengagement, and interactivity between news producers and consumers.

It is no longer taken for granted in research or among policymakers and practitioners that audiences are homogenous in their reception of messages, or that the messages necessarily take on the meaning intended by the news producer. Interactivity between news program maker and news consumer is not just about the former receiving responses on news output from the latter. It also includes the news consumer in the making of news. This might be an especially salient aspect of news production used for the dissemination of strategic narratives and disinformation, where the intent is to influence the target audience to see the flaws and dysfunction of their own society, and to encourage that audience to question and doubt the political system in their home country. The broadcaster might produce news on contentious and critical issues, narrated in harmful ways, to invite vocal responses from the audience by way of tweets, Instagram posts, and comments on the media's website. These might in turn generate more news coverage that fuels tensions even further, resulting in an increasingly aggressive and negative spiral of news coverage. The audience responses, including those critical of the original story broadcast by the news channel, become the driving force of the story and contribute to its infectious and emotionally charged content. In this sense, audiences for disinformation, or to use Wagnsson's term "consumers of malign information influence", become co-creators and disseminators of meaning, and can "function as suitable vehicles for aiding the messenger in trying to polarize society, undermine democracy and even erode the national security interests of the target" (Wagnsson, 2023, p. 1863)

RT and Sputnik are both global news channels with audiences all over the world. The RT YouTube channel is often talked of as a highly successful platform, thought to be the first such channel to reach one billion views, having gained popularity with its eyewitness reports of catastrophes

and disasters (Crilley et al., 2022, p. 223). At the same time, politically and ideologically driven content has made up only a small proportion of these reports (1% of RT's YouTube content) (Crilley et al., 2022; see also Mickiewicz, 2018), and it is on the news sites and in news broadcasting that these topics appear. Taken together, the popularity of RT and Sputnik is often talked of as a result of their digital presence. Even though RT has long been a widespread international broadcast news channel, its television audience numbers outside of Russia have never been very high compared to other international broadcasters such as CNN International and BBC World. RT and Sputnik seem instead to cater to niche audiences in Western countries and elsewhere.

RT and Sputnik audience figures should be treated with caution, not only because official statistics might be unreliable, but also because of the numerous outlets to consider and the different ways that are used to define and measure audiences. There are also reasons to be cautious in assessing popularity and spread by way of the resources spent by RT and Sputnik or the amount of news programming that they offer. With regard to RT's YouTube videos, Orttung and Nelson (2019, p. 85) show that the RT Arabic version made about a quarter of the total number of YouTube videos, but had an audience share of only 16%. The RT flagship by contrast displayed the opposite relationship, with 12% of output and an audience share of 31% (p. 85). Attracting the attention of an Arabic audience thus proved more difficult for RT than appealing to English, Spanish or Russian speakers.

Moreover, when describing the RT and Sputnik audiences, there are reasons to keep users and consumers of the different outlets separate. Studies on Twitter followers show huge numbers of users (Orttung & Nelson, 2019; Crilley et al., 2022), but their motivations for following RT and Sputnik or their reception of the tweets must not be equated with what motivates RT and Sputnik readers. Based on their analysis, Crilley et al. (2022) argue that "RT Twitter followers rarely engage with RT content" (p. 222).

A large quantitative study of the number of views of RT and Sputnik official websites and mobile apps investigated audience reach in 21 countries between October and December 2021. The study found that the audience for the official websites and the mobile app was below 5% of the digital population of the respective countries (Kling et al., 2022, p. 1). The numbers were thus considerably lower than the number of social media users found in studies of social networking sites, including for

example Twitter feeds and YouTube videos (Orttung & Nelson, 2019). Even if the size of the RT and Sputnik audiences is relatively low, however, they still amounted to millions of European news consumers.

Taken together these different categories of users and consumers could shed some light on the attraction of RT and Sputnik as news organizations, how they function as nodes in news networks and how information and news from RT and Sputnik spread. If we are interested in learning about audiences' news intake, sense making or reasons for choosing to consume news from these channels, however, it is more fruitful to look at reception of news content. Drawing on previous studies by Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019) and Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020, 2021), Crilley et al. (2022, p. 225) write that Twitter followers are not equivalent to a traditional broadcasting audience, or even to the engaged "active" audiences that comment on YouTube videos. Indeed, a user might follow an account but never engage with it at all—and simply forget to unfollow it (see also Marwick, 2018).

Asking who the audiences of RT and Sputnik are Wagnsson (2023) found that RT/Sputnik consumers were predominantly male. Three out of four consumers were male (see also Kling et al., 2022), that RT and Sputnik were only two accounts among many international news media (and world leaders') accounts that they followed, and that the followers constituted a heterogenous population. With regard to age, Wagnsson (2023) and Orttung and Nelson (2019) found that younger males aged 18–29 were slightly overrepresented. In the Swedish study, 13% of young men consumed RT/Sputnik, compared to 7% of all Swedes. Orttung and Nelson (2019), studying RT's YouTube audience, also found in their study that young men with a higher education appeared to be the most frequent consumers. Like Wagnsson, they concluded that this audience group tended more than other consumers to interact with the comments on stories and share news through links and reposts. In contrast, Kling et al. (2022, p. 3) found that men in the older age groups were substantially more likely to be Sputnik/RT consumers (see also Crilley et al., 2022).

Acknowledging the difficulties in identifying and categorizing RT and Sputnik audiences, it nonetheless seems that they tend to be dominated by male consumers who engage with international news and include RT and Sputnik in their news menu along with established international news media such as BBC World and CNN International. According to Kling et al. (2022), comparisons of RT consumers across countries find significant national differences. Finland, Ireland, and Italy had an audience

website/app reach of less than 1% in the months prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and enforcement of the EU ban. This contrasts with Spain (RT 3.94%, Sputnik: 2.63%), Germany (RT: 3.18%), and France (RT 2.32%).

Wagnsson (2023) also found that Swedish RT and Sputnik consumers shared all kinds of news on social media to a somewhat greater extent than non-consumers (although it was rare that they reported sharing RT/Sputnik news content), and that they tended to sympathize with nationalist and conservative political views. RT/Sputnik consumers were both more media savvy and more skeptical of established or mainstream media than non-consumers of these media. The respondents appreciated the content and shared it on social media, and 40% said they consumed for “pleasure” when asked about their motivation, while 31% argued the content of news was a reason to consume RT/Sputnik. It is worth noting that despite their skepticism towards established media, they found public service broadcasting and Swedish journalists more trustworthy than Sputnik and RT (Wagnsson, 2023).

The results also show that consumers of RT and Sputnik tend to be overrepresented in sympathizers with non-parliamentary parties and in supporters of the Swedish far-right Sweden Democratic party. At the same time, it should be stressed that RT/Sputnik consumers were found among supporters of all political parties. In comparison to the group of non-consumers, the consumers showed a lower level of trust in politicians, institutions, news, and journalism more generally. This did not prevent them from sharing untrue or unreliable news content through their social media networks, however, including a group of news consumers who engaged with the content even when they suspected it to be untrue.

Based on these findings, Wagnsson states that RT/Sputnik audiences were found to have more so-called identity grievances, meaning negative feelings related to an individual’s sense of identity-based injustices, which can yield conflicts between people holding different identities. Although there were indications that non-consumers of RT/Sputnik also held identity grievances, such as “Sweden has gone too far with regard to feminist politics” or “Sweden should do more to promote traditional values and traditions”, these were significantly more common among consumers. Wagnsson concludes:

the findings exposed that consumers align with RT/Sputnik messaging on identity grievance issues and national security issues more than non-consumers do. They hold the potential to function as megaphones of Russian messaging in Sweden, whether intentionally or not. (Wagnsson, 2023, p. 1863)

It might be assumed that the size of the audience would be reflected in the amount of resources and program output produced by the media organization, but this seems not to hold true in the case of RT. The varying sizes of the audiences for RT in different countries and parts of the world have not been found to correlate with the amount of news output of the RT channel producing news in that country or region. Orttung and Nelson (2019) studied mainly news videos and found a divergence between the number of YouTube videos produced and aired on RT and the size of the audience watching the videos. Despite the considerable amount of news, talk shows, and documentaries on the English-speaking channels, for example, RT has not succeeded in attracting large Anglo-US or Western audiences. The number of viewers fluctuates and seems to coincide with Russian engagements abroad, such that audience numbers rose when Russia launched its military activities in Syria (September 2015) and during the US presidential campaign in 2016. The situation has been different in Africa and in Latin America, where fewer resources spent on news production have not prevented a steadily growing audience (Orttung & Nelson, 2019). Overall, studies have shown that RT (and to some extent also Sputnik) has gained greater popularity in the Arab, South American, and African worlds than in Europe and North America. Limonier shows in his study that French-speaking Sputnik has larger audiences in African than in hexagonal France (Limonier, 2019).

This discrepancy is most significant with regard to RT's Arabic broadcasting, where a high number of videos broadcast (26% of the total number of broadcast videos in the sample) was matched with a lower proportion of views (16% of the total number of RT video views). The opposite relationship was found with the RT Flagship, which had a small share of the total number of videos (11%) but a large portion of the total number of views (31%). The number of people watching RT YouTube videos was found to fluctuate depending on breaking news or dramatic events, especially when these involved Russia, creating so-called rally effects or momentary peaks in viewer numbers, quickly followed by low numbers of viewers (Orttung & Nelson, 2019).

The short shelf life of RT videos forces RT editors to constantly scramble to find new material to attract attention to its message. As Syria receded from the headlines, RT flagship and the other stations turned more of their attention to the various crises in Europe, particularly the immigration problems caused in part by fighting in Syria in the early part of 2016. With the UK Brexit vote in June 2016, attention on Europe reached a peak. The US election then became a focus, with Wikileaks releasing Democratic Party e-mails in July and the voting in November 2016. (Orttung & Nelson, 2019, p. 84)

Previous research has found that, despite their large resources and plentiful news coverage, political programming, and talk shows, RT and Sputnik have relatively small audiences in the West. However, there is a lot more to reception than audience size, particularly as RT and Sputnik are sometimes regarded as addressing niche audiences. As noted above, studies have shown that RT and Sputnik news consumers appreciate the content and share it on social media (Wagnsson, 2023; Wagnsson et al., 2023).

*Alignments Between RT and Sputnik News, and Audiences’
Opinions and World Views and Motivations for Consumption*

While studies have highlighted similarities in the news discourses of Sputnik/RT in targeted countries, for example with regard to depictions of right wing candidates in national elections and other types of imprints in domestic debates (Jamieson, 2016; Elshehawy et al., 2021), few have been able to discern whether the Russian state media news coverage succeeds in shaping public opinion, ideological outlooks or voting behavior in another country. In their experimental study of audience reception of RT in the US, however, Carter and Carter (2021) show how RT coverage of foreign policy issues influences viewers’ opinions. The same effect was not seen with regard to the domestic news topics included in the study. They write: “Exposure to RT, we find, induces respondents to support America withdrawing from its role as a cooperative global leader by 10–20 percentage points” (p. 49), a point pushed by RT in the news pieces to which the respondents were exposed. Knowing that the news emanated from a news outlet connected with the Russian government did not change the responses. Carter and Carter (2021) conclude that their study finds “no evidence that RT undermines trust in democratic institutions or changes domestic political opinions” (Carter & Carter, 2021, p. 53), but that it does shape opinions on foreign policy: “Our central theoretical

argument is that beliefs about foreign affairs are more susceptible to outward-facing propaganda than beliefs about domestic politics” (Carter & Carter, 2021, p. 58).

Audiences’ disregard of the source of information has also been found in a study by Fisher (2020), which analyzed the influence of Russian international broadcasting (RT) on US audiences. In an experimental online survey conducted in 2016, Fisher asked whether the audience’s knowledge that a mediated message came from a foreign government made any difference to the opinion formation of that audience in regard to the coverage they were presented with (p. 281). The article chosen for the experiment was a news story on Ukrainian human rights violations. It was representative of the coverage about Ukraine in which RT has depicted the Russian government as defending humanitarian interests and state sovereignty. Of the 895 participants in the study, the average age was 38 and there was an almost equal number of women and men; 55% of the participants had at least a college degree (p. 286). The participants were divided into four groups and given different information about the source, ranging from one group having no information to a fourth group being told what the source was and its known intentions (Fisher, 2020, p. 286). The results showed that the fact that the information came from a Russian state-affiliated news outlet did not seem to affect the way in which the content was perceived (Fisher, 2020, p. 287). The fourth group of participants was found to have as many negative attitudes to Ukraine as the group that lacked any information about the source. It did not matter if the audience knew the information came from Russian state media. This still did not lead them to question the views or opinions presented. Fisher concluded that revealing the source of the information as a countermeasure against disinformation might not have the desired effect, especially for audiences with little prior knowledge of the topic.

Fisher writes:

What this means in practice is that making the source of foreign information apparent is an important counter-propaganda strategy, but it may only be effective on a limited audience with sufficient prior knowledge about the topic. Individuals with lower levels of prior knowledge about Ukraine are actually more likely to adopt less favorable attitudes toward Ukraine when presented with more information about the Russian network. (Fisher, 2020, p. 289)

In their study, Lemke and Habegger (2022) were interested in the role reporting style plays in the reception and impact of RT and Sputnik news. Focusing on the French presidential election campaign of 2017 and its aftermath, they compare RT and Sputnik Twitter feeds to a network of Twitter accounts that are interested in French politics. In their search for overlaps between the Russian state media tweets and the other Twitter group, they found that the Kremlin-linked outlets were active in local networks, and that themes such as Islamophobia, chaos in Western societies, Euroscepticism, alleged alliances between corrupt elites and immigrants, and “Russia as a responsible international player” were given prominence (Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 21). Their findings indicate that RT and Sputnik know how to address their audiences in order to incite a flow on Twitter networks beyond their immediate realm. However, the design of the study did not enable them to assess whether or how French audiences were influenced in their voting behavior as a result of these flows. What they could see was how the user panel’s tweets aligned with tweets from Sputnik and RT.

The study also found links between the Russian state media Twitter feeds and the far-right, including both parties and individuals, which indicates that the far-right is used as an inroad to domestic politics in Western democracies and their networks (Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 21; see also Badawy et al., 2019).

In one of the few in-depth qualitative analyses of RT and Sputnik audiences, Wagnsson et al. (2023) asked Swedish consumers, as representatives of citizens of democratic countries, about their motivations for consuming the content of international propaganda outlets. Based on responses from interviews with 43 Swedish RT and Sputnik consumers—selected using an assessment survey by a well-established Swedish analysis and research agency, Novus, from their Sweden Panel—four profiles were inductively identified: *distant observers*, *reluctant consumers*, *media nihilists*, and *establishment critics*. These profiles, or ideal types, demonstrated that audiences might consume RT and Sputnik for very different reasons. In line with the findings of an interview study by Schwarzenegger (2023) with users of German alternative media, including RT and Sputnik, and several quantitative studies, the Swedish study concluded that the audience is fragmented and diversified.

In addition, the close readings of the respondent’s explanations also give an idea of what these different approaches might be. The distant observers consume RT and Sputnik because they think it is important to

know what other people are reading and what alternative media outlets publish, not because their own views are confirmed. Some members of this group expressed resentment and fright of these type of media (Wagnsson et al., 2023, pp. 15–16). The reluctant consumers are, as the label indicates, skeptical of the reliability of these media, but they turn to them because they deliver specific types of news not found elsewhere and they are easily accessible. The media nihilists are critical of all media without distinction, and as a consequence their consumption patterns include a broad spectrum of media types. Some media nihilists are balanced in their view and argue that it is only natural that different media promote different interests and therefore present biased news coverage; others present stronger negative resentments. However, they all claim that to be accurately informed calls for consumption of all available news. Finally, the establishment critics represent the group with the strongest critique of established media, which they find to be biased, corrupt, and too politically correct. They express strong preferences for alternative media (Wagnsson, 2023, p. 18).

Another aspect of understanding the appeal of RT and Sputnik was explored in the same study by asking to what extent the consumers align ideologically with the channel's messaging. The distribution of opinions was found to fall into three main segments. Of these, one was found to align with the RT and Sputnik messaging, the Anti-Woke, and one to directly oppose it, the Progressive Wokes. A third segment, the Confident Pragmatists, shared views with both Wokes (Wagnsson et al., 2023, p. 19). Wagnsson et al. (2023, p. 19) write that:

Interestingly, those who most strongly agreed with the ideas projected—the Anti-Woke—were also those who most strongly admonished the outlets as muddying the information space, showing that while there is a high degree of ideological overlap, they are not uncritical followers of the outlets.

The results confirm what other studies have shown: that RT/Sputnik audiences have different reasons for their consumption and that among these are people who find support for their own views as well as people who disagree. For some, these media are only part of a larger number of news channels in their daily or weekly news repertoire that provides them with alternative topics and ideologies. For others, these media are consumed because they are part of the alternative media and represent anti-establishment perspectives.

However, other studies have found stronger affiliations between “Anti-Woke” type consumers and RT and Sputnik. Anti-establishment appeal was found to be the main reason why the French protest movement, the Yellow vest activists, were more positive about RT and Sputnik than they were about the mainstream French media. Both left- and right-wing sympathizers consumed RT and Sputnik news about the demonstrations. Twitter seemed to be the vehicle where news and information were being transmitted, while Facebook played a greater role in the construction of the messages. The study found strong mistrust among the French for the media, and that many people see the media as part of the establishment and as no longer representing the interests of the people. This was also why they turned to RT and Sputnik, especially when it came to coverage of a demonstration targeting the elites and those with political and economic power (Gérard et al., 2020).

IN SUM

The need to understand more about the news output of the Sputnik news website and RT television output, which is what this book propounds, is not based only on the size of the audience, which in itself is difficult to measure. The significance of the messaging and the underlying claim that these media intend to cause harm are related to more complex processes. Their malign influence is perhaps more connected to their harmful narratives and long-term everyday influence on the global news media. It should also be noted when looking at studies of Twitter flows and their interlinkages between RT/Sputnik and domestic networks that the different platforms are linked. RT and Sputnik might have an indirect influence on fueling or supporting certain sentiments, ideas, and views in domestic news networks to which they link up and which have a wider spread or a considerable impact on a country’s politics and social life.

Moreover, the ban on RT and Sputnik by the EU and the closure of RT America do not mean the end of outreach by these media. Both are still producing and disseminating news in other parts of the world. In Europe, audiences may have diminished in number (Eurobarometer, 2023) but there are still viewers and readers who circumvent the ban and have continued to consume Sputnik and RT with the help of technology (Timmermann, 2022).

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CHAPTER 3

Everyday Disinformation: RT and Sputnik News Coverage

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that developments in media technologies involving digitalization and social media networks and platforms have increased the capacity not only for the free flow of information and transnational interconnectedness, but also for surveillance by authoritarian regimes and for disinformation. It is for this reason that the concept of propaganda, discussed in Chap. 1, has been reworked and revised by scholars. This chapter takes as its point of departure aspects of the media developments that have enabled the practice of digital disinformation. It then moves on to introduce the concept of *everyday disinformation* as a way to explain Russian disinformation in its current form.

The chapter provides a context in which study of the Swedish case can be placed and understood. Sweden has been heavily targeted by disinformation by way of Russian state media and news coverage, but so have a number of other European states, as well as states in North America, Africa, and elsewhere. With a focus on RT and Sputnik, the chapter reviews previous research findings on Russian disinformation against Western and African states, and presents the national images cultivated by the Russian international news media outlets.

DISINFORMATION AND DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS

Since the 1980s, the media industry has undergone dramatic upheavals in its business models and technologies. The rise of digital platforms has changed the relationship between information producers and consumers, especially in the fields of news production and journalism. An intensified interactivity between journalists and their audiences has brought about citizen journalism (Allan, 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013; Cottle, 2014), in that citizens have become participants in and producers of news, blurring the boundaries between professional journalists and citizen content and production of news stories, often referred to as user-generated content (UGC). Easy access to amateur footage enabled by mobile phones and low cost, easy and fast distribution have inundated news media outlets with images and visual material. Where journalists used to search for footage, they now spend more time selecting and verifying images.

Such changes in the production and consumption of news have given rise to global networks and a multitude of news media platforms. The dissemination of news is more diverse and the mass media (from one to many) and multicasting now compete for attention with narrowcasting in an increasingly fragmented media market. Distinctions between the *new media* in contrast to *old media*, the traditional media outlets of broadcasting and print, have dissolved since almost all established media institutions produce news for a number of different platforms simultaneously (Chadwick, 2017). Newspaper journalists do stand-ups in web-television newscasts and links to articles are made accessible through apps. News stories are shared between users of social media networks, which has further diversified media consumption patterns. It is also truer than ever before that such mediated messages and narratives, whether broadcast to a mass audience or shared in Facebook groups, know no national boundaries. Oates et al. (2021) for example found collaboration between the right-wing US Fox news and RT, and that the sympathies between these news organizations are stronger than between US Democrats and Republicans—an interconnection which might have been unexpected only a few decades ago.

These developments in news journalism in Western liberal societies have not been without their critics, and journalists as well as scholars have highlighted a decline in professional journalism, as well as diminishing resources in news organizations which has caused news media outlets to

cut down on their foreign coverage or close it down altogether. With the advent of the internet, advertising revenues for old media organizations fell, and audiences and readerships diversified their news consumption, diminishing the audience for established news media (McChesney, 2013; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Benson, 2018). Furthermore, the increase in transparency meant that the difficulties of doing politics behind closed doors greatly damaged diplomacy, a situation exacerbated by harmful leaks of sensitive documents leading to crises in foreign relations. Others have welcomed the new opportunities offered by digital technology as strengthening democracy and the citizen's rights to know. Military operations and intelligence work have benefited from new means of digital communication but have also found their organizations and activities more exposed and at greater risk (Hellman et al., 2016).

At the same time, these organizational, technological, and political media developments are being used increasingly successfully by authoritarian regimes to suppress, control, and surveil. What was formerly Russian propaganda has been adapted to current media dynamics and aligned with a more anti-Western approach. What might for a time have been benign public diplomacy has turned more hostile and antagonistic. Examples of the informational weapon have reached beyond the conventional military sector and now primarily target domestic issues in foreign countries. It is no secret that the low cost and easy dissemination of news coverage to target audiences underpin a resurgence in Russian-sponsored information influencing activities with geopolitical objectives. Oates (2014) talks about "a rewired propaganda" and refers to the digital media ecology as enabling the construction and dissemination of strategic narratives (Oates, 2014), and most scholars agree. What is new is not the use of information in the context of security and defense, but the use of digital technology and of liberal democratic news media systems (see e.g. Rid, 2020; see also Chap. 1). There is therefore good reason to keep in mind that the current situation with regard to disinformation can be seen as a continuation of *active measures* adapted to new media technology and a different world order. This calls for an understanding of disinformation as a long-term phenomenon, which is what is embedded in the term *everyday disinformation*.

EVERYDAY DISINFORMATION

Disinformation campaigns are part of a continuum of disinformative narratives and information flows. Wagnsson writes that a trademark of Russian disinformation (or malign information influence, which is the term she uses) is that it is both long term and systematic (Wagnsson, 2023a, p. 662). She likens Russian disinformation to a “continuously, viscous stream in which lies manipulations and heavily biased information mix” (Wagnsson, 2023a, p. 652). The news format, with its daily bulletins and continuously updated online editions, fits well with everyday disinformation, and therein lies the seriousness of the problem. A steady flow of biased and denigrating news narratives about a nation and its population can over many years normalize attitudes, values, and ideas both about the nation and within it, producing a tendency towards intolerance, polarization, disrespect, and a diminution of the pluralist and liberal public sphere.

Hence, this study of Sputnik and RT coverage of Sweden focuses not on particular events, but on continuous day-to-day disinformation activities mediated through the two Russian international news organizations. It can be positioned at the crossroads between studies of propaganda and digital media, studies of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and studies of information influencing activities targeted at liberal democracy and the West, as well as within the group of narrative disinformation studies.

This is not to say that there are not special campaigns launched against countries in which Sputnik and RT take on key roles, such as showing burning cars in the suburbs of Stockholm, underscoring the Trump narrative on “last night in Sweden”; or spreading news about Swedish social services kidnapping migrant children. Thus a focus on everyday practices does not make case studies irrelevant. On the contrary, it is of key importance to focus on disinformation campaigns at certain peak moments where the public is particularly sensitive to influence or the political system is vulnerable, such as during election campaigns or a national crisis. These cases often showcase key ingredients of the antagonistic coverage, however, such as anti-establishment views, domestic conflict and chaos, government incompetence or its inability to control a critical situation, and problems caused or aggravated by Muslim immigrants. They do not deviate from the day-to-day narratives in terms of content and structure, which shows that disinformation is not an incidental or temporary phenomenon (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021; Hellman, 2021). It might be displayed in more or less dramatic news stories, but it is an everyday practice that for

most European states has been ongoing for many years and is therefore better characterized as a constant flow of everyday news coverage. According to Lucas:

... propaganda efforts like those surrounding the downing of the Malaysian jetliner are not isolated Russian responses to particular events. Instead, they are manifestations of a comprehensive strategy using “sharp power” to disrupt, subvert, and essentially hijack the information systems of targeted countries and regions. The Kremlin’s ambitions are evident in the scale of its financial investments and the global reach of its activities. (Lucas, 2022, p. 138)

Lemke and Habegger (2022) also make the point that more attention must be given to everyday disinformation. They studied Russian disinformation as a “percolation network” with regard to the #MacroLeaks, and used fine network analysis to identify the connections between a vast array of Twitter accounts, most notably with Sputnik and RT. Everyday disinformation, they argue, is dependent on the internet, its fast transmission of messages and capacity to distribute information to a vast audience in a short period of time, but also with relative anonymity for the sender or participant in the network. It is about platform users engaged in everyday sharing practices. “It is the combination of hyperconnectivity and the everyday digital practices that makes the strategic use of digital disinformation campaigns so powerful” (Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 8).

The term everyday disinformation directs attention to the long-term process in which public trust in institutions and in politics and democracy is slowly and gradually eroded—rather than through a single or time-limited election campaign. Lemke and Habegger (2022) conclude their study about the #MacronLeaks by emphasizing the low-intensity, continuous process of disinformation.

The #MacronLeaks episode reveals a sophisticated process operating at the level of individual users and localized internet communities. Russian disinformation campaigns rely on an insidious process that plays the long game of undermining public faith in institutions and eroding political trust. It preys on the weaknesses of advanced Western democracies, especially on their open, fragmented and polarized media ecologies. Russia and other geopolitical actors are not looking for a political or military knockout blow. Instead, they promote a long-term and low-intensity strategy of demobilization—death by a million digital cuts. (Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 21)

The antagonistic actors engaged in everyday disinformation have therefore put “great effort into embedding information influence in seemingly normal and attractive news reporting, projected through channels such as CCTV-N and RT” (Wagnsson, 2023b, p. 1850). This further distinguishes everyday disinformation from traditional propaganda, since it uses new channels and international news media, and links these to the global media ecosystem. Moreover, it hitches on to citizens’ established media consumption habits and, because of its format, clouds the distinctions between public diplomacy, propaganda, and traditional journalism (Wagnsson, 2023b, p. 1850). Such reporting is often made appealing through affective narratives that build on disinformation (see Turcsanyi & Kachlikova, 2020; Eberle & Daniel, 2019; Crilley & Chatterje-Doodly, 2020).

In order to learn and understand more about the Russian disinformation in foreign countries, it makes sense to analyze the everyday news coverage of RT and Sputnik. This book sets out to do that with the case of Sweden (see Chap. 4) in an effort to reveal what these everyday narratives say about Swedish society and what it is being told. However, a review of previous studies of RT and Sputnik’s news coverage of other countries is called for in order to assess the differences and similarities in everyday Russian disinformation, and to contextualize the Swedish case. This chapter presents what is known about RT and Sputnik’s depictions of the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the United States, French-speaking Africa, and Ukraine, during election campaigns and crises, as well as in everyday coverage.

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION TARGETED AT SIMILAR NATION STATES BUT WITH DIFFERENT CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Research has found a pattern in the projection of antagonistic narratives by Sputnik and RT targeted at the United States, as well as states in Europe and other parts of the world. On closer examination, however, studies have also found national differences worthy of consideration. Both similarities and differences reflect Russian perceptions of the West as a threat to the values that the Kremlin under President Putin has declared it will defend. They can be summarized as typical national conservative values such as the promotion of Orthodox Christianity, “morality”, and “traditional family values”, features underlined by an antipathy toward Islam,

LGBTI+ communities, and migration. In addition, it is a conservatism that promotes respect for the authorities, and contrasts security and law and order with liberalism. The threat from the West also involves geopolitical interests such as the defense of Russia's territorial borders in the light of NATO enlargement and strengthening its Eastern European military flank (Petersson, 2023; Edenberg, 2023; Pallin, 2023, for the use of gender see also Edenberg, 2020, 2021).

However, the major part of the disinformation is not expressed as defense of a Russian lifestyle and political culture against Western supremacy or imperialism. Instead, it is built around depictions of values and norms that the Kremlin resents and rejects. The international news broadcasters are set up to demonstrate to the domestic audience and the world the negative consequences of societies adopting a liberal, rather than a national conservative, outlook, and how detrimental liberal Western attitudes are to governance and societal security.

The Russian state media constructs news coverage to show how Western societies are built on liberal democratic principles that it deems vulnerable, malfunctioning, and weak, with consequences that reach from domestic unrest to damaged international reputations and reduced trust among strategic partners. Sweden is one of the countries that has for many years been heavily and negatively framed in this way by RT and Sputnik, but other Western countries have also been targeted. There have been only a few longitudinal studies, and even fewer that employ qualitative methods, but there have been in-depth analyses of Russian involvement in election campaigns and crises, for example, that in many respects share similar features with one another and with everyday disinformation.

Commonalities Found in Studies of European Countries

There are striking similarities between Russian disinformation in European countries (see Deverell et al., 2021; Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019), especially when studying the framing of the news or the problem definitions in the narratives. Most frequent are the similarities in framing societies as dysfunctional. The countries are all depicted as struggling with social conflict, crime, and lack of integration, which is explained by high levels of immigration and the impact of Islam. The latter two are often conflated in the news coverage and at times depicted as connected to terrorism. The theme of immigration is particularly notable in RT and Sputnik's coverage of Germany and Sweden. Reports focus on violent crime, and social and

religious differences as key obstacles to integration (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 91). The political systems are led by incompetent leaders who fail to maintain law and order while at the same time undemocratic tendencies grow stronger. Depictions of population mistrust of the political leadership and the elite demonstrate anti-establishment attitudes, sometimes expressed as anger and frustration, sometimes as ridicule and irony. Moreover, Western states share a declining international reputation as they are considered troublesome international actors. The Netherlands is for example depicted as a “greedy actor in the international arena who ignores EU values of unity and provokes irascible states with tactless political moves” (Hoyle et al., 2023, p. 217).

Tailor-made News Coverage

There are also national differences in how countries are targeted, and these seem to be tied to national political cultures, established foreign policy orientations, and the national trademarks and symbolism by which the country is known internationally. The target countries’ international reputations might be similarly exposed to disinformation, but the types of narratives used to achieve this seem to differ. Russian disinformation focuses on the features, values, and resources the target state tends to hold dear in its nation branding or public diplomacy, or on representations that might be sensitive for the state’s identity. In the Swedish case this might be its policies on equality, in the Netherlands its liberal drugs policy, in Denmark a willingness to engage in international operations, and so on. Thus, it is about disclosing weaknesses in areas where a state tends to present itself as strong and exploiting areas where the state is experiencing challenges.

The Nordic Countries

In a comparative study of Sputnik’s coverage of the Nordic countries, Sweden stood out as the country subject to the most negative and destructive narratives. The researchers sampled all news coverage between 2014 and 2018 with the name of the country in question in the headline and conducted separate narrative analyses of each country using a three step qualitative method of analysis developed by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021). This comprised questions about the actors, places, problems, and solutions that made up the narrative, and in-depth connotative narrative

analyses of the structure of the news stories. It found that all the countries were negatively depicted and said to be in moral decay. This was amplified by talking about the countries as “the Nordics” and referring to them collectively as dysfunctional and naive (Deverell et al., 2021, pp. 29–30). However, there were also differences in the narratives between the countries. For example, Sweden and Denmark were marked out as “lost causes”—the latter to a lesser degree than the former—and both countries were depicted as failed states and states in decline. Denmark’s international engagement was acknowledged but rated as insignificant, and Sweden’s reputation as steadily falling (Deverell et al., 2021).

It is notable how the immigration question was at the forefront of the coverage of all four countries but stressed most strongly in the Swedish case. This is in line with the comparative study by Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) of several European states and the United States.¹ This found that Sweden in particular, along with Germany, was depicted as facing severe social and cultural tensions, including violent crime, linked to migration and Islam. The articles adopted a mocking tone and, in some instances, went further in finding denigrating material to publish about Sweden. Moreover, in contrast to what was found to be the typical reporting style built on news from external sources, there was a notable increase in reports written about Sweden in the style of editorials that passed judgement on the Swedish way of dealing with social problems such as crime and migration (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, pp. 81–82).

The authors of the Nordic study concluded that the negative and denigrating coverage found in the study could be tied to “standard strategies and tailor-made narratives working to destruct, direct and suppress” (Deverell et al., 2021, p. 15). Based on their findings, they argued that the Russian news media narratives were detrimental to democracy and could erode national security, damage actors’ status in international society (Deverell et al., 2021, p. 31) and, as a result, could weaken international or Nordic cooperation.

The Netherlands

In a Dutch study of RT coverage of the Netherlands between January 2018 and December 2020, Hoyle et al. (2023) used a similar method of

¹The states included in the study were the United Kingdom, the US, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Ukraine.

analysis as Deverell et al. (2021) to identify six narratives. These share similarities with the findings on Sweden of Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021), most notably the portrayal of the state as “hyper liberal” to the extent that law and order could no longer be maintained, where decadent, deviant communities take hold of norms degenerate to the detriment of democratic governance and government control.

Although the RT coverage of the Netherlands shares with coverage of other countries narratives about liberalism having gone too far, leading to violent unrest and domestic conflict, the imagery used in the Dutch case is more colorful. It stamps the country as a “narco-state” and combines this with coverage of how the police and other public authorities fail to deal with criminal gangs, and a laissez-faire approach to drug use and to immigration. Here too there is a mocking tone to the coverage of the public authorities and the government, which is combined with depictions of the Netherlands as a dangerous society. An arrogant and demeaning tone runs through several narratives but is given its strongest expression in narratives that Hoyle et al. label “weird society” and “foolish institutions”. These depict the country as ridiculous and not to be taken seriously. Hoyle et al. (2023 p. 216) write:

In belittling Dutch society and culture, pathologizing its progressive aspects and mocking liberal groups for pushing these “strange policies”, there is a concerted effort to tarnish the Netherlands’ image as respectable or admirable. Instead, the Netherlands becomes absurd, ridiculous, even morally reprehensible—and undeserving of recognition by the international community.

In addition to this high-handed attitude to the Netherlands, there are accusations of Dutch Russophobia, most notably in connection with and amplified by the investigation into the shooting down of Flight MH17. Overall, the Netherlands is depicted as a flawed international actor and a nuisance to its EU partners, and spoken of as a “reckless geopolitical actor” (Hoyle et al., 2023 p. 217).

With the exception of these analyses of the Netherlands and the Nordic countries, there are few in-depth qualitative studies of Sputnik and RT disinformation about other countries where the analysis extends over a period of time and includes daily news coverage of a variety of topics. Qualitative studies of the UK, Germany, the US, and France tend to focus on specific crisis events or election campaigns. Despite the fact that these

cover only limited time periods or situations that are not easily generalizable to the everyday, these case studies are informative about the ways in which Russian state news coverage is constructed and used to disinform and weaken a foreign state when the stakes are particularly high for governments and institutions seeking to maintain legitimacy and public trust.

Germany

A comparative study by Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) showed that RT and Sputnik coverage of Germany and Sweden was similar in its emphasis on immigration. Both countries were depicted as burdened by social conflict as a result of high levels of immigration. In the German case, this was strongly related to crime and difficulties with integration. Immigrants were depicted as perpetrators of violence and sexual crimes, and reports linked immigration to Islamic terrorism and terrorist attacks in Germany. Problems were exacerbated by the German government, for example its failure to manage asylum applications. The image of Germany was also one of a country where far-right extremism was to be found all the way up to the German military forces, and there was mention of underground Nazi activity (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, 78p).

While the latter was framed as a reason for social division and domestic problems, Elshehawy et al. (2021) show that RT also gave support to the far right political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its politics. Based on their study on the 2017 German election campaign, they write:

... Kremlin-sponsored media provided what AfD operatives may have found useful—a news forum publishing appropriately slanted migrant stories to refer to in political discussions. We find evidence that Kremlin-supplied coverage spiked, compared to domestic outlets, around the national elections that also resulted in AfD's most significant political breakthrough....The anti-refugee message more broadly exacerbated internal divisions in the ruling parties and may have dissuaded voters from turning out. (Elshehawy et al., 2021, p. 2)

The findings of the study give empirical support to the insight that disinformation campaigns are not merely knee jerk reflexes, where the news narrative of a candidate running for office or a party campaign is either promoted or dismissed. Instead, they should be seen as needle injections into a system that influences the framing of a campaign or a

discourse on certain issues and perspectives rather than others, and some explanations rather than others.

Like the US and French presidential elections, there were revelations concerning a disinformation campaign during the German federal elections in 2017. In an analysis of over one million news stories in the German and Russian media in the run-up to the election, Elshehawy et al. (2021) found that refugee stories were more heavily emphasized in Russian outlets than in the German media discourse, and were more strongly framed to give legitimacy and support to AfD and its political position. In contrast, Chancellor Angela Merkel was negatively targeted, and referred to as “autocratic” and out of touch with German voters and their preferences. Like the US and French cases, where candidates Joe Biden and Emanuel Macron were not merely negatively portrayed in the media, but also had their campaign email accounts hacked (see below), Merkel was the target of Russian information influence campaigns using revelations from her private telephone and email-conversations, as well as damaging news reports. The German government was criticized for its inability to deal with the large flows of migrants to Germany. RT made frequent references to what it called a “refugee invasion” (p. 1) and held the mainstream parties and the government responsible. Merkel was “endangering the country” (p. 1). At the same time, RT gave its explicit support to the extreme rightwing AfD, which was pushing an anti-immigration agenda, and after the election reported that AfD was the true winner (p. 2). The main conclusion of the study was not simply that RT reported negatively about the German management of refugees and asylum seekers, but that its coverage boosted AfD by aligning with its political ideas and by augmenting the amount of anti-immigration coverage in the run-up to the election. In parallel, RT also set its affiliated networks of news and social media platforms (on Ruptly, InTheNow and Twitter) in motion to disseminate these messages more widely (Elshehawy et al., 2021, p. 13).

The pattern of reporting derogatory coverage of Chancellor Merkel and the government, and cultivating an image of Germany as crumbling under the pressure of large numbers of migrants, had begun quite some time before the election campaign. In January 2016, a year and a half earlier, news about the rape of a young Russian-German girl of 13 by three Arab men made it into the headlines. This case, which attracted much national and international attention, is illustrative of the different components of disinformation against Germany. A few days after the first report was published, it was established that the story, referred to as the “Lisa

case”, was totally untrue. The girl in question had run away from her parents and then lied about the rape. By then, however, the story had hit the headlines, especially in the Russian state media. Despite the fact that it was known that the story was false, it continued to be covered in the news and on news websites. The story is alleged to have emerged from what Janda refers to as “a minor website for Russian expats living in Germany” (Janda, 2016; Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués, 2022, p. 13). It might not have gained momentum had it not been for events in Cologne a few weeks before, when migrant men attacked women during the New Year’s Eve celebrations (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués, 2022, p. 13). Coverage of the reported rapes on New Year’s Eve was framed around the lax and passive German police being unwilling to act, make arrests, or file charges against the perpetrators. This very same framing was initially applied to the Lisa case.

Set in this context, the story attracted news value and was further heightened a few days later, when a team from the Russian Channel One interviewed a woman at a rally of the ultranationalist National Democratic Party of Germany, who presented herself as Lisa’s aunt. In the interview, she claimed that the police and media were concealing the truth about what had happened to Lisa. The interview was broadcast on the Channel One news bulletin that day and it was repeated once again, this time by the Russian correspondent Ivan Blagov, that Lisa had been raped by three men from the Middle East (See McGuinness, 2016). The story went viral and within 10 days had been viewed on Facebook one million times (Decker, 2021, p. 226).

At this point the scoop was picked up by several Russian state media outlets, including RT International, Sputnik, and RT Deutsch. More stories appeared with even more gruesome accounts of girls being raped by men from the Middle East while a passive and disengaged police force did nothing. The Lisa story was further disseminated by right-wing German groups through their social media sites, and it was later argued that AfD had capitalized on the discontent stirred up by the campaign.

By the time the Lisa story was revealed as a fabrication, it had already ignited strong reactions from prominent Russian immigrants, some of whom marched to the German chancellery in protest. These street protests, broadcast on Russian-affiliated media such as RT Deutsch, as well as other national and international media, involved emotional speeches and images of banners with appeals to treat children with respect and to keep them safe regardless of their nationality (RT Deutsch Jan 23 2016; Decker,

2021, p. 216). German-Russian minority communities stood side by side with far-right wing activists, and it was reported that such demonstrations took place all over Germany. Banners read for example “It’s not just about Lisa; we want order and safety restored in Germany”; “Together against chaos”; and “We trust the media less and less” (Decker, 2021, p. 227 with ref. to Gunkel & Sternberg, 2016), showing that the protests went beyond the case of Lisa and vented mistrust in public institutions more generally.

The case also reached the highest diplomatic levels when Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergej Lavrov accused the German police and legal system of not taking anti-Russian sentiments seriously due to political correctness (Meister, 2016). Lavrov commented on the Lisa case in a press conference:

We wish Germany success in dealing with the enormous problems caused by migrants. I hope these issues do not get swept under the rug, repeating the situation when a Russian girl’s disappearance in Germany was hushed up for a long time for some reasons. Now, at least, we are communicating with her lawyer, who is working with her family and with the Russian Embassy. It is clear that Lisa did not exactly decide voluntarily to disappear for 30 hours. Truth and justice must prevail here. (Sergej Lavrov, quoted in Decker, 2021, p. 227)

According to some commentators, the Lisa case was seen as a “wake up call” for Germany’s political elites and played a part in Germany’s deteriorating relations with Russia (Meister, 2016). The case also exposed the extent to which AfD and other far-right activist movements were able to use the disinformation campaign to their own advantage. According to Decker (2021, p. 216): “With the indirect aid of the Russian government’s foreign media apparatus, AfD has translated disaffection and resentment within the Russian-German community into part of its strategy for electoral success”.

France

French scholars have argued that, compared to most other European states, France’s friendly relations with Russia and before that the Soviet Union—especially among its leftist parties and in more recent decades with its right-wing parties—have left responses and countermeasures to RT and Sputnik disinformation less developed, and that disinformation

has been downplayed as a security issue. Vilmer (2019) talks about a pro-Russian seam stretching from the extreme left to the extreme right. Three of the major presidential candidates in the first round of the 2017 presidential election—Marine Le Pen, François Fillon, and Jean-Luc Mélançon—for example, favored lifting sanctions against Russia (Vilmer, 2019).

Since the revelations of Russian involvement in that presidential election campaign, however, disinformation has been seen as a greater threat. A few weeks after the election, the newly elected President Emmanuel Macron made what was seen as a strong statement against Russia in which he condemned RT and Sputnik for interfering in the campaign and referred to them as tools of Russian disinformation. In his statement, he accused the news media outlets of concealing their true purpose, which was to deceive French citizens in the run-up to the election.

Russia Today and Sputnik have worked as agents of influence during this campaign and have spread falsehoods about me and my campaign... It was a serious offense that foreign press organizations—called to do this by whom I do not know—interfered by spreading serious untruths during a democratic election campaign. In response I will yield to nothing in never giving in....Russia Today and Sputnik acted not as press organizations nor as journalists. They have behaved as agents of influence, of propaganda and false propaganda no more and no less. (President Macron, Versailles, 29 May 2017, translation by the author)

Although foreign interference and meddling in a presidential election would have had elicited a strong response from any government, and generated public statements, domestic investigations, and countermeasures, Macron had special reasons for his strong and openly accusatory language as it was his candidacy that had been the target of the disinformation campaign. This had begun several months earlier with the spreading of rumors, false information, and forged documents (Vilmer, 2019), but efforts to sabotage the campaign peaked with what came to be known as the Macron leaks.

These leaks involved the release of half a million tweets containing over 20,000 emails and large amounts of stolen data, including forged documents disseminated within 24 hours and sent from trolls and fake accounts (bots), all with the hashtag #MacronLeaks. This took place only two days before the second round of the elections when no media, political party,

or think tank is allowed to publish political information that might influence the result. This denied the Macron campaign any opportunity to respond to or counter the information contained in the leaks.

However, it was later found that despite the large number of tweets and the timing of their release, the campaign had had little impact (Vilmer, 2019). Users who engaged with the campaign were found to be mainly foreign and not French (Ferrara, 2017). Lemke and Habegger (2022) studied the Macron Leaks by analyzing the RT and Sputnik Twitter feeds and independent accounts (so-called panel tweets) that were active during and after the presidential election. They found that the Twitter links to the initial stories by RT and Sputnik on the #MacronLeaks attracted little attention. The revised stories, however, which contained more substantial (mis)information about the leaks gained traction and increased activity on the internet between Twitter accounts. The number of tweets and retweets about the MacronLeaks were then considerable, indicating a high level of activity at both Sputnik and RT, which led Lemke and Habegger (2022, pp. 13–14) to argue that RT and Sputnik were viewed by the creators of the Macron leak hashtags as vessels for pushing the (mis)information provided.

Notwithstanding the Macron Leaks, in his study of RT and Sputnik's coverage of the presidential election campaign, Zapico Alonso (2022) found negative coverage of Macron's candidacy throughout. Macron and his candidacy were denigrated in articles and interviews. Macron was said to resemble a US agent backed by a rich gay lobby and there were allegations of an extramarital affair (see Vilmer, 2019, p. 4, Zapico Alonso, 2022, p. 37).

Russian state media disinformation about France is perhaps best known to center around opposition to the Macron candidacy, including through the Macron Leaks. However, the Russian state media outlets also focused their coverage of France on migration and reporting on strong anti-immigration sentiments. This is known to be a favored topic of the extreme right-wing parties. Mattelart (2018) analyzed the French-speaking edition of RT in one week of 2017 (June 29 to July 6) and found that RT gave ample support to the extreme right, including Front National and its leader, Marine Le Pen. Her critique of Macron was made in colorful language in several news articles, which in turn gave rise to comments from readers in even stronger language (Mattelart, 2018, p. 18). However, as in findings on analyses of Russian state media coverage of other Western countries, it was not uncommon for the RT and Sputnik newsrooms to

support contrasting views, even diametrically opposed positions, between political elites quoted in the articles and readers' commentaries. At times, conflicts took place between different political parties and representatives, giving the impression not of a climate conducive to open debate, but of chaos and disorder. With reference to reported disagreements between Le Pen and other right-wing proponents, it was found that a considerable number of comments published opposed Le Pen and disagreed with her projections of France as unruly and rebellious (p. 18). Mattéart sums up the main findings on the depiction of France by RT:

By glorifying Russian foreign policy and its leader, by vehemently criticizing the US government as well as the European institutions, (by) condemning with no less force the policies of the French president by distilling from them more or less elaborate arguments against immigration and elevating itself as a defender of a threatened morality, French RT has managed to seduce the public which, if one is to believe the commentaries published on the site, is more than willing to accept the theses conveyed by the extreme right. (Mattéart, 2018, pp. 20–21, translation by the author)

The image of France as a troubled society is therefore in line with RT and Sputnik's coverage of other European states with migration as among the foremost causes for concern, along with declining morale and expressed sympathies for anti-immigration views, but differing in its depictions of exceptionally severe conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. As in other countries, the political leadership is vehemently criticized and distrusted, and political parties and public institutions are seen as failing (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019; see also Lemke & Habegger, 2022, p. 21).

In contrast to most other studies, Mattéart (2018) reviews all types of news broadcast on French-speaking RT during the week analyzed. Thus the study also includes news reporting on topics other than those centered on France. It found a number of articles glorifying Russia and President Putin, contrasting Russian global policy with US policy and promoting a multipolar world order, in line one might add with the French foreign policy tradition. The international coverage in the French language edition of RT gave a voice to well-known international figures such as the Argentinian soccer player Maradona, who expressed his appreciation for Russia and President Putin (p. 12). To this were added stories ridiculing President Trump and denigrating officials in his administration. The European Union was not ridiculed as much as it was depicted as weak and

malfunctioning, with Members of the European Parliament choosing to be elsewhere when Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission was invited to speak. Articles such as these stirred fierce anti-EU comments from readers who called for a “Frexit”. The migration crisis was reported in both a European and a specifically French context, and raised concerns about replacement theory, concern that the number of people with non-European backgrounds was about to surpass the number of native born Europeans (Mattelart, 2018).

It is noted above that RT and Sputnik have been found to capitalize on nationally sensitive political and social problems that tend to generate polarization, domestic unrest, and violence. In France, racial and social cleavages have found expression in rioting in the suburbs, anti-immigration sentiments and even terrorist attacks, all of which are the kind of topics RT and Sputnik tend to cover from a perspective closely aligned with the French far right. Added to this, RT and Sputnik were heavily engaged in the coverage of the Yellow Vest movement—a protest movement that revealed yet another social cleavage in French society, in this case between socio-economic classes. The protests began in November 2018 in response to the increased cost of living, due primarily to a rise in fuel prices, but grew into a movement calling for social and economic justice that coincided with Macron’s highly unpopular proposals to reduce the budget deficit. A study of RT and Sputnik Twitter feeds in the first month of the Yellow Vest campaign showed that RT and Sputnik content on Twitter was “relatively popular across a broad spectrum of the French political landscape, from left-leaning to far-right parties”. The Yellow Vest communities and their representatives, however, only rarely appeared in the feeds (Gérard et al., 2020, p. 2, See also Chap. 2).

The UK

In their quantitative framing analysis of RT and Sputnik’s coverage of the UK in sampled weeks from 2017 and 2018, Ramsay and Robertshaw find a majority of the 952 articles (and 1361 frames) to be framed as crime/violence alienation. This might be explained by the time periods chosen, which included terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, and the Skripal poisoning. Outside of these events, however, crime/violence framed news items did not dominate the coverage. It is therefore worth paying more attention to the high number of “social conflict” and “failure of government and political parties” frames. Social conflicts included

issues such as “conflict and disagreement between ethnic, religious, racial and social groups” and “tensions related to immigration”, whereas government failure was about incompetence, governmental division, and scandal (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 73). Like the Swedish case, there were relatively few articles framed around partisan conflicts compared to those reporting on government failure (p. 74).

A major event in the UK—which brought the Russian state in direct confrontation with the British government, and which gave rise to large amounts of news coverage in RT and Sputnik as well as in the British and other international media—was the Skripal poisoning in March 2018. A former Russian spy, Sergey Skripal, and his daughter Yulia living in Salisbury were found to have been poisoned by a nerve agent (Novichok) known to have been developed by the Soviet Union. Investigations were started but it was not until six months later that the British police identified two suspects who turned out to be agents of the Russian military intelligence service (GRU). In an analysis of the news coverage of RT and Sputnik (as well as the British media) in the four weeks immediately following the incident, researchers found a mix of competing, confusing, and contradictory narratives about the incident. It seemed as if the primary aim was to inundate the news feeds with as many narratives as possible to create confusion about how the events had unfolded (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 23).

Statements in the coverage (made in 138 of the 735 articles), concerning explanations of the circumstances leading up to the poisoning, its origin, the motives and the actors involved, as well as the unfolding of events, were found to be based on a broad range of sources, dominated by a few Kremlin sources, but all of which argued Russia’s innocence and speculated about why Western governments were blaming Russia. Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) summarize the findings from their comprehensive analysis:

Narratives often appeared following public interventions by Western governments. Following Theresa May’s speech to the UK Parliament on 12th March in which Russia was accused and the nerve agent ‘Novichok’ identified, a flurry of narratives contesting the origins and existence of Novichok appeared on RT and Sputnik, and narratives framing the incident as defined by geopolitics and Western domestic political problems began to emerge. (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 22)

Another narrative that was often repeated told that Russian express willingness to cooperate with the British in the investigation had been turned down. Instead the UK and the West, often personified by Prime Minister Theresa May, one-sidedly accused Russia of being behind the poisoning despite there being no such evidence. Editorial statements by RT and Sputnik refuted the allegations made about Russia's guilt (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 22).

Looking more closely at the news reporting, two British analyses of Russian and British news coverage demonstrate the extent to which mediation processes played a role in the Skripal poisoning. They define the incident as a "disruptive media event" (Tolz et al., 2021; Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021; see also Dayan, 2009 and Katz & Liebes, 2007). Within the media events framework, Tolz et al. (2021) emphasize the commercial drivers behind the developments in the case. Although RT began covering the incident as a UK media-driven story, said to be detached from reality and to serve as a good illustration of the notorious hysteria of the media in the UK, the channel eventually fell in with the dominant storyline of most other national and international media, and broadcast an interview with the two suspects who had allegedly been ordered to speak to the channel by President Putin himself (Tolz et al., 2021, p. 2982). What might be supposed was an attempt to strengthen the credibility of the Russian state was a failure, however, as both international and domestic audiences doubted that the interviewees had told the truth. The credibility of the RT narrative thus fell and "RT's continued use of mocking sarcasm, for example, by claiming that the main damage caused by the interview was to Salisbury's image as a tourist destination" did nothing to restore the reputation or the credibility of either the Russian government or RT (Tolz et al., 2021).

In a similar vein, the study by Birge and Chatterje-Doody (2021) shows how RT and Sputnik made use of their respective editorial policies, "question more" (RT) and "tell the untold" (Sputnik), in order to contrast their approach to reporting on the incident with that of the British news media. Birge and Chatterje-Doody describe the Russian and British coverage as engaged in a "credibility competition" (p. 171) and assign the theme of "uncertainty" as a descriptive label of how the Russian state media covered the case. In reporting on the incident as a narrative of uncertainty, RT and Sputnik sought to divert attention from Russia and the investigation of the incident, and to portray the British media allegations as speculation. Drawing on BBC World, ITV News, and Sky News, where the Skripal

poisoning was compared to the murder of Aleksander Litvinenko,² RT and Sputnik argued that the British media was more interested in exploiting the incident to create a thrilling spy story than in reporting the facts of the case (Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021, p. 178). British media sensationalism was contrasted with interviews on RT and Sputnik, where solid and reliable experts made rational and sensible suppositions about the incident.

When, six months into the investigations, two Russian suspects were identified by the British police, the framing of the story changed. The two men, said to be salesmen visiting the Salisbury cathedral at the time of the poisoning, were interviewed on RT by editor-in-chief Simonyan in what seemed to be an effort to further stress the uncertainties around the case; but it was an effort that failed judging by the comments from online audiences (Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021, pp. 182–183). Following the interview, the substance of the suspects' links to the Salisbury case were all-but-ignored on RT, which instead began to focus on “light interest tangents” (Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021, p. 183). The coverage added humor and satire, and downplayed its critical edge, lending support to Ramsay description of RT and Sputnik coverage as “competing and often contradictory” (2019).

Nonetheless, the analyses of the Skripal case show how the news media stood at the center of a diplomatic and security political conflict between Russia and the UK, revealing not only political distrust and diplomatic conflict, but also distrust of each other's media coverage. The UK government is depicted as lying, not to be trusted, and out to harm Russia. Russian spokespersons, experts, and diplomats, along with a few Western critics, make statements that back up the coverage, saying that the UK had “rushed to blame Russia without establishing the facts”, that there was “no evidence that Russia is responsible”, that the response was driven by Russophobia and by “biased UK/Western media inflaming tensions” and that the whole affair had been turned into a “witch hunt” where there was “no intention of proper investigation before blaming Russia” (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, pp. 25–27).

It is notable that the coverage was framed around Russia itself and its disrespectful treatment by the UK, including what were described as preposterous allegations about involvement in the poisoning. In this sense,

²Alexander Litvinenko was a former officer of the Russian Federal Security Service who had defected to the UK and died having been poisoned with polonium 210 in 2006.

the Skripal coverage differs from coverage of other topics in that here Russia itself tends to take center stage and less is reported about the UK. In contrast to the Nordic studies, for instance, the studies of the Skripal case find less coverage denigrating the targeted society, such as depicting the UK as a country riven by domestic unrest and as ungovernable. Instead, since the case directly involved Russian foreign relations, RT and Sputnik coverage appeared centered on defending Russia's power position and international reputation at a time when a presidential election was upcoming and Russia was to host the FIFA Football World Cup. Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019), however, note that after Prime Minister May's intervention, in which she accused Russia, stories were published that linked these accusations to a UK which had manipulated the few allies it could still rely on "into anti-Russian actions against their interests" and that was seeking to deflect attention away from the decline of democracy in the UK (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 28).

The United States

In the case of the United States, Russian disinformation by way of Russian state-affiliated media covers a vast array of topics and employs a number of formats. That said, three main areas stand out. The first concerns the Russian media coverage of the US election campaigns in 2016 and 2020, including the primaries (see e.g. Tucker et al., 2018 p. 28; Shekhovtsov, 2018; Benkler et al., 2018). Second, are the domestic conflicts around race, most frequently reported in recent years around the Black Lives Matter movement. Third, there is an anti-establishment theme that is not unique to the US, but particularly strong there, within which can be found a large variety of negative public attitudes and sentiments such as citizen mistrust of political leaders, conflicts between the president and other public bodies, accusations, and allegations and indictments against public figures in the administration. To this third group should also be added allegations of undemocratic practices, or conflicts over the US Constitution and its foundational pillars. Polarization is a motor in all of the themes. Tucker et al. (2018) argue that the US two-party political system makes it especially vulnerable to polarization being used by a foreign hostile power to cause harm by way of disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 61).

In their large-scale study of RT and Sputnik coverage in 2017 and 2018, Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) list a number of topics sorted under the most frequent frames on coverage of the US: "violence/crime",

“government and institutional failure”, and “institutional conflict”. The institutional conflict frame, they write, “was dominated by coverage of conflicts between the President and other branches of government and public bodies” (p. 76) along with numerous other investigations that started after the 2016 election, such as those regarding Russian interference in the presidential campaign. RT and Sputnik argue that these investigations prevent the government from functioning properly. However, failures of public institutions are also given considerable attention with police misconduct, dysfunctional public health systems, and the failures of the US military most frequently reported. Carter and Carter (2021) mapped RT content by way of links to articles on Twitter. They found examples of conflicts in and between US states, and between the federal and state levels. Moreover, RT and Sputnik also report on violence, crime statistics, and gun crime in schools or tragedies where young children are perpetrators (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019, p. 77).

Added to the domestic perspective is coverage describing the US as the NATO bully that both complicates the workings of the organization and exerts pressure on other states to follow its lead, while forcing US weapon systems on them (p. 67). This is also a theme found in Carter and Carter (2021), where the US is as a superpower exercising its influence globally by ignoring international rules and norms. A quarter of the articles report on US allies and how they are plagued by terrorism, crime, and corruption. They also find a fair amount of bizarre, more or less believable and silly stories, which they refer to as “viral content”.

It is interesting to note that the Russian state media reporting on the US does not just cover polarizing, contentious issues at the top of the domestic news agenda, but also reports on NATO—an alliance that the US audience is known to ignore for the most part and which tends to raise little interest (Oates et al., 2020, p. 8). This differs from how RT and Sputnik usually report on Western countries but is a reminder that Russian geopolitical security concerns should also be seen as driving forces of the international coverage, and that future studies should pay more attention to this. The study on the Nordic countries presented above also found that the Sputnik coverage included a number of articles about NATO (see Deverell et al., 2021).

It is mentioned above that the disinformation produced by Sputnik and RT tends to target what can be thought of as national vulnerabilities or cherished values. Race can be seen to fit both those criteria in a US context. Race is a point of contention in the US past and present, and is

closely connected to the principles of freedom and equality, which are similarly laden with heavy historical symbolism as well as topical questions on the political agenda and at the core of the US Constitution. In a study of Russian influencing operations on Facebook, Bradshaw et al. (2022) analyze the case of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, to identify the frames used by different Russian state-affiliated outlets (referred to as media properties). They pose two questions: “How do English-language Russian state-linked media properties cover civil unrest in the United States?”; and “Are there any differences between established broadcasters and newer, digital-first channels?” (p. 2).

The results showed that RT and Sputnik primarily produced negative frames of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) whereas the newer media outlets supported the BLM. RT and Sputnik both depicted the protestors as violent and questions of racial justice in the US were described as hypocrisy (Bradshaw et al., 2022, p. 1). In line with previous research (see Graphika, 2020 and Stanford Internet Observatory, 2020), it was found that Sputnik and RT presented the protestors as “violent rioters and looters”, whereas the newer media sites drew attention to police violence against Black Americans (p. 3). When comparing the two sets of data—RT and Sputnik with the newer social media sites—differences were also observed with regard to the intensity of the interactivity with audiences, where the newer sites received more traffic than RT. The newer sites are more supportive of the US left, critical of the police and supportive of Black Lives Matter. RT and Sputnik instead stayed true to their right-wing national conservative positions, in this case being anti-BLM and pro-police (p. 3), while also framing the events as chaotic and reaffirming social divisions. The authors conclude that the Russian media are “playing both sides” (Bradshaw et al., 2022).

A lot of attention has been paid to Russian disinformation about the US in connection with the election campaigns of 2016 and 2020. Although it is not possible to determine exactly how RT and Sputnik coverage, their Twitter feeds, and other affiliated Russian state outlets influenced the outcome of the elections, most empirical studies assert that their coverage favored Trump with supportive reports, whereas his opponents received negative and derogatory coverage.

This is the view of Oates (2021), writing about the Russian disinformation campaigns of 2016 which gave support to Trump and disseminated damaging pieces about Hillary Clinton. She writes that: “it was often difficult to separate Russian propaganda from pro-Trump narratives” (Oates,

2020, p. 1). Oates argues that, as a libertarian media system, the US media is particularly vulnerable to the kind of information influencing attacks launched by the Russian Internet Research Agency at the time. The heavy emphasis on freedom of speech and a low degree of regulation of media content are two factors that increase this vulnerability. The principles on which a free and liberal media system is based also open the door for malign and harmful information flows, and developments in social media have facilitated dissemination of these flows (Oates et al., 2021).

In her book about Russian involvement in the US presidential elections of 2016, Kathleen Hall Jamieson reveals and analyzes a number of different ways and channels through which Trump's election campaign was boosted by Russian state information agencies and news outlets while Clinton's was delegitimized. Jamieson (2018, p. 164) refers to a US intelligence report published in January 2017, which concluded that:

Russia used trolls as well as RT as part of its influence efforts to denigrate Secretary Clinton. This effort amplified stories on scandals about Secretary Clinton and the role of WikiLeaks in the elections campaign. [Such efforts sought to] undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017 quoted in Jamieson, 2018, p. 164)

The result of the 2016 presidential elections cannot be explained by Russian disinformation as a causal relationship. It is nonetheless important to identify the activities of Russian hackers, trolls, and social media influencers in order to learn about the exposure of election campaigns to foreign information influence and disinformation, and to enable national comparisons (see the sections about Germany and France above). In her study, Jamieson presents detailed accounts of such activities.

One of the major interventions that it is alleged was made by Russian information services took place when Russian hackers gained access to stored Democratic Party emails and other data and had them distributed through WikiLeaks at a highly opportune moment for the Trump campaign. At the time, this material had a large impact on the media agenda, and it was also found to have influenced the moderators of the presidential debates (Jamieson, 2018, p. 6). Jamieson alleges collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russian disinformation agencies, which released a large number of emails from the Democratic Party's campaign

headquarters only a few hours after the *Washington Post* posted what came to be known as the Access Hollywood story. This story showed Donald Trump boasting about his abuse of women and the accompanying tape, a recording from 2005, verified the views he expressed in crude language. Chair of the Republican National Committee Reince Priebus is said to have urged Donald Trump to drop out of the campaign immediately after the recordings became known. However, only half an hour after publication of the *Washington Post* story, Wikileaks released the “cache of emails stolen by Russian operatives from the account of Clinton campaign director John Podesta” (p. 162) and all media and consequent public attention was redirected to the Democrat campaign. There was also all sorts of disinformation spread about Clinton, such as that her campaign chief was part of a secret cult (Jamieson, 2018, pp. 6–7), or that Clinton was funded by ISIS supporters, and was corrupt and physically unwell—all with WikiLeaks as the source (Jamieson, 2018, p. 62 with ref. to Woodward, 2018).

In the presidential election campaign of 2020 it was instead the Democratic candidate Joe Biden who was targeted with negative reporting, including during the primaries when RT and Sputnik gave their support to Bernie Sanders, who is politically to the left of Biden. The news reports identified Biden as a representative of the establishment with links to both Washington and Wall Street, and as being at odds with his electorate, using rough language when meeting with voters and repeatedly making blunders when speaking to an audience (Burrett, 2020, p. 12 in Oates et al., 2020). He was also tainted by allegations of interference in the justice system in Ukraine on behalf of his son. In one RT report, the Ukrainian prosecutor in the case, Viktor Shokin, is quoted as saying that Biden might be behind an attempt to poison him and bribery in connection with the case. In contrast, Sanders is presented as a victim of anti-socialist prejudice, “the people’s champion”, with the Russophobic US mainstream media working against his candidacy (Burrett, 2020, p. 12). Burrett’s analysis of the Russian coverage finds depictions of a dirty primary election campaign in the Democratic party with dishonest candidates seeking to frame one another and play tactical games behind the scenes. The various accusations, leaks, and outbursts framed the election process itself as a dysfunctional elite project with angry or disappointed voters appearing occasionally to air their mistrust and dislike (Burrett, 2020, p. 13).

Biden continued to be portrayed negatively in the ensuing presidential election campaign. Oates et al. (2020) conclude their study about the

links between US websites and RT/Sputnik coverage by identifying a strong narrative alignment between Fox News tweets and RT/Sputnik coverage with regard to the coverage of Biden and his presidential campaign. They write that Sputnik and RT depict Joe Biden as “a placeholder for leftist conspiracy” as well as “corrupt” almost to the same extent as Fox News, while the narrative “Joe Biden is senile or sunseting and a sexual deviant” appeared more often in RT and Sputnik than on Fox News (Oates et al., 2020, p. 10).

The analysis of the Russian coverage of the US primaries for the 2020 presidential election gives more detailed information about the epithets used to define the Democratic party candidates. It also discusses the image of the US constructed by the Russian state-affiliated media, which can be described as a US with a weak political system marked by hypocrisy and failing democracy, and a deeply divided population politically (Burrett, 2020, p. 14).

Looking at the treatment of candidates in Russian (RT) and Chinese (CGTN) news coverage over an extended period during the 2020 election campaign, Moore and Colley (2022) found in their analysis of RT, over a six-week period between September 29 and November 10, 2020, that over half the sampled articles focused on Donald Trump, whereas Joe Biden featured in about one-third. However, it was not just that Trump received a lot more attention; he was also by far the favored candidate (p. 8). The Biden family was accused of being a family of criminals; Joe Biden of being physically and mentally frail and his son, Hunter Biden, repeatedly referred to as corrupt and involved in scandals. When the two candidates are compared, Trump is held to be the people’s strong man and praised on everything from foreign policy achievements to bodily constitution, having succeeded in combating the Covid-19 virus (p. 8). Furthermore, the RT coverage was found to support Trump with regard to his outlook on the US political and social situation. In line with the Trump campaign, the channel presented the electoral process as fraudulent, and the US as in a state of chaos as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement and the “riotous American Left”, using the Trump campaign’s reference to “Antifa”.³

³ Antifa is a loosely held together organization that unites activists protesting against authority, fascism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Sometimes the members work with other activist networks such as Black Lives Matter. Activists are divided on the justification of the use violence in their protests. Some activists dress in black and wear masks and some would argue that it is an anarchist movement (Bogel-Burroughs & Garcia, 2020).

In line with the work of Jamieson (2018), Moore and Colley (2022) find ample evidence for RT's far-right leanings, giving examples of positive depictions of the far-right Proud Boys group, referred to as "good husbands" and defenders of democracy and freedom of speech. Tensions between Afro-American communities and others in the US are paralleled with extensive coverage of US so-called culture wars, with "legacy media" as the key target for criticism along with the technology corporations Facebook and Twitter. Moore and Colley refer to RT in this context as "a domestic culture warrior" (p. 17). Added to this are unsympathetic depictions of celebrities with liberal leanings who are seen as naive, weak, and unwilling to defend conservative values (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 11).

The findings of Moore and Colley's study are in many respects similar to those of other analyses of RT coverage (Hoyle et al. 2023; Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022), such as on how the international channel reports as if it were a domestic news outlet taking an inside perspective (see Chap. 2). The presenters are said to use terms such as "our society" and "our media" when reporting on conditions in the US. This, write Moore and Colley, "strengthens RT's attempt to appear as an authentic domestic US voice rather than a foreign news outlet" (pp. 11–12), which is further underlined by the omission of references to Russia in its news reports. "It frames issues in a partisan way that mimics US right-wing news media, giving the impression it is a domestic participant in US culture wars, fighting against 'woke' liberal elites rather than an external observer" (p. 18). The coverage of the US presidential election thus reflects an anti-establishment position and argues wherever possible against Big Tech industry, the mainstream media, celebrities, and the so-called Washington elite (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 17).

Ukraine

A considerable amount of research has been conducted with regard to Russian disinformation about Ukraine centered on the events that began with the street protests in 2013 (referred to as the Euromaidan uprising since it began on the Maidan square in Kyiv following President Yanukovich's refusal to sign European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement.), which erupted following the decision by president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich not to bring the country closer to the EU by signing an Association Agreement. When the regime used force to put a stop to the protests, they spread from student communities mainly in Kyiv

across the country and became a movement against the authoritarian regime. Yanukovych was ousted but the country was left internally divided with pro-Russian separatists in the east and a pro-EU government in Kyiv. In February and March of 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and, while many Western countries and others condemned the annexation, excluding Russia from a number of international organizations and imposing economic sanctions, hostilities continued in the east. In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, starting a full-scale war. This is not the place to do justice to the role of disinformation in either the run-up to the Russian annexation of Crimea or its invasion of Ukraine. Instead, this section presents the findings of various studies on Russian disinformation in a state it considers to be part of its sphere of influence, with which Russia and its population share a past but, due to which, it finds itself in direct confrontation with Western and European ideals and values (see Claessen, 2023; Chaban et al., 2023).

In her analysis of Russian television coverage (Channel One) between 2012 and 2014—before and after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Khaldarova (2021) found that the framing of Ukraine went from a fraternal depiction as Russia’s little brother to a hostile “other”. Drawing on narrative theory and applying Wagnsson and Barzanje’s narrative strategies (2021) to Russian e-news platforms, Chaban et al. (2023) found similar projections of the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. The strategic narratives that shaped the Russian discourse were an antagonistic communication strategy. Ukraine was moving away from Russia, turning into an other, in this case as a result of seeking visa-free access to the EU, and “emerges as a wretched international player and a worthless partner”, as well as “a contemporary antagonist of Russia” (Chaban et al., 2023, pp. 15–16).

In Khaldarova’s study, turning into a hostile other is connected to the Euromaidan protests and pro-EU movement, and the Russian news reports began to define the protestors as aggressive ultra-right radicals, personifying them as fascists and “heavily-built men with covered faces wielding clubs and other weapons”. It broadcasts reports that stressed the destruction the protestors left in their wake (Khaldarova, 2021, p. 14). A terminology reminiscent of World War II became more frequent as references were made to “genocide” and “mass graves”.

The Ukrainian government was associated with the terms “junta” and “neo-Nazi” (p. 15). News coverage on Channel One was found to have undergone a gradual narrative turn from positioning Ukraine as a

subordinate younger sibling in need of Russian benevolence to depicting it as a distrusted and deceptive actor with a growing acceptance of ultra-right groups and “fascists”. In Chaban et al. (2023), the narrative speaks of betrayal as Ukraine becomes increasingly pro-European. Shortly before the outbreak of the Maidan upheavals, both the Ukraine government and pro-EU Ukrainians are reported as being reckless and irresponsible, “fuel[ling] anti-Russian hysteria”, and allowing members of ultra-right parties into parliament. As the protests continue, the Ukrainian government and the pro-EU protestors are no longer foolish, naïve, and misguided, but increasingly referred to as fascists and “monsters”. These depictions became more pronounced after clashes in Odessa in May 2014 when many people died. The more radical the language, the more antagonistic the representations of the pro-EU Ukrainians. Khaldarova writes:

The channel also began employing dehumanized characterizations, such as ‘monsters’ in reference to Ukrainians....The radical groups’ members were distinguished from other Ukrainians only when it was necessary to emphasize that people in Ukraine (especially Russian speakers) were suffering from the massive spread of fascism in their country. (Khaldarova, 2021, p. 14)

Visuals further stressed the contrasts between pro-EU Ukrainians and Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians. In their study, Grigor (Khaldarova) and Pantti (2021) analyzed Channel One visuals in combination with texts and verbal commentary for a period of six months in 2014 that overlapped with the larger study referred to above. Their analysis shows that the Russian news coverage highlighted the suffering of civilians, mainly Russian-speaking eastern Ukrainians, due to the war, and their struggles to survive or flee. There were numerous images of worried, crying, or sad-looking mothers holding their children close. Intermingled with these stories were also fake reports of mothers talking about Ukrainian atrocities and brutality (Grigor [Khaldarova] & Pantti, 2021, p. 150).

In the fall of 2014, Channel One added a military dimension to its coverage by paying special attention to the Ukrainian army. Ukrainian troops, often labelled fascists, were reported to have destroyed Soviet monuments and World War II war memorials. When Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down in eastern Ukraine, blaming the Ukrainian army fitted well with the established narrative of Ukraine as the hostile other (Khaldarova, 2021, p. 16). Overall, the narrative about Ukraine is one in which Russians are devastated, and suffering under a Russo-phobic

and fascist government. The visuals reinforce this message (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2021, p. 150; see also Hutchings & Szostek, 2015).

It should be noted that the coverage of Ukraine is set in a different context compared to how RT and Sputnik report on European states and the US. In their comparative study of European countries and the United States, Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) decided to include Ukraine due to its “unique position as a target (and subject) of Russian propaganda” (p. 72). Ukraine can be seen as a case where disinformation is targeted at a country under extraordinary political and military pressure (p. 72). However, whereas the other states analyzed in this context are unquestionably part of the Western sphere, despite its ambitions to position itself as Western and European, Ukraine is not perceived as such from a Russian perspective. Furthermore, the Russian military invasion made Ukraine a different case from the countries not subject to military aggression. This does not exclude Russian news coverage from being used for disinformation to destabilize the country. On the contrary, this is why Russian and pro-Russian news outlets have been banned from Ukraine.⁴ However, proper exploration of disinformation under these circumstances calls for a different research design than that which the current study can offer. Studies on war journalism tend to highlight a number of difficulties with news coverage and information flows during armed conflict, some of which are somewhat similar to the disinformation discussed in this book, others of a different nature.

However, research has found that the strategies of Russian disinformation used against Western Europe, most notably in the US presidential election of 2016, were first developed and tested during the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021, p. 4664). In a study on the so-called 4D strategies, dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay (see Snegovaya, 2015), which originated in Cold War Soviet propaganda of reflexive control, Doroshenko and Lukito show that all four strategies were used by way of Twitter and Internet Research Agency (IRA) handles, supported by offline Russian news. They write: “Russian media supported the IRA’s disinformation campaign by characterizing the Ukrainian government as illegitimate and brutal, using derogatory terms such as ‘the

⁴In February 2021 President Zelensky announced sanctions against three channels owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, a Russia-friendly Ukrainian oligarch and parliamentarian, 112 Ukraine, NewsOne and ZiK.

fascist junta' and 'Banderites', referring to Ukrainian WWII independence movement leader Stepan Bandera" (p. 4666)

African States

Russian disinformation in African states has perhaps not been highlighted to the same extent as it has in Europe, but French scholars have shown that RT France and Sputnik have significant audiences in several French-speaking countries in Africa. In fact, RT is much more popular in the French-speaking countries of Africa than it is in France (Limonier, 2019). Sputnik is the more popular and widespread of the two. Limonier suggests that this might be due to Sputnik's more local targeting strategies, using content grounded in local media or blogs (pp. 8–9). He writes that Sputnik has inherited a "certain tradition of sensationalism which is well-adapted to modern techniques for optimizing visibility, such as clickbait", a phenomenon where the number of visits to websites is used for marketing purposes and where content is sensationalist in order to attract large numbers of visits (Limonier, 2019, p. 9).

From empirical studies it seems that use of the Russian international channels, in contrast to what has been found in Europe and the US, is more geared to winning hearts and minds than denigrating, smearing, and weakening African societies. It is worth stressing that the Russian state media's coverage of the Sahel region, for instance, does not show domestic perspectives on the situation in the African states or in hexagonal France. Instead, the coverage contains stories with negative projections of France with reference to neo-colonialism and past colonialism (Audinet, 2021, p. 69), but there is little coverage of domestic frailties, violence, and conflict (see e.g. Limonier, 2019; Audinet, 2021). So much so that the term public diplomacy might be a better choice of word than disinformation, since it connotes the type of non-confrontational strategic communication in which Sputnik and RT are engaged in with the African states. At the same time it should be noted that the popularity of RT and Sputnik in Africa is also due to the successful adoption of Russian media content by African actors who use it to advance their own political agendas (Limonier & Laruelle, 2021, p. 417). Analyses of RT and Sputnik news content in French-speaking African states find that it tends to legitimize the Russian presence in Africa and, as part of that endeavor, to sow doubts regarding the usefulness and achievements of the French contingent in the region (Limonier, 2019). When they appear in the news coverage, France

and its deployed forces tend to be presented as failing or performing badly in their fight against terrorism in support of the Sahel governments. In comparison, the Russian forces are reported to have been more successful.

Limonier writes that: “RT and Sputnik news agencies have succeeded in their aim to obtain the ‘normalization’ and institutionalization of their position as part of the media landscape of French-speaking Africa” (Limonier, 2019, p. 19). At the same time, the study finds considerable differences between countries with regard to the frequency with which RT or Sputnik content is accessed or disseminated, and the type of news content that is spread. With regard to politically relevant content, Algeria, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast were shown to be among the French-speaking countries with the largest number of sites on which RT and Sputnik could be found. On the content of the news, the study calls for more research but lists the situation in the Middle East, and Syria in particular, Israel, and Palestine, as well as news of a more local character.

One geopolitically hot topic reported on by Sputnik France and RT France was Operation Barkhane, which was launched in 2014 as an anti-insurgency military operation in the Sahel region to support the governments of Chad, Niger, the Central African Republic (CAR), Burkina Faso, Mauretania, and Mali to maintain control of their territory. After a coup d’état in Mali in 2021, the French government decided to pull out and the operation ended in November 2022. Audinet found in his study of RT France and Sputnik France coverage of the operation that both reported critically about the French forces and their presence in the Sahel region (Audinet, 2021, 59pp). The study of news reports from the beginning of 2018 to the end of 2020 showed that, contrary to what has been found in most other studies on RT and Sputnik, two-thirds of the articles were fact-based, written in an analytical style and neutral/impartial with regard to the French presence in the region. Around one-fifth of the articles were polemical or sensationalist, with news criticizing the management of the operation and the lack of political strategy, which was said to have aggravated the terrorism it was meant to reduce. As little as 10% denigrated the French presence in the area. These negative and critical news stories, however, were often satirical, sarcastic, and ironic, and the problems with the operation were reported as connected to the French colonial past. There is for example an RT video showing a sick soldier collapsing next to President Macron on a visit to the base in N’Djamena, having just sung the Marseillaise (RT France Dec 24 2018, referenced by Audinet, 2021, p. 65).

There seems to be little if any of the kind of disinformation found in RT and Sputnik coverage of European countries involving distorted messages, lies, and derogatory depictions of leaders or of deteriorating societies (p. 69). Audinet's case study on CAR, where the coverage was produced mainly by Russian journalists, tells a different story with regard to topics and frames, but shares with the former case the format of fact-based and analytical news (2021). One of the major themes in the coverage is the competition for power on the African continent, in which France is losing influence, which is demonstrated by a number of news stories that deal only with the Russian presence and engagements in CAR, completely ignoring French significance and influence (Audinet, 2021, p. 72 referring to Sputnik France 20 April, 2018 and 10 December 2018). There are reports on summits between the Russians and the French in regard to CAR as well as political statements referring to the Russian presence in Africa, with a senior French diplomat warning against what he refers to as "la présence de mercenaires russes en Centrafrique" [The presence of Russian mercenaries in the Central African Republic] pursuing an anti-French policy in CAR (Audinet, 2021, p. 72 referring to Sputnik France January 24, 2019). Only occasionally are there articles attacking the French position using emotional language and a hostile tone. The journalist behind the greatest number of chronicles and editorials contrasts Russian stability with French chaos and mocks "l'hystérie élyséenne", interpreting French presidential outbursts as a response to the alliance forming between CAR and Russia (Audinet, 2021, p. 76).

IN SUM

This chapter has presented research that has used mainly qualitative methods to study Russian disinformation through Sputnik and RT in various European countries, the United States, and some African countries. The review found similarities in several respects. Much of the coverage is of domestic news about the target country and includes, in almost all cases, conflicts and problems related to immigration, social unrest, and public mistrust of the authorities and governments. In countries such as France, Germany, and the United States, studies of disinformation activities during election campaigns have shown that RT and Sputnik tend to support right-wing conservative candidates and parties, have sought to denigrate leftist and centrist candidates, and seek to sabotage information flows. In coverage where Russian interests have been at stake, analyses have shown

that RT and Sputnik not only denigrate the target country, but also defend Russian security interests.

The studies about the Skripal poisoning and the downing of flight MH17 were two such events where the Russian authorities made use of RT and Sputnik to create coverage in their defense and in so doing engaged in disinformation. By contrast, other studies of news output during an extended period that focus on day-to-day coverage found Russian foreign policy and political views largely absent from the news. Even if studies of separate cases, crises, and election campaigns make relevant and insightful contributions to our understanding of disinformation, the disinformation that they reveal should not be defined as occasional or disparate campaigns. The kind of disinformation that is carried out by state international news organizations represents an everyday practice with harmful narratives being produced and disseminated on a daily basis on whatever topics set the news agenda at that particular moment.

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Narrative Analysis and Framing Analysis of Disinformation

INTRODUCTION

The method of analysis of this study is narrative analysis. It is complemented by a framing analysis, the latter which intends to give an overview of how problems and solutions are addressed and constructed in the news coverage of the two Russian state news channels, RT and Sputnik, that broadcast for an international audience in English. The two methods, framing analysis and narrative analysis, are also compared in order to bring out their strengths and weaknesses. The chapter is centered on narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is particularly useful in a study where the ambition is to make manifest what bearing the construction of news stories has on the meaning making, in this case. The narratives studied are state-supported strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017). The messages of the news are relevant to the question of how Russian state-affiliated news channels depict Sweden, but of equal significance is how the news are narrated. Therefore, each plot of the coverage, e.g. the storytelling of the individual news pieces/articles, was analyzed in-depth to identify both the features of the plot and how these are connected and structure the plot. The plots were then grouped together which led to the definition of the narratives.

DEFINING “NARRATIVE” AND STRATEGIC NARRATIVES

Narratives in their most simple form are storytelling. They focus on a sequence of events where an aspect of the status quo is breached as a result of an impetus, which could be a problem, and there is progress to a new point of status quo (in some cases a resolution) or a restoration of equilibrium. In line with Bruner, this book defines narrative as:

a sequence of events that carries meaning and is justified, at least in part, by the fact that it somehow violates what is normal or expected. We do not narrate all the details of any circumstance; what we choose to narrate is generally noteworthy because it stands out by posing a problem or exception. The point of the narrative is to resolve the imbalance or uncertainty of the problem and to restore equilibrium. (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 320, referring to Bruner, 1996)

The everyday disinformation that this study explores is perceived as a strategic narrative. The term “strategic” assumes an understanding of intent, meaning that there is determination and an objective behind the narrative. The term does not indicate that the intent is either malicious or benign, but only that the narrative has direction and purpose. However, in the context of Russian disinformation, strategic narratives refer to stories being told to achieve political influence over target countries. Accordingly, they are defined as: “a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al., 2017).

STUDYING NARRATIVE: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Narrative offers a route to insight about the appeal and resonance of disinformation (see Ruston, 2017). Narratives are central to how humans make sense of the world and award significance (Branigan, 1992; Bruner, 1991; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011; Fisher, 1984), and central to identity formation (Polkinghorne, 1988). It is by understanding narratives as systems that we can gain a closer understanding of the relationships between narratives that span time or place, or audiences. Because of the link between narrative and identity (Polkinghorne, 1988; Somers, 1994; Spence, 1983), and narrative and decision-making (Ruston, 2017;

Winterbottom et al., 2008), a thorough analysis of malicious narratives calls attention to narratives as security practices. Telling stories about “the other” has the potential to alienate states from one another, or to bring about rapprochement and create alliances between them. In this sense, constructing or disseminating strategic narratives has real-world consequences for national and international politics. This study views the role and significance of narratives as similar to the three roles defined by Ruston (2017). He writes that narratives are critically important not only because they are systems of stories, and as such sociocultural objects, but because “a narrative is also a mode of comprehension”. Narratives carry and create values and ideologies, but they are also to be considered practices in that they “structure consequences, meaning, and significance through the relationships of the actions/event, actors/agents, and referents operating within the system” (Ruston, 2017, p. 28).

In other words, narratives are systems that involve actors, events, locations, and temporality, and that cohere within a structure of conflict, desire, action, and resolution. Through the relationships between the constituent stories and their structures, narratives embody specific values and provide cognitive templates for understanding contemporary events and situations. In addition, narratives are relationally constructed in that they take on meaning and have impact only when they interact and relate to other narratives, or are connected to personal and collective identities (Archetti, 2018). They must not be seen as messages, packaged and transmitted from sender to receiver; nor should they be expected to be received like a “hypodermic needle model of communication” (Archetti, 2018, p. 233 referring to Rogers, 2003, p. 303). Thus, while studies of disinformation that trace the flow and amplification of topics are important, they lack analysis of how topics take on meaning through the connectivity of their constituent parts and through storytelling structures, and therefore tend to overlook critical elements of how disinformation might resonate with key groups or invite identification with audiences.

Narratives, in particular strategic narratives, contain features that might stir strong responses of either appeal or repulsion. Narratives call for less cognitive interpretation, prior insight, or knowledge than rational discourse (Fisher, 1984). A convincing narrative might be built on personal experience and not on what is scientifically known, what experts claim, or what can be logically or rationally reasoned. Nor must narratives provide accounts of different and opposing arguments and viewpoints, or present various perspectives in order to have political significance. Even if

arguments can be part of narratives, the kind of communication that centers on narratives rather than rational discourse might downplay critical arguments and debates where different sides of a question are juxtaposed, and treat opposite views as disruptions or outright threats to the coherence of the story. It is much more difficult to build convincing and coherent narratives with several contrasting viewpoints. In new patterns of media consumption where people are increasingly consuming news that they personally seek out, rather than as passive recipients of mass media output provided for them, opposing narratives can be filtered out or, if recognized at all, be treated as hostile. Acceptance of opposing viewpoints as equally valid is likely to diminish. It has been suggested that one purpose of harmful strategic narratives targeted at foreign audiences is to destabilize democratic societies by reinforcing and enhancing polarization.

HOW MESSAGES ARE EMBEDDED IN NARRATIVES

The underlying idea behind undertaking a narrative analysis is that meaning is constructed through narratives and that an analysis of narratives can extract these meanings and expose them. A narrative analysis therefore aims to answer questions about both *what* is being told in the story and *how* the story is being told (Chatman, 1978, Robertson, 2005, p. 221); and, by combining the two, to identify the messages they contain. In this analysis, I am interested in what the Russian state media reported about Sweden, but also in learning about the meanings that were produced through the news reports. Narrative analysis is especially suitable for helping to answer such questions. The way in which the story is told is key to learning about how messages are produced.

In contrast to other similar methods of qualitative content analysis, narrative analysis aims to trace the meaning making of the text through its temporal and spatial aspects. It is through the momentum of the text, the chronology, and the way in which the different components of the text are linked together in sequences that the story takes on meaning. A narrative can in this sense be likened to a theater play where the story to be told by the actors on the stage has a definite starting point (a situation of status quo) which is transformed by the introduction of an event, dilemma, or intervening incident/factor. The breach of the status quo moves the play forward and eventually reaches a conclusion where a new status quo is established. For the narrative to be driven forward and gain momentum, there must be intervening actors, and there is also a stage or space on

which the actors are positioned in relation to one another, but also to the context, the space, the temporality, and the problem. The aim of the analysis is to deconstruct and define the basic structure of the narrative of each article. This is referred to as the plot. In order to identify and thereby disclose the meaning of the narrative, the plots are analyzed and aggregated into patterns that stretch over numerous articles published over an extended period. The narrative is thus an aggregation of plots.

SAMPLING NEWS ABOUT THREE THEMES: CLIMATE CHANGE, PUBLIC HEALTH, AND MORAL VALUES AND ETHICS

The narratives selected for analysis were those produced by the two key actors: the two Russian state-controlled media outlets, Sputnik and RT. These are known to be part of the Kremlin's media operation and are often referred to as "weapons of information" in Russia's attacks on the West (see Chap. 2). They were selected for analysis because they have been engaged in disinformation about Sweden for several years and, until the spring of 2022, were easily and freely accessible to a Swedish audience through the internet. It was no secret that these media outlets were intended to work as Russian propaganda and cultivators of disinformation with the intention of harming Western societies, Sweden included. This section presents the material and samples used for the analysis.

To enable an in-depth exploration of the narratives of RT and Sputnik, a decision was made to limit the empirical analysis to news coverage of three themes: the environment and/or climate change, referred to as the environment; public health; and moral values and ethics; as well as to material published between July 1, 2019 and January 31, 2021. These are broad themes that cover topical issues, but which do not necessarily include sensational news or dramatic events, or themes that are antagonistic in themselves. Topics such as crime, law, and order and immigration were rejected on those grounds, and because they were predicted to be more blatantly derogatory. I wanted categories that would cover different aspects of the Russian output, which would reveal underlying values, and are perhaps more resistant to change (values, morals, ethics) and touch on issues where Russia tends to be critical of the West. It is for example well established that the Russian government has for many years denigrated the West, using moral and ethical arguments that depict it as decadent.

Environmental issues and climate change are subjects where Russia might use its inferior position to show that the West while proclaiming itself to be best in class, has flaws and shortcomings—perhaps by not being as independent of fossil fuels and good at limiting pollution as proclaimed. The chosen themes were therefore believed to provide a satisfying variety of issues and a relatively broad scope of news to be analyzed.

As coding and analysis of the material progressed, it became increasingly obvious that the third theme, on moral values and ethics, offered the most interesting and relevant news reports for the purposes of the study, but also that it was too broadly defined. It garnered a set of disparate and varied news items about topics ranging from anti-Semitism to IKEA's Christmas advertising campaign. A closer look at the selected news on the theme, however, found that they were better categorized as culture, gender, and (anti-)liberalism. The common denominator was that they all raised questions about identity and underlying values, most often in connection with the Swedish nation. The themes analyzed in the study from this point on, and which formed the structure of the analysis throughout, were therefore: climate change, public health, gender, culture (tradition and national heritage), and (anti-)liberalism.

The Sample Used for Analysis

News items were selected if their main content was on any one of the three themes, they depicted Sweden and were published between July 1, 2019 and January 31, 2021. The theme of public health was almost entirely centered on Covid-19 and the climate change items were almost all about Greta Thunberg, the globally recognized Swedish then-teenaged climate activist. The other topics covered more varied content. The Sputnik items were found on the Sputnik news archive on its website. The RT items were intended to represent not only RT, but also televised items about Sweden. These were accessed through the internet archive using the search words Sweden and Swedish. This search yielded only a few television items about Sweden during the time period with particular reference to the three themes. It appears that RT television programming covered only one major question about Sweden at a time, which at that particular time were the legal proceedings against Julian Assange and related events. The number of RT items of relevance for the study therefore ended up being quite small. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show the distribution of themes in the two news channels.

Table 4.1 Corpus:
Sputnik Sweden

<i>Topic area</i>	<i>Number of articles identified</i>
Climate change	60 (of which 50 were on Greta Thunberg)
Public health	67 (of which 65 were on Covid-19)
Gender	67
Culture	47
Anti-liberalism	65
Total	289

Table 4.2 Corpus:
RT Sweden

<i>Topic area</i>	<i>Number of articles identified</i>
Climate change	1
Public health	17 (all Covid-19)
Gender	5
Culture	
Anti-liberalism	
Total	23

Analysis of Sources

The first level of analysis sought to identify the distribution of sources in the news articles. Identifying and analyzing the sources used is of particular interest, since Sputnik rarely publishes stories written by its own journalists. Its staff members have little or no presence at the location of events and do not conduct interviews, what Widholm terms desk reporting (2016). Instead, Sputnik base their articles on Swedish media sources. By identifying the sources used, we can learn more about how Sputnik and RT interact with the Swedish media ecosystem.

It was asked to what extent the sources used were domestic or foreign, or whether the Russian media behave like international news media reporting about Sweden as a foreign country or were more like domestic media. It has been argued that Russian state media tend to link up with domestic alt-right media. A question was therefore asked about the use by Sputnik and RT of Swedish mainstream and public service media relative to alternative or fringe media.

In addition, because it is often claimed that RT and Sputnik represent anti-establishment media, it was interesting to find out whether there were

a greater number of ordinary people and activists represented in the stories than political and economic elite or establishment spokespeople. Finally, it was asked in what ways different news themes relied on experts as sources.

FRAMING ANALYSIS

The second level of analysis was a framing analysis. The intention was to find out how issues were depicted within each theme, and qualitative framing analysis made it possible to include all the items and categorize the results. The distribution of frames also aimed to provide a context in which the narratives could be related in terms of amount of coverage or the frequency with which a certain problem was depicted.

Framing is a method that seeks to identify the core message of a text and explore how it acquires meaning through the way in which it is presented. One of its main proponents defines framing in an oft-cited quote:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (Entman, 1993, p. 52)

Framing therefore defines the nature of the problem described in a particular text and how it is depicted, and therefore moves beyond the mere denotative level of analysis to focus on how a news item connotes meaning. Framing is an organizing principle that gives meaning to texts and, as Reese writes, frames “work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese in Reese et al., 2003, p. 11).

Entman (1993) provides a set of generic questions that can be used in almost any type of analysis. These include questions about the definition of the problem, the causes of the problem, how the agents involved and their performance should be evaluated, what solutions or remedies suggested are justified, and what the expected results are. Other scholars propose standard frames derived from previous framing analyses, such as a conflict frame, the attribution of responsibility frame, the economic consequences frame, or the human interest frame (see Scheufele, 1999, p. 106; Neuman et al., 1992, p. 64, Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

A news item about the Covid-19 crisis, for instance, might, depending on how it is being reported, be framed as medical news, a political crisis,

an anti-immigration piece, a gender-related piece, and so on. A framing analysis can identify patterns of messaging that cut across topics and present different issues as similar problems. The content categorized according to frames will give a picture of the problems, solutions, and values that give meaning to the content and move beyond the mere topic (the denotative level of meaning making). This appeared to be an especially useful method in the case of Sputnik, since previous research has found that the coverage is characterized by a small number of very strong patterns or routines for how news items are packaged and structured (Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021). Framing analysis can be applied as both a quantitative and a qualitative method. Even with a distribution of frames according to categories and with numbers, the analysis to determine the framing was qualitative and still involved a relatively high degree of interpretation.

Based on a first round of coding of narrative features (see A to F below), each article was assigned a frame, which was developed inductively. This comprised a summary of the content at a generic level. For example, a story about IKEA receiving a storm of criticism for supposedly calling their December campaign a “holidays campaign” instead of a “Christmas campaign” was summarized as: “IKEA has gone too far in adapting to the non-Christian population: strong negative reactions from people”. Based on the frames identified, categories were developed giving four or five frames for each of the five themes. Each item was then assigned a maximum of two framing categories. The IKEA article for example was coded as the framing category: “selling out Sweden”. Before describing the narrative method of analysis, the next section deepens understanding of framing analysis and explains its relation to narrative analysis.

How Framing Analysis Differs from Narrative Analysis

As was discussed above, framing analysis is useful for revealing how problems are defined, solutions presented, and responsibilities assigned to different actors. It seeks to delineate the node around which a message or discourse is centered. Framing as a phenomenon dates back to Erving Goffman’s writing (1974) about how people seek influence and strive to reach their goals by way of communication. He did not engage with media, but other scholars found his theories useful in relation to mediated communication. Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3) defined a frame as “a central organizing idea for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue”. Since this might also be seen as way to describe news

journalism, framing became connected with journalism. As the concept was brought into the study of media and communication, most notably by Entman (1993), it was developed into a methodology applied to analysis of how media and mediated communication exercise influence and power. Framing became a way to conceive of power and influence. It was argued that political agents who managed to frame issues and problems in ways that made them more attractive could strengthen their power positions, and would be better placed than their counterparts to gain popularity, win elections, or influence political decision making. Scholars of critical theory would add that the major media institutions, by way of their media logics or for political-economic reasons, would contribute to and reinforce the dominant framing and make it more difficult for other frames to gain attention (see e.g. McKnight & McNair, 2012). The same logic might be applied to Russian disinformation, albeit from a foreign perspective and with malign intent. For example, if RT and Sputnik repeatedly frame news about migration to Sweden as crime stories, and the frame comes to dominate the Swedish media networks, this constrains politicians from discussing migration from other perspectives, as something other than criminal activity, at least without being forced to explain why.

In this sense the framing of a problem has consequences for which solutions might be acceptable and legitimate for resolving the problem, who to hold accountable and to whom the public will turn for solutions. Framing analysis can trace and explain how social issues and problems are constructed and how frames differ between opposing parties, sometimes in the form of frame games or “framing contests” (Entman, 2003, p. 417), and the possible social and political consequences.

One advantage of framing analysis is its fairly strict focus on how problems and solutions are constructed and made sense of, as the above-mentioned categories attest. This enables systematic studies of news content and the construction of news, but also of how framing is connected to journalistic norms, values, organizational cultures and routines, among other things (see Scheufele, 1999, p. 109), and to the adoption of these frames by the audience. Audiences, politicians, and the media are all engaged in framing activities; and the interrelationships between their framing of political issues and questions have consequences for all three. This is important for politicians’ abilities to legitimize their decisions, for public trust in state institutions, and for audience loyalty to media institutions. When applied to Russian state media’s news framing of a target country, it is important to take into account that the media outlet is a

foreign actor using news reporting to negatively frame events in the target country and seeking to gain public trust in part at least by deviating from politician's framing of events, while also quite possibly intentionally seeking to exaggerate the discrepancies between the establishment's and the citizens' framing of problems. Livingstone and Nassetta (2018) argue that the transnational setting and the communication being about disinformation campaigns make framing a less useful methodological approach because it is based on the relationship between national news organizations and political institutions.

Moreover, framing has only limited capacity to reveal how news stories are structured in order to generate meaning. It aims to locate the key point of the meaning making (the problem), but does not always help to position actors in relation to one another, contextualize events, or take account of emotions and atmosphere. It tends to focus mainly on rational discourse, in which truth and reason are sought, such as on the best course of action or why a political strategy failed to deliver.

This is where narrative analysis is a better choice for in-depth studies of disinformation, since narratives are not grounded in rationality. De Fina and Georgakopoulou refer to works by Bruner (1986) that talk about narrative as a mode of "thought, communication and apprehension of reality" based on stories in contrast to the logo-scientific mode which is based on arguments (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011, p. 15). De Fina and Georgakopoulou write in reference to Bruner that

in the narrative mode, meaning is not presented in terms of definitive truths, as, for example, in scientific writings where the results of experiments are reported, but as ambiguous and open to exploration. (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011, p. 16)

Another major difference between framing and narrative analysis is the latter's focus on sequences of events and the connectedness of parts (see Somers, 1994). The basis for both the understanding and the analysis of narratives is that they are reliant on time and how sequences of events (plots) move forward. The point of departure for a narrative is a situation of status quo. Some external impetus or, as Bruner writes, "something that violates what is normal and expected" ruptures the status quo and sets the story in motion. Then, in its standard format, the narrative finds its resolution in the establishment of a new status quo. Thus, the imbalance is resolved and equilibrium restored (Bruner, 1996, p. 90). In contrast to

framing, which has no such ambitions, narrative analysis seeks to describe this movement in order to capture the meaning that is generated in the process. In other words, the way in which the story is told is as relevant to the analysis as what is being told, and the two aspects are linked.

Like framing analysis, however, narrative analysis pays attention to how the problem is defined, but only as one dimension of what storytelling entails. The ways in which the problem is related to the other parts of the story are more important, including how the actors are described and the roles they are assigned, the environment in which the story takes place, the tone of voice of the story, and the expression or lack of emotion.

A sequence of events moves the plot forward and the identity positions of and relationships between the characters are formed as this takes place, be this how states are defined in the international system or how categories of the population are positioned. Underlying these notions is a narrative ontology, which also sets the narrative analysis apart from framing analysis (see Somers, 1994), and stresses the construction of actors' identities through their positioning in the narrative.

In the analysis of Sputnik and RT's news coverage of Sweden, the two methods complemented each other. The framing analysis focused on how the problem in the news item was made sense of and the type of problem the topics were defined as. To describe how RT and Sputnik built their messaging about Sweden, however, narrative analysis was more suitable for capturing the structure of the storytelling, which parts and relationships were depicted, how these were connected to one another in time and space, and moving the sequence of events forward. Including the analysis of the sources, the three levels of analysis were applied to present different aspects of the content, highlighting and stressing different features of the Russian state media's image of Sweden.

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING THE NARRATIVES

It is the narrative analysis, however, that provides the most in-depth understanding of the news messages, and is the type of analysis that best captures how the news coverage is constructed to project Sweden. It is through the momentum of the text, the chronology, the way in which the different components of the text are linked together in sequences, and how pieces of information are put together or distinguished that the story takes on meaning (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). The interconnectedness of the parts of the narrative is key to a narrative analysis.

Somers (1994), from which the methodology used here takes its inspiration, describes these “constellations of relationships (connected parts) as embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment”. She calls the features of the narrative: (a) relationality of parts; (b) causal emplotment; (c) selective appropriation; and (d) temporality, sequence, and place (Somers, 1994, p. 616). In line with Somers, the analysis placed great emphasis on how the parts of the plot related to each other, but also on whether stories had similar structures and meaning, and formed patterns of messaging. Causal emplotment means that the different parts are connected in causal relationships: A happens because of B. Selective appropriation is similar to framing in that a delimiting interpretation or approach is adopted that serves as an organizing principle for value judgements and future interpretation. Temporality, sequence, and place are linked with what happens, where and when, and how the parts of the story are ordered in the narrative.

The argument that narrative methodology requires analytical attention to be focused on relations leads to an almost equally strong call for emphasis on identities. Narrative analysis has been found to be particularly useful for identifying identity constructions (de Fina, 2015; Hellman, 2007). The positionality of the people, organizations, institutions, and states appearing in the narratives is key to how RT and Sputnik depict Sweden. Thus, the coding of actors participating in the news involves not just naming them, but interpreting their role and the position they are assigned (see Patterson & Monroe, 1998).

The narrative analysis of the study took in all aspects of the coding, but was mainly centered on problem, solution, and temporality, along with a summary of the unfolding of events. The roles assigned to different actors were also central. Attention was paid to the structure and chronology of the news items, and how sections about context were linked to the “hook” of the story, or what is highlighted as the violation of the status quo. This latter aspect was found to be especially important. There might for example be a story about Covid-19, to which was added a background paragraph, not tied in to the narrative, containing figures about a drastic increase in the number of migrants to Sweden. The problem was thus not so much the Covid-19 pandemic itself, but that immigrants refused to abide by the already highly liberal restrictions. The lack of integration of the background information into the plot might be seen as a silent call to readers to make the connections themselves. The narrative analysis is thus both about coding for the narrative features of the plots, and paying

attention to the sequencing of events and how different components of the story—events, facts, actors, ideas, emotions, and so on—are linked and take on meaning through the way in which they are positioned in relation to one another.

The intention of the analysis is, first, to deconstruct and define the basic structure of the narrative of each article (the plot) and what narrative features are being used, to enable identification of the meaning of the broader narrative system over a number of articles. This is a way to grasp the main threads and patterns of the messages in the news coverage. This method has been found to be particularly useful when analyzing material that follows a relatively strict structure, which previous research has found to be the case with Sputnik (Hellman, 2021; Wagnsson & Barzanje, 2021), and when the aim is to understand discursively how the news story is imbued with certain messages.

Each item underwent a narrative coding procedure, which identified a plot, or the storytelling, of each item ($N = 312$). After coding each item, the plots were aggregated into narratives. Patterns were then searched for across the plots, during which attention was also paid to how links were established between the themes. From the resulting findings, I formulated four dominant narratives: (a) the liberal left, a threat to traditional Sweden; (b) Islamic takeover; (c) gender confusion causes continuous conflict; and (d) liberalistic defiance during a pandemic.

The narratives are presented in Chaps. 6, 7, 8, and 9. The narrative on liberal defiance during a pandemic is an extended version of a Swedish study about Sputnik coverage (see Hellman, 2021), to which is added analysis of RT. The features coded for each news item, which taken together make up the plot, are presented below.

Sources

First, the sources referred to in each news item were noted. A news media organization such as Sputnik has few journalists of their own working in the field. Coding sources provide information on which sources constitute its main intake for Sweden, and how these are treated and assessed; that is, the extent to which they are depicted as credible, stirring up conflict, having the courage to provide controversial or sensitive information or appearing to conceal information, and so on.

Actor

An actor is a person, leader, institution, organization, state, or government represented as having an active role in the news story and participating in the unfolding events. This means that actors have agency. People or organizations mentioned or spoken of as objects rather than subjects are not considered actors. One news item reported that a Swedish journalist in Iran had appeared on camera wearing a veil, an event which was said to have raised strong reactions among Swedes. The reporter in question did not participate in the news item. She was the object of the piece so was not coded as an actor, since she had no agency. The tag or identity of each actor appearing in the news was noted, but more important was the assignment of the role of actor in the plot.

The narration of the actors/characters was expected to include characterizations of suspects/offenders, victims and heroes, and stereotypical or mythical figures. A woman participant in a news report might be thought of as a sex worker, princess, virgin, mother, and so on, but also as the victim or the heroine. Actors might be assigned an authoritarian role in the article, depicted as powerful and influential. It was also noted whether actors were disputing with one another and, if so, whether one actor seemed to gain the upper hand, or the depiction of the disputants was more about the fact that they disagreed with or fought with one another. In the latter case, this might indicate a deliberative kind of coverage where the media serves as the arena for public debate, but such a positioning of actors in the narrative can project an image of a fragmented, polarized society where no one gets along and where some actors are seen as loud, rude, disrespectful, and seeking to increase their power.

Previous research has shown that the way in which actors are depicted and the roles they are assigned has a great influence on how their messages and viewpoints are perceived. This might be connected to the reliability of the message, its weight, whether it is extreme or mainstream, legitimate or illegitimate and possible to dismiss or credible. The essence of the narrative is in this sense dependent on the way in which the actors in the narrative are presented and the roles and functions ascribed to them.

Space

Space is thought of as the location of the news item and where an event happened. It might be a place or a context, a situation, or even an event

such as a football match. This would be comparable with the scene and scenography of a play. The analysis asked what the space of the plot looked like. Where possible, the extent to which the space was significant for the story and its unfolding was stated, or how the story depended on space for its messaging. Some narratives took on meaning in close connection with the space, such as in the example above of the reporter on site in Iran. Swedish feminist foreign policy and the efforts made to represent Sweden as a feminist country were questioned by the image of a Swedish reporter wearing a veil on location in Iran. In other cases, the site of the event was irrelevant for the meaning making of the plot or the space was defined as an organization rather than a geographical place. A story about an organization of Muslim LGBT+ activists in Sweden participating in the pride festival depicts space as a community of outsiders under a banner of the pride flag. The report connected the organization to the suburbs of larger cities but did not explicitly situate it in these places. This shows that although space is for the most part depicted as a concrete and/or specific place or room, there are exceptions where space is coded as more of an abstraction, or a place-less community.

The Problem Or Conflict

The problem in the news tended to be clearly defined and served for the most part as the driving force of the plot. This is typical of news stories but was especially marked as RT and Sputnik tended to depict problems and conflicts to demonstrate domestic problems as weaknesses and instabilities in Swedish society. The problem was coded using a few descriptive sentences focused on the points of contention, dysfunctions, or actors' critique or complaints. The problem was also analyzed in relation to other features of the plot. Furthermore how problems were sometimes explained by linking them to other problems and conflicts was also noted. Attention was paid to how this was done and how the links were explicitly and/or implicitly established.

Implied Solutions Or How the Original Status Quo Can Be Restored

To restore a disrupted situation to a stable status quo goes back to the very essence of how narratives are understood. It might be a way to reach closure in the story and is, narrative methodology aside, known to be a

much-used format in news journalism. However, in the context of disinformation and harmful narratives, the resolution of the story might serve an especially pertinent purpose by showing that closure is impossible or a new status quo unattainable. This reinforces the view of a dysfunctional society for which there is no remedy. In coding for how solutions were depicted in the plots, it was found that attention had to be paid to a reverse position of problem and solution, as news reports assigned the solutions to the original position or status quo (the starting point of the plot/the sequence of events) and the rupture to the new position. This was a way to narrate social decline and the downfall of a state. The solution was presented as a call to return to old values and traditions, and to restore society to what it once was. When coding for solutions as a feature of the plot, it was therefore important to keep an open mind about solutions being depicted as an unattainable status quo that had been left behind.

Temporalities: Past, Present, and Future

Projections of temporalities are key to the plot as these descriptive features are the very foundations and building blocks that drive the story forward or allow a look over the shoulder to what has passed, which can also be a kind of driving force for a story. The question here was therefore not whether the narrative contains temporality, or expressions of time, but how that temporality played into other features, such as the conflict/solution dynamic. It asked whether the news item depicted a problem of the past that had been resolved in the present, or what used to be unproblematic or even an asset had become a problem that called for a solution. Attention was also paid to depictions of the future and visions for Sweden, as well as threats on the horizon and pending conflicts that have not been addressed by the authorities.

Narrator

To the five similar narrative features to those used by Somers (1994) was added a sixth: the narrator. The narrator is the storyteller and answers the question of from whose perspective the story is told. The choice of narrator appeared to be connected to the choice of actors brought into the story and of what sources to use. The narrator was not evident or even relevant in every news item and in some plots was an external voice telling the story, such as the reporter leading the reader through the unfolding of

events or giving voice to the different actors as part of the plot. In other plots, one of the actors was the narrator, so the story was told from his or her perspective while other voices responded, adding supportive or adversarial comments. The coding for the role of the narrator was thought to be especially useful in order to show how Sputnik and RT colored their plots with the anti-establishment attitudes that both are known to favor. Analyzing who the narrator was and the position the narrator was assigned in the plot clarified the relationships between the actors, the weight of their arguments, which values they promoted, and the positions prescribed to elites or ordinary citizens. The positions from which actions and reactions were reported were also noted. This added to the interpretation of how actors were classified in the plots.

IN SUM

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study—narrative analysis—and explains its suitability for a study of disinformation by Russian state-affiliated news media. The narrative analysis is centered on both the content of the constructed messages and how they acquire meaning through the way in which the stories are told. The narrative analysis is complemented by a framing analysis, which is an in-depth content analysis that focuses on the way in which a problem or issue is defined. The framing analysis therefore shares with the narrative analysis the ambition to explore how messages come to take on meaning. The narrative analysis, however, sees messaging as storytelling and places emphasis on how the story unfolds through the sequence of events. Seven key features of the narrative that guided the coding of the news material were presented: sources; actor; space; the problem or conflict; implied solution, or how the status quo can be restored; temporalities, past, present, and future; and narrator. The narrative analysis itself involved taking all of these features into consideration in demonstrating what and how meaning is produced. With the exception of narrator, these were taken from the work of Somers (1994) and from their application in a similar empirical study by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021).

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CHAPTER 5

Sources and Frames

INTRODUCTION

This first part of the empirical analyses presents the sources used and how the news stories were framed. This provides an overview of what the coverage looked like across topics and which sources the stories were built on. The sources were of special significance since Sputnik in particular, but also RT, base their stories on material from other media. Sputnik rarely dispatches reporters to the location of an event, and RT only occasionally. The latter usually relies on experts invited to the studio.

The framing analysis was structured according to the three themes discussed in Chap. 4: public health, climate change, and moral values and ethics. It included all the news items sorted under these themes published or broadcast between July 1, 2019, and January 31, 2021. The theme “moral values and ethics” was later found to be too broad, and therefore divided into gender, culture, and anti-liberalism in order to better reflect the content of the news. With the exception of the news items about climate change, the same news coverage was used for the narrative analysis. In Sweden, climate change was not used to the same extent as the other themes for disinformation purposes. This was to a large extent linked to its focus on the world famous environmental activist, Greta Thunberg, who featured in the vast large majority of the coverage of climate change and

the environment. Although her Swedish background was mentioned, Greta was only rarely positioned in the narratives as a representative of Sweden. Nor was Sweden depicted in connection with her activism or with environmental concerns. Climate change is, however, included in the framing analysis.

SOURCES

The sources were not just used for items of information, facts, or figures. More importantly, they seemed to influence or even set the agenda on what events to cover and for quotes and depictions of actors. Articles were thus often built around a few statements by the authorities made in a broadcast or published in traditional media. In many cases, it was difficult to distinguish between actor and source. There were also instances where an authority of some kind was said to have made a statement but where the original source of the statement was not mentioned. Some articles in Sputnik were reworked, edited, or copied from Swedish conservative or right-wing media.

As can be seen from Table 5.1, a high proportion of the sources were from Swedish domestic media, with an emphasis on public service broadcasting (television and radio) and the national daily broadsheets. A frequent way for RT and Sputnik to refer to the broadcast media was “state-controlled”; other terms were “state television” and “state media”. This was defined as having strong leftist and left-green leanings at odds with the distribution of political views among the Swedish public. In one article, the Swedish television broadcaster was depicted as:

largely modelled after the BBC and *sharing many traits with its British counterpart*. It is funded by a public service tax on personal income. Previous surveys have indicated a *massive left-wing slant* at SVT. Over 50 percent of its staff reportedly supports the *left-wing Green Party*, which only got 4.4 percent of the votes in the 2018 general election, barely passing the 4 percent threshold to enter parliament. (Sputnik, October 7, 2019e)

Public service broadcasters and broadsheets were used to make reference to various types of Swedish organizations, political parties, individual politicians, and government ministers, as well as representatives of government and other agencies, business leaders, and so on, which were often

Table 5.1 Sources of plots used by RT and Sputnik

<i>Categories of sources</i>	<i>Example of media sources</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Total</i>
Social media and Vox pop	Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, named and unnamed social media users, citizens	101	10	111
Swedish broadcast media	Sveriges Television (SVT), Sveriges Radio (SR)	93	0	93
Swedish old media (broadsheets and tabloids)	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (DN), <i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (SvD), <i>Expressen</i> , <i>Aftonbladet</i> , <i>Dagens Industri</i> , <i>Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå</i> , TV4	82	0	82
Scientific and other experts	Academics, scientists, journalists, think tanks, research institutes	40	14	54
Government agencies	Non-party affiliated; FHM, Swedish central bank, universities, police, Sweden's national food agency, Armed Forces, govt officials	36	6	42
Other	Industry media such as <i>Veckans Affärer</i> and <i>Resumé</i> , corporations, social movement actors, international institutions, NGOs, religious organizations, business corporations (e.g. IKEA)	31	7	38
Political sources	Named Swedish politicians, e.g., MPs and MEPs, party leaders, and local politicians	22	12	34
Swedish alternative media	Nya Tider, Fria Tider, Samhällsnytt, Nyheter idag, Exakt 24	31	0	31
Local and regional newspapers	<i>Göteborgsposten</i> , <i>Sydsvenskan</i> , <i>Borås Tidning</i> , <i>Dalarnas Tidningar</i> , <i>Nerikes Allehanda</i>	25	0	25
Nordic media	Yle, NRK, Aftenposten, Danish Radio, Extra Bladet, Politiken, Nordiske	20	0	20
Non-Nordic foreign media	Reuters, BBC, France 2, CBS, Fox News, Rebel News, <i>New York Times</i> , The Daily Show, CNN, The Global Times, Business Insider, New English Review	14	0	14
Christian newspapers	Congregations, Swedish Church, Världen idag, Dagen, Svensk kyrkotidning, Kyrkans Tidning	14	0	14

collectively referred to as the establishment. The voices and opinions of citizens, or “ordinary people”, were most often quoted from social media, such as individual tweets or Instagram posts (quotes from netizens). Tweets and Facebook items were most often published as screenshots pasted into the articles. There were also articles referencing surveys conducted by Swedish polling institutes such as Novus. The use of these

sources was at times confusing and the figures were often presented using dramatic and exaggerated phrases.

DOMINANT FRAMES DEPICTING SWEDEN

The framing analysis was undertaken to identify the problems and possible solutions presented in the coverage. Coding for frames entailed identifying the key issues and how they were constructed by way of their contextualization and textual composition. In contrast to a topic, which denotes the subject of the news item, or answers the question of what the news item is about, a frame connotes the problem posed by or key issue of the item and answers the question of how the issue is being depicted. The same topic can thus be framed in different ways or take on different connotations. Each news item in the sample was described with reference to what the problem revolved around. Having coded all the news items, patterns were sought among the frames described and framing categories were developed for each theme. The distribution of frames identified for each theme is presented below, starting with the distribution of gender frames (Table 5.2. Each section exemplifies the content of a different framing category).

Gender

Gender (In)equality

Several news reports were centered around gender equality and inequality, both of which might have been considered problematic depending on the

Table 5.2 Distribution of frames in the theme of gender in Sputnik and RT, July 2019 to January 2021

<i>Frames</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Tot</i>
Gender (in)equality	23	0	23
LGBTQI	14	0	14
Migrants and Muslims with reference to gender equality and feminism	12	1	13
Swedish feminist policy	13	0	13
“The Unsexy space”	11	0	11
Other	0	0	0
Total	73	1	74

Note: Each article was coded for a maximum of two framing categories

context. Some articles reported on equality issues with reference to statistics and surveys and just presented the results—at times without making any explicit point (Sputnik, July 17, 2020m; Sputnik, February 26, 2020e). There were news items about discrimination against and sexual abuse of both women and men, and also targeted at LGBTQ+ groups (Sputnik, July 9, 2019a; Sputnik, October 8, 2019f). The #metoo movement was frequently used to stress gender conflicts, but especially to make a point about threats to masculinity (see e.g. Sputnik, July 9, 2019a; Sputnik, October 29, 2019i). Men were depicted as victims, and said to be frequently targeted with unfounded and false allegations or accusations. According to RT and Sputnik, Sweden was the country “hardest hit”, or even “totally engulfed”, by the #metoo campaign, and was now plagued by internal divisions between men and women with no strategy for how to move forward.

LGBTQ+ (Sexuality, Homophobia, Sexual Minorities)

Similarly, the Swedish establishment was depicted as a tenacious defender of the rights of LGBTQ+ people to fulfil and express their sexuality. There were reports about a new hymnal developed to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ groups, a bill passed in parliament removing the obligation on HIV infected persons to inform their partners and several articles about gender reassignment surgery to give individuals the gender of their choice.

However, embedded in most of these reports were resistance to and divisive views on LGBTQ+ communities, and news topics aroused strong comments on social media, which were published in the articles. A hockey player criticized her teammates for beginning a lesbian relationship, negatively affecting the quality of their play; the Minister of Equality was looking into removing the terms “mother” and “father” to promote gender neutrality. One topic said to have provoked great controversy in domestic politics was participation by the Swedish armed forces in the Stockholm annual pride event. Critics argued sarcastically that the Swedish defense forces should not be engaged in political activism. The armed forces were accused of being reckless with taxpayers’ money and ignoring their main tasks. The media coverage used the tension between the armed forces’ marketing sexual liberalism and the public’s dislike of such campaigns to expose internal conflicts and stress the alleged weakness of Sweden’s defenses.

Migrants and Muslims Threaten Equality and Feminism

The gender issue was frequently framed as connected to immigrants, and especially Muslims. This frame focused on the subordination of women in Islamic societies and how this was influencing the Swedish way of life. This was expressed using a relatively limited set of phrases, some of which were identical across a number of articles, and was combined with statements about the large increase in the number of Muslim migrants to Sweden. Muslim women were reported as posing a difficult dilemma for Sweden, whose politicians and officials believed that they were defending freedom of religion when in fact they were defending Muslim subordination and the oppression of women. Much attention was given to heated debates about the veil and the hijab. There were reports of heated disputes between politicians (especially at the municipal level) fueled by suggested or imposed regulations on wearing the veil in public. Engaged politicians and netizens positioned themselves as for or against, and argued strongly for their point of view. The Swedish authorities were accused of gullibility by citizens who argued that the Islamic faith was incompatible with Swedish legislation and liberal values, and who expected leaders to defend Swedish law and values. Immigrants, mainly from Arab countries, were portrayed as a burden, capitalizing on Swedish welfare, increasing the cost of social services because of Arab women's needs (e.g. subsidizing Muslim migrants' driving licenses) and posing a threat to women by exposing Swedish and Arab women to abuse and violence.

Swedish Feminist Policy¹

RT and Sputnik's portrayal of the relationship between men and women in Sweden was one of tension and polarization. Sweden was depicted as suffering from an ongoing gender war that the national leadership had failed to control or prevent. Sweden was said to pride itself for its progressive ideas on gender and equality in general, and its feminist foreign policy in particular. It was described as having a naive belief that promoting feminism was the answer to all social ills. Critics argued that Sweden was way off when it came to gender equality concerns; and that feminists and feminist policies were overly radical, absurd, and even unethical—doing more harm than good. Sweden's relationships with other countries, such

¹Included in the term feminism here are issues such as equality between men and women, feminist policy, the struggle to include women (or men) in areas where they are underrepresented, and gender neutrality.

as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, had deteriorated as a result of Swedish feminist and gender politics. Swedish men and women were also negatively affected, although it was not made clear how. The stories covered alternated between discrimination against men and discrimination against women.

“The Unsexy Space”

This study found news coverage framed in line with what Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) termed in previous analyses of Sputnik “the Unsexy space”. Sputnik and RT frequently published stories in which the Swedish authorities or public figures sparked strong reactions by expressing—in statements or through policies—liberal views on sexual intercourse. When Swedish artists, influencers, and business representatives were reported as celebrating feminism and empowering women’s sexuality, they were hailed by some and rejected by others. Critics argued that such views were inappropriate or offensive, and in some cases that these were expressions of hate against men. The items almost exclusively comprised controversial events that it was reported had provoked outrage from the general public, such as artworks with genitalia-related motifs or social issues centered on women’s menstruation. Issues around prostitution, human reproduction, abortion, pedophilia, and gender dysphoria among children were also part of the coverage, and used to demonstrate the harm that a preoccupation—or “near obsession”—with sexuality had caused. Taken together, Sweden’s liberal sexual attitudes were made to appear highly contentious, and as serving as a breeding ground for crime and mental illness.

Culture

The frame culture analyzed the ways in which Sweden was talked about with regard to identity (both national and personal) and national image. This also included ways of life and expressions of national symbolism, as well as art and music, national traditions and ceremonies, and reports on the sense of belonging of explicit ingroups and outgroups (Table 5.3).

Selling Out Sweden

Articles framed as “selling out Sweden” depicted a fear of how the Swedish authorities talked about Swedish traditions, values, habits and heritage, and their reluctance to deal with “deviant” or harmful religious and criminal practices. Religious radicals and criminals who violated the social

Table 5.3 Distribution of frames in the culture theme in Sputnik and RT, July 2019 to January 2021

<i>Frames</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Tot</i>
Islamic takeover of Swedish way of life	22	0	22
Selling out Sweden	18	0	18
Nationalism and cosmopolitanism	3	1	4
Other	4	0	4
Total	47	1	48

Note: Each article was coded for a maximum of two framing categories

contract were said to be allowed to roam free while victims of crime and abuse had to manage for themselves, receiving no support or sympathy from the state. Immigrants and villains (the difference between two was often blurred), on the other hand, were treated as sensitive creatures rather than perpetrators, and were seldom convicted or punished. Referencing countless allegations and angry comments from people on social media, public dissatisfaction with the Swedish political and legal authorities was portrayed as severe, and it was stated that the general public found their state institutions and government too passive and sometimes easily fooled. The articles expressed views about a dysfunctional undemocratic system that was bleeding financially and culturally, but was still handing out taxpayers' money and pushing Swedes and their traditions aside for the sake of Muslims and foreigners. This idea was amplified in coverage that reported allegations as facts, and stated that the Swedish church was "leaking membership at an alarming rate" (Sputnik, December 11, 2019o), that it could no longer sustain or maintain its churches and that in the long run it would be unable to fulfill its obligations to preserve cultural heritage. The Church of Sweden was also accused of supporting Muslim political activism and providing room for oppressive religious movements.

Islamic Takeover of the Swedish Way of Life

An overwhelming proportion of the material on culture in RT and Sputnik concerned Muslim influences on Swedish society and how the Swedish authorities responded to or managed these. Overall, Sweden was portrayed as a country facing severe threats to national core values and national unity due to "mass immigration" (Sputnik, February 19, 2020d), primarily from countries in the Middle East and the Arab world. Immigrants were portrayed as troublemakers and reported as

overrepresented in the crime statistics, engaged in subversive activities, profiting from the Swedish welfare system, and cheating Swedish agencies and bureaucracies. People who had lived in Muslim societies described what kind of a threat Muslims were to secular and Christian societies, that the ideology would bring radicalism to Sweden and the existence of so-called sleeper cells, which were just biding their time before they would move into action and take over Swedish society (see for example Sputnik, December 2, 2019). Muslims were said to disrespect liberal and secular values, recklessly assert their rights and demand that their norms and habits should be the norms and habits of Sweden, despite the clash between these and the Swedish way of life. These alleged developments were said to cause resentment in the population, which had been made victims in their own country. The situation was described as deplorable and desperate, leaving honorable citizens concerned and fearful, first and foremost for the sake of the children which was a group, the reports argued, that was particularly exposed and affected. Non-Christian and pro-Muslim activities in schools and homes, such as Islamic role-play, were a sign of ongoing Islamification and indoctrination, and were leading families to leave Sweden (see for example Sputnik, August 29, 2019c). Using comparisons to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when over one million Swedes left for the United States, it was reported that emigration was an increasing trend in Sweden, and that 2015 (same year as the European migrant crisis) was a “bumper crop”.²

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

A smaller but highly relevant proportion of the news articles on culture and identity concerned the relationship between national and cosmopolitan values. It was reported that landmark institutions and large corporations, such as SAS and IKEA, were abandoning their marketing strategies and aligning themselves with cosmopolitan values (Sputnik, February 13, 2020b; Sputnik, October 31, 2019; February 27, 2020f). These corporations had traditionally served not only as national brands, but also as important symbols of Swedish and Scandinavian national identity,

² Statistics Sweden (2023) states that “during the 1990s and since the late 1990s, about 10,000 Swedish-born persons emigrated every year. The number increased during the 1990s and since the late 1990s around 20,000 Swedish-born persons emigrated every year. However, the number of emigrants has decreased during the last decade”. The figure for 2019 was around 8000 for Sweden-born persons.

including Christian values and traditions. Outraged citizens were quoted as claiming that such political correctness was ridiculous, that it had gone too far and, above all, that it was contributing to a downplaying and deconstruction of such values and traditions. These responses were spurred, for example, by a report that IKEA had decided to refer to its December sales campaign as the “Winter season” rather than “Christmas”. The tensions and conflicts between progressive multiculturalists and traditionalists—who tended to express nationalistic views—were also on display in news about right-wing extremist parties in Scandinavia, which were reported to be multiplying and taking action to bring about a purely white Sweden freed of immigrants and cleansed of traces of multiculturalism. This tied in with the theme of anti-liberalism (Table 5.4).

Anti-liberalism

Anti-establishment

As part of their attacks on liberalism, RT and Sputnik coverage frequently expressed anti-establishment views. Articles stressed the level of discontent and upset among the general public about the workings of the “state-funded media”, Swedish Television and Radio. Plots told how state media outlets had violated fundamental principles they themselves claimed to be guided by. There was talk of state media not living up to their self-proclaimed moral standards; for instance, by banning what they defined as racist words only to be found using these same words later (Sputnik, December 4, 2019m). Leading media organizations were said to be driven by status seeking and self-promotion, leading them to exaggerate events and situations and to deviate from the truth, or to make stories up such as

Table 5.4 Distribution of frames within the theme of anti-liberalism in Sputnik and RT from July 2019 to January 2021

<i>Frames</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Tot</i>
Xenophobia	23	0	23
Freedom of speech	21	1	22
Anti-establishment	15	1	16
Other	3	1	4
Total	62	3	65

Note: Each article was coded for a maximum of two framing categories

on Islamophobic hate crimes (see for example Sputnik, October 18, 2019g). In response, netizens had accused the outlets of hypocrisy, lack of transparency, and applying double standards. Similarly, it was alleged that the Swedish authorities were mistrusted by various groups, such as right-wing voters. Leading media organizations were said to have a left-wing bias and to be engaged in left-wing activism, such as by giving opinions on whether people's eating habits were healthy or sustainable (see for example Sputnik, December 4, 2019m).

Freedom of Speech

Controversies regarding freedom of speech were a recurring topic in the material. The coverage depicted the Swedish people as deeply divided on what or who should be protected and restricted in the public space. The Swedish government and the authorities were said to exercise dictatorship and to be hypocritical for arguing for the protection of freedom of speech while at the same time forbidding views to be expressed that deviated from the mainstream (Sputnik, September 15, 2020o). The role, status, and rights of racists and controversialists were portrayed as “a hot potato” that the government felt best left alone. Articles often consisted of opinions expressed in social media by members of the public who were negative about what they saw as the “Åsiktskorridoren” (opinion corridor), or the room for oppositional views, being narrowed, and calling for it to be widened (Sputnik, August 18, 2020n; Sputnik, July 2, 2020l).

Xenophobia

When topics linked to the extent of ethnic and religious discrimination were broached in the coverage, the stories tended to be framed around uncertainties over whether xenophobia should be seen as a big problem in Sweden. Native Swedes and ethnic minorities were depicted as opponents that lacked respect for one another, with one seeking to cause harm to the other on the basis of race and ethnicity. There were, for instance, reports about Nazi raids (Sputnik, November 12, 2019k) and so-called dominance crimes intended to humiliate Swedes (Sputnik, March 23, 2020h; Sputnik, December 18, 2019p). News reports referred to evidence that discrimination and attacks against members of minority groups with non-Christian beliefs were on the rise in Sweden, but native Swedes were also shown as victims.

Table 5.5 Distribution of frames in the public health theme in Sputnik and RT, July 2019 to January 2021

<i>Framing category</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Tot</i>
Sweden is an outcast/losing international status	14	10	24
Swedish government is inept and hypocritical; the public ignorant and careless	15	3	18
Sweden is gambling with citizens' lives—and poor crisis management	8	8	16
Other	14	1	15 ^a
Reality is catching up—restrictions revisited	7	5	12
Total	58	27	85

Note: Each article was coded for a maximum of two framing categories

^a5 of the “other” frames are about Greta

Public Health

The coverage on public health was centered almost exclusively around Covid-19. However, medical issues such as risk factors, symptoms, treatment, and infection tracing were not the focus. The coverage was framed around Sweden's Covid-19 strategy, national governance, crisis management, public opinion, and international reaction (Table 5.5).

The Swedish Government Is Inept and Hypocritical; The Public Ignorant and Careless

One issue that was often reported was how the Covid-19 crisis had affected the relationship between the Swedish government (state institutions) and the people. This issue was repeatedly framed as Swedish governance being dysfunctional, and how the leadership was weak and indecisive about what to do to stop the spread of Covid-19. Disagreements over the Covid-19 strategy, demonstrated by civil protests, domestic political opposition, and scientists calling for tougher measures, were used to “puncture the myth” that Sweden was a stable and respectable country. Sweden was said to hold an exaggerated belief in itself, making claims to strong social cohesion as a society permeated by solidarity, loyalty, and morality. Sweden had lulled itself into a false sense of security with a leadership that argued it was well prepared to manage the pandemic. Stories of youths intentionally spitting at or coughing near the elderly, the police, and healthcare staff were used to back claims that the Swedish assertion that Swedes were standing on high moral ground, loyally supporting one another in times of crisis, was

a distortion (Sputnik, April 13, 2020j; Sputnik, March 31, 2020i). There were also images of crowded shops and cafés, and large gatherings of people happily waving flags. Citizens craving individual freedom were described as going overboard. Understanding of the covid-19 crisis was said to differ strongly between social groups, partly because elites and the establishment were refusing to be transparent about the virus and crisis management, keeping citizens uninformed of the threats to their lives and health (Hellman, 2021, pp. 461–462).

Sweden Is an Outcast, Losing International Status

Another prominent public health frame was that of Sweden, in light of the pandemic, showing itself to be an outcast—and a state losing international status. Sweden was reported to have made international headlines by choosing a Covid-19 strategy that differed from most other countries in the “West”, and which had had seriously negative consequences for people. Sweden was talked about as an outlier, out of touch with reality, driven only by self-interest and with little or no solidarity shown with the international community. The strategy was reported as causing negative reactions around the world as the number of deaths and infections increased. Sweden’s open and liberal policy was described as a “stand-alone-approach”, which included odd and insufficient measures with severe consequences for the elderly and the most vulnerable. Foreign commentators stated that no one should follow or be inspired by the Swedish example (Hellman, 2021, p. 460). In one article, Sweden was grouped together with Belarus as the only country to keep its borders open. Sweden was also accused of prioritizing economic growth and military capability over public health.

Sweden Is Gambling with Citizens’ Lives and Poor Crisis Management

Sweden’s unconventional response to the pandemic gave rise to articles scrutinizing Swedish crisis management and the healthcare system. The Swedish government was accused of ignoring the risks of Covid-19, and taking insufficient measures to tackle the disease and mitigate its effects. The Swedish strategy was described as daring but morally dubious, and not uniformly supported; it was “passive”, “lax”, and entirely reliant on personal responsibility and voluntary social distancing. The strategy was called a “gamble” (Sputnik, May 1, 2020k), a “risky move”, a “deadly mistake” (RT, June 4, 2020), and “an experiment” that lacked scientific evidence. The value-laden concept of herd immunity, also referred to as

the Great Barrington Declaration, was frequently debated or hovered around without being discussed in detail or substantiated (Hellman, 2021, p. 462). It was claimed that the Swedish government and Public Health Agency had a Malthusian attitude, or had adopted Darwinian theory, and accepted the sacrifice of human lives for the greater good of the wider population. Government officials and medical health experts were accused of being cynical and violating human dignity. In addition, Sweden lacked sufficient medical supplies and protective equipment to deal with the disease.

Reality Is Catching Up – Restrictions Revisited

The fourth category of the public health frame focused on Sweden heading towards an apocalypse or doomsday scenario that the government was unable to prevent, in tandem with the incompetent government framing. The news stories told how difficult priorities might have to be set in the social services, such as in healthcare, care for the elderly and the police force. Revealing statements by government officials said that the country had “got its tactics wrong” and that precautions or stricter restrictions were “necessary to turn the tide”. These were used especially in headlines and subheadings to convey an image of the Swedish leadership acknowledging its failure. Experts and television commentators presented alarming estimates of the number of infections and patients in intensive care, and of mortality rates. To amplify this deceptive message, the figures were sometimes illustrated in graphs with steep curves on the screen or in pictures. Voices calling for radical action to adopt strategies contrary to those of the government or the Public Health Authority (Folkhälsomyndigheten) were also given prominence.

Climate Change

The climate change frame for Sweden was centered almost entirely around the myth and persona of Greta Thunberg—most often spoken of as Greta. This included depictions of Greta as a person, her situation, her activism, and the responses to her protests, public rallies, and speeches. Even though Greta is Swedish, there were few references to Sweden in the coverage. The narrative about Greta also contained very little information or substance on environmental questions or concrete climate change-related topics. Nonetheless, this brief section on the coverage is included in the analysis. The articles about climate change were coded into four frames

Table 5.6 Distribution of frames about Sweden with regard to climate change in Sputnik and RT, July 2019 to January 2021

<i>Framing category</i>	<i>Sputnik</i>	<i>RT</i>	<i>Total</i>
Greta the preacher: moral lectures and shaming	15	0	15
Greta the child: a pigtailed puppet	12	0	12
Greta the celebrity: global actor	12	0	12
Greta the activist: radical protest	8	0	8
Greta the pawn in the game: victim of political power	7	0	7
Other	5	1	6
Total	59	1	60

Note: Each article was coded for a maximum of two framing categories

that illustrate how Greta was made to represent Sweden or Swedish values. Only a limited part of the coverage on climate change and the environment dealt with questions other than Greta. A few were in line with the Greta discourse, in that they identified Sweden as a country with extremist views on the question of climate change. Partly because of the “Greta syndrome”, people were said to have gone mad when it came to fighting climate change. Children were being taught to eat insects; cannibalism was being discussed, and so on. The political left was labeled the most radical group, proposing absurd measures to protect the environment (Table 5.6).

Greta the Preacher: Moral Lectures and Shaming

The most frequent framing category portrayed Greta as a preacher presenting moral lectures and shaming people. It brings together the articles in the Russian news outlets that reported people being upset and provoked by Greta and what they saw as her cult of followers. These articles claimed that Greta and her movement induced unjustified guilt and shame, and that they gave moral lectures to people they identified as not taking proper action to combat climate change. It was said that Greta used harsh rhetoric to dismiss and reprimand adults while praising her own generation for its efforts. This criticism of her attacks on adults was combined with sarcasm. Greta was ridiculed, depicted as a saint with exceptional skills, qualities, and ideas, and referred to as the “Ayatollah of Climate Change” (Sputnik, September 23, 2019d), an “eco-version of Joan of Arc” (Sputnik, October 20, 2019h), the “climate-Messiah” (Sputnik, December 5, 2019n), and so on.

Greta the Child: A Pigtailed Puppet

Greta's young age was often raised, invoking concern and distrust. On one hand, she and the youth engaged in her movement were depicted as victims of child abuse and child exploitation. The articles and television clips depicted adults as perpetrators: parents, teachers, or the adult world in general were either seen to be benefiting from Greta's activism for their own sakes (e.g. by using her in branding on cars and other products or for charitable purposes) or depicted as failing in their responsibilities as adults, for example, to make sure she got a proper education. The adults had secretly brainwashed and traumatized Greta and her companions with post-apocalyptic horror stories about the end of the world as we know it, and encouraged the young activists to truant from school in order to protest. This, it was argued, was done without Greta's knowledge or permission and it was absurd that the social services did not intervene to put a stop to it.

Greta's appearance and mental health were also frequently referred to in order to denigrate her and the spheres in which she was active. Her braids and rosy cheeks made her a perfect stereotype not only for the Nordic race, but also for the "Aryan". Greta was made to incarnate children who were dysfunctional and vulnerable, and the green movement was accused of dishonest conduct when it used her as a poster child. Due to her medical record and her autism diagnosis, she was portrayed as having poor judgement and therefore not to be trusted. Together with her infrequent displays of bad temper, this was used to depict her as ignorant and a spoiled child who always got her own way. She was described as a solitary, naïve, and discredited girl who had been given an unreasonable amount of authority. In this sense, she was represented in Sputnik and RT as an odd mix of both victim and authoritative figure.

Greta the Celebrity: Global Actor

Greta was portrayed as a poster child (see above). She had been elevated to international stardom by adults, dominated headlines and figured on the frontpages of respectable newspapers. Pejorative language was used to describe how she frequently mingled and attended meetings with political elites, top-ranking business leaders and celebrities such as former US President Barack Obama, the Pope, and the US actor Leonardo Di Caprio. The worldwide media attention, and the prestigious awards and nominations she received, aroused criticism and negative emotions. She was called "a media darling" (Sputnik, October 23, 2020p) with access to the

corridors of power, said to enjoy special privileges and bypass gates that would otherwise be closed to her. This was facilitated by politicians, officials, and powerful institutions and corporations who accepted (and even welcomed) being run and influenced by a little girl. In this spirit of anti-establishment sentiment, it was sarcastically suggested that she ought to be given an Oscar (Sputnik, February 4, 2020a).

Greta the Activist: Radical Protest

It was alleged that Greta and the “ludicrous and nonsensical cult” that revolved around her were hysterical alarmists who caused unnecessary climate panic. Climate change deniers and skeptics found Greta’s activism ridiculous and gave her epithets such as “Doomsday prophet” (Sputnik, February 14, 2020c), “guru of the apocalypse” (Sputnik, July 24, 2019b), and “eco-warrior” (Sputnik, March 4, 2020g). The measures she advocated to combat climate change were said to be extreme, illegitimate, and unreasonable. They were said to lack scientific evidence, be undemocratic and to divert attention from more important issues, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. While Greta was reported to have claimed that her diagnosis gave her superpowers, critics argued that she was mentally ill and that her protest rallies were flawed.

Greta the Pawn in the Game: Victim or Actor with Political Power?

The fifth and final framing category about climate change involved Greta being described as a political pawn in the game of power politics. There was speculation on whether various actors had taken her hostage in order to push their agenda, increase their profits, or gain a positive reputation or status. Greta was accused of double standards and hypocrisy as she protested jointly with dubious people and groups such as Nazi youths, radical anti-fascists (“Antifa”), and former criminals while also cooperating with industrial conglomerates. It was repeatedly stated that the international left, “lefties”, had aligned themselves with Greta and turned her into a propaganda symbol for their movements. Greta was also accused of contradicting herself, claiming she was non-political while at the same time siding with left-of-center politicians. Mainstream journalists were said to be aiding Greta’s activism with uncritical reporting on her campaigns instead of taking their media responsibilities seriously and exposing her scams.

SUMMARY

This chapter has presented how Sweden and the problems it faced were framed by the Russian affiliated state media RT and Sputnik and what sources that were used. The framing analysis of news included the selected themes gender, culture, anti-liberalism, climate change, and public health published between July 1, 2019, and January 31, 2021. It was found that the most frequently used sources were Swedish public service media and the national daily broadsheets. The framing analysis emphasized threats posed to the cohesion and national identity of Sweden by different domestic groups such as feminists, migrants, and Muslims. Taken together the frames made manifest that the consequences of these threats were a decline of a once well-functioning nation with domestic unrest and an inability to defend against a gradual islamization of society. Added to this, news about the environmental activist Greta Thunberg also implicitly stressed the downside of a liberal society and its extended freedom of speech that gave global voice to a child to run the debate on climate change.

APPENDIX: DEFINITIONS OF CATEGORIES OF SOURCES

Swedish Broadcast Media

Swedish public service media: television, Swedish Television (SVT); and radio, Swedish Radion (SR). Both these media outlets are known to be highly trusted by the Swedish public. TV4, a Swedish free-to-air television network. It is the largest commercial broadcaster in Sweden, owned by Bonnier Broadcasting group.

Swedish Old Media (Broadsheets and Tabloids)

Major national newspaper and outlets with national and international coverage, printed or published daily, distributed to subscribers across all of Sweden, “newspapers of record by reputation”, such as *Dagens Nyheter* (DN), *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD), *Expressen*, *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Industri*, *Tidningarnas Telegrambyrå* (TT).

Swedish Alternative Media

With a political stance on the right of the political spectrum (conservative, paleolibertarianism, paleoconservatism, libertarian, liberal conservative, nationalistic, etc.). From an outsider perspective, these news organizations are often described as right-wing radical, alternative right, far-right, or conspiratorialist. What they have in common is that they criticize the mainstream media for its liberal-left bias and for not giving proper attention to issues. Examples include *Nya Tider*, *Fria Tider*, *Samhällsnytt*, *Nyheter idag*, *Exakt 24*

Political Sources

Political actors elected by the people who have a political appointment or executive position in the Swedish government, parliament or elsewhere, such as ministers and party leaders and Members of the European Parliament. Political sources are separate from government agency and scientific experts (see below).

Government Agencies

Non-political officials and other individuals working in the public/governmental sector, such as ministries, agencies, and other institutions, nationally as well as internationally. Examples include *Folkhälsomyndigheten* (the Public Health Agency), Sweden's central bank, universities, the police, security service, *Living History Forum*, *Brå*, the Swedish national food agency, the Swedish Armed Forces.

Scientific Experts

Often academics who are experts or authorities in a particular area or topic nationally as well as internationally. Examples include scientists, journalists and authors, *Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue*, think tanks, *Worldometer*, *Pew Research Centre* and *Eurobarometer* (the European Commission).

Christian Newspapers

This category includes information and news that are gathered from the Swedish church as an institution, its different congregations, Sweden's Archbishop Antje Jackelén, or any other representative of Swedish Christian churches. This could be a direct or indirect announcement, statement, or some other type of publication/press release. This category includes information published in daily newspapers that have a Christian history or profile, such as *Världen idag*, *Dagen*, *Svensk kyrkotidning*, *Kyrkans Tidning*, and *Kyrkans arbetsgivarorganisation*.

Local and Regional Newspapers

Community journalism that serves distinct regions, neighborhoods, suburbs and small towns, and cover news that concerns the population in these areas, such as *Göteborgsposten*, *Sydsvenskan*, *Västerbottenkuriren*, *Borås Tidning*, *Dalarnas Tidningar*, and *Nerikes Allehanda*

Nordic Media

Yle, NRK, *Aftenposten*, Danish Radio, Extra Bladet, Politiken, Norwegian news agency, Nordiske (pollster).

Industry Media

*Includes for example *Läkartidningen*, *Veckans Affärer*, *Resumé*, *Fplus*. Only referred to a handful of times and therefore included in the “other” category together with “local and regional newspapers” as they all cover a specific geographical or thematic area/news coverage intended for a certain interest group. *Veckans Affärer*, *Resumé*

World and European Institutions

Only referred to a handful of times—WHO, Eurobarometer (European Commission), Worldometer, EU in general, not named NGOs—so should probably fall into another suitable category. Ex. WHO, EU in general, not named NGOs

European Media

European newspapers and outlets from Europe's biggest countries, most of them with large circulations. Evenly distributed across the political spectrum, such as Reuters, the BBC, *The Guardian*, Deutsche Welle, *El Pais*, EUObserver, FAZ, the *Financial Times*, *The Independent*, *Bild*, France2, the New Statesman.

Non-European Foreign Media

Mainly US newspapers and media outlets. Like the European media, their political stance/orientation differs from left (Global Times) to far-right (Rebel News, Fox News). Russian (2 + 1 Putin). Examples include CBS, Fox News, Rebel News, the *New York Times*, The Daily Show, CNN, The Global Times, Business Insider, New English Review.

Social Media

Content provided on social media constitutes a large and important part of the news coverage, especially for Sputnik. In cases where social media is referred to, the organization that was at the time known as Twitter is almost exclusively the source. Two subcategories were identified (a) tweets from ordinary people (anonymous/unnamed), or print screens from random people's accounts; and (b) spokespersons of some kind (including for organizations), a well-known and/or strong voice within a particular area such as a celebrity, a politician, or an opinion leader. Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook are also social media sites used in the coverage but more rarely, and in a few cases social media in general is given as the source of information. One article reports about a debate on Flashback and refers to it as Sweden's most popular forum. It is common when social media are listed as the source for print screens from these platforms to be inserted into the article. The posts often include a picture, memes, and/or emojis. Main examples: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, named and unnamed social media users, citizens

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CHAPTER 6

The Liberal Left: A Threat to Traditional Sweden

INTRODUCTION

This and the next three chapters (Chaps. 6, 7, 8, and 9) present the results of the narrative analysis of the four main narratives identified. Taken together, they make up the master narrative about Sweden that is presented in Chap. 10. There are overlaps between the narratives not only because of the methodology, but because of the storytelling techniques by which RT and Sputnik construct their strategic narratives. The narrative connections and overlaps affect the meaning making of the messages in the news coverage. This is discussed in reference to the story telling techniques in Chap. 10. It should be noted that the sub-narratives identified in the analysis are presented, in this and the other empirical chapters, with few comments on how they are interpreted or what position is taken to them by the analyst. The aim is to project what the sub-narratives are according to Sputnik and RT and how they are told.

As is discussed in Chap. 4, while the framing analysis centered on how the problems reported on were defined, who was responsible and whether there were solutions to the problems, the narrative analysis ran deeper, and focused on the storytelling of each news item; that is, the way in which the pieces were told, or the plots. Attention was therefore particularly focused on how malign messages merged into the coverage and took on meaning by way of the different narrative components, their interrelationships, and

how the stories unfolded by way of the sequential ordering of the events. In this first narrative chapter, the focus is on the negative consequences Sweden is said to have suffered by clinging on to liberal leftist ideas. The chapters that present and analyze the four narratives are structured according to sub-narratives. The first narrative presented in this chapter “The liberal left: A threat to traditional Sweden” is made up of the following sub-narratives: “Freedom of expression and freedom of religion pose problems, and cause incompatibilities”; “Political divisions over liberal democratic values”; “The Swedish church: a troublesome liberal with a diminishing congregation”; and “The Swedish media is left wing and supports the state and the establishment”. It is well established in research on Russian disinformation that liberalism and liberal democracy are key targets (see Chaps. 1, 2, and 3), and that Sputnik and RT are known to be supportive of rightist conservative parties (Colliver et al., 2018, p. 5). During the time period analyzed the Social Democrats (SAP) and the Green party (MP) were in government forming a left-green coalition with the SAP party leader as prime minister.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION POSE PROBLEMS AND CAUSE INCOMPATIBILITIES

Two basic pillars of liberalism were particularly prominent in the narrative about the liberal left: freedom of expression and freedom of religion. These two human rights were repeatedly used in the anti-liberal narrative of Sputnik and RT to demonstrate the negative effects of the implementation of liberalism and liberal democracy on social stability and a well-functioning society.

Sweden’s supposedly strong defense of freedom of expression was depicted as an oxymoron. In various articles, Sputnik and RT argued that principles said to be of such significance were mostly lip-service or, when it was effectively applied, the news outlets argued that what was treated as a sacred principle in fact led to nothing but chaos, confusion, and antagonism between people. Freedom of expression turned out to be a Pandora’s box that once opened, was beyond any state actors’ grasp or control. Perhaps the strongest critique of liberalism came to the fore in pieces arguing the incompatibility between freedom of expression and freedom of religion. There were reports, for example, about the debate surrounding the hijab, and about attacks on and defense of the sanctity of the Quran

(see below), showing how freedom of religion took precedence over freedom of speech. There were reports in which foreign-born Swedes expressed similar concerns, assigning responsibility to left-leaning politicians who, they argued, had made it impossible for people to criticize or express their dislike for Islam and Muslim traditions (see e.g. Sputnik, March 7, 2020f). If Swedes expressed their dislike for Islam, they risked being sued or charged in a court of law, accused of racism. Plots arguing the primacy of freedom of religion over freedom of speech showed how supposedly liberal Sweden was not so liberal after all. On the contrary, Sputnik and RT argued, Swedish elites and law enforcement agencies politicized opinions and fueled polarization by denying people the right to debate openly or to show their dislike for norms and values that went against liberal Swedish values.

While publicizing these struggles, Sputnik and RT were at the same time reporting how the Swedish authorities and government refused to acknowledge any social tensions. Plots were structured to show the hypocrisy of elite groups, depicting them as tiptoeing around issues and trying to silence voices, for example, about Sweden's involvement in World War II, or representation of the Swedish flag as a symbol of oppression and slavery (Sputnik, July 2, 2020k; Sputnik, July 15, 2020m), as well as involvement of the Swedish church racial biological studies on Sami people and other forms of abuse (Sputnik, October 8, 2020x).

This added to the image of Sweden that ran through all the narratives: that Sweden is not what it appears to be (see e.g. Chap. 7 on the narrative on the pandemic). Coverage showed how talk about freedom of expression weighed lightly when it came to coverage of Islam and Muslims. It was unacceptable in Sweden to write sarcastically or critically about Muslims. At the same time, it was claimed that political leaders and other authorities, such as the police, were prevented from intervening in cases of abuse, discrimination, or violence because of liberal legislation and the significance it assigns to freedom of religion, which provides leeway for all sorts of behavior.

Schools were reported to have removed traditional hymns from graduation day, which had been sung by Swedish school children for decades—because the singing of hymns was seen as disrespecting Muslim schoolchildren and in breach of the principle of a secular Swedish school system (Sputnik, November 11, 2019i). There were plots about Swedish pupils who were forbidden to wear necklaces with a Christian cross (Sputnik, October 12, 2020y) while Muslim women and girls were allowed

to wear the hijab (Sputnik, January 15, 2020a; Sputnik, February 14, 2020c); and there were stories of non-Muslim pupils forced to pray to Allah as part of religious teaching (Sputnik, March 6, 2020e). Among the different actors in the plots, leftist politicians were depicted as especially weak, oversensitive, and indecisive with regard to freedom of expression. They were reported as giving in to special interest claims and adding restrictions according to what was considered politically correct (Sputnik, July 21, 2020n; Sputnik, March 7, 2020f). Despite fancy and lengthy liberal talk by politicians and state authorities, when it came to criticism of the Muslim population and Muslim customs and traditions, freedom of expression appeared no longer valid.

Sputnik showed how Swedish values and principles were being challenged by foreign cultures and traditions, and succumbing to the pressure. The plots showed how an overemphasis on liberal democracy prevented any defense of Swedish culture and values, and like the sub-narratives about the party political disputes, liberal democracy was found to cause destabilization and the disintegration of the state. Credulous state and church authorities gave permission for any kind of organization to register as a religious community as long as it claimed to favor feminism, social justice, and environmental protection, and to support LGBTQ+ rights. Even Satanists were accepted. A background paragraph explained:

However, since the Church of Sweden was separated from the state in 2000, a push for a more equal treatment of other faith communities was initiated. In recent years, a plethora of [religious societies](#) have been registered in Sweden, from the Islamic fatwa agency to the Scientologists. (Sputnik, August 2, 2019b)

Liberal leadership was depicted as so keen to defend freedom of speech and freedom of religion that it downplayed the responsibility to maintain order and stability, leading to violence and riots as a consequence. In a television report from the south of Sweden, RT, with a reporter on site, showed how the country had literally been thrown into chaos. Street fights and clashes between protestors and the police had followed online streaming of a Quran-burning in Malmö by anti-Islamism activists from the Danish political party, Hardline. The anchor introduced the piece, “Torched Faith”:

There have been violent scenes in Sweden after unrest was triggered when anti-Islam activists burned a Coran and streamed it online. Police say that more than 300 people outraged at the event took to the streets in protest. However, the situation descended into riots with demonstrators starting fires and clashing with police. (RT, August 29, 2020)

The accompanying pictures showed young men in hoodies fleeing from the police and police cars chasing after them. There were numerous police cars in the street lit up by sirens and streetlights. The police task force, in full riot gear, was on site and blurry pictures from a chaotic scene showed them moving violent protestors by carrying them and placing them in police vans while gunshots were heard in the background. The anchor in the studio said the police had admitted that they had lost control during the violence. He also told how the founder and leader of the Hardline party, Rasmus Paludan, had been banned from entering Sweden, and that three of “the members of the party are being arrested on suspicion of inciting hatred”. There was no criticism of the tardiness of the Swedish authorities in acting against the Coran burning campaign or the Danish activists. Nor were there any reflections made on what Sweden was willing to endure to protect freedom of speech. The violent pictures spoke for themselves, or so it might be assumed. Nor was there any mention of the alleged instigator of the riot, Rasmus Paludan, being banned from Sweden.

The fact that an event such as a Coran burning was allowed despite the risk of ensuing violence was commented on by Kent Ekeroth, a member of the national conservative right-wing Sweden Democrats (SD) party. Ekeroth was ascribed an expert position in the plot. He was depicted as an anti-liberal critic and someone who helped make sense of the violent event. He gave his opinion that what had just been witnessed in Malmö showed how the Swedish state had lost control over immigration and over its territory. Ekeroth made a connection between what he termed Sweden’s “huge demographic problems” with immigrant groups “becoming a bigger part of Swedish society”, and how this incident would familiarize Swedes with the Danish anti-Muslim party. Ekeroth framed the problem as an immigration issue over which the government and the police had no control. His definition of the problem closed the story (RT, August 29, 2020).

Like RT, Sputnik reported on the Coran-burning staged by Paludan and his Swedish colleague Dan Park, but in a series of articles. The plots were the same as the one in RT: the Coran was set on fire and the

authorities stood perplexed and indecisive in the face of street violence. Paludan and Park argued that they were exercising their right to free speech, while the police feared continuing riots and an escalation of violence in Muslim communities. Day after day of coverage amplified the image of the powerlessness and passivity of the police. When freedom of expression was challenged by Islam, Swedish society appeared weak and indecisive about how to defend it. Although identified in the plots as radical defenders of freedom of speech, the plots assigned Paludan and Park the roles of known instigators of social unrest and men with criminal records. The coverage made clear the extremes to which Swedish liberal principles had taken the country, and that those defending the principles appeared to be right-wing extremists and former criminals.

One Sputnik article, sourced from the reports of two Swedish far-right news media outlets, *Samhällsnytt* and *Nyheter Idag*, told how the police had denied Paludan and Park the right to burn the Quran in the Malmö district of Rosengård (a suburb it defined as “vulnerable” and a “no-go area” with a large Muslim population), since this was seen as a security risk. The police were said to have offered them an alternative site for their protest, which was likely to be seen as a provocation of Muslims and against Islam. In response, Park was quoted as telling *Nyheter Idag*: “I told the police; you’re bowing to the violence. You are afraid that there will be violence, so you give in. The violent ones get to decide on freedom of expression”. Paludan told *Samhällsnytt*: “The Swedish police obviously love Muslims and dare not do their duty. A shameful chapter in Sweden’s history, the day when the Swedish state rejected freedom of expression and freedom of assembly” (Sputnik, August 18, 2020r). Such provocative and antagonistic language was often given a voice in Sputnik, which came to associate freedom of speech with depictions of a state imploding from within. In one article, Paludan was quoted as saying that “Sweden is going to hell”; in another he accused the law enforcement agencies of “running Islamists’ errands and functioning as a ‘sharia police’”, thereby alleging that the Swedish police favored the protection of Muslims over freedom of expression (Sputnik, August 31, 2020s). Other articles depicted Paludan as a former lawyer whose activism in the name of religious freedom and freedom of expression had forced him to request constant police protection, costing Danish taxpayers huge sums of money (Sputnik, August 5, 2020q), but also as someone whose zeal in protecting these rights had caused unrest and riots.

Taken together, the news plots about the Coran burning presented a clear message: When the state grants its citizens freedom of expression, chaos breaks out, riots ensue and only people like Park and Paludan dare to stand up for what Sweden claims is a foundational principle of liberal democracy (Sputnik, August 18, 2020r; Sputnik, September 11, 2020t; Sputnik, February 26, 2020d; Sputnik, August 5, 2020q; Sputnik, August 31, 2020s; Sputnik, September 14, 2020u). This was not just depicting a society in chaos, but also evidence of the threat that liberal ideas pose to law and order, and to society's moral values.

POLITICAL DIVISIONS OVER LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC VALUES

A second sub-narrative focused on political divisions, including party political disputes over liberal democratic values. While the depictions of a vague and incompetent leftist government played a key role in the plots for demonstrating that Swedish society had been weakened and lacked a firm leadership, little attention was paid to either Left Party or social democratic ideologies. Instead, the left was lumped together with “inadequate liberals”, and like them was said to be contributing to the demise of the Swedish state by ignoring rising crime rates and the problems of mass immigration, and instead focusing all its attention on climate change activism, multiculturalism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

The political issues on the domestic agenda were off-track and showed that the Swedish authorities did not understand where society was heading or the real problems that needed to be addressed to halt further decline. The length to which Swedish society was about to decline was illustrated by a news story in Sputnik, which reported on a school project where pupils were taught to eat insects to cut waste, using 3D-printed toys (Sputnik, September 23, 2019f). This was said to be part of a solution to the problem of climate change. The agency running the project was depicted in the plot as seemingly oblivious to how extreme their teaching was, talking about the need to “switch from high-carbon beef to low-carbon bugs”. A photograph of the so-called play food, to persuade children to approve the new menu, led the article depicting a close-up of unappealing insects on a skewer with the caption: “grilled maggots for human consumption”. In a playful manner, the project had named the dishes Algae Ball, Bug Mac, and Tasty Waste, but underneath the humorous and ridiculous wording Sputnik made reference to this being the “food of the future”. The source of the item was *Veckans Affärer*, a

well-established, highly credible, prestigious journal. Use of *Veckans Affärer* added to the message that this was an example of what was being seriously debated in Sweden. At the same time, it provided further proof of the absurdity of political life/space in Sweden.

The story used a number of quotes from the organizers, arguing that the sustainable food they were introducing was “vital for mankind’s survival”, with the word vital in quotation marks. It was therefore logical to get children accustomed to this diet. In this way, the plot balanced between humor, absurdity, and future survival. An image from a *Veckans Affärer* tweet inside the plot showed colorful toys standing in stark contrast to the photograph of a skewered insect that introduced the article. Thus, what began as an image of an unpleasant, almost repulsive future scenario was somewhat moderated by the emphasis on “sustainable eating”, as it was termed. However, tweets from the public in response to the future of food were less conciliatory. Some seemed not to take the project seriously; others expressed their disgust. One person tweeted: “Feels a little soon. The zombie apocalypse is not here yet”; another tweet predicted that children would “die of starvation and cold. We see a new totalitarian ideology being born, climatism, which will result in the de-industrialization and self-destruction of Western civilization”. Another tweet argued: “No adults can possibly stop it”.

This plot is an example of how Sputnik in particular demonstrated the silliness and absurdity, on top of mere criticism, of how Sweden led by liberal leftist ideas engaged with marginal topics or serious topics in a ridiculous manner while refraining from taking proper action on core political and social problems. Individual plots, as in the case of the above news item, might not be structured as conflicts between opposing parties, even if the responses to the teaching on future foods received strong comments. Instead, by mixing this type of colorful article—pushed to extremes and often centered on problems of climate change, LGBTQI issues, or multiculturalism—with news about the government’s inability to deal with problems of crime or the spread of Covid-19, Sputnik and at times RT made clear how far liberal leftist ideas had led the country astray. Instead of dealing with violence in the suburbs, or the mental health problems of the young people, projects were teaching children that bugs were edible.

Later the same year, and in response to the government preoccupation with what it treated as questions of the liberal left, Sputnik reported that a new communist party was being launched with a stated objective of

turning attention back on to the defense of working class interests. The story did not link the new party to the liberal influences on the traditional left, but stated that there was disappointment among the working class that there was no longer a leftist party defending working class interests. Nils Littorin, one of the initiators of the new party, and the narrator of the plot, was quoted:

Pride, for instance, has been reduced to dealing with sexual orientation. We believe that human dignity is primarily about having a job and having pension insurance that means that you are not forced to live on crumbs when you are old. (Sputnik, December 20, 2019p)

According to this plot, as a consequence of the left abandoning the working classes, Sweden had ended up in a situation where far-right and far-left parties were both competing for the same group of people, and they also shared the same critique of the traditional left and the establishment (Sputnik, December 20, 2019p).

The sequence of events as part of the plot made it clear first that a new party was being launched and then that this was due to the left abandoning its policies and the interests of the working class. The plot moved on to describe how the left had created its own problems as well as problems for its traditional voting base. Reference was made to Littorin's claim, in Sputnik's words, that the left was "going through a prolonged identity crisis". Littorin, serving as narrator of the plot, then explained the crisis in greater depth, saying that since the left was now focused on elite issues, such as Greta Thunberg's climate activism, immigration, and multiculturalism, and was more concerned about justice and equality for migrants than for the workers, this had led members of the working classes to turn to right-wingers, a move criticized by communists, to which Littorin belonged, and this was a reason for the launch of the new communist party. The underlying problem, he argued, was a "chaotic immigration policy"—an explanatory factor that appeared repeatedly in Sputnik and RT coverage of a variety of social problems—with its connections to cultural clashes, segregation, honor culture, and clan mentalities. This choice of terms clearly positioned migrants as the foreign and troublesome "other". Moreover, questions that preoccupied the left such as LGBT+ issues and the climate movement drew attention away from socio-economic issues. The plot ended with a reaffirmation of the critique of the left in a statement of another regional left-wing leader. Markus Allard was

quoted as saying that “socialists don’t belong to the left”. In a stark formulation, he said that the left had abandoned the working classes in favor of “parasitic grant-grabbing layers within the middle class”. The launch of a new communist party was thus given salience by fellow working class representatives and the view that the left had gone astray was reinforced.

The Sputnik and RT coverage also projected how the promotion of liberal values posed internal problems for Swedish liberal and progressive politicians. These stories gave the impression that liberalism could not be taken seriously and attracted only naive groups, and that the liberal ideology was shooting itself in the foot and contributing to the demise of a well-functioning society. Exaggerated individual freedoms were likely to lead to chaos and an ungovernable country where people used their freedom to limit that of their fellow citizens.

The most telling examples of the dysfunction of liberalism were found in stories about the newly elected liberal party leader, Nyamko Sabuni, “a rising political star” who had “shocked many with her views”. She was said to have created a rift in the party by abandoning core liberal values and launching right-wing policies such as tightening regulations on immigration, and social policies, and getting tough on crime. The very fact that she as a liberal had taken these measures confirmed the difficulties surrounding liberalism. In an RT piece, Sabuni was said to have exacerbated problems that already existed in the party. The RT commentator noted: “Sure, she’s been to gay pride parades and has served in the Swedish ministry for gender equality, but when it comes to multiculturalism, she says she wants to [here he uses air quotes] ‘bury it’”. The contradictions between her identity and political opinions were emphasized when the commentator presented her as “black” and “an immigrant”, and as other party members were quoted as saying she was too right wing and too strict on migration for senior members’ approval. This all added up to Sabuni personifying the internal contradictions and impossibility of a functional liberal left.

Sabuni having expressed tougher measures against migrants and turning her back on the traditional social liberal values of the party appeared no longer as a true representative to her party friends, some of which were reported to leave the party as a result (RT, July 1, 2019b). This was substantiated with quotes from party members and electorates expressing dislike against Sabuni for turning away from what they considered liberalism and social liberalism.

The plot about the deep internal troubles of the liberal party, exasperated by its new leader, can be seen as one of several plots that contributed to the sub-narrative about liberal democratic values being at the center of party political disputes, and proponents struggling to survive. The relatively short RT piece on Sabuni made obvious, however, by capitalizing on the personal identity of the new leader, how low the odds were on a viable liberal ideology. Not even a black migrant woman with past engagement in protests against honor violence, female mutilation, and the hijab for young girls was willing to hold on to core liberal values such as multiculturalism and a generous migration policy. Not even the head of the party sympathized with its core tenants (RT, July 1, 2019a).

Negative assertions of the liberal left, which went far beyond the liberal party, were sometimes projected by RT and Sputnik as absurdities or as impossible to take seriously, since leftist proponents tended to possess a distorted conception of reality. It was not uncommon for these news reports to be structured to project anti-establishment views and to show that the authorities (liberal left representatives) were out of touch with reality and with the views of the public. This was illustrated by a story in Sputnik that took its point of departure from a recently published annual report by the Swedish security services (SÄPO), the security police and MUST, the intelligence services (Sputnik, March 27, 2020g). This report stated that in contrast to similar studies from previous years, domestic right-wing extremism and not Islamism posed the main threat to Swedish society; and that the former was “fueled by ‘influence campaigns’ from Russia and China”. The plot, however, revolved as much around what the narrator depicted as the absurd idea that right-wing extremists were being lumped together with anti-feminism, animal rights activism, and climate activism as security threats.

The headline, “Swedish report that lumps anti-feminism, climate activism with ‘right-extremism’ is ridiculed”, was accompanied by a sketch of agitated women with their fists in the air and banners in their hands. The caption read: “8 March, March on/Keep up the fight (upp till kamp), feminism” framing the problem to be understood as a redefinition of the Swedish feminist struggle from emancipation to a security problem on a par with rightist extremism. In combination with the headline’s incredulous slant on the message as something to be laughed at rather than feared, the plot was set in a tone of disbelief, the security services clearly having gone too far in their assessments at the cost of their credibility.

The introductory paragraph of the article indicated that the report had been received with skepticism and it was explicitly said to have “raised many eyebrows”. The story then cut to the threat from Russia and China. Claims were made that the alleged right-wing threats were spurred by these two countries.

... the terrorist threat from violent Islamists is waning across the Western world, as opposed to that from right-wing extremists, fueled by “influence campaigns” from Russia and China. The “extremists” are said to be radicalized by violent propaganda on the Internet and social media. (Sputnik, March 27, 2020g)

Russia was allegedly working to destabilize and polarize Sweden, but these were threats that came from within (Sputnik, March 27, 2020g). Ahn-Za Hagström, senior analyst at SÄPO and assigned the role of expert in the plot, was reported to talk about the broadening of right-wing extremism in which she included nationalism, resistance to LGBTQ+ activism, racism and xenophobia, and criticism of feminism. She was also said to have “lambasted internet free speech as a major problem”, having written, “I cannot stress enough the importance of the Internet for violent extremism”.

The phrasing by Hagström made it seem as if SÄPO found free speech a problem. It was a statement that received no further comment, but to which was added that extremist propaganda was facilitated by the use of the digitalization, which SÄPO exemplified using messages such as “the country we once knew is gone” and “politicians have lost their grip”—seemingly harmless conservative views that are far from what could be called radical or extreme.

Overall, the Swedish SÄPO report was, according to Sputnik, regarded as untrustworthy and even somewhat absurd, as it claimed that Islamism was not as serious a threat as right-wing extremism, that the internet was to blame for violent extremism and that phrases published on internet forums, such as: “the country we once knew is gone”, would be considered extremist propaganda.

It was a general tendency for RT and Sputnik to represent phrases or wording in favor of democratic liberal values, as stated by actors or narrators, as weak, absurd, or stupid. At times, assigning such epithets to liberal spokespeople was used to reaffirm the hypocrisy of elites, at other times it served to demonstrate that these values were not only useless, but also

destructive to society. Hagström's quote could thus be seen as revealing the security services' anti-liberal stance, but it could also be interpreted as providing confirmation of the ways in which liberal values weakened a society from within.

Having therefore established that the security services saw threats and security risks from sections of Swedish society that had previously tended to be characterized as Sweden's strength, the narrator continued to list the external threats that the report had identified, which emanated from Russia and China. The allegations against Russia were strongly refuted and the accusation that Russia was involved in intelligence activities against Sweden in order to stir polarization was presented as preposterous.

It was similarly noted that climate activism was also seen as a security threat—an issue where Sweden often presented itself as a frontrunner—and quotes from the tweets of ordinary citizens expressed both surprise and disbelief at this statement. One tweet alongside a photograph of Greta Thunberg asked: “So climate issues are now violent extremism?”; another said: “SÄPO, now a proud member of the activist government left”. Taken together, SÄPO and MUST were depicted as representing a liberalist establishment so keen on defending leftist liberal values of feminism, climate activism, and animal rights that they ended up drawing conservative rather than liberal conclusions and seemed not to notice. Sweden must be protected from foreign and domestic antagonistic forces, and this led to a skewed perception of reality and an exaggerated and perhaps even distorted view of security threats. In this way Sputnik once again highlighted the absurdities in the establishment's defense of liberal values (Sputnik, March 27, [2020g](#); See also Sputnik, April 8, [2020h](#)).

A vulnerable domestic Swedish security situation, at the heart of which lay liberalism, was depicted in a variety of emotionally charged ways from drastic and radical formulations about the threat—Russia was claimed to have extremist groups active in Sweden—to laughable and ironic depictions of the analysis and conclusions of the security services: that internet free speech and climate activism were key problems, and that Sweden was an unsafe place. In contrast to the heightened threat image, lame and weak evidence were presented that could not be seen as convincingly underpinning the threat scenarios and implicitly cast doubt on the credibility and competence of the security services. (Seemingly mild messages interpreted as threatening, social media publishing conservative views and Greta being the primary threat.) The allegations that Russia had supported right-wing Swedish radicals were interpreted accordingly. Taken together, the plot

concluded that liberal values caused serious security problems that the Swedish security services were far from capable of containing, especially as they seemed to see threats where none existed and neglected to look for them where they were most likely.

Two weeks later, the SÄPO report once again featured in a news article about its controversial threat assessments, repeating that internet free speech was a Swedish security threat along with “resistance to LGBT activism”, while jihadism was now less of a threat. Sputnik did not formulate its critical stance in the form of arguments, but in a fact and figures paragraph:

At the same time, Sweden remains one of Europe’s leaders in terms of jihadists per capita, having provided about 300 ‘Daesh travelers’, as they are sometimes referred to in official parlance. About half of them have returned “home”, almost none faced prosecution for crimes committed in the Middle East. Several, however, were later convicted of crimes committed on return to Sweden. (Sputnik, April 8, 2020h)

Making implicit connections between narratives to create meaning—the Swedish approach to Islam with the defense of liberal values—was a storytelling technique that Sputnik and at times RT tended to make use of. A lax attitude by the Swedish security services to jihadists returning “home” from the Middle East was set against the scare of internet free speech, or so one might understand from the juxtaposition of these two views. Both reaffirmed an image of Sweden as letting its uncompromising defense of liberal leftist values and its ensuing reluctance to acknowledge Islamic security threats take priority over proper national defense.

THE SWEDISH CHURCH: A TROUBLESOME LIBERTARIAN WITH A DIMINISHING CONGREGATION

To the group of liberal and leftist-liberal institutions posing threats to traditional Swedish values and contributing to the demise of the nation was added the Swedish church, which had formerly been affiliated to the state but independent since 2000. Its left leaning liberalism was reported as causing conflicts with the Christian conservative right, which feared that the Swedish values and traditions that the Swedish church had represented, maintained, and defended were about to be abandoned.

The Church of Sweden was said to be no longer defending national Christian traditions, or caring for landmarks of national heritage such as old churches in the countryside or Christian artifacts and symbols. Instead, it had transformed into a progressive public actor engaged in Greta Thunberg's climate movement and in defense of mass immigration, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ+ rights, while its membership was in rapid decline—a fact mentioned repeatedly in the news. Many smaller congregations, especially in the countryside, experienced severe financial troubles and some had been forced to close church buildings, which were often also sites of cultural heritage (Sputnik, December 25, 2019q). Inefficient state subsidies had aggravated the situation, as had the church's separation from the state in 2000.

The sub-narrative about the Swedish church as a libertarian was linked to theological disputes only to a limited extent and members leaving the church were rarely depicted as a problem of a growing secularism. The problems surrounding the Church of Sweden were instead mainly connected to its diminishing role as a national actor on tradition and morals. Markus Dahlberg, responsible for cultural heritage within the Church of Sweden, was quoted commenting on what a loss the closure of a church entailed: “Many associate churches with their family history, and remember ‘this is where grandma and grandpa got married’, or ‘this is where mom is buried’. It may also be that the building carries much of the countryside’s history”.

The problems faced by the Church of Sweden and implicitly its inability to resolve them was thus a serious threat to the national heritage, church history, and local historical memories, but the plot also connected the problem to the disruption of families' connections to local and provincial locations. In this plot, as in others, the Church of Sweden seemed no longer prepared to defend Swedish cultural and historical heritage, and to ignore the connections families felt with provincial churches and religious sites. The plot's temporality stressed the significance of the connections between past and present, and the role of the Church in the continuity of people's family histories.

The plot ended with a paragraph that provided context on the problem, adding to its meaning, and repeated themes and phrases that were continuously used in articles about the Church of Sweden:

The Church of Sweden is known for its liberal position on issues such as homosexuality, mass immigration, and climate change and is often blamed

for its perceived “activist” position. Archbishop Antje Jackelén has sparked controversy by attacking the “Patriarchy” and “destructive masculinity”, most recently in her Christmas message. In contrast, Bishop Eva Brunne stirred outrage by claiming she had more in common with Muslims than the so-called Christian right. (Sputnik, December 25, 2019q)

Against the centrality of the plot focused on historical continuity and tradition, the Church of Sweden appeared no longer willing to pay attention to national customs and Swedish national heritage, but was depicted as an institution engaged in liberal ideas to the point where going against the right became more important than representing Christianity. These liberal ideals were said to have caused division within the Church over how far its activism should be allowed to go.

Added to this anti-traditionalism, articles depicted the church as de-emphasizing and diluting Christian theology and becoming increasingly eclectic. The broadening of the theological perspective was treated by Sputnik as a kind of hyper ecumenical approach where collaboration with mosques was given higher priority than uniting the Christian community (See e.g. Sputnik, December 11, 2019n; Sputnik, December 25, 2019q; Sputnik, September 28, 2020w; Sputnik, November 4, 2020ab). The ambivalence of the Church of Sweden to continue to be the carrier of a traditional Swedish legacy was also reported in stories questioning Christian symbols and traditions because of their exclusive effects. Representatives of the church argued that Christian customs and traditions might be perceived as offensive to non-Christians, and some argued that they might best be removed and replaced with more inclusive, secular customs and habits (Sputnik, December 11, 2019n; Sputnik, July 15, 2020m).

Despite its progressive stance, the church was presented as an insecure liberal activist that appeared indecisive on how to project its new image. This was demonstrated in stories about a new altar piece, named “Paradise”, which depicted gay couples and transsexuals. The altar piece was inaugurated in St Paul’s Church in Malmö on first of advent but taken down just one week later. The criticism of the piece, which was initially praised by both the media and church officials, was that the serpent in the painting was depicted as a trans person (Sputnik, December 2b, 2019l; Sputnik, December 12, 2019o). The representation of evil in connection with trans people was not the message the church wanted to deliver, however unintended, and the altar piece was promptly removed.

The standard Sputnik “facts and figures” background paragraph that closed the articles centered, in the case of the sub-narrative about the Church of Sweden, on the church having joined the liberal movement and seemingly lost members because of it—a causal relationship hinted at but never explicitly argued. This was, in some articles, complemented by a reminder of the fast-growing Muslim community. With few variations, the standard final paragraph about the Church of Sweden read as:

The Church of Sweden maintains a rather liberal position on a plethora of issues, such as homosexuality, mass immigration, and climate change. At over 5 million members, it remains Sweden’s largest religious organization and Europe’s largest Lutheran denomination, despite a rapid decline in worshippers (at a pace of about 2 percent annually). The Church of Sweden went from 95 percent of the Swedish population to barely 57 percent within a matter of decades. (Sputnik, December 2b, 2019l)

Just as it does the liberal left government, mainstream media and public service, Sputnik defines the Church of Sweden as part of the establishment and positions it in opposition to ordinary citizens with regard to its values, roles, and functions. When the reports on various events are added together, it gives the impression that citizens disagree with the activism of the Church, such as its support for feminism and LGBTQ+ rights, the closure of provincial churches, and collaboration with Muslim congregations (Sputnik, October 28, 2020z; Sputnik, May 7, 2020j; Sputnik, April 13, 2020i; Sputnik, December 11, 2019n; Sputnik, January 28, 2020b). It is especially notable that the growing number of Muslims was compared with the drop in the membership of the Christian church, but that trend was apparently being ignored by the Church of Sweden or only passively noted (see Chap. 8 on the narrative “Islamic takeover”). Instead, it was foreign actors who were warning against increased Islamist influence and even possible Islamist rule in a future Sweden (Sputnik, December 2a, 2019k; Sputnik, August 18, 2020r; Sputnik, July 3, 2020l).

THE SWEDISH MEDIA IS LEFT-WING AND SUPPORTS THE STATE AND ESTABLISHMENT

A strong theme in the Sputnik and RT narrative on the liberal left was the threat it posed to the notion of, and assets connected with, traditional Sweden. There were repeated revelations of underlying mistrust between

groups of citizens, and between citizens and public institutions, where the former often appeared representative of the old ways and the latter pushing forward with left-wing radical ideas not supported by the public. The division and mistrust between state media—Swedish television (SVT) and Swedish Radio (SR)—and the citizens were particularly stressed. The conflict was set in an anti-establishment context that projected the hypocrisy of the establishment. Here were powerholders acting in their own interests contrary to their protestations of serving the public and failing to protect core liberal democratic values such as freedom of expression. What appeared to be a liberal left working in the name of the citizens was in fact a government with a double agenda supported by the state media. Sweden was not what it seemed. Public service broadcasting was depicted as a broadcaster more in the service of the establishment than in the service of the public. Moreover, the complexity of problems associated with the liberal leftist insistence on widespread freedom of expression was being further emphasized by the links between the Swedish public broadcasters and the leftist government. In contrast, Sputnik and RT presented themselves as truth-tellers, showing society as it was and offering platforms where the public's voices could be heard. This approach was well in line with the journalistic role conceptions of Sputnik and RT.

News pieces told how SVT sided with the (left-leaning) establishment on the normalization of Muslim traditions (Sputnik, October 11, 2019h), on feminist standpoints, and on what came to be defined as politically correct with reference to discriminatory terminology (Sputnik, July 21, 2020n), as well as on issues of provocative modern art (Sputnik, September 17, 2019d) and sustainable eating (Sputnik, December 4, 2019m)—all of which were in opposition to the SVT audience's views and preferences. Just as the government was out of touch with its electorate, SVT was shown to be at odds with the public. The views of the audience, most often represented in the plots by ordinary citizens but sometimes politicians, were presented through individual tweets and Instagram posts, and expressed right-wing or conservative opinions in opposition to the authorities, the government, and the media. The public thus represented were said to be “slamming it”, by rebelling, scoffing, and responding with irony.

A Norwegian survey referred to in numerous Sputnik articles found that an overwhelming majority of Swedish journalists (70 %) sympathized with left-wing parties (see e.g. Sputnik, October 7, 2019g). This led Sputnik to conclude that journalists “do not harmonize with the political viewpoints of the general public”. The overrepresentation of left-wing

journalists, it was reported, gave rise to trust issues between the Swedish press and right-wing (or a majority of) voters (Sputnik, July 28, 2020o). Twitter comments by right-wing and liberal-conservative politicians were brought to the fore to show support for the argument:

As might have been expected. The fact that the phenomenon is not seen by people on the left is, of course, because they themselves do not suffer from constant angling and bias.... Perhaps not so strange that we on the right prefer to have direct unfiltered contact with our voters via social media instead. (Sputnik, July 28, 2020o)

In an environment where the identitarian left takes over the newsrooms, isn't it natural that words like Indians, cowboys and Eskimos are getting banned from the broadcasts? (Sputnik, July 28, 2020o)

The latter comment referred to a program broadcast a week before, and reported in Sputnik under the headline: "Swedish radio sparks uproar by banning 'racist words' like 'Red Indian' and 'Eskimo'" (Sputnik, July 21, 2020n). The story gave a brief account of how SR had acted to prevent and combat racism, discrimination, and xenophobia in their programming. The decision to ban the words "Eskimo" and "Red Indian" was said to have been influenced by the ice cream maker Triumfglass, which had recently announced that it was changing the name of one of its products from Sitting Bull. The plot gave only brief attention to the reason of the SR decision, and instead emphasized the numerous comments from the SR audience. Among them was Katerina Janouche, a well-known author and journalist in Sweden who appeared in several of Sputnik articles during the time period: "So you have been away from social media for a few hours and when you come back 'Eskimo' and 'Red Indian' are both 'racist words'. You can't make this s**t up. What's next? Jew? Swedish? Russian?" Another person wrote:

Speak of public service idiocy, Indians and Eskimos are both proud peoples. Now the state media wants to marginalize and bundle them together under the collective name Inuit. What clumsy inventions will come next? (Sputnik, July 21, 2020n)

These and similar social media comments emphasized the extent to which the general public found sound judgement lacking in state-funded media and that SR had lost all rhyme and reason in its attempt to be

politically correct. It sought to demonstrate that public service media failed to reflect the public interest, stirred conflict, and was defined by its audience as part of the establishment.

In yet another Sputnik story, public service broadcasting featured as similarly out of touch with the public it was intended to serve. In a story headlined “Swedish National Broadcaster in a Pickle Over ‘Propaganda Offensive Against ‘Fake News’”, SVT was reported to have launched a campaign to promote its own type of journalism, what in quotation marks was named “factual journalism” as if Sputnik wanted to distinguish itself from the channel and its ethics (Sputnik, October 7, 2019g; see also Chap. 10 on storytelling techniques, where the use of quotation marks is further discussed). The campaign film *Hen of a Feather* aimed to counter disinformation (or fake news as it was termed in the report) and to defend proper journalism, but it “sparked criticism on social media” in particular on Flashback, referred to as “Sweden’s most popular forum”. This plot was typical of a Sputnik story and took its point of departure from the problem that had arisen as a result of a failed disinformation campaign meant to make audiences aware of harmful information influencing activities, but which had been perceived instead as state leftist propaganda.

The plot elaborated on the causes behind the failure and a point was made about disinformation having been connected to right-wing conservative presidents Putin and Trump.

A lavish advertising campaign by tax-funded national broadcaster SVT that highlights the importance of “factual journalism” in combating “fake news” and features images of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his US counterpart Donald Trump has landed the broadcaster in hot water. (Sputnik, October 7, 2019g)

It then transitioned over to the audience side of things through use of an emphasized “however” that marked the irreconcilable differences of opinion between the actors. The audience was given voice before the end paragraph provided the context for the hostility between the state media and the public.

The criticized film featured a story about President Putin ordering a disinformation campaign against Sweden. Once published, it gave rise to several tweets. More significantly, it was also depicted as inspiring President Trump to launch his smear campaign against Sweden. The Sputnik story thus alluded to the 2017 Trump campaign that became known as “Last

night in Sweden”, in which he had given a biased view of the domestic situation in the country at that time.

The Sputnik report on the SVT film centered on the criticism from Swedish viewers. The initiative was scornfully described as a ridiculous “propaganda offensive” and people were quoted urging SVT to shut it down. For its part, SVT defended the campaign. Its CEO, Hanna Stjärne, stated in a press release that: “With the first film ‘Hen of a Feather’ we want to stand up for all the good journalism in Sweden, whether it is done by public service broadcasters or private sector actors, at a time when journalism is needed most”.

SVT marketing manager, Christer Mellstrand, interviewed in the Swedish journalists’ newspaper *Resumé* refuted the allegation that SVT had adopted a political stance when it depicted a Russian official giving orders to a troll-factory in the fictive campaign film. In response to Mellstrand’s quote, the narrator of the Sputnik plot wrote in an ironic tone of voice that the marketing manager perhaps did not see how the episode might be seen as a political statement: “Portraying a Russian official giving orders to a so-called troll factory is ‘not in any way’ taking a political stance, he stressed” (Sputnik, October 7, 2019g). The Sputnik reporter went on to quote Mellstrand, who stressed: “It is important that we proactively explain why SVT exists....Sweden’s image is under attack”. These statements were followed by a few netizen quotes that expressed mistrust of the public broadcaster. One netizen tweeted: “Hi SVT, is this movie for real or are you kidding with yourselves?” A user on YouTube wrote: “Pure propaganda, you should be shut down right now”.

In typical Sputnik fashion, the plot was concluded with a facts and figures background paragraph, in this case about SVT. The background paragraphs generally in the Sputnik coverage tended to have a great influence over the message of the plots (see also Chaps. 7 and 9). Often without any explicit transition, the end paragraph provides an interpretative framework for what had just been read and positions the problem of the plot in a specific context with the help of facts and figures. In this case, it informed how SVT is modelled after the BBC, is funded by taxes and that over 50% of staff support the left-wing Green Party, which received only 4% of the votes in the 2018 general election. This summing up of the story therefore used facts to further underline the biased, left-wing slant of SVT and added to the series of plots that showed the extent to which the corporation was out tune with its audience (see e.g. Sputnik, February 14, 2020c).

CONCLUSIONS

The narrative that the liberal left is a threat to traditional Sweden came to expression first and foremost in projections of democratic liberal values giving rise to domestic polarization between citizens and powerholders, a dissolution of respect for law and order and progressive attitudes that give freedoms to individuals that got far beyond government control. Taken together, it was the attitudes of and activities in line with the liberal left that explained the erosion of the Swedish state, according to Sputnik and RT. The government and key public institutions, such as public service media and the Church of Sweden, were particularly targeted.

The threat that the liberal left posed to traditional Sweden was often through its passivity and ignorance, rather than forceful and determined measures; and when measures were taken, they appeared misdirected. Their roles appeared obscure and their decision making indecisive or reactive, rather than active, but regardless of whether they took measures, they were constantly at odds with their citizens. The police stood passively by as rioters burned cars in the name of freedom of speech, public service media decided against the use of “eskimoe” as a denigrating term, to the incomprehension of its audience, the secret services warned about the risks of the internet but downplayed Islamic fundamentalism; the Swedish Church saw its membership fall and traditional church buildings close, but turned their focus to LGBTQ-rights and engaged in climate activism (see e.g. Sputnik, February 26, 2020d; Sputnik, September 19, 2019e; Sputnik, July 25, 2019a).

The response of ordinary people to the anti-liberal and hypocritical revelations took the shape of screen shots of ordinary people’s tweets or Instagram posts (with images) integrated into the plots. These were made to represent the public at large, which confirmed that the political leaders and other decision makers were not trusted and that there was a conflict between them and the Swedish people, the latter arguing that political correctness had gone too far. The establishment was criticized for trying to limit freedom of speech, and this critique appeared in several news items connected to the role of mainstream media, and in particular public service media (see below), which was seen as severely problematic (Sputnik, November 3, 2020aa; Sputnik, September 15, 2020v), and literature (Sputnik, November 30, 2019j; Sputnik, July 2, 2020k, July 29, 2020p).

Issues of freedom of speech and freedom of religion caused particularly strong controversies in these sub-narratives because they were approached

by RT and Sputnik as incompatible. In most cases, freedom of speech drew the shortest end of the stick. There were few establishment actors in the plots that were depicted as daring to infringe the right of Muslims to practice their customs and traditions. This strengthened the expressed view that Sweden was not what it appeared to be; that the left liberal leadership and public authorities claimed to defend freedom of speech but were unwilling and unable to do so. The impression was that the liberties so strongly promoted by Sweden were mere talk, implemented only when it served those in power and did not risk stirring antagonisms between groups in society. Yet, the liberal discourse about freedom of speech and freedom of religion gave powerholders and decision makers plenty of problems, leading to protests, chaos, and even street violence. The narrative demonstrated how the liberal leadership naively thought their various interventions promoted and defended democracy and social integration, but repeatedly ended up exposed for doing something unethical, tasteless, or idiotic—all of which, RT and Sputnik argued, further fueled divisions in society.

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Obsessive Gender Concerns Leading Sweden Astray

INTRODUCTION

It is well-established that gender is key in security politics and the field of disinformation is no exception (Edenborg, 2021; Cushman & Avramov, 2021). This chapter presents an analysis of how the Russian state-affiliated media Sputnik and RT use gender in their coverage about Sweden as part of their disinformation. By way of a narrative analysis of Sputnik and RT news coverage about Sweden, using the analytical model developed by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) and which is based on methodological tools defined by Somers (1994), a number of sub-narratives were identified: Sweden is unsafe for women; Feminized societal security; The armed forces, firefighters, and the police; Gender as an absurd Swedish obsession; Muslim traditions clash with feminism and gender equality; Women moving ahead: are they taking over? The vulgarity of women; and, finally, The wounded (un)sexy space. Each of these sub-narratives is presented below. The sub-narrative was derived from aggregating narratives of the individual news pieces (plots) reporting on gender. Each plot was derived from a systematic analysis of a set of narrative features. (For a full presentation of the method see Chap. 4.)

The analysis paid special attention to how the news reports were constructed and what storytelling techniques that were used. The most significant of these techniques was the instigation of polarization (in particular

between individuals of different gender and religions and between groups with different views on gender and feminism), sometimes combined with emotionally charged depictions. According to the Sputnik and RT news narrative the preoccupation with gender in Sweden weakens the country. It causes conflicts between Swedes and weakens its national defense forces.

The gender narrative was strong in Sputnik but appeared only occasionally in RT. Through the gender narrative, Sweden was seen as a country where feminism, equality between the sexes, and discrimination in favor of LGBTQ+ groups impacted a number of social and political issues. Feminism and gender equality were depicted as cornerstones of Swedish society and often functioned as perspectives applied to various news topics—from recruitment to the armed forces to marginalized LGBTQ+ Muslims. Gender was thus included in the coverage of a broad scope of issues regarding equality between men and women, feminism, feminist politics, LGBTQ+ rights, patriarchy, sex and sexuality, including for example individuals' sexual identity, pornography, and promiscuity. Sputnik used the gender narrative to demonstrate how the reality of Swedish society deviated from the ideal model it had prescribed for itself. The coverage claimed that gender equality and feminism were promoted as Swedish trademarks but were at the same time heavily contested by Swedes. This, according to Sputnik, gave rise to numerous problems in the Swedish society, generating conflict and controversy between for example right-wing supporters and LGBTQ+ communities, between feminist proponents and Muslim groups, and between men and women. Gender was the cause of the conflict in some of these, while in others it aggravated existing problems. Regardless of how the causes were explained, the Swedish government and other authorities had difficulties addressing any of them.

The shared features that sorted gender-related news into a narrative could best be characterized by their inconsistencies and the lack of a neat pattern of plots. The conflicts and social ills that gender concerns gave rise to, and which were said to be a strong contributory factor to Sweden's decline, were both subtle and obvious, depicting both ordinary and dramatic events. Plots told of antagonism and division between men and women, with women claiming to be discriminated against or made subordinate. Sputnik wrote: "Swedish politics are becoming increasingly polarized along gender lines..." (Sputnik February 25, 2020h), while another news item reported that this appeared not to be the case in the workplace, at least not with regard to sexual harassment, to which men and women were equally exposed according to a recent survey—the explanatory factor being which sex dominated the workplace (Sputnik July 9, 2020a).

Sweden appeared obsessed with inequality between the sexes and the harassment of women, regardless of the facts of the matter. Several plots told of a Sweden that promoted itself as governed by feminist concerns, having taken initiatives to increase equality between the sexes, intent on preventing abuse and discrimination, but where the government and feminist proponents had gone astray—leaving reality behind and ignoring the facts (Sputnik July 9, 2019a). Exposure of the hypocrisy surrounding gender-related issues was typical of the narrative and came to the fore in all the sub-narratives.

SWEDEN IS UNSAFE FOR WOMEN

A strong undercurrent in the narrative on gender was that despite all the talk of feminism and gender equality, women in Sweden felt insecure. They were reported as being exposed to threats and as feeling afraid. The sub-narrative “Sweden is unsafe for women” was demonstrated in several plots and the problems focused not just on women’s exposed positions, but also on the conflicts that the preoccupation with gender had given rise to. This contradictory sub-narrative demonstrates how gender was used to highlight its counterproductive consequences: despite Sweden’s preoccupation with feminism and LGBTQ+ issues, women felt unsafe and polarization was increasing between gender groups in society.

In an article, “Quarter of Swedish Women Afraid to Leave Home, Survey”, Sputnik (October 8, 2019e) presented the results of a survey that showed Swedish women afraid to walk home at night for fear of being abused, beaten, or sexually assaulted. The preamble to the article stated that deadly violence was “relatively uncommon” in Sweden, but that such violence and the number of sexual assaults had increased in recent years—a trend, it was noted, that went against the UN principle of reducing all forms of violence against women. The article did not state to what extent there was deadly violence and from what level it had increased. The article referred to a “wave of sexual assaults”, but no statistics were given on the number of crimes committed. The plot closed with a reflection by the initiator of the survey, Sofie Lifvin, who was quoted telling SVT: “A more restricted life is a serious consequence of fears of being exposed to crimes that mainly affect women, but by extension it is a problem for all of us if the goal is for us to have an equal society”.

The plot was typical of this sub-narrative in the sense that it was centered on and presented a social problem built on statistics or scientific

research but the interpretation of the figures was contradictory, claiming an increase in violence directed at women and arguing that the deadly violence remained at the same level as in recent years. The exposure to crime was framed as being gravest for women but the figures presented did not indicate this. The main take away from the story was that women in Sweden were at risk when they left their homes at night and, given the wave of sexual assaults, were right to be afraid. Sputnik reported that women chose alternative routes because they feared becoming crime victims. The quote by Lifvin together with accompanying statistics painted a gloomy picture of a Sweden where the fear of crime, and the targeting of women in particular, kept people indoors and prevented an equal society. Both consequences could be said to strike at the very core of what Sweden was known as or expected to be: a liberal and feminist country where people were free and safe, and where equality between the sexes was central (Sputnik October 8, 2019e).

Another article on women's insecurity reported on a women-only music festival. Women needed a "man-free" zone where they could safely participate in and attend events without running the risk of being sexually abused. The story did not revolve around the risk of abuse, but dealt with the organizers' efforts to accomplish a women-only festival without being sued for discrimination. The year before, it had been ruled discriminatory because of the way it was promoted and communicated to the public. Men must not be forbidden to attend or to buy tickets, but the festival was for women and non-binary people, Sputnik clarified. The problem and the solution to the plot overlapped and both reinforced the view that women were vulnerable. The "man-free" festival was reported to have been launched in order to help the authorities protect women from rape and abuse (Sputnik November 29, 2019i). The plot emphasized Sputnik's claim of Swedish feminists' hypocrisy, reporting that despite all the talk about gender equality, women in Sweden were still subject to abuse and organizations were trying to find ways around the liberal principles that Swedish elites boasted of defending. It also implicitly indicated that law enforcement was unable to keep women safe.

FEMINIZED SOCIETAL SECURITY: THE ARMED FORCES, FIRE FIGHTERS, AND THE POLICE

A key characteristic of the gender narrative in Sputnik were accounts of the feminization of typical male professions. The sub-narrative “Feminized societal security: the armed forces, fire fighters, and the police” discussed how women had begun to enter typically male-dominated professions of a kind that demanded extraordinary physical strength. The analysis of the problem definition of the plot found that recruitment was also a problem, however. The armed forces were expected to comprise women and men but, like the police, they faced serious problems recruiting women. Men in Sweden seemed keener on engaging in a military career than women, and this was reported as the problem of the plot (Sputnik October 15, 2020s). Sputnik quoted the Swedish Armed Forces’ Facebook page: “How can one of the world’s most equal countries have a defense force where just under one-fifth of its personnel are women? This is indefensible. Our work to become more like the country we defend continues. An equal defense is a stronger defense” (Sputnik October 15, 2020s).

The dilemma of too few women being attracted to the Armed Forces was first and foremost presented as a problem in light of the heavy promotion of gender neutrality, diversity, and equality. As it turned out, the armed forces had not met the objective to become more like the country it was defending. Set against its Facebook post, Sputnik’s framing of the problem was that the Swedish Armed Forces appeared more like promoters of LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality than an actual military force. This criticism was reinforced following publication of a newspaper advertisement in which the Defense Force promoted its pro-LGBTQ+ sympathies (Sputnik July 30, 2019b; see also Sputnik August 4, 2020q). A Sputnik article entitled “‘You’re soldiers not activists’: Swedish Soldiers Under Fire on Twitter for Front Page Gay Pride Ad”, (July 30, 2019b) republished the advertisement and reported negative reactions to it. In response some readers tweeted that the Defense Force had gone mad. Swedes were turning against their own military force and their main argument, according to Sputnik, was that the armed forces should not engage in political campaigning or propaganda, their money should not be spent on advertisements, and the focus should be on defending Sweden rather than promoting pride festivals. One tweet read: “Your only task is to defend Sweden against external enemies so stop blithering and devote yourself to what you should be doing. You are soldiers, not Pride

activists”. Other users tweeted highly critical and sarcastic messages, such as: “I pray to God we’ll never need to be defended by the Swedish Pride Army and their sham soldiers”; and “Are you going to beat the Russians with a handbag?”

Despite a note at the end of the plot (i.e. the narrative of the news piece) that the advertisement had also sparked positive responses, with people saying the PR stunt with regard to LGBTQ+ rights was a necessary one, the message was that the armed forces were propagandistic, had gone astray, and had ceased to give priority to the defense of Sweden. The coverage of the armed forces’ participation in the Stockholm Pride Festival and the defense of LGBTQ+ rights was used to demonstrate the weakness of Swedish defense and the weak support it had from the public. The article ended with a brief background paragraph that, with a slight touch of irony, highlighted the weight the Swedish Armed Forces had assigned to the festival.

The Swedish Armed Forces have been taking part in various Pride events since the 2000s. This year, it has a packed schedule that includes seminars on “Coming out in a macho organisation”, actual pride parades and even a “Run for Pride” event, touted as the most colourful run of the year. (Sputnik July 30, [2019b](#))

Another typical series of stories that made up the sub-narrative of feminized security were plots about women police and firefighters. As was the case with the armed forces, recruitment of women to the police force was in decline. The drop in the number of female police officers, however, was mentioned as only one of several problems facing Swedish law enforcement. There were also too few police officers with foreign backgrounds. The proportion of this category of police officers had not increased over the past four years, while at the same time Sweden faced an increase in gang violence and no-go-zones in the suburbs (Sputnik December 30, [2020w](#)).

One of the plots centered on two separate problems that were connected only in the sense that they both illustrated the difficulties the police force faced in Sweden. There were too few women and minority groups represented in the force and there was increased gang-violence, giving rise to “street shootouts, explosions and gangland violence”. The two problems in focus—recruiting women and minority groups, and gang violence—were unrelated and never connected; yet they appeared in the same plot. This was a narrative structure that was seen many times in the Sputnik

plots. In contrast to the storytelling technique where seemingly unrelated problems or topics are tightly connected by way of the narrative structure of the plot there are no narrative tools used to connect the disparate problems. This might be seen as an invitation to the Sputnik consumers to make the connections themselves (More about storytelling techniques below. See Chap. 10 of this volume.)

A background paragraph recounting the gender history of the Swedish police stated that the force was 33% women in 2019, of a total of 20,000 officers. Chief of Police Max Lutteman was quoted as saying that the recruitment of women to the police force was a priority. Sputnik reported that the number of women signing up remained stable and that “progress in this area has been slow”. Lutteman commented that this was due to tradition. The police were reported to be dealing with the problem by facilitating different admission criteria for women, such as adopting different physical endurance standards for women than for men.

The article then reported on the number of police with foreign backgrounds. The problems here were poor test scores on problem-solving and in personality tests, and poor language skills. Seemingly with no immediate connection to the paragraphs about recruitment, there was a final note on the increase in gang-related criminality and of no-go areas in the Swedish suburbs, with reference to Lasse Wierup’s recent book, *Gangster’s Paradise. How Sweden became an arena for crime, shootings and bombings* (Sputnik December 30, 2020w). The numbers of gangs and gang members were repeated from the introduction to the plot.

The difficulty of recruiting women to the armed forces was the problem that led the story. It was a major failure for a police force in a nation making constant claims to be promoting feminism. As the story moved on, however, the question broadened to include not just women, but another underrepresented group—applicants with foreign backgrounds. Finally, the plot about the difficulties recruiting marginalized groups turned into the problem of gang violence and suburbs that had been identified as no-go areas. It was never explicitly mentioned, but the question of how the recruitment of women could be so important to the police when criminal gangs were roaming the suburbs was left hanging.

Firefighting was yet another profession in Sweden with few women applicants and voices calling for an increase in numbers, according to Sputnik. As with many of the plots in this sub-narrative, it was unclear who exactly was calling for an increase in women or increased equality. The low level of women was reported to have been criticized, however, and in one

of the plots this was raised by a “group of female firefighters”. Like the stories about the armed forces and the police, the problem identified in the plot was the difficulty in increasing the number of women because they did not pass the physical tests, which were set up for men and not women. Women were reported as being disappointed that they were unable to join but if the bar were lowered, this would be discriminating against male applicants who passed—or so the argument went. Comparisons were made between the tests for firefighters and those for the police, the latter having lowered its bar to accommodate female standards and, as a consequence, seen overall performance levels decline.

The Swedish Police Academy sets lower strength requirements for women than men and has been criticized for endorsing a set of double standards and lowering the overall level of performance. (Sputnik December 22, 2020v)

Blanche Sande at the right-wing Swedish think tank, Timbro, was reported as saying that the use of employment quotas to recruit more women caused two main problems:

One is that these “quotas” are really just a finer way of saying “discrimination”, in this case discrimination against male applicants who lose their place to female applicants with poorer results.

The significance of the firefighter needing to be strong and fit enough to do the job was questioned and debated. The union director at the Greater Gothenburg rescue services and some female fire fighters argued that it was a question of group performance and in a sense which qualities a firefighter needed to contribute to the group. The implicit question, never explicitly spelled out, was whether firefighting had become less about physical strength and more about teamwork and other qualities—or from its viewpoint less masculine and more feminine. Or whether it was still dependent on the physical strength of each individual, and there was therefore a need to turn down most women applicants (Sputnik December 22, 2020v).

The sub-narrative exposed how Sweden struggled to live up to its proclaimed gender equality norm and feminist image. It asked numerous questions about weaknesses and strengths in men and women (and LGBTQ+ groups), and how these might be reconciled. The armed forces, firefighters, and the police were three traditionally male institutions, all

involved in providing national security, which were reported as being weakened if or when women were admitted. Even if not explicit in the articles, an implicit rhetorical question was whether women could do physically demanding jobs like men, and the extent to which in striving for equality Sweden was going against all rhyme and reason, against biology and against nature. The plots balanced on a thin line between sound and reasonable analyses and denigrating depictions of a gender debate that had gone too far. Nonetheless, the plots added to the general view of the narrative that gender equality caused all sorts of problems—from difficulties in recruitment, to attracting the right people, to carrying out assigned tasks (Sputnik December 22, 2020v). Most importantly, the plots in this sub-narrative articulated with total certainty how Sweden’s key security institutions were being weakened by their insistence on gender equality at all costs.

GENDER AS AN ABSURD SWEDISH OBSESSION

A seemingly exaggerated—and at times even absurd—preoccupation with gender as a solution to all social problems was a strong sub-narrative given further salience by its juxtaposition with the sub-narrative of how gender issues fueled domestic conflicts and were the cause of social problems and poor health, as illustrated by the sub-narrative of the (un)sexy space (see below). The obsession with gender issues was expressed through the broad range of events in which gender was the focus or framed reports—from crime prevention to snow removal and foreign policy (see for ex Sputnik September 11, 2020r). A common characteristic of the coverage was that the gender or feminist perspective was portrayed as silly, absurd, and sometimes outright stupid. In one plot, the Stockholm authorities, reportedly notorious for placing gender at the top of the agenda, were reported to have failed to manage snow removal properly following difficult weather conditions. The plot ended with a picture from a tweet of a snowy street and text saying: “Feminist snow removal looks misleadingly like no snow removal at all”—or, in other words questioning what good feminism was doing to the citizens of Stockholm (Sputnik September 19, 2019d).

In another report from Stockholm, a local politician proposed courses on feminism, gender, and masculine norms for men as a measure to stop the increase in gang violence in the suburbs. While, quite unusually, the plot led with a solution instead of a problem, the proposition was

interpreted as confirmation that the political leadership had lost control of the suburbs. The police were said to mistrust the method and a representative of the police was quoted as saying, in comments seemingly unrelated to the proposed gender course, that the situation had been allowed to get out of control while politicians remained paralyzed.

The plot was told as one long ridiculous story, where the gender course was treated as an absurdity while the quotes confirmed that the Swedish authorities appeared to have lost all sense of proportion, and believed that talking about and teaching gender would reduce crime and violence. The lead paragraph read:

While Stockholm has seen close to 70 shooting incidents so far this year and experiences an average of five rapes a day, the authorities intend to remedy its spiralling crime problem by talking more about feminism. (Sputnik September 19, 2019d)

The plot unfolded with information about several other measures taken, such as the dissemination of information, engagement by social services, extensive investigations of underage offending, and so on. The police expressed skepticism, which made the political authorities appear isolated in their belief in gender education as a remedy for the surging violence. Tweets from ordinary Swedes lined up with the police, but some failed to take the proposition seriously and saw it as a joke. One anonymous Swede tweeted: “You might believe this is a sketch, but it isn’t”.

On a more serious note, the plot depicted how Stockholm’s political leaders were faced with a “spiraling crime problem”, against which they were clueless. It was presented as far from comical but instead puzzling that the solution they ended up promoting was to talk feminism to this group of suburban young men. What was even more astonishing, according to the plot, was that resorting to gender for solutions to social problems appeared common rather than unusual for Swedish decision makers. The narrator of the plot provided a context for the proposition, noting “this is not the first time the Swedish authorities have sought solace in feminism”, to which was added examples from (once again) “gender-equal snowplowing”, which it was reported had led to a traffic standstill as pavements were given higher priority than the streets, and “feminist urban planning”—a project aimed at increasing security for women living in the “no-go” Stockholm suburb of Husby. Referring to these other controversial gender projects served to further increase the impression of absurdity

and irony of the gender course. Within the plot the problem and proposed solution were ridiculed. The proponents of the gender course as a strategy were made to represent Sweden's naivety and inability to deal with genuine, serious problems—in a mockery of the incompetence of the Stockholm politicians whose preoccupation with feminism seemed to weaken their ability to govern. Tweets from the public added to this image. One tweet read: “Why not top it with some LGBT certification and drills in gender language so that they [the criminal gang members] learn the official totalitarian newspeak”. This attitude was in line with other reports where a naive Swedish leadership was shown to have lost control of governing the country, while insisting that talking about and promoting feminism was the answer to all social ills (Sputnik September 19, 2019d).

WOMEN MOVING AHEAD: ARE THEY TAKING OVER? THE VULGARITY OF WOMEN

The sub-narrative “women moving ahead: are they taking over” told how women's interests and voices were given increased attention in the Swedish public sphere, and the plots demonstrated that Swedish women knew how to speak up. These outspoken women were most often depicted in negative terms and the epithet feminism was associated with offensiveness, unmotivated attacks, and vulgar and tasteless behavior. Accounts of gender equality and feminism were often used to show the absurdity of liberalism; it was as if all boundaries dissolved when feminists were let loose. In this sense, women rampaging in society was part of the ills that liberalism and progressive forces caused for Sweden, thereby overlapping with the narrative of the liberal left as a threat to the nation (see Chap. 6). Plots depicted famous women saying crazy things, and musicians and artists as vulgar, while campaigns urged women to take up more room in public spaces. Taken together, it was claimed that this worked to normalize vulgarity (Sputnik March 4, 2020k). It was reported that the Feminist political party (FI) was recruiting young children in its efforts to increase its membership. Even the prestigious daily *Dagens Nyheter* appeared to have been caught up in the feminist-crazed trend by raising concerns about there being too many stuffed “male” animals in museums (Sputnik October 25, 2019g), and there were plots describing how the armed forces were keener on promoting LGBTQ+ rights than defending the country.

It was typical for these plots to begin with proposals on gender equality that had been made by representatives of the establishment, the government, local government, or a state authority. Having presented their views or defined a problem, some plots followed by putting the question in a wider context: the plot inferred a marked “however”, which functioned as a dividing line in the structure of the plot and was followed by emotionally charged negative responses from angry and upset men and women: men upset with women, women upset with men or citizens upset with the authorities.

One illustrative plot is a report about Moa Berglöf, who used to be a speechwriter for the former prime minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, of the conservative Moderaterna party, and who now worked as a journalist. She had alleged in an article that the British prime minister, Boris Johnson, might have faked his Covid-19 infection to gain political popularity, and had been aggressively attacked for this on social media, which Twitter quotes from citizens and an expert testified to. Berglöf was said to have presented herself as a “feminist supremacist” and was referred to as a feminist writer. These identity markers were unconnected with her accusations against Johnson, but were nonetheless linked in the plot. Berglöf’s outburst against Johnson was also set in the context of her past as the writer of the famous Reinfeldt speech “open your hearts”, which was an appeal to Swedes to be accepting of difference and show compassion for fellow human beings (then in connection with migration), and had attracted much attention at the time and since. The contradictory description of Berglöf appeared to explain how feminism might change an individual for the worse. Implicitly, Berglöf’s feminist profile explained her lack of empathy and compassion. Responses from social media users were reported as highly critical. Magnus Ranstorp, “Sweden’s leading terror researcher”, tweeted a response to Berglöf’s comments about Johnson, describing her as: “Lacking empathy and extremely stupid”. Other descriptions were “online hater”, a “sick person”, and a “disgusting leftist troll” (Sputnik April 14, 2020).

A young, successful, and well-known Swedish influencer, Bianca Ingresso, was also depicted in Sputnik as going overboard in advising women to drink their period blood as, she claimed, this would help to shorten their periods. Ingresso was depicted as a mad woman, even if it was alleged that the blog post about the blood did not come from her pen but was written by her equally famous mother, Pernilla Wahlgren. The plot positioned Ingresso in contradictory roles that she inhabited at one

and the same time: the role of a madwoman and a pampered, young, silly but influential blonde. The responses to her suggestion were vulgar and highly critical. Like the case of the art installation of a menstruating woman in a park in a small southern Swedish town, Ingrosso upset Swedes with her talk of blood and periods. It was the kind of talk that caused conflict, dispute, and unrest (Sputnik April 15, 2020m).

A similar plot demonstrating the vulgarity of Swedish women explained how a Swedish women punk band, which had won an award in the category best Rock/Metal Band of the Year, had given a live performance on Swedish Public Radio Broadcasting (SRP3). In connection with the concert, one of the band members was reported to have given a speech praising women struggling in the healthcare sector, those working in women's shelters and those who hid refugees. The speech ended with one of the band members mooning and saying: "Fuck Jimmy", in a reference to the right-wing Sweden Democrats and their leader Jimmy Åkesson. Comments on what Sputnik headlined "roaring profanities", for and against the speech and the act, were reported but the plot became a discussion on immigration. Once again, women were depicted as loud, vulgar, outspoken, and showing bad taste, but also as being given an elevated platform on which to display themselves (Sputnik January 22, 2020c). The denigration of Swedish feminists was further reinforced, since the article was published on the same day as an article about a Swedish Muslim woman who won a prize for her modest and devout fashion style, which was referred to as feminine, subdued, and discreet.

FEMINISM A THREAT TO TRADITIONAL VALUES

"Impudent women", which tended to be an epithet used for feminists, cut through all the gender sub-narratives. This gave expression to views about feminists as set apart, vulgar, and provocative, but also positioned women as well as feminism as a threat to traditional values. While feminists and their proponents argued that they represented progress, their opponents claimed that feminism generated societal problems and increased domestic conflict. This sub-narrative interpreted feminism as a threat to traditional values in plots that explained how the establishment failed to see the extent to which feminism challenged traditional values and ways of life. At the same time the sub-narrative told how difficulties motivated women to break into male territory (alongside the difficulties of recruiting female

police officers and firefighters discussed above). Swedish gender efforts seemed to fail on both counts.

There was a depiction of feminism and female vulgarity clashing with traditional values in the small town of Sölvesborg in the south of Sweden, the hometown of the SD leader Åkesson and run by the SD. It reported on controversies surrounding the Pride rainbow flag and provocative modern art installations exhibited in the town (see above). The local SD leadership had taken down the rainbow flag because, along with the provocative art pieces showing menstruating women sitting with their legs spread apart, both were said to be disturbing older inhabitants and perceived as provocative. The perspective from which the plot was told, or its narrator, was that of the SD leadership, which argued against the flag and the art installations for the sake of the children in Sölvesborg who should be protected from such imagery. The rainbow flag was framed as being inappropriate because it was a political symbol that should not be on public display as representing the town, because this went against tradition. In addition, if someone wanted to glorify women's menstruation, which was what proponents of the piece argued, they should buy the art for their own homes and not display it in public places (Sputnik September 17, 2019c).

An Instagram post in Swedish of Amanda Lindh, the Minister of Culture and Democracy, was added to the article but not translated. In it, Lindh argued fervently for art to be free and wrote that what was provocative today might be considered classical (i.e. traditional) in the future. The important point made in the story was that Sweden, as exemplified here in one of its strongest national conservative municipalities, was not only feminist with a disregard for conservative values, but that gender equality and feminism brought polarization. The story made it clear that defenders of traditional values and cultural heritage had no support from the government (Sputnik September 17, 2019c).

The sub-narrative told in several plots how feminism challenged not only patriarchal structures and historically grounded male dominance, but core national and traditional values. In an article "Swedish Thesis That Labels Academic Freedom, Objectivism 'Patriarchal Oppression' Gets Highest Grade" (Sputnik January 27, 2020e), Sputnik referred to an academic thesis by a female political scientist who argued that objectivity and academic freedom function in ways that maintain the patriarchy or suppress women. The thesis had been brought to Sputnik's attention by the foundation Academic Rights Watch, which was reported as seeing this as

a sign of how relativism and radical feminism had spread to “Sweden’s most prestigious universities”. The scholar in question was reported as arguing that truth-seeking and objectivity led to women’s subordination. The plot was structured as a tension between feminists and the universities over what science and objectivity represented, and to what extent these pillars should be defended against the feminist threat of relativism. The Sputnik article was alarmist in its formulations and warned against the threat posed by feminist views on academic research and science, arguing that it might ruin both. The preamble to the article read: “A foundation set up to guard academic freedom in Sweden has noted an alarming spread of relativism and radical feminism within the country’s most prestigious universities” (Sputnik January 27, 2020e). Feminism was depicted as a genuine and concrete threat to the academic tradition of doing science and what was referred to as scientific work. Moreover, “the mere fact that objectivity is sought in the research world is, according to the thesis, in itself an expression of patriarchy, which refers to ‘the structural subordination of the woman in relation to the man’”. Feminist views could therefore be seen as disavowing objectivity in science.

Another typically male domain that was reportedly being questioned by feminism was eating meat. In a provocative and critical plot, the Swedish National Food Agency was reported as accusing men of “sticking to a meat diet for the sake of masculinity”, and of seeking to change this norm by redefining masculinity. In a tweet aimed at the male population, the agency urged:

Men and boys eat the most meat, which is not good for health and environment. How can the meat norm be changed? You don’t have to eat a lot of meat to be masculine or build muscle.

The responses from politicians and ordinary citizens were fierce and the agency was accused of left-wing activism. Critics argued that it was not for the agency to spend time and money on such issues. One social media user wrote: “Kick all left-wing activists from the National Food Agency”. Responses were published from Swedish political representatives, among them Moderate Party MP Lars Beckman whose tweet read: “Has your account been hijacked or have some of your employees tweeted from the wrong account? Or is this how the Swedish National Food Agency expresses itself now?”

Most of the tweets shared the perspective that a government agency should not have any opinions on what people (or men) prefer to eat or how their food intake connects to their perception of gender. Nonetheless, the tweets made obvious the extent to which gender issues stirred emotions and indicated both anti-establishment sentiments among the public and critical views about gender being integrated into every policy area. Swedish men were being provoked on both accounts by being told not to eat so much meat (Sputnik December 4, 2019j). The article followed a pattern in Sputnik where it was repeatedly shown how men and masculinity were being challenged and questioned by liberal authorities.

MUSLIM TRADITIONS CLASH WITH FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUALITY

The sub-narrative Muslim traditions clash with feminism and gender equality told the strongest story of the problems feminism faced in Sweden. Feminism and gender equality were presented as deeply challenged when set in the context of Islam and the Muslim community in Sweden. The clashes between Islamic and Western lifestyles, which Sputnik and RT highlighted throughout their coverage, were particularly obvious when applied to feminism and gender equality.

Several reports centered on disputes surrounding the veil and the hijab—the two terms often used interchangeably¹—from whether it could legally be banned in public or for young girls in school, or should instead be accepted and perhaps even encouraged (Sputnik December 16, 2019k; Sputnik January 15, 2020a; March 3, 2020j; RT February 4, 2020a), and whether non-Muslim women should wear the veil in Islamic environments out of respect for Muslim customs (Sputnik October 11, 2019f). Even Princess Victoria, who was usually depicted as representing national unity and national pride, ended up in what Sputnik referred to as “Hot Water for Donning Islamic Veil” when visiting a mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The princess wearing a veil was said to “have sparked strong republican feelings” (Sputnik November 11, 2019h). A foreign

¹The use of terms was at times also explained. In one article about the ban of Muslim veils in schools and preschools in the town of Skurup, it was stated that: “The ban involves all sorts of garments intended to conceal the face...” and “The ban involves headscarves, burqas, niqabs and other garments that the purpose of concealing the face and is valid for both students and staff” (Sputnik December 16, 2019k).

correspondent reporting from Iran appearing on air wearing an “Islamic veil” received similar criticism (Sputnik October 11, 2019f). The headline read: “Swedish broadcaster roasted for hijab-clad correspondent”.

The question of the veil and women’s rights was reported as an implicit threat to Sweden and used symbolically to confirm the Islamic takeover of society (see Chap. 8). One plot reviewed a televised debate that had been shown on public service television (SVT) about whether pupils should be banned from wearing the hijab in school. The debate between two Muslim women with differing views had become heated and the headline read: “Outrage as Muslim Tells Hijab Opponent to ‘Move Away’ From Sweden in Televised Debate” (Sputnik March 3, 2020j). Another story reported how a pro-Islamic party had mobilized to get into parliament with claims of giving parents the right to decide on their children’s use of the veil (Sputnik January 23, 2020d).

Local politicians in the southern province of Skåne were reported as having failed in their efforts to ban the veil for girls in publicly funded schools, but the community was depicted as heavily divided. It was a typical pattern of this sub-narrative to use debates about the veil to highlight heated and emotionally charged divisions between people in Sweden. One plot told how non-Muslim teachers were wearing the veil in solidarity with their Muslim women colleagues and pupils. Those who favored a ban were quoted as saying the veil-wearing teachers were “idiots” and “medieval”, and argued that they “promoted the oppression of women” (Sputnik January 15, 2020a).

One of these plots told how the Discrimination Ombudsman had ruled that the decision by Skurup municipality to ban the veil in primary schools and preschools was illegal (Sputnik November 16, 2020t). Sputnik wrote: “the Islamic dress code is thus protected under the law”. The ruling formed the background to the problem of the plot and centered on a heated and divisive debate between citizens and decision makers. Those who argued in favor of the ban said that forcing girls to wear the veil was deeply oppressive and went against feminism, and that society had a responsibility to protect women from such constraints. Others thought that women and children should be able to decide for themselves what they chose to wear, including the veil. One side of the conflict was therefore presented as arguing that banning the veil was an encroachment on freedom of religion and women’s rights, while the other side believed that encouraging or enforcing wearing of the headwear was oppressive to women and denied them their human and civil rights. The arguments

between the different views were in essence quite distinct. By juxtaposing them, however, the problem was depicted as an entangled mess of opinions.

Thus, the message of the plot appeared not to be to seek to depict the headwear as incompatible with Swedish feminism as much as to project that Muslim immigration had brought conflicts to local municipalities that were impossible to resolve. There were no solutions to conflicts such as these: not through reconciliation, not by reaching agreement, and not in law. The large number of Muslims in Sweden had brought with them unresolvable conflicts, turning feminist Islam into an oxymoron. The end paragraph of this type of Sputnik plot summarized the question as follows:

The number of Muslims in Sweden has soared in recent decades, from several hundred in the 1950s to over 800 000 in a country of around 10 million today. The conflict between the Islamic view of society and Sweden's feminist philosophy has raised issues previously unknown to the largely homogenous and predominantly Lutheran nation. Among other things, some Nordic Muslims may find it hard to agree on issues such as women's rights and the acceptance of sexual minorities, which are seen as staples of Nordic society. (Sputnik November 16, 2020^t)

The discussions and controversies surrounding the veil and the hijab showed how Islam had gained a foothold in Swedish society to the point where it had become impossible to maintain feminist values without adapting them to and accommodating Islamic customs. This was shown in several fashion-related plots in which models posed wearing designer hijabs (Sputnik January 22, 2020^b), as well as a plot in RT about how public service SVT normalized the veil for children through a music contest app which "allowed users of all ages to dress their on-screen image with the traditional Muslim head scarf for women" (RT 2020 February 4, 2020^a).

RT reported that contrary to what might be expected given Sweden's liberal values, SVT had affirmed and perhaps even encouraged the hijab for young girls, the app being aimed at children from the age of three. This was followed by reactions from the Swedish public, represented through tweets shown on the screen and which said for example: "All to normalize Islamization... Every normal person with or without children should be terrified and disgusted"; and "Islamists have, of course, infiltrated SVT". Having made it clear that SVT had got itself in hot water (a

trend) with its audience, the anchor laid out the context and broadened the issue: Today, he said, was global hijab day and whereas liberal Sweden had chosen to welcome the hijab others had defined it as a no-hijab day. The world was said to have been polarized by world hijab day.

A British and an American woman—both women’s rights activists—had been invited to the studio to explain why one of the most liberal countries in the world would want to affirm the hijab and even impose it on small children. One of the women, Reese Everson, said:

The app developers are merely reflecting the culture taking place in their community. What we know is that a lot of people have immigrated to Sweden, and they are practicing the Muslim faith and they require that their children as young as three wear the hijab. (RT February 4, 2020a)

She went on to say that Swedish teachers were being asked to take responsibility for and ensure that Muslim girls did not take off their hijab “even if they want to play”. At the same time, she added, there had been cases where principals had forbidden pupils to wear the hijab: “So, there is definitely a community where this is a very real and present apparent issue and concern so we have to just allow the app designer to basically play to their audiences if you will”. She concluded by refusing to take a stand or, in a sense, define the problem.

The anchor went on to suggest that perhaps what was going on was cultural appropriation. He asserted that the SVT app might be seen as an effort—perhaps brought on by ignorance—to exploit or insensibly adopt Muslim culture and traditions. In contrast to the moderate and diplomatic reflections made by Frey earlier in the plot, she refuted this saying:

I don’t think there is any appropriation going on (through the SVT app). I think that they are just trying to represent the community. But I do think the hijab does have a lot of negative connotations attached to it which just aren’t being addressed and I hope people will start to address them. (RT February 4, 2020a)

The piece was run again the following day but in a shortened version (RT February 5, 2020b).

Addressing the negative connotations attached to the veil/hijab was exactly what had been done in a plot in Sputnik some two weeks earlier. In an article headlined “Outrage as Swedish *Elle* Picks Hijab-Clad Influencer

as ‘Look of the Year’” (Sputnik, January 22, [2020b](#)), one of Sweden’s most renowned sex experts and authors as well as far right-wing conservative columnists, Katerina Janouch, narrated a plot with reference to fashion reporting in the magazine *Elle*.

The plot opened with the winning influencer, Imane Asry, referred to as saying “the time is ripe to normalize the hijab in the fashion industry”. The plot told how she had received the prize much to her own astonishment: “I was absolutely convinced that someone who looked like me could not win such an award”. She went on to say that not only Muslims, but also other women can be inspired by her work and that the fashion industry was ready to “normalize the hijab”. The plot showed pictures of Asry in various Muslim outfits. The sequence of events in the plot was then ruptured by a “however”, since the nomination had “ruffled a lot of feathers among the Swedish public”.

Ann Heberlein, a right-wing writer and columnist called *Elle* “scripture for fashion enthusiasts” and Katerina Janouche, urged women to protest against the prize going to “an Islamist”: “Otherwise, it seems *Elle* has taken a stance—FOR women’s oppression, against women’s freedom”. Hanif Balif, a Moderate Party MP, was also quoted: “This is stricter hijabism than you find on the streets of Teheran”. The plot argued that many thought *Elle* was indirectly supporting the oppression of women while also “importing a conflict [anti-Semitism] originating in the Middle East” (Sputnik January 22, [2020b](#)). The plot concluded with the oft-repeated facts and figures on the number of Muslims in Sweden having soared from 500 in 1950 to 800,000 today.

Both Sputnik and RT repeatedly pitched gender equality against Islam and the Muslim community in Sweden. The plots were not formulated to take a particular stance against feminism or against Islamic views on women and gender equality, but they defined and repeated an incompatibility between feminism and Islam, and created a sub-narrative that showed that when feminism clashed with Islam, it folded. The plots sought to show how the foundation of Swedish liberal values was dissolved or was impossible to maintain when faced with Islamic values. It was the defense of liberalism that had led to the demise of feminism and gender equality, and implicitly a growing Islamization of Swedish society. In this sense, the sub-narrative about the clash with Muslim traditions complicated the gender narrative. Feminism was the cause of the Swedish decline. Unresolvable problems arose in combination with the threat of Islamism, and despite

feminism being reported as a threat to Swedish traditional values, defending national values became a defense of feminism and gender equality.

A WOUNDED “(UN)SEXY SPACE”

The name of this sub-narrative, (un)sexy space, is taken from the study by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) and defines the account of sex, sexuality, and reproduction—often in relation to plots about crime (sexual abuse) or health issues (gender dysphoria). It was common for the plots to involve children and youth, which added to the impression that Sweden was not only ultra-liberal, but also a promiscuous country preoccupied with issues regarding sex—or in other words “a sexy space”—from an early age. Plots about Sweden as a sexy space depicted a country far from being based on traditional family values, but nor was it a country where liberal Swedes’ sex lives involved promiscuous, obscene, or exciting sexual adventures. Instead, the liberal sexual approach was reported to have led to all sorts of ailments and discomforts. Plots depicted young people suffering from anxiety and/or depression and being confused about their sexual identity (Sputnik February 13, 2020g). Other plots showed young people as victims of sex crimes or perpetrators of such crimes (Sputnik May 22, 2020p). There were accounts of pedophilia and suggestions on sentences for pedophiles (Sputnik December 14, 2020u). Muslim girls were taught how to please men sexually (Sputnik February 26, 2020i) while young men underwent vasectomies having decided early on that they did not want children (Sputnik February 3, 2020f).

In one plot about gender dysphoria—a condition in which perceived gender identity and biological sex are experienced as a mismatch—in young Nordic people it was argued that the problem was not that of uncertainty about an individual’s sexual identity, but of the mental disorder from which they were suffering. Experts argued that this could not be helped even with a change of sex, regardless of whether the patient believed that to be the case. Thus, the experts interviewed were at a loss to know how to help these young people. The problem was serious: Nordic and Swedish teenagers were suffering from poor mental health and the number of youths with these problems was growing fast. The headline talked about an “avalanche-like increase” among teenage girls (Sputnik February 13, 2020g) and the phrase was repeated in another story on the same topic published a couple of months later. Sputnik later reported that the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare had decided not to lower

the age at which a person could be able to change gender through surgery (Sputnik September 11, 2020r) forei. It was talked of as a U-turn and explained by the fact that there had been such a rapid increase in the number of young patients in what was termed “the gender reassignment sector”, many of whom had neuropsychiatric diagnoses.

In addition, there was an increase in vasectomies, especially among younger men. In one plot, the headline read: “It’s political: Record Number of Swedish Men Getting Sterilised”, and a sub-headline added an ironic tone, asking: “Is Sweden Ready to Go Chinese on Family Planning?”. Figures were presented followed by explanations of the reasons behind the high numbers. A man, referred to as a “sex educator”, was quoted arguing a connection with the self-determination process of men. They wanted to take matters into their own hands, just like women had with birth control in earlier decades. This could be interpreted as an implicit argument that the reason why men chose not to reproduce stemmed from the attitude of independence brought on by feminism, but this was not spelled out. Nor were any further parallels drawn with China’s family planning in the story (Sputnik February 3, 2020f).

There were also other more scandalous plots about sex-related issues. In one such story, calls were made for drastic and restrictive policies on the purchase of sex, which in turn called for tougher legislation. In a story with the headline “Swedish Government Wants to Throw Sex Buyers in Jail as ‘Slave Traders’ Rapists””, new legislation on the sex trade was reported to be on the table aiming to criminalize the purchase of sex in order to restrict prostitution and human trafficking (Sputnik May 21, 2020o). A plot featuring young people who sold sex to make ends meet following Covid-19, during which many lost some or all of their income, was used as an example of the problems Sweden had with its sex market. Connections were made between the selling of sex and the deep dip in the Swedish economy, and hard times were also said to have led to a rise in sugar dating sites and businesses (Sputnik May 22, 2020p).

Pedophilia was another Swedish ill and a problem that was reported as having reached the highest political echelons. As a consequence, it was said that calls had been made for immediate political action. A well-known Center party Member of the European Parliament (MEP) had been found to have a partner who was a pedophile. The affair had prompted the Sweden Democrats (SD) women’s union to demand chemical castration, and this led the plot. The first paragraph read:

The [women's] union stressed that crimes against children are on the rise and argued that the policy of castrating the culprits is now needed "more than ever before", citing a 30 percent increase in rapes against children. (Sputnik December 14, 2020u)

The problem identified in the plot, the pedophile scandal, was connected with the solution of chemical castration. The motivation for such measures, according to the Sweden Democrat's Women's section, was to keep children safe. To strengthen its argument the section referred to statistics stating that there had been a 30% increase in rapes against children since 2010.

Having been exposed, the MEP was reported as having resigned, and was quoted as stating:

Since my collapse when I reached a dead end, I have been unable to get peace. Everyone says that you should give it a rest, but it is not possible to defend yourself from this. It affects my family and my relatives. (Sputnik December 14, 2020u)

The story portrayed the image of a society lacking ethical rules where no codes of conduct were effective, and where politicians pitied themselves for getting involved with pedophiles and children were increasingly at risk of rape. The SD women were depicted as having had enough, and were positioned as the defenders of children. The Center party leader expressed compassion for her colleague, but the SD women's section called for radical measures against sex offenders to be implemented immediately, such as the chemical castration of pedophiles, the abolition of statutes of limitations for sexual offences against children, and criminal records to be kept longer than ten years for individuals convicted of sexual offences against children.

CONCLUSIONS

The narrative "obsessive gender concerns leading Sweden astray" told how conservative values such as traditional family roles, and mainstream conceptions of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality were being questioned, challenged and at times ridiculed. Gender appeared to have become an obsession, a perspective through which every problem or issue had to be interpreted, even if this meant that facts were ignored, reason set

aside, social problems grew, and people suffered. The preoccupations with gender and feminism were connected to a naive idealism that sometimes led the Swedish authorities to ridiculous extremes in striving to remain in line with feminism or gender neutrality. This went hand in hand with depictions of Sweden as an ultra-liberal country where no traditions, conservative values or national interests were sacred. More importantly, they must not stand in the way of the individual's right to choose his or her lifestyle.

Gender issues and feminist ideas continually gave rise to irreconcilable conflicts, exacerbated by the growing number of Muslims. The instigation of polarization as a storytelling technique of the narrative was frequently noted, in particular as the arguments of the parties to the conflicts were never or rarely met with responses. There seemed to be not enough room for the differing interests raised by gender concerns as traditional values clashed with progressive ambitions, feminist liberal values with Muslim ways of life, young and vulgar women with conservative men, and calls for equality in male-dominated professions came up against women's weaker physiques. The structure of the narratives with a dividing line between the conflicting parties marked by the word "however", and the use of emotional language emphasized the polarization.

At the level of individual gender and identity, all this gave rise to increased mental illness—especially among the young. There were instances where gender appeared as a far-fetched and bizarre factor, mainly used to conform to a Swedish obsession and void of all rhyme and reason. In other cases, gender took on a socio-political significance highlighting deep-lying social ills, such as in accounts of discrimination, abuse, harassment, oppressive Muslim traditions, and crime.

Finally, gender was reported on in connection with other topics and narratives that appeared to have little to do with gender issues (this is referred to in the sections on storytelling techniques in Chaps. 1 and 10 as overlaps of themes and narratives). Sputnik or RT might report about a statement made by a political leader, business CEO or a well-known public figure but only briefly contextualize the statement thus making it appear ridiculous or upsetting. There were for example references made to feminist snow removal in Stockholm or suggestions to offer courses on feminism to criminal gang members. Added to this there were news plots that combined seemingly unrelated topics without present any connections between them, such as the difficulty of recruiting women police officers with the increase in gang violence.

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CHAPTER 8

Islamic Takeover and Selling Out Sweden

INTRODUCTION

The narrative of Islamic takeover and selling out Sweden was heavily centered on national conservative values and the threats posed to the Swedish way of life. It focused on the downgrading of Swedish traditional values, symbols, and images for the benefit of Islamic traditions and culture. The Muslim community featured in coverage of all kinds of topics and it was most frequently assigned the role of villain, responsible for social ills. Until 2015, Sweden had been known as a state with a generous immigration policy. However, armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa led to a large increase in the number of migrants to and people seeking asylum in Europe, and Sweden in particular. The government took unprecedented measures, closing the borders and drastically limiting immigration. Events leading up to this policy turn were most often referred to in the public discourse as a migration crisis.

RT and Sputnik repeatedly made references to the situation in 2015 as “mass immigration”. Many of the plots were set against this backdrop, and the Islamic takeover was described as the result not only of Muslim efforts spurred on by the “mass immigration” of 2015, but also as a result of actions taken by Swedish companies and public institutions that facilitated Islamic inroads into Swedish society. Through ignorance, laziness or fear of being dragged into sensitive and controversial debates, the authorities

had neglected to defend Swedish values and culture when these had been challenged and threatened. News reports showed how the government and state agencies were incapable or unwilling to defend core Swedish values, even in cases where churches were attacked and vandalized (Sputnik, November 19, 2020p; Sputnik, November 16, 2020o), or where crimes were committed and abuse took place (Sputnik October 8, 2020m; Sputnik February 14, 2020f). Four sub-narratives are analyzed that together made up the narrative of “Islamic takeover and the selling out of Sweden”: Muslims, a vulnerable group to be protected or the enemy within?; Threats to Swedish traditional values; Attacks against Christians and Jews; and Swedish celebrities and national icons cave in. I present and explain the narrative below, demonstrating how these sub-narratives came to expression in the various questions and topics covered during the time period.

MUSLIMS: A VULNERABLE GROUP TO BE PROTECTED OR THE ENEMY WITHIN?

The first sub-narrative posed the rhetorical question whether Muslims were a vulnerable group to be protected, which was most commonly reported view of the government, or an enemy within. This tended to represent the view of RT and Sputnik that the Muslim community was a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

The plots portrayed how the authorities treated Muslims in Sweden as a vulnerable, exposed group, and therefore found it unacceptable for anyone to criticize Muslims or their way of life. This position was held by actors identified as leftist and center-leftist. The Sputnik narrative told how the Swedish government and government agencies, often represented by actors such as parliamentarians or government ministers, allowed negative and potentially threatening tendencies and incidents to pass, out of concern for the welfare of Muslims and to protect their rights.

In one news item, Sputnik reported about the founding of a Muslim LGBTQ+ organization that planned to participate in the Pride festival under the banner “We are needed”. The plot contrasted the Muslim LGBTQ group, which was described as exposed and vulnerable, with allegations that the group and its demonstrations sought to provoke homophobic responses from the Muslim community and to create an image of Muslims and foreigners as people smearing Sweden. The plot concluded that clashes between islamic groups had happened before in Sweden, and that one of the organizers of a similar LGBTQ demonstration had been accused of “trying to incite tensions among various population groups”.

The problem was thus an old one, and Swedish politicians seemed to be aware of this—a fact that further added to their irrationality and naïveté in deciding not to take action: “In the past, the traditional **Muslim world-view** has **clashed** with Sweden’s secularism championing **LGBT rights**. In 2015, a gay pride parade in Järva, a predominantly Muslim area of Stockholm, stoked a lot of controversy” (Sputnik, August 1, 2019a).

In another story a photograph depicts prayer during the Eid al-Fitr holiday from the balcony of a large Mosque, in which hundreds of men are leaning forward, under the headline: “Iraqi Christians Warn Sweden of ‘Islamist Rule’”. Iraqi Christians served as the narrators of the plot, arguing in a number of quotes that Sweden was naive to have taken in such a great number of Muslims from the Middle East, that it was failing to see the strong islamization forces at work and the extent to which this threatened human rights, and that radical Muslims were hiding their extremism from public view and biding their time. Swedish academics reported as disagreeing and were said to have “brushed aside the idea of an Islamic takeover despite dramatic demographic change”, even if “they admitted the rise of Islamist indoctrination and increasing tensions” (Sputnik, December 2, 2019i).

Other stories reported anti-Islamist voices trying to convince the Swedish government of the threats posed to Swedish society by the Muslim community and Islam, and how all efforts proved unsuccessful. The government was presented as adamant in its refusal to acknowledge such threats, and instead maintained its attention on the vulnerable position of Muslims. According to the preamble to a critical news article the government was said to be pushing for increased support for Muslims by teaching Swedes about the islamophobic hate crimes and prioritizing to work to counter radical nationalism: “Critics of Sweden’s priority to stop ‘Islamophobia’ have suggested that the government inadvertently runs Islamists’ errands, effectively providing them with a shield from criticism” (Sputnik, October 18, 2019c).

Sputnik argued that the Swedish security services linked radical nationalism to hate crimes aimed at vulnerable groups, including the Muslims. Connecting the different segments of the plot, the view was reinforced of a Sweden led by a government ignorant of the problems it was creating for itself or what liberal democratic pillars it was effectively erasing in the process. The idea of banning anti-Islamic expression was reported as having raised severe criticism and spurred strong opposition from the Centre for Secular Education.

The end paragraph is a typical feature of Sputnik articles. It contains a standard set of formulations, depending on the topic, to provide context to the news. This one provided facts and figures about Sweden and its approach to Muslims. Like most of the plots with Muslims as the leading part, it ended with this information:

Sweden has over 800,000 Muslims (about 8 percent of the country's population) and has consistently been [ranked](#) among the best countries for Muslims by the Islamicity Foundation, a US-based non-profit organization, topping all European nations in the recent edition and trailing only New Zealand.

Recently, a [pro-Islam party was formed](#) to secure Muslims' status as an official minority.

In recent years, however, Sweden has been embroiled in a number of scandals [involving radical Islam](#), involving, among others, [Daesh* terrorists](#) and [extremist organisations](#) such as [the Muslim Brotherhood*](#).

** The Islamic State Group (IS), also known as ISIS, ISIL or Daesh, and the Muslim Brotherhood are terrorist organizations banned in Russia and numerous other countries. (Sputnik, October 18, 2019c)*

This plot shared with most others in this sub-narrative a clear and concrete message that Islam causes numerous types of problems for Sweden and challenges its key foundational principles. While citizens and some civil society organizations protest against the Muslim open door policy, the Swedish government appears oblivious to negative developments the impact of Islam and the Muslim community bring to bear on society. It is depicted as ignorant of the forces it is up against (Sputnik, October 18, 2019c). The problem according to the plot was thus not primarily that the large Muslim community gave rise to social tensions, but that the Swedish government, in contrast to the Swedish public, was oblivious to the negative developments. All the plots instead tell how the Swedish authorities identify Muslims as being in a disadvantageous position, and therefore justify prioritizing Muslim rights at the expense of others (see e.g. Sputnik, December 30, 2019n; Sputnik, January 15, 2020a; Sputnik, February 26, 2020g; Sputnik, October 30, 2019d; Sputnik, December 11, 2019j; Sputnik, December 2, 2019i; Sputnik, March 6, 2020h; Sputnik, March 13, 2020i).

Sputnik also provides plots with the tables turned, where Muslims attack Swedes. One such example was referred to as a "dominance crime" and described a growing type of crime performed by immigrants and with

the aim to humiliating Swedes or “locals”. With reference to a video published in *Sambällsnytt*, a Swedish far-right news media, Sputnik published an article headlined “Sweden in uproar over video of immigrant gang abusing, urinating on Swedish boy” (Sputnik, December 18, 2019). The events were presented in the attached video while the article drew attention to the strong reactions the video had generated from Swedes. One of the people quoted was Mia Aksoy, a journalist, who responded strongly and emotionally to the abuse shown in the video. “I’m boiling with rage. I suffer so immensely with the Swedish boy in the clip. Do you politicians even understand what you have done? These damn lowlifes must get out of this country. Age does not matter. They are going out!”

Others talked about this kind of crime as characterized by racism and defined it as unprovoked violence. This contrasted sharply with the attitude of the authorities and the judiciary in the sub-narrative who were depicted as distant and unmoved. They were absent from this plot but there was mention of similar problems in Norway, which was equally sensitive about law enforcement and where the judiciary gave reduced sentences because the perpetrators were from foreign cultures. Quotes from ordinary Swedes argued critically that the courts were helpless because immigrants and immigration were treated by the authorities as such sensitive issues and this prevented them from taking proper action. The voices argued that the criminals in acts such as those shown in the video represented a group that was treated and identified as a victim and not the perpetrators. While Swedish boys were the victims of assault, their attackers, defined as vulnerable, were untouchable.

The plots depicting the ways in which the Swedish government facilitated Islamic inroads into Swedish society were followed up with pieces showing the policies bearing fruit. Sputnik reported that a pro-Islamic party was on its way into the parliament with a political agenda pushing for increased adaption to Islamic customs, such as giving parents the right to decide when children should be wearing the hijab, and a prohibition on criticism of Islam (Sputnik, January 23, 2020b). Reports of instances where the authorities had chosen not to reveal the identity of a perpetrator or categorize Muslims or non-European migrants in statistical reports added to this picture.

While the overall sub-narrative spoke about the Muslim community as victim and in need of support, politicians were depicted as ignoring or paying less attention to Swedish groups, such as the working classes or the rural population, which also faced hardships (see e.g. Sputnik, December

20, 2019k). Plots in the sub-narrative tended to demonstrate a polarization between Swedes and Muslims, and often took the form of a zero sum game where increased benefits or sympathies for one group meant increased costs and antipathy for the other. What made matters worse, according to Sputnik, was the position of the Swedish government and the public authorities which did not acknowledge the threat, but on the contrary lent support to the Muslims and showed a readiness to meet their needs. By structuring the plots as confrontations between “us and them”, and positioning the Muslim group as a hostile other against “ordinary” Swedes, Muslims were defined as a serious threat to Sweden and the Swedish way of life, while the government most often sided with the Muslims.

With few exceptions—of which the riots in connection with the burning of the Quran was the most prominent example—these plots rarely told about actors and groups fighting one another openly over opposing and irreconcilable values. Instead, the narrative described how foreign values and cultures—ways of thinking and being which went against everything Sweden professed to stand for—were creeping into Swedish society while the government did nothing to stop it, or even assisted in the process.

Irregularities in connection with the Muslim community were reported in several pieces to have been revealed by non-governmental groups and individuals in Sweden. In one story, Sputnik (October 30, 2019d) told how Swedish researchers were warning that government grants were being used to create a parallel Islamic society. The Swedish government was reported to be using millions of taxpayers’ money to finance a student organization called Ibn Rusdh, the work of which led to the isolation of Muslim immigrants from Swedish society. Two academics and known experts in the field were given the role of narrator. They told how the organization in question received large amounts of public money even though it was known to be racist, antisemitic, and close to the Muslim Brotherhood (Sputnik, October 30, 2019d). The government was absent from the story.

The contrast between the lax authorities and upset and engaged citizens came to the fore in a plot telling how Muslims were exposing Swedish schoolchildren to Islam. In a school in Emmaboda, fifth graders were asked to pretend for one lesson that they were in a quran school. They had to kneel on prayer mats facing Mecca and worship Allah in Arabic. The girls had to sit at the back of the classroom. Parents saw this as unacceptable and had urged the principal to “take time out”, or temporary leave of

absence, from his post. The principal was at odds with the parents and the public and did not see why role play during a class on religion was either indoctrination or even a serious incident. It had been for play, he had argued. A father to one of the pupils was quoted saying that: “kneeling in the face of a ‘hostile’ religion that ‘oppresses and marginalises girls’ contradicts the very idea of school education and sends the wrong kind of message, as is the idea that one gender is somehow more important than the other” (Sputnik, December 24, 2019).

Reactions on social media were also shown. One user was quoted as saying: “Imagine the reverse... Muslim children had been made to participate in Christian or Jewish ‘role play’. Then heads would have rolled and the outrage milieus would have been jangling” (Sputnik, December 24, 2019). In an almost identical story from the small town of Tierp, “Forced Islamization at Swedish School as 9-Year Olds Confess to Allah in Religious Studies”, Sputnik made an explicit connection with the growing Muslim population in Sweden and the declining number of Christians. Setting Islamic role play in a wider perspective, Sputnik concluded that “a hot debate on the place and the role of Islam in Swedish society has erupted”, a comment reinforced by the fact that here too the municipality defended the role play and stated that there was no Islamicization going on at the school (Sputnik, March 6, 2020h). Both these school events were reported in the Swedish rightist conservative papers *Samhällsnytt* and *Fria Tider*; the latter also in the Christian papers *Dagen* and *Världen Idag*. None of them were referenced as sources.

THREATS AGAINST SWEDISH TRADITIONAL VALUES

While Sputnik talked about the selling out of Sweden, and a decline of Swedishness and the legitimacy of Swedish culture and traditions spurred by the growing Muslim community, the government was simultaneously said to be engaged in the deconstruction of the national heritage. The sub-narrative of threats against traditional Swedish values gathered plots articulating these threats and the defenses put up by citizens. The leadership of Sweden was depicted as proactively dismantling the nation. National symbols, which often overlapped with Christian symbols, were depicted as potential provocations for a multi-ethnic population that must either be explained or removed (Sputnik, September 25, 2019b; Sputnik, November 11, 2019g).

The narrative revealed an uncertainty in Swedish society about what was the correct and appropriate way to express, name, or signify ethnic groups and nations, including the Swedish nation. The famous hockey team Frölunda Indians was reported to be considering a name change because it might connote discrimination against indigenous populations (Sputnik, July 10, 2020j). The political correctness of the Swedish flag was questioned as it is was said to represent a Christian heritage and to signal religious oppression (see e.g. Sputnik, July 15, 2020k). By connecting the Swedish flag to a murky national past, the plot underlined the depth of the trouble that Swedish society experienced because it suggested that even one of its strongest national symbols generated division and conflict rather than cohesion and national unity. An academic scholar representing the Humanist Society argued that the cross on the flag should be removed since it “represented the nation’s Christian heritage and the oppression it allegedly stands for”. The cross was also said to be too closely associated with slavery. Tweets from Swedes were quoted that expressed disagreements. One Twitter user dismissed the claims, arguing that the scholar had revealed himself to be a “university leftist” while another commented that “symbols tend to exceed their historical origin. A yellow cross on a blue background means Sweden, full stop”.

In a similar vein, and based on a story picked up from the two national dailies, *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen*, Sputnik reported that the Swedish National Agency for Education had proposed removal of the national anthem, some hymns, and some historical epochs from the primary school syllabus (see also Chap. 6 on the liberal left narrative). These sensationalist ambitions appeared to be the main driving force of the plot, since it was also reported from the start that the Agency had had to back down “after a public uproar”. The message was thus two-sided: the government was trying to deconstruct Swedish national heritage but citizens were strongly opposed and forceful in their protests. The plot was thus simple in structure; it was introduced with a presentation of the proposition followed by reactions—“massive public outrage”—from both right-wing politicians and the Swedish public, whose comments opposed certain aspects of the history curriculum or the national anthem being erased from curriculums and eventually from the national collective memory. Once again, the authorities and decision makers were positioned as actors attempting to break-up the nation, remove its symbolism, and tear up its historical roots, while the citizens struggled to defend traditional values.

Two Swedish politicians—Ebba Busch, the leader of the Christian Democratic party, and Jan Björklund, a former Education Minister and leader of the Liberal party—demanded that the proposal to remove the national anthem be withdrawn. Busch gave “a passionate speech slamming the authorities for plans to erase ancient history, the Bible, the national anthem and hymns from the school curriculum”. She was reported to have compared the proposition to the politics of East Germany while the Liberal Party’s current spokesperson on education policy, Roger Haddad, was quoted as telling *Aftonbladet*: “We can’t have an authority that butchers key historical elements, that proposes strange changes for our national minorities and now has recently proposed that the children should not learn our national anthem in primary school” (Sputnik, November 11, 2019g).

The article ended with quotes from peoples reacting on social media. One user tweeted: “Don’t touch our national anthem”. The short plot could be said to represent in a nutshell how Sputnik in particular narrates the threats that a leftist government poses to Swedish customs, traditions, and ways of life. The way in which the short story was told is typical of a group of plots that claim that major efforts are required from the citizens of Sweden in order to safeguard their national traditions and heritage. The opposition had joined forces, the citizens had responded and together had they succeeded in preserving national traditions and culture (Sputnik, November 11, 2019g).

In a story headlined “Bah, Humbug! Swedish Party Lobbies to Do Away With Christian Holidays in ‘Multicultural Country’” (Sputnik, September 25, 2019b) Sputnik reported on a proposal by a local Center Party member in the town of Filipstad that Sundays and Saturdays should no longer be mandatory days of rest. The politician argued that this was a “religiously-conditioned anachronism that is ‘untimely’ and ‘uneconomic’”. It was noted that this had been suggested by the Social Democrats in 2011. The plot was structured around a solution to a problem that was never explicitly formulated: that the Swedish economy would benefit from becoming more efficient, and that employees choosing which of two days in a week to have for their days off would enhance economic efficiency. It was hinted at with phrases such as “our way of living is out of step with the current work week” and references to weekends being “untimely” and “uneconomical”—terms written with quotation marks. More importantly, the proposition showed that Swedish society was too heavily based on the Christian way of life, given the composition of its population. Given its

multicultural and increasingly secular nature, it would make more sense for society to become more secular in its organization, and have holidays and celebrations that mirror its citizens' interests and identities. The typical fact and figure paragraph at the end of the article made the point that 25% of Swedes had a foreign background. The plot should be understood in the context of the sub-narrative as it served as yet another example of how the Swedish political elite was supposedly ignoring or refusing to defend the Swedish nation, as the national culture had lost its legitimacy and must not be given priority or serve as the norm.

The narrative of an Islamic takeover took its cue not only from depictions of threats to Swedish traditions and its way of life, but also from threats of increased segregation between people and insoluble conflicts between groups. Suggested reforms by various spokespersons, leaders, and elites, such as those exemplified above, caused conflict with ordinary Swedes who at times were depicted as irreconcilable, and in that sense were expressions of polarization. While the authorities on the left and center left were depicted as the representatives most often in favor of a multicultural society, which was said to imply the removal of Swedish cultural, religious, traditions, national symbolism, and national heritage, the public—mainly represented through tweets and Instagram posts—tended to express very different opinions. Like the other narratives in Sputnik, the heavily contested views on whether or how traditions and Christian values should be defended and promoted were shown as bringing about deep divisions in society and in the government. In one plot, the well-known and outspoken Social Democrat Nalin Pekgul expressed her criticism of, disappointment in, and incomprehension of her party's views on the integration of Islamists. She was reported not to understand: "how the left could have been deluded by the Islamists' message of its alleged 'anti-racist struggle', as the Islamists themselves sow misogyny, antisemitism, and hate toward sexual minorities" (Sputnik, September 4, 2020).

Pekgul asserted that the Green Party was to blame for indulgent views towards Islamists, and that her own party had sold its soul to the Islamists and allowed the Green Party too much influence on questions about the integration of Islamic values into Swedish politics and society. She had left politics and gone back to work as a nurse, disappointed in her party which, she said, had betrayed its values and sided with Islamists in exchange for votes: "They pursued their policies through the Green Party. Just look at the bills in parliament and opinion pieces they wrote. When Söpo wanted to map extremists, they said that Söpo was being racist".

In this sub-narrative, there was a strong emphasis on the divisions between progressive and conservative forces, and the former were said to pose threats to the Swedish way of life either by their extreme ideas about justice and equality, or because they considered Swedish national heritage and culture to be indefensible in light of the cosmopolitan composition of the population. The defenders of traditional Swedish values were positioned as sound and confident people and groups that dared to criticize not only the left progressive forces set on tearing down national Christian symbols to promote secularism, but also the leftist view of Islamists as harmless victims. The experts in this sub-narrative came mainly from the progressive side, and made clear the lengths to which progressive forces were prepared to go, using their expertise to argue their extreme views. In contrast, arguments of conservative proponents were concrete, and this was often referred to as a head-on struggle to defend the national heritage, because this was what Sweden stood for and should continue to stand for.

ATTACKS AGAINST CHRISTIANS

The sub-narrative attacks against Christians and Jews placed the Swedish church at the center of attention, and claimed that Christians were suffering and their church was under pressure. It might seem strange that Russian state media paid so much attention to Christianity and the Church of Sweden, since Sweden is known to be a highly secular country. However, the point of departure for these plots was that the role assigned to the church was primarily that of an institution in defense of nationalism, tradition, and conservative values. As the church was said to be deviating from its role in preserving Christian values and tradition, and instead engaging in climate change and LGBTQ+ activism and the promotion of Muslim rights, it therefore featured in the sub-narrative as a troubled national institution with declining membership.

In almost every final paragraph of news articles related to the Church of Sweden, Sputnik noted both that the church was losing members and that it had taken a liberal position on homosexuality, migration, and climate change. These two facts were not connected but juxtaposed in closing the plots:

While remaining Europe's largest Lutheran denomination with over 5 million followers, the Church of Sweden has long been leaking members at a rapid pace of about 2 per cent a year. As of 2018, 57 per cent of the Swedish

population were members of the Swedish Church, a marked drop from 95 per cent in 1972, in a matter of only a few decades.

The Church of Sweden is known for its liberal position on issues such as [homosexuality](#), [mass immigration](#), and [climate change](#) and is often criticized for its perceived “activist” position. Archbishop Antje Jackelén has sparked controversy by attacking the “patriarchy” and “destructive masculinity”, most recently in her Christmas message. (Sputnik, December 25, [2019m](#))

The Swedish Church was portrayed as an accomplice in the selling out of Sweden; and as bowing to other religions in the name of ecumenical understanding, disregarding the dilution of its own standing as it aimed more for radical political change than preservation of the continuity of the Christian church and faith across time and space.

Sputnik reported that the political activism of the Swedish Church in support of migrants was causing resentment among Swedes. Reporting of the turn towards migrants was combined with a turn away from its responsibility to preserve the national Christian heritage. Engagement with migrants by the church gave rise to conflict and the church was accused of refusing to see how it was being used by immigrants who were trying to cheat the system (Sputnik, January 28a, [2020c](#)). The plot took on a mocking tone, ridiculing the church for believing prayers would make a difference to migrants applying for asylum, and introduced the story by saying: “Earlier this month, the Church held prayers throughout the country for migrants who are in the midst of the asylum process in the hope that God would stop the expulsions, sparking accusations of political activism and ‘left-wing liberal propaganda’” (Sputnik, January 28a, [2020c](#)).

The underlying problem in the plot, however, was not the prayer in itself but the Church’s political activism. This was not for the first time, Sputnik reported, as the Church of Sweden had previously been found to be “providing illegal immigrants with refuge”. This activism was criticized, in particular since it was alleged that the Church was naive to give support to immigrants who were trying to cheat the system. It was the Church of Sweden in the region of Norrbotten that had launched a campaign to influence the authorities to give unaccompanied children the right to stay in Sweden, and to grant residence permits to people who had spent longer than a year in the country. The campaign, named “Keep Sweden Together”, was symbolized by a crocheted doll “with a veil and a backpack”. Marking the divisions between proponents of the progressive campaign and other Swedes with a stressed “however”, the plot made

clear that not only there were people strongly opposed to the campaign, but the man behind it was a minister and a local politician for the Center party. Social media users commented critically that the Church of Sweden had become politicized and been infiltrated. One Twitter user was quoted by Sputnik as saying: “This is left-wing liberal propaganda, with no root in reality, from the church itself”. The plot concluded by declaring that the Church of Sweden was rapidly losing members and that dozens of churches had closed down (Sputnik, January 28a, 2020c).

The sub-narrative added depictions of the difficulties that practicing Christians experienced in Sweden. Besides their increased disapproval of the church’s political engagement and its financial difficulties, there were reports of attacks against Christians and Christianity. These plots served as illustrations of how several sometimes contradictory efforts to denigrate Swedishness were projected side by side by Sputnik and to some extent also by RT. On the one hand, Swedish actors talked self-critically about national heritage and Christian traditions being offensive to the immigrant population and to foreign cultures present in Sweden. On the other hand, these very traditions, including the church, were reported to be under attack from immigrants, Satanists, and left-wing extremists (Sputnik, November 16, 2020o; Sputnik, November 19, 2020p). This showed not only that Sweden was ridden with conflicts between Swedes defending their national heritage against Muslims who sought to subsume it, but that a number of other groups were attacking each other to gain leverage and cultural influence in Sweden.

In a story on November 16, 2019, Sputnik reported vandalism at a Catholic church in a Gothenburg suburb. The priest, positioned as a victim, was reported to be in shock and unable to comprehend what had happened to his church. Items placed on the altar had been thrown away—an especially serious violation as only the priest can touch the altar in Catholic churches. The priest was quoted in a quote taken from the national daily *Aftonbladet*:

It was nasty. The sheer scope makes you feel some kind of shock. There are various indications that that there is an anger directed at us. Everything that was on the altar was thrown away... This makes a deep impression on us believers. (Tobias Unnestäl in *Aftonbladet*, quoted in Sputnik, November 19, 2020p)

The statement by the priest was followed by a quote taken from the far right newspaper *Fria Tider*. Max Skalenius, a youth leader, was quoted speculating on who the perpetrators might be: “We have had problems with Satanists and left wing extremists, then it could be Islamists, or someone mentally ill”. Skalenius’ tweet was accompanied by photographs he had taken of the destruction. He argued that the incident showed that Sweden and Christianity were under attack.

Archbishop Antje Jackelén tweeted about the seriousness of the crime: “when nothing is sacred, anything can happen”. The police defined the incident as vandalism rather than a hate crime, and it was reported that they had no suspects and had made no arrests. As was often the case when the police featured in Sputnik reports, they were depicted as passive, playing down crimes and incidents, and unable to provide protection of safety. Furthermore, the passivity of the police added to the impression that the protection of Swedish churches and of Christianity was not seen as important.

A few days later, a similar incident took place when another church, located in what was described as a district on the police list of “vulnerable areas”, was attacked (Sputnik, November 19, 2020p). The preamble set the scene for the plot by stating, with reference to the police, that “the attack could have been carried out by ‘someone frustrated with Christian doctrine’ or ‘angered by society at large’”. There had been extensive vandalism but a stolen cross was later returned damaged as the figure of Christ had been removed. An assistant in the parish commented that there might be a message in this act. There was no mention of an Islamist group being behind the attacks but this was implied in both plots.

Antisemitism was similarly attributed to the increasing Islamization of Sweden, and this was more explicitly expressed than when it concerned Christians. Muslims and people from the Middle East were reported as being overrepresented in antisemitic crimes, allegedly having brought the Middle East conflict to Sweden. Sputnik referred to a study that showed that 51% of antisemitic incidents could be traced to Muslim extremists. More importantly, however, the plot’s cue was the Swedish prime minister, Stefan Löfven, who was quoted as saying that the cause was “mass immigration from the Middle East”. The plot stressed this position by opening with a photograph of Löfven and the headline: “Swedish PM pins rise of antisemitism on immigration from the Middle East”. The quotes were taken from a television interview in which Löfven spoke about migrants from the Middle East who had been exposed to state propaganda

and took a different view on Israel's right to exist. A Jewish representative underlined the situation in Sweden by similarly describing antisemitism as having been imported from the Middle East. A facts and figures section added in the middle of the plot sought to provide a fact-based context. It told of the high number of migrants from the Middle East who came to Sweden in 2015 and in the following years. The plot ended with a critique of Löfven for assigning blame of antisemitism to right-wing politicians and by recalling an incident where his own youth party had expressed antisemitic sentiments. It added that antisemitic incidents were most frequent among Muslim extremists, less frequent among left-wing extremists, and almost non-existent among right-wing extremists (Sputnik, January 28b, 2020d).

SWEDISH CELEBRITIES AND NATIONAL ICONS CAVING IN

The final sub-narrative, on Swedish celebrities and national icons caving in, contributed to the narrative by showing how plots in Sputnik and RT drew attention to national brands, businesses, and well-known people closely associated with Sweden's nation, and how their actions were contributing to Sweden's decline. The sub-narrative was tied in with efforts by the Russian state media to damage Sweden's international reputation, even if this was not explicitly mentioned in the news. Swedish companies and celebrities known all over the world were featured in the coverage and the plots, and were commonly defined as contributing to the destruction of the notion of Swedishness.

One such national icon was the furniture company IKEA, which a report declared was not promoting their sales in December as Christmas sales, but choosing instead using the term "Winter Celebration" in order to avoid offending non-Christian Swedes (Sputnik, October 31, 2019e). The company was reported as being ridiculed by its Nordic neighbors and by Swedes, but also as causing anger and resentment for not having the courage and stamina to use the word Christmas. The narrator began the plot by referring to the campaign as a "marketing trick" or "marketing ploy", which gave the impression that it might be a humorous gesture or a smart strategy. However, as it turned out, it was not smart at all. The greater part of the plot was a collection of comments cut from various individual social media posts, including a screen shot from Ikea's own webpage of glasses decorated with Santas using candy canes as snorkels and with a caption in Danish: "Winterparty—clear glass, Santa—IKEA"

("Vinterfest, glas klart glas, julemand, IKEA"). One Danish social media user was quoted as calling the ad: "a genuflection for the cause of Islam" and pledging to "boycott the company". Swedes were also reported to have responded negatively. One Twitter user asked: "Hi IKEA. What will you call Ramadan? April celebration? Or is it just Christian celebrations to be renamed?" The plot contained only one sentence on IKEA's view in which it was reported as claiming that "Winter Celebration" had been used for commercial reasons (Sputnik, October 31, 2019e). The plot presented the different actors and voices as highly emotional in their expressions. The comments seemed to extend beyond those of angry customers dissatisfied with a product, and instead reflected disagreement with the values thought to be ascribed to IKEA, and on which the customers in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway felt the company had capitulated.

A month earlier, IKEA had experienced similar problems, although at the time it was reported to be in good company with many other businesses which had made the same mistake by using the phrase "to each his own" as a slogan, without realizing that these words had been on a sign at the entrance to the Nazi concentration camp, Buchenwald (September 30, 2019).

Another iconic Swedish company to make detrimental marketing choices was SAS, which was reported to have gone overboard in a campaign to convince the market of its cosmopolitan rather than Scandinavian origin. The company was reported to have been forced to back down following massive criticism (Sputnik, February 13, 2020e). The campaign was referred to as having "sparked a hullabaloo" with its multiculturalist message that Scandinavian culture was copied from elsewhere. The problem as it was defined in the plot was that the advertisement had argued that cherished symbolic Nordic artifacts such as wienerbrød (Danish pastries, literally Viennese bread) and Swedish meatballs actually emanated from elsewhere, and had been imported to Scandinavia or could be considered borrowed, all of which were arguments customers had rejected or disliked. This gave the impression that the company and its customers were at odds with each other. However, a revised advertisement was also met with fierce criticism. The company was said to be holding on to its connections to global values while launching a revised version of the advert. The nationalist viewpoint was represented by Soren Espersen, a right-wing Danish politician who said he would not fly with SAS if the company maintained this profile. SAS defended its revised advert by arguing that it stood behind the cosmopolitan values, but that the first version

generated comments and discussion that it did not want to be associated with. The Danish right-wing party continued its opposition to the ad and demanded that the Danish government “sharply reprimand” SAS because “SAS spits on everything that is genuinely Danish, genuinely Swedish, and genuinely Norwegian”. In the Swedish media, the widespread criticism of the commercial, with its unapologetically globalist and pro-immigration message, was **dismissed as a conspiracy** linked to “Russian trolls” and “right-wing extremists” (Sputnik, February 13, 2020e). The story created genuine confusion about what the problem was and who was to blame for what. What was clear, however, was that the SAS ad, because it refrained from depicting Scandinavian and national values, touched a sensitive nerve about threats to Scandinavian identity (Sputnik, February 13, 2020e).

Like the denigration of iconic Swedish and Scandinavian businesses, there were plots that smeared, humiliated, or slandered Swedish celebrities, often known to and appreciated by Swedes for their sincerity and genuine goodheartedness. There was a story about PewDiePie (PDP), the world famous YouTuber, who had stirred up netizens by addressing a transwoman as if she were a man. This led Sputnik to publish a report on the YouTuber and his controversial past, alleging antisemitic and Nazi sympathies (Sputnik, November 22, 2019h; see also Sputnik, November 9, 2019f). Other Swedish personalities were depicted in the coverage as having made blunders or unintentionally revealed their true selves. The influencer Bianca Ingrosso talked about menstrual blood, Princess Victoria, contrary to all her talk of Swedish feminism, wore a veil when representing Sweden in Bosnia and Herzegovina, sparking “strong republican feelings” among Swedes (see also Chap. 7). Greta’s activism was repeatedly reported as having dark undertones concealed from the public gaze, be they her association with Nazis or her position as a victim of career-minded parents. Taken together, featuring famous Swedes in Sputnik (and occasionally RT) tended to add to the notion that things were not what they seemed and that “you should not be deceived by appearances”.

CONCLUSION

The narrative analysis identified four sub-narratives: Muslims: A vulnerable group to be protected or the enemy within?; Threats against Swedish traditional values; Attacks against Christians; and Swedish celebrities and national icons caving in. Taken together the sub-narratives made manifest different articulations of the threat of Islamism and the Islamization of

Sweden and depicted how the Swedish authorities responded. In contrast to the public, whose views were represented mainly through Tweets, the authorities be they the Church of Sweden, the government, or major Swedish companies were reported to disregard the threat against Swedish values, heritage, and traditions and even occasionally unwilling to defend them. By using story telling techniques such as polarization, misuse of and the stirring of controversies around concepts, and mockery by way of citations the news narrative can be said to deviate from liberal journalism and be referred to as disinformation.

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CHAPTER 9

Liberalistic Defiance During a Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an analysis of RT and Sputnik’s coverage of Sweden with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the analysis show how the Russian state media used the pandemic to denigrate Sweden, highlight weaknesses and shortcomings in its social fabric, and expose its leadership as incompetent and the hypocritical self-perception and self-promotion of the Swedish nation as a well-functioning country with trusted institutions and loyal citizens as a myth. This narrative, which was prompted by the pandemic, during which the Swedish authorities embarked on a different path, and to many a controversial strategy, shows how a global crisis might affect disinformation and the construction of harmful narratives. More importantly, however, it demonstrates that the narratives were similar in content and format to the other news themes, which strengthens the thesis about disinformation as everyday practice. Even at times of crisis, the harmful narratives remain the same. We must therefore be cautious about talking in terms of disinformation “campaigns”, which would indicate that the disinformation is temporary and a result of external events.

This chapter is a revised version of Hellman (2021). The Swedish article did not include analysis of RT programs.

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As with any global crisis, news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic was key to the very survival of countries' populations, the projection of national images and to relations between countries, as well as for the international reputation of states, and thus in all respects central to security policy concerns. This was also the case for Sweden. Disinformation in this context might be especially detrimental in that essential information is being distorted and as a consequence is mistrusted by the public. The smearing of public institutions and of the government might reduce the legitimacy of the national leadership and its experts, and thus endanger citizens' lives. From a longer term perspective, harm might be done to Sweden's ability to build alliances with other states, remain a trusted international partner, and count on international support if needed—on all of which Sweden's foreign policy is heavily dependent. Disinformation about Sweden with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic therefore posed severe security challenges, in that it was disseminated during a global and national crisis. As is shown in the analysis, however, this narrative was no different from other less critical crisis situations or longer-term deficiencies in the RT and Sputnik coverage.

The analysis is based on 68 news items in RT and Sputnik published and broadcast in March 1 to May 31, and August 1 to October 31, 2020. The time periods were chosen to cover the outbreak of the pandemic and its progression. These were also the time periods when the management of the crisis was being hotly debated. As the number of people infected fell in the summer months, coverage in July to August is excluded. The analysis resulted in a narrative that could be characterized in four sub-narratives: (a) Sweden lacks proper leadership; (b) Sweden is characterized by conflict; (c) Sweden is the odd one out—incomprehensible to the world; and, finally (d) Sweden is not what it seems hypocritical Sweden. I present and explain the narrative below, demonstrating how these sub-narratives came to expression in the various questions and topics covered from the first infection diagnosis in Sweden into the fall of 2020.

SWEDEN LACKS PROPER LEADERSHIP

One of the most significant features of the RT and Sputnik narratives on the Covid-19 pandemic was the depiction of an alarmingly passive leadership at a time of acute crisis. The coverage combined reports of severe criticism of the handling of the national crisis for its lax, disengaged attitude, with the national government almost completely absent, with reports of dramatically increasing mortality rates, and seriously frightening and

dark future scenarios. In most of the reports, the narrator takes an anti-establishment perspective and demonstrates the inadequacies of the leadership in various ways, combined with news reports centered on the existential threat that the pandemic poses that are highly dramatic in tone and choice of words (for ex. Sputnik April 5, 2020i, 2020j).

Some articles adopted an apocalyptic tone, using alarmist language in reports that suggested that thousands of people would be infected and die in the coming years with no solution available. This doomsday atmosphere was amplified in a news article in which two professors stated that all options had been exhausted, and that Sweden was facing a tragedy that no one seemed to want or be able to prevent (Sputnik April 10, 2020l). Yngve Gustafsson, Professor of Geriatrics at Umeå University, was quoted saying: “I’m very, very sad. Many people will lose, many lives. We will see infinitely worse numbers in the coming weeks”. A statement by Björn Olsen, a professor at Uppsala university and expert on pandemics, gave a similar message using dramatic language: “The pandemic is coming at us like a flood. It’s like a wall of infection... we will see huge increases in the coming weeks....The authorities have failed to understand the severity of the situation”. Olsson also argued that because of the tardiness of the Swedish government’s response, close to 8 million people were expected to be contaminated by the virus and thousands would die.

The deadly threat of the pandemic was given further weight using parallels with the Spanish flu epidemic a century before, and horrific scenarios of the health services prioritizing which patients would be worth saving, all of which were contrasted with the indecisiveness and passivity of the leadership, making it appear irresponsible beyond belief (Sputnik, March 16, 2020b). The problem was thus defined as the government for too long refusing to see the pandemic as a threat to the population and then, once it began to do so, failing to decide on the most appropriate strategy. This means that reports stressed the authorities’ indecisiveness on the question of open or closed borders, who should be allowed to enter Sweden, how large a proportion of the population was infected, and the strategy to adopt to limit the spread of the virus. The government and public health authority actors in the news items were depicted as untrustworthy and ignorant, and also at times as in conflict with medical experts about how to contain the spread of the disease and what measures should be taken (see below). It should be noted that throughout both periods, RT and Sputnik reported the pandemic with regard to Sweden as failed crisis management jeopardizing the lives of Swedish citizens, not as a virus that had spread globally and against which the world’s population lacked immunity.

In the absence of a proper Covid-19-strategy, a number of experts were reported as delivering critiques and sounding the alarm about the increasing spread of the virus (Sputnik, March 20, 2020d). These experts questioned Swedish crisis management and raised concerns about growing divisions in Sweden over how to fight its spread. The stance of Sweden's state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, who played a leading role in the coverage, was said to conflict in part with views held by other scientific experts.

As the weeks wore on, Sputnik repeated its sub-narrative about the precarious situation in Sweden and the lack of proper leadership in managing the crisis (see e.g. Sputnik March 2, 2020a; Sputnik March 19, 2020c). Following publication in *Dagens Nyheter*, one of the Swedish daily newspapers, on April 14 of a letter signed by 22 experts expressing concern about the Swedish Covid-19 strategy, the criticism of Tegnell increased.

An article on April 17, 2020, identified a number of problems and conflicts, such as weak leadership, a continuing high death toll, and disputes between scientific experts at Swedish Universities and Tegnell (Sputnik April 17, 2020n). Like several other news stories, the plot had a diffuse structure, but it was made clear that Tegnell had the main role and was being both praised and criticized for his conduct. There was no sequence of events driving the story forward. Instead, the article appeared more like a platform where a number of expert views were quoted that differed from those of Tegnell. Taken together, these statements formed a strong critique and offered alarming scenarios that deviated considerably from those presented by the Public Health Authority. The plot rested on the now familiar sub-narrative of a leadership unable to lead, producing powerless recommendations and refusing to come clean about the use of herd immunity as a strategy.¹ The plot used alarmist language that reinforced the image of a state in chaos, which was about to break down as a result of the inability of its leadership to act promptly.

The sources for this story were typical of Sputnik news items. These comprised quotes from official representatives of the state and public agencies, and from three researchers, which had been published in *Dagens Nyheter*, a Swedish newspaper, and in this case also by Norway's public service broadcaster, NRK. The plot was therefore built around the views and opinions of these actors, but the story was told from the point of view of the researchers, who thus also serve as the narrators of the plot. Drawing

¹Herd immunity as a concept was often referred to. It means that immunity against a virus in a population is reached when a certain proportion of that population have been infected.

on quotes from these three, the plot told how Sweden under the leadership of Tegnell was implementing a strategy that would in all probability lead to the deaths of thousands of people, and no one seemed to be able to stop him. These experts were also deeply concerned about the great divide over how best to fight the virus in Sweden. According to Sputnik: “Despite people dying in large numbers, the authorities stick to the *laissez-faire* approach. The situation is unbearable” (Sputnik April 17, 2020n; Sputnik April 17, 2020o).

The divisions of opinion were not only between experts, the story reported, but also between ordinary Swedes and experts. People generally appeared to support Tegnell, but numerous scholars were of a different opinion. A professor at Karolinska Institutet, Cecilia Söderberg-Nauclér, is quoted as calling Tegnell’s strategy a “dangerous experiment”. “There is reason”, she continued, “to fear that disaster is lurking around the corner. It will explode in our faces” (Sputnik April 17, 2020n). Furthermore, she claimed that Tegnell was the only one to trust herd immunity to be the only way to put a stop to the spread of the disease. There was no mention in the plot that Tegnell disagreed with the experts, but another professor, Johnny Ludvigsson, was quoted arguing in favor of the Tegnell strategy in the long term.

The differences of opinion between State Epidemiologist Tegnell and several medical researchers presented in the articles on April 17 could be seen as reflecting the role of the mainstream media to serve as a platform for deliberation and the exchange of opinions and ideas. However, the plot’s problem was framed as a crisis situation where the key experts expressed themselves in dramatic phrases such as “ugly death rates” and a disaster that would “explode in our faces”. At the same time, Sweden was in a delicate situation in which it was inappropriate to open up an endless debate, but which instead called for national consensus. The main message of the story—the problem—was that the strategy pursued was likely to lead to thousands of deaths. The views of citizens were not at the center of the plot, but they were referred to as being supportive of Tegnell’s position. At the same time, one of the articles (Sputnik April 17, 2020n) was accompanied by a photograph of an empty street in the Old Town of Stockholm, and the caption indicated that shops and restaurants were closed, making it seem as if Tegnell’s no need to lockdown strategy might be understood in any event.

Throughout, the depictions of a passive Swedish government and public authorities, and the problems and divisions caused by the strategy adopted, contributed to an image of a Sweden in a state of chaos and

confusion. A sequence of events in the plots was therefore often conspicuous by its absence. It was not just that the authorities were lax and rarely reported as providing solutions; they lacked a strategy and there were numerous messages and pieces of information pointing in all possible directions to confirm that this was the case. The information provided in a single news item was often contradictory. Disagreements between various experts and politicians revolved around the herd immunity strategy, which was reported as alternately rejected and advocated by the Swedish authorities (see e.g. Sputnik April 5, 2020i; Sputnik May 15, 2020p).

Herd immunity was at times used interchangeably to represent two alternative scenarios: a chosen strategy in which the government was prepared to sacrifice Swedish lives to reach immunity for the wider population; and a state of immunity in the population that eventually arises as the virus takes its natural course and the pandemic subsides. These narrative structures resulted in an image of Swedish decision makers and crisis managers as passive, indecisive, or incompetent. The reports projected sentiments of incomprehension—mainly from foreign actors or from RT and Sputnik journalist narrators—at the lack of crisis management, such as the decision to reject lockdowns, dismay at the risks to which Swedes were being exposed, and the despair mainly of experts because there were no longer any measures to take that could put a stop to the deadly pandemic as it was too late (Sputnik, 2020l April, 10c; See also RT, News with Rich Sanchez, April 2, 2020).

In some of the RT news items, there was outright astonishment at the passivity of Swedish decision makers. To images of Swedes strolling in the streets, shopping and drinking coffee at outdoor cafés, the anchor of a news program informed viewers that whereas most countries had introduced lockdowns, “Sweden’s shops, cafés and primary schools are staying open. There is no lockdown, and the borders are open” (RT News April 2, 2020a 4am broadcast). From this brief mention of Sweden, the anchor moved on to talk about Nepal, saying: “Different approach in Nepal though, police there are keeping their distance while enforcing the lockdown....”. No other links were made between Sweden and Nepal, and there is no further mention of the death toll or preventive measures in either country. One might expect viewers of RT to find it far-fetched to compare these two countries without elaborating on the differences and similarities of their anti-Covid strategies. However, it is typical of the RT news reporting style to leave information out and invite the audience to actively engage with the news content to connect different pieces of

information, thereby making sense of the message. In this case one might reflect on the fact that Sweden, a country known to be prosperous, had done so little to protect its population, whereas Nepal, with such few resources, had taken measures.

In a news and current affairs program in the afternoon of the same day (RT News with Rich Sanchez, April 2, 2020 1:30 pm) the Swedish government's strategy was contrasted with that of Russia. In the introduction, Sanchez says that "Sweden has taken a very laid back approach when it comes to lockdowns and quarantine and social isolation, very different from the rest of the world". (For more on how Sweden is depicted as the odd one out, see below.) A UK Member of Parliament, George Galloway, is asked to explain this odd strategy and is quoted saying: "the politicians in Sweden will be remembered forever in a good way. If it doesn't come off, it will be the hanging of them". He goes on to speak about how few restrictions there are in place:

That's the policy in Sweden—a famously liberal place but one with many tensions these days over big immigration, big refugee flows and so on. So, there are a lot of stress points, a lot of fractions in Swedish society. The government has taken a very very big risk. (RT News with Rick Sanchez April 2, 2020)

The reference to Sweden being a troubled society because of its liberalism was an oft-repeated refrain in the Sputnik and RT coverage. The heart of the matter spelled reckless government, the consequence of which had also been visible in how it dealt with migration and refugee flows. The government was so keen to defend liberal values, it was argued, that dealing with the pandemic in a proper way had been ruled out. The note on the open borders was part of this narrative and a feature raised in different contexts as a Swedish trademark. It exposed how all doors were open into Sweden, whether for infected people, migrants from all over the world, or Quran burning troublemakers, all of whom added to the anti-liberal narratives of these news media (See for ex Sputnik March 19, 2020c). The credibility of the sub-narrative was strengthened by the fact that the sources were mainstream Swedish media outlets and government officials who had appeared in these outlets.

SWEDEN IS CHARACTERIZED BY CONFLICTS

The pandemic coverage was heavily focused on domestic conflicts and disputes, especially between experts and representatives of the government. Although RT and Sputnik gave voice to officials from other European countries who reacted to the Swedish strategy with everything from surprise and wonder to outright dismay, the conflicts over the Covid strategy took place in Sweden. This gave the impression that the image of Sweden as a country of consensus was false, and that its international reputation should be questioned (see below). In much of the coverage, the fact that the controversial Covid strategy differed from that of most countries took center stage and formed the point of contention between people, actors, and political parties in Sweden. This came to the fore especially when coding for the problem or conflict feature of the plots, and when analyzing the roles assigned to the actors.

Some actors, such as the state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, were given a contradictory role in the coverage, at times representing the views of experts while at other times representing those of the public authorities. However, there were few direct quotes from Tegnell. Instead, he was positioned in the news plots as a node against which arguments and problematic situations or incidents were related. Seemingly contradictory standpoints were treated as compatible and the views of Tegnell were left unclear. It was rare for ordinary people to be interviewed, or for individuals to be assigned the role of Swedish citizens. This might seem contradictory to the anti-establishment approach of these news media outlets, but the public's voice was instead projected by way of critical and emotionally charged tweets from individual accounts. These were translated and inserted into the articles in Sputnik and shown as text on the screen by RT.

One RT piece headlined "Dubious strategy" (RT News June 13, 2020d) reported the strong criticism the government was receiving from the opposition. The plot opened with a statement by the anchor that as a result of the passive government, Sweden found itself in a crisis with a high and increasing death toll. The anchor went on to talk about the political divisions in what was referred to as a precarious situation. Right-wing oppositional leaders Jimmy Åkesson (Sweden Democrat, SD), Ebba Bush (Christian Democrat, KD), and Ulf Kristersson (Conservative party, M) were all quoted as expressing their disapproval. Over reporting by RT staff, the screen displayed quotes by the leaders:

Åkesson: “The government and the public health authority have been given chance after chance to correct their mistakes. Despite this, the delays and the handwringing remain”.

Bush: “The Swedish government has deliberately allowed a large spread of the disease. In a difficult crisis, we will always be leaderless as long as this government is in power”.

Kristersson: “There have been obvious, fundamental failures. We didn’t get protective equipment to care homes in time, although everyone knew that they were the most vulnerable”.

At the end of the story, Kent Ekeröth, a disgraced former SD parliamentarian who had stood trial for minor assault in 2017 and was now a reporter for the far-right news outlet *Samhällsnytt*, stated in an interview that Sweden had the highest mortality rate “of most countries” and claimed that the Swedish government thought “testing was [is] unnecessary” (RT News June 13, 2020d).

In late March of 2020 a large group of Swedish scientists published a petition calling for a revised strategy with stricter measures in line with international recommendations. This was picked up by Sputnik and used to confirm the divisions and disorder that allegedly existed in Sweden between scientists, decision makers, and responsible officials. Tegnell, it was claimed, was being criticized for defending individual liberties at a time of crisis and resisting a lockdown of society. Tegnell was said to be arguing that the Swedish people must be trusted to take responsibility for their own and their fellow citizens’ health and safety. The scholarly community did not share his opinion. The contrasts between the strategies and the depth of the divisions were made clear by positioning the actor groups as diametrically opposed. The public authorities appeared controversial, dangerous, and at odds as they were not grounding their strategy in scientific knowledge. The chaos in Sweden and the schisms between actors were further reinforced by the article giving the latest death toll, a factual statistic that was followed by a quote from the National Director of Health and Medical care, Björn Eriksson, “the storm is here”, thereby contributing to the sense of urgency and imminent danger. In stark contrast to the image of a Sweden as in chaos with public authorities resisting the provision of proper protection for citizens and jeopardizing peoples’ lives, the photograph (signed AFP) at the top of the article showed a large group of Swedes smiling, laughing, and standing close together waving Swedish flags. The AFP picture was accompanied by the caption: “Swedes waving

their flags at the outdoor museum Skansen in Stockholm June 6, 2005, to celebrate the National Day” (Sputnik March 26, 2020e). The picture was thus not a current authentic depiction of the situation in the country, but served the main message of the news story well. The contrast between the footage of happy, cheering flag-waving Swedes and the statement by Eriksson reinforced the image of a society in chaos, deeply divided and with the authorities keeping its population in the dark about the imminent threat to citizens’ lives and wellbeing. The flag-waving Swedes appeared to be celebrating their nation in total ignorance of the ongoing pandemic and the state epidemiologist seemed not to be about to intervene. At the same time, thousands of experts were stressing the seriousness of the situation and warning about the existential threat of Covid-19. Judging from the photograph in particular, it was difficult not to see the cheering Swedes as in the eye of the storm. It seemed that they were unconcerned, or even carefree. The differences in the experiences of the pandemic between the actors in this critical situation were projected as extraordinary but the footage provided some explanation. The public health authority had still not accepted the threat that Covid-19 represented and the population was similarly unperturbed.

Tegnell’s liberal approach was depicted as seen as reckless by the experts (Sputnik March 26, 2020e; See also Sputnik April 15b, 2020; Sputnik April 17, 2020o). The Swedish authorities and the research community had diametrically opposed opinions on how to manage the pandemic. Scientific experts sought to demonstrate the gravity of the situation but were ignored by the authorities, which seemed to turn a blind eye to the problems while keeping the population in the dark.

Conflict Topics

Both Sputnik and RT made much noise about the conflicts centered around the meaning, function, and applicability of herd immunity. However, the pandemic was also framed around other topics. Special emphasis was given to the ways in which the Swedish strategy affected vulnerable elders. Under the headline “Covid-19 Spreading Among Retirement Homes Across Sweden, Elderly Residents ‘Terrified’” (Sputnik April 3, 2020g), Sputnik reported that Sweden had inadequate protection against infection and lacked medical equipment. This was an illustrative example of how RT and Sputnik raised issues that were also widely debated in Sweden, around which they constructed a narrative about irresponsible authorities, confusion with regard to risk and crisis management, and

conflicts between actors, but with heightened emotion and drama (See also Sputnik April 3, 2020g; Sputnik March 30, 2020f).

The news item about the spread of the virus to retirement homes centered on the problem of deficient protection against the virus and the lack of healthcare equipment. The virus had spread to retirement homes and Tegnell was quoted as expressing concern, but according to Sputnik he had not done anything to alleviate the situation. He could only admit to failures in protecting the elderly. Sweden was seen as employing not just an incomprehensible liberal and permissive approach, but one with ruthless undertones. Drawing on statements made by medical doctors on Swedish public service television (SVT) and radio (SR), including from a specialist in palliative care and a nurse, these actors were made the narrators of a plot that told of the predicament Sweden was in. They referred to the lack of protective gear for nurses working with the elderly and the prospect of people having to die alone since visits to hospital would have to be prohibited (Sputnik, April 3, 2020g).

In a similar article a few days before, the same attitude to the Swedish Covid-19 strategy was on display in a statement by a highly respected senior professor of clinical bacteriology, Agnes Wold. Her statement, which it was reported was supported by the former chief epidemiologist Johan Giesecke, formed the headline of the article: “‘Luckily Only Kills Elderly People’: Swedish Doctor’s Coronavirus Take Roasted on Social Media” (Sputnik March 30, 2020f). Appearing on a popular television talk show, Wold was reported to have said: “It’s [the virus] a real pathogen, of course. It kills people and so on. But luckily, it basically kills only elderly people. In fact, we have to be pretty grateful for that”.

Following the quote, the news story nuanced Wold’s stance and reported that the risk of dying from the disease was lower for younger people. However, it was the statement about being fortunate that served as the driver of the plot. Professor Wold’s and Giesecke’s controversial standpoint was strongly criticized by ordinary Swedes on Twitter, expressing emotionally charged opinions in harsh words, and demonstrating the contradictions that existed between Swedish citizens and the authorities: “No, Agnes, we should not be grateful that our loved ones are suffocating to death on ventilators. However, we should be grateful that younger people often do well”, wrote @Memingjoeren, while @Vikingakvinnan wrote: “Agnes Wold has an utterly disgusting view of humanity”. The use of experts in this and other similarly structured news plots tended to lead to polarization and expose cleavages between experts and members of the

general public on social media. Moreover, the plot appeared to reveal the cold-hearted cynicism underlying the Swedish strategy.

The confusion around the different positions of various actors was amplified in the article by a concluding statement from the then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, that he did not exclude a scenario in which the government might decide to isolate Stockholm (Sputnik March 30, 2020f). The statement was contrasted with the statements by Wold, Giesecke, and the SPHA's chief analyst, Lisa Brouwers. This gave the impression that Löfven was detached from and uninvolved in the crisis management. The Swedish government appeared incapable of governing Sweden at a most difficult time. In sum, the narrative of Sweden as a divided country was directly linked to issues about the state authorities' unreasonably liberal approach, which instead of assisting the public by managing the crisis had led to inhumane crisis management.

This article was in many respects typical of the Sputnik coverage of Covid-19 in Sweden. It took its point of departure from an interview published in the traditional Swedish media featuring a familiar and popular Swede—Pr. Wold. The message of the plot was pointed and sought to capitalize on a controversial expression, the responses to which were emotionally charged in the form of numerous tweets. These exposed not simply divisions between citizens and elites in Sweden, but also differences in views about the Swedish Covid strategy. The tweets were often strongly worded or drastic in content. There would also be more moderate and low-key comments, but these tended to be inserted in less noticeable positions in the plot. As noted above, it was quite difficult to determine which actors opposed one another and what the differences of opinion were. A statement by one actor might be contrasted with an answer to a different question by another actor. The government was rarely present in the Covid coverage, other than in passing. Although Prime Minister Löfven was included as an actor in the article about risk assessment for the elderly, his presence confirmed his absence from the ongoing debates about the pandemic and his statement was disconnected from the rest of the plot. Taken together, the articles contributed to the sub-narrative “Sweden is characterized by conflict” and reinforced the image of Sweden as torn, divided by conflict over absurdly liberal and, at the same time, inhumane crisis response, all of which was proof that the government had lost control of the situation.

The Covid-19 crisis was also linked to other domestic problems by Sputnik, which confirms the prevalence of overlapping narratives. The

inability of the Swedish leadership to protect citizens from the virus was for instance connected to questions about immigration and to the climate activist Greta Thunberg. Sputnik reported how migrants created problems for crisis management by being strongly overrepresented among the infected and lacking the ability to protect themselves (see e.g. Sputnik April 15, 2020). At the same time, it was reported that Sweden was continuing to accept new asylum seekers (Sputnik March 19, 2020c). There were no news items reporting on confrontations between groups of Swedes and immigrants. Instead, immigrants featured repeatedly and in different contexts as the cause of problems and dilemmas. Taken together, this gave the impression that Swedish interests were incompatible with those of migrants and asylum seekers (see e.g. Sputnik April 13, 2020m).

SWEDEN AS THE ODD ONE OUT: INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO THE WORLD

This sub-narrative of “Sweden as the odd one out” was mainly derived from coding the positioning of actors, their interrelationships, and how these connected to the sequence of events. The actors were mainly represented by foreign governments, foreign commentators, and officials. Foreign actors were ascribed the agency and Sweden was assigned a more passive, reactionary role. The Swedish position was one of isolation and most, although not all, foreign actors expressed incomprehension with regard to the Swedish Covid-19 strategy.

Almost every article repeated that Sweden had adopted an unconventional approach to tackling the pandemic and that the Swedish authorities maintained this approach despite the steadily increasing number of deaths. Government officials, including Prime Minister Löfven, were portrayed as naive and their attitude as incomprehensible in the face of various disaster scenarios or catastrophic realities already at work. On April 5, 2020, Sputnik reported: “While Italy was drowning in coronavirus cases and the streets of other European countries were left empty [...] it seemed like Sweden didn’t even know what Covid-19 was or how dangerous it could be”; “What on earth are they thinking?” (Sputnik, March 30, 2020f). A few days later, Löfven was quoted saying: “we who are adults need to be exactly that: adults” (Sputnik April 5, 2020i), a statement that Swedes were reported as agreeing with and that strengthened the Sputnik

sub-narrative of Sweden as the odd one out—a country that the rest of the world did not understand or approved of.

The thoughts and opinions of foreign commentators and authorities on Sweden's "deviant" strategy were often brought to the fore in Sputnik's news coverage, and these voices were used to confirm the widespread opposition to the Swedish position. One British journalist, Marcus Stead,² was quoted as saying that the Swedish example was not to be imitated (Sputnik April 17, 2020n). Polish media outlets were reported to be using Sweden as a deterrent or terrifying example and the Polish prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, was said to have called the Swedish strategy "Darwinist", stressing that it would be inconceivable to implement such a policy in Poland (Sputnik May 15, 2020p).

Sweden's Nordic neighbors were also reported to be taking a stand. Several news reports compared the death tolls in the Nordic countries, concluding that Sweden's was far higher than the others. Sweden therefore also appeared to be a problem to its closest allies. The Danish border was reported to have been closed to Swedes while remaining open to Norwegians and Germans. Sweden's high death toll was said to be a consequence of the decision not to impose a lockdown. As a result, Sweden must pay the price by being marginalized from the rest of the world. Together with Belarus, Sweden was said to be the only country that had decided against a lockdown and kept its society open. A Spanish study on herd immunity, which was repeatedly referred to by Sputnik as the underlying basis for the Swedish strategy, was reported to show that it did not provide sufficient protection—at least not in the short run (Sputnik May 15, 2020p).

Nonetheless, Sweden was described as continuing to go its own way, alienating itself from the European family and, it was argued, thereby contributing to international polarization. RT and Sputnik used a variety of factors to explain the measures taken by Sweden, all of which confirmed views of Sweden that marked it as different and deviating from the rest of Europe. Over images of Swedes recklessly socializing in outdoor cafés, foreign experts and Sputnik and RT reporters stated that the authorities were used to trusting in people's ability to take personal responsibility. Other explanations were linked to the idea that extreme weather conditions in Sweden had hardened the population over time, strengthening its resistance to hardships such as a pandemic. Moreover, Sweden had a long

² Marcus Stead is only assigned the title UK journalist, but no media source is given.

tradition of pursuing an independent foreign policy, had experienced an exceptionally long period of peace, and had chosen to remain outside of NATO, all of which was evidence of the strong urge to act independently and to manage crises on its own. References were made to the critical voice of the legendary Prime Minister Olof Palme who during the Cold War had expressed strong criticism of US foreign policy, Sweden's foremost Western ally. Using these various aspects of the Swedish political culture and foreign policy tradition to explain Sweden's Covid-19 response was done in a mixed tone of voice, sometimes humorously ironic, sometimes heavily critical, and sometimes condescending, explaining the strategy as a result of ignorance, and occasionally curiously intrigued.

RT in particular questioned the strategy over and over, and why Sweden was so different from any other country in Europe or the world. Long interviews were broadcast with experts, scholars, and other reporters and commentators from RT and from other European countries, but also Sweden, explaining and discussing the Swedish approach. There was a special emphasis on why Sweden persevered with the measures, or rather lack of measures, especially as the pandemic progressed and the number of deaths rose; and since "Sweden's death rates are far, far more catastrophically worse than its neighbors" (RT Going Underground, May 6, 2020a). Even though some experts were quoted as saying that it remained to be seen whether in the near or distant future the strategy might turn out for the best, the RT journalists kept stressing incomprehensible Swedish crisis management, which was also in line with RT's journalistic style as expressed in the channel's slogan to "question more". This questioning was at times supported by evaluative statements from internationally renowned sources. The World Health Organization (WHO), for instance, was quoted with reference to the Swedish strategy as having labeled implementation of herd immunity "unethical" (RT News October 13, 2020e). This gave the impression that the criticism was not that of RT or Sputnik but from a highly regarded source.

Swedish isolation from the rest of Europe and the Nordic countries was further stressed in reports about the planning of a multinational military exercise, of which Sweden was in charge. Despite the critical situation in Europe, where most societies were in lockdown, the Swedish Defense Forces were reported to be continuing preparations. While country after country withdrew from participation, Swedish forces argued that this was a time when the armed forces needed to reaffirm its strength. A representative of the Swedish Defense Forces was quoted saying that "when society is

in crisis, defense must be at its strongest” (Sputnik April 3, 2020g). Sweden was therefore depicted as abandoned by its allies in military matters due to its Covid-19 strategy, which was weakening Swedish society in more ways than one. The military exercise was also criticized by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, whose representative accused the armed forces in an op-ed in a Swedish daily newspaper of being out of touch with reality. She was quoted as saying that: “The perception of security must be broadened. You can’t throw a grenade at Covid-19, weapons can’t protect us” (Sputnik April 3, 2020g).

The Covid-19 news was connected in several news items about Swedish defense and added to depictions of Sweden’s precarious situation. Another example was a piece in RT about what was called bizarre spending by the defense forces at a time when every krona was needed for managing the pandemic. In an astonished tone, a news anchor announced that: “Despite being overwhelmed with high casualty rates in the pandemic, Sweden’s parliament okayed a massive and record rise in *military spending*. The defense ministry’s excuse: Russia”. The RT anchor argued that the money was much needed for healthcare and schools. A professor of epidemiology who appeared quite frequently on RT to comment on pandemic-related issues said that he was not surprised at the decision to increase the defense budget. He said that Sweden planned to export arms to Saudi Arabia, so it could continue bombing Yemen, but also suggested that the reason for the preoccupation with military arms and defense matters in the middle of a pandemic was that Sweden intended to investigate “the possibilities of recovering its lost empire in the Baltic area” (RT News December 17, 2020f).

Such conspiratorial comments, which occasionally appeared, seemed to add spice and drama to the news plots. However, the sub-narrative about Sweden as the odd one out was more often reinforced by the use of recurring phrases that were correct in substance but, when contextualized in the narrative, gave a biased view of Sweden, making the country appear to be governed by morally dubious leaders isolated from Europe and the world. In a number of news items, the plot was concluded with one of two standard paragraphs. The phrases in this final paragraph told of the latest death toll and the number of people registered as infected. The figures were connected to the decision by the Swedish authorities not to organize a lockdown, which was repeatedly argued to be strange and controversial, and to have led to high numbers of deaths and massive protests in and outside of Sweden. In some articles, the final paragraph mentioned the economic benefits that Sweden had drawn in comparison with countries

that had taken stricter protective measures. A typical concluding paragraph read:

Sweden, which notoriously refused to shut down and has largely pursued a voluntary model of restrictions and even at some point suggested aiming for herd immunity as a goal, has seen over 86,000 COVID-19 cases, resulting in nearly 5,850 deaths, most of them senior citizens. Due to the fact that the scope and death toll of the Swedish outbreak has so far been much higher than those of its Nordic peers combined, Stockholm's response triggered massive internal and external criticism over the unnecessary 'death, grief, and suffering', in the words of Swedish academics who cautioned the world not to follow the nation's example. (Sputnik September 14, 2020s)

A shorter version, which included the same key points on the Swedish Covid-19 situation, said that:

Sweden's controversial no-lockdown strategy continues to polarise the global public, with some berating it for 'unnecessary deaths' and others crediting it with keeping the economy afloat and avoiding market crashes. (Sputnik November 16, 2020u)

SWEDEN IS NOT WHAT IT SEEMS

The oft-repeated phrases about the deviant Swedish Covid strategy, and the depictions of a Sweden where life seemed unperturbed by the ongoing pandemic, with business as usual despite people dying in their thousands, social unrest dominating society and a country more or less isolated from the rest of the world, all gave the impression that Sputnik was seeking to "bust the myth" that Sweden was a stable and highly respected country where citizens and institutions trusted one another. It was a sub-narrative that described how the Swedish authorities were deceiving their own people, as well as the outside world by concealing the real intentions behind the Covid-19 strategy.

There were, for example, the pictures of crowds in happy gatherings in the midst of the pandemic (Sputnik August 18, 2020r; Sputnik March 26, 2020e) but also depictions of youths caught spitting at healthcare workers and police lined up to protect passengers from assault at railway stations (see e.g. Sputnik April 13, 2020m). Throughout, however, it was reported that Swedish experts continued to insist that Sweden was a high-trust society and that Swedes knew how to take responsibility. Statements were

taken out of context and used to show the hypocrisy of the leadership, for example that Sweden's high death toll was an effect of the decision to prioritize financial profit before the lives and health of the population. (RT News December 28, 2020g, 6 am broadcast) This was never expressed by any of the actors—either public agencies or citizens—but a conclusion drawn by Sputnik, and one that appeared reasonable from statements made in different contexts that had been joined together.

This Swedish hypocrisy was manifest by the creation of an inconsistency in the plot's sequence of events, which made the unfolding of the plot jarring. This served to illuminate the contrasts between the actual sequence of events and an expected sequence of events based on previous plots and "common knowledge". Well into the RT and Sputnik coverage of the pandemic, the reason for there not being a lockdown had been reported as due to Swedes trusting their public institutions and being assumed to take personal responsibility to prevent the spread of the virus. However, in a news item about the organization of rave parties in Sweden, it was reported that a group of rave organizers had disobeyed recommendations to limit the gathering of crowds and simply moved their parties outdoors (Sputnik August 18, 2020r). With implicit mockery of the supposedly loyal and responsible Swede, it was reported that the Swedish music scene had gone underground, having fled to the forests so that young people could continue to gather for big parties. Tegnell was quoted as saying that a rave was a typical high-risk activity. Although subdued in tone, the plot closed with the oft-repeated end paragraph that labeled the Swedish strategy a maverick approach, but it also stated that the limit on the number of people allowed at public events had been lowered from 500 to 50. In contrast, the footage showed large numbers of people standing close together, and organizers confirming that there would be outdoor parties all over Sweden, with the headline: "Illegal Raves Blossom in Swedish Forests Amid Covid-19 Festival Ban". The view that Swedes were safe and sound because of their mentality and the Swedish political culture in which they had been socialized seemed demonstrably hollow.

RT reported in a similar vein about the disparity between the image of Sweden as projected by the establishment and the "real" Sweden. A professor of epidemiology, Ferrada de Noli, who often appeared on RT, confirmed the view that Swedes were not as disciplined as was often claimed. On the contrary, Swedes did not follow recommendations and nor did they trust the authorities, as was also frequently claimed. Questioning these dominant notions about Sweden or treating certain views as established facts in order to question them, RT argued in several news items

that the situation in Sweden was not under control and that there was a lack of consensus between experts, the authorities, and citizens. People set their own rules, disagreed about how the situation should be handled or chose not to care about the pandemic at all (RT News April 2, 2020a; RT News April 6, 2020b; RT News April 12, 2020c). This demonstrated that underneath the glossy surface was a much harsher reality that the authorities seemed unwilling to acknowledge, and in some news items Sweden was said to be heading for disaster, which made it appear even more upsetting that the authorities were neglecting to inform citizens.

Both RT and Sputnik made use of a number of concepts to confirm their notion that the government and the public authorities were concealing information from citizens. The frequent use of value-laden words, such as herd immunity, polarization, and “laissez-faire” (for more about polarization and laissez-faire see Chaps. 6 and 8), in confusing and contradictory ways created an image of the Swedish authorities as manipulating and obscuring the truth about the state of the nation.

The concept of herd immunity was often used as an epithet for the Swedish Covid-19 strategy, even though there were few if any statements by the public authorities or experts that this was part of the strategy. In both RT and Sputnik, the concept was connected to words such as “desirability” and “conflicting messaging”, indicating that the authorities had herd immunity as a secret objective. Herd immunity was also ascribed different meanings, which added to the confusion and uncertainty that some reports associated with the Swedish situation. The concept of an actual status of immunity against a disease in a population as opposed to a desired strategy to aim for was not kept distinct in the news coverage. This was also what led to the critical comments from experts and others, such as the Polish politician who was quoted speaking about a Darwinist approach. RT reported about a US author, Mike Davis, who had written a book on the plague of capitalism and Covid-19, in which he alluded to herd immunity being applied in Sweden as a neo-Nazi concept. The host of the show intervened and said that they had invited the Swedish ambassador to London on to the program. There was no mention of why he was not there, but the host went on to say that “Sweden has acknowledged that it had made some mistakes”, adding that it “certainly denies any Nazi activity”. The discussion then moved on to the connections between capitalism and pandemics (RT Documentary September 7, 2020b).

One news item highlighted the discrepancy between estimations of the herd immunity threshold (40–60%) and the proportion of Swedes who had been infected (1%), and concluded that the Swedish population was

far from reaching herd immunity. In response to the allegation that Sweden was employing herd immunity as a strategy, Ivar Arpi, a journalist at *Svenska Dagbladet*, asked: “How many must die for the sake of herd immunity?” (Sputnik May 15, 2020p). In a quote in a Sputnik article published about one month before Arpi posed his question, Tegnell was said to have “resolutely rejected the idea that Sweden’s strategy is building up herd immunity, while insisting that it is the only way of stopping the pandemic” (Sputnik April 6, 2020k). Later in the year, when the spread of the virus was found to be lower in Sweden relative to other European states, Sputnik talked of a return to the concept of herd immunity and suggested this was the cause of the low number of infected Swedes (Sputnik September 21, 2020t). Use of the term herd immunity was a good example of how concepts were used in diffuse and contradictory ways. Polarization was another such term, which was used as synonymous with divisions or differences of opinion but did not name or describe any situations in which established groups confronted each other without considering or paying attention to the views of the other.

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian state media RT and Sputnik used the pandemic to denigrate Sweden, highlighted weaknesses and shortcomings in its social fabric, and exposed its leadership as incompetent and the hypocritical self-perception and self-promotion of the Swedish nation as a well-functioning country with trusted institutions and loyal citizens as a myth.

The deviating strategy employed by the Swedish authorities was used to explain Sweden as an odd society different from other European states, criticized by its closest neighbors and EU member states, and with an international image that no longer held true.

The analysis of the Covid-19 crisis as a particular global crisis event adds insights about everyday disinformation. The narratives were similar in content and format to the other news themes, but with the context for the news coverage being a pandemic that threatened peoples’ lives differed in the increased demands for reliable and correct information. This shows what challenges liberal democratic societies face when the provision of accurate and reliable information flows and the defence of the freedom of speech are to be combined with preventing deceptive and harmful information from entering the news media system.

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Everyday Disinformation

INTRODUCTION

This study asked what the Russian state media narratives about Sweden were about, how they were told, and in what ways they could be said to cause harm to Sweden. It was undertaken in order to analyze how an authoritarian and hostile state—Russia—uses news media as part of its security strategy to construct and disseminate disinformation that poses a threat to Swedish national security. Moreover, disinformation also targets deeper democratic competencies, altering people’s relationship with information and facts in general, and their ability for critical thinking (Bjola & Papadakis, 2020, p. 2; Lemke & Habegger, 2022). The use of information influencing activities to strengthen a state’s power position is not new, but novel media technologies, the internet, and easy access to social media have opened up new opportunities for digital disinformation and made it easier for authoritarian regimes to reach larger international audiences. In this chapter I summarize the findings of the narrative analyses of Sputnik and RT news coverage about Sweden and discuss story telling techniques that were used and which contribute to explaining why the narratives can be seen as disinformation and differ from journalism. They are both everyday practices, but in contrast to journalism, disinformation is referred to as an everyday security practice. The summaries do not include explicit references to RT and Sputnik news plots. These can be found in the empirical chapters.

Various terms have been used for the information influencing activities of this age, taking account of these new media technologies. This book has used the term disinformation, defined in line with Bennett and Livingstone (2021) who note that disinformation:

involves the production and dissemination of intentionally distorted information for the purpose of deceiving an audience. Distortion might involve deliberate factual inaccuracies or amplified attention to persons, issues, events, or both. Some disinformation campaigns seek to exacerbate existing social and political fissures by mimicking social protest movements and radicalizing and amplifying their narratives. (Bennett & Livingstone, 2021, p. 35)

The empirical focus of this study was on Sweden and how the news narratives about the country were constructed by the Russian state media outlets, Sputnik and RT. Sweden was an appropriate case given its high scores on liberal indexes, and that liberal ideas have been an especially noted target of Russian disinformation. In their study of disinformation during the Swedish election campaign in 2018, Colliver et al. (2018) refer to Sweden as “the heartland of Europe’s liberal, social democratic consensus”, but they also show that Sweden is increasingly vulnerable due to domestic links with the international far-right. Their analyses of disinformation during that election campaign found that the country was exposed to smear campaigns from both Russian state-sponsored media and the international far-right (Colliver et al., 2018, p. 12).

Sweden may be a suitable case but it is far from unique. Studies of other European states, the United States and elsewhere, have shown similar exposure to this type of disinformation. A number of studies have investigated various disinformation campaigns, especially in connection with general elections. A review of this research is presented in Chap. 3.

The empirical analysis was carried out using narrative analysis. This method is presented in Chap. 4. It asked what the Russian state media narratives about Sweden were about, how they were told, and in what ways they could be said to denigrate Sweden. A framing analysis was undertaken as a first step, to learn about the ways in which problems were defined, and to weigh the different frames across the five themes of gender, culture, anti-liberalism, public health, and climate change, on which the sampling of the news items was based. With the help of the framing analysis and a first search for meaning making patterns across the plots (i.e. the narrative of each news item), four narratives were identified. Special attention was paid to the sources used and to the narrative techniques (see

below). It was found that links were established between some of the themes, and this was also considered when the narratives were defined.

These findings were brought together in the inductive formulation of four dominant narratives: (a) the liberal left: a threat to traditional Sweden; (b) obsessive gender concerns leading Sweden astray; (c) Islamic take-over and the selling out of Sweden; and (d) liberalistic defiance during a pandemic. These narratives were analyzed in detail and the results of the analyses formed the image of Sweden that the Russian state-controlled media, Sputnik and RT, sought to project. These narratives should not be seen as separate from or independent of one another. They were connected and the linkages between them added to the routinized and continuous image of Sweden—a master narrative of a nation in decline.

THE MASTER NARRATIVE ABOUT SWEDEN: A FAILING STATE VICTIM TO LIBERAL IDEAS

As noted above, the narratives that made up the everyday coverage of Sweden in Sputnik and RT shared features with findings in other studies of Russian disinformation in European countries and the United States. These included narratives about liberal values giving rise to domestic conflict, malfunctioning institutions, individual ill-feeling/discomfort, and at times pure absurdity. There were also anti-establishment narratives where political elites and other authorities were depicted as untrustworthy and hypocritical, with ulterior motives behind their decision making or governance.

The Russian master narrative on Sweden—of attacks on the liberal order and the anti-establishment approach—served as core ingredients but they did not make up the whole story. Adding all the narratives identified in the news coverage together, it could be argued that the overall story about Sweden that RT and Sputnik intended to tell was to “reveal the true nature of Sweden” against the “pretend ideal that the elites were working to project”, to which liberalism was key. The main message was that Sweden is not what it pretends to be. It is not a homogenous country where political and social problems are managed in a climate of consensus. It is not a country appreciated by its neighbors and the other EU member states. It is not a country where people are satisfied and happy thanks to far-reaching individual freedoms.

The master narrative about Sweden as a failing state victim to liberal ideas was a story about a country so keen on its liberal values that it had become ungovernable. The government was depicted as either unable to deal with national concerns or absent from the picture altogether. Sweden appeared to be a society where the basic pillars of a nation state had been tossed away, with devastating consequences for governance, consensus, and cohesion. Sweden was depicted as a society where national heritage was downplayed, and where Swedish customs and traditions were seen more as problems than assets. The master narrative illustrated an enforced tolerance for Islam and Muslim traditions, as well as an increased acceptance of women forcing their way into traditionally male domains. Internationally, the pandemic had shown Sweden to be the odd one out and foreign governments had voiced strong criticism or incomprehension of the Swedish approach.

Liberalism and liberal ways of life were depicted as destructive and harmful to society in several different ways. The narrative entailed that liberalism had been allowed to run amok and the Swedish nation was losing leverage and status because of it. An unrestrained liberal ideology had caused the nation to decline, increasingly weakening society and adding to a growing mistrust of authorities, along with an individualism associated with egoism giving rise to conflicts of interest where there used to be consensus and acceptance. In short, it was because of liberal democracy and ingrained liberal values, firmly upheld by elites and netizens, that Sweden was unable to deal with its broad domestic problems, from crime and unmanageable refugee flows to the pandemic and gender discrimination. Progressive liberalism prided itself on uprooting traditional values and downgrading national unity without seemingly acknowledging the negative consequences this gave rise to.

A number of indicators were presented to support the notion that Sweden was in decline. These included climate activism led by Greta Thunberg, a young girl with a neuropsychological dysfunction; feminism clashing with Muslim customs; LGBTQ+ rights, which over-sexualized society and were lenient towards pedophiles; biased state media institutions in the hands of the establishment; multiculturalism leading to mass immigration; a Christian church that no longer defended traditional Christian values; and at the head of all this a government incapable of maintaining stable and determined leadership, often at odds with the public or its citizens

This was demonstrated, for example, in depictions of inadequate leaders who did not dare to name, define, or address social problems that were there for all to see—many of which were connected to migration issues. Moreover, the government failed to pay any attention to protecting the nation, its national cultural heritage, customs, and traditions. These were insignificant to the liberal left elite almost to the point where it was considered improper to promote any kind of Swedishness before an all-inclusive cosmopolitanism, and where immigrant Swedes’ customs and traditions had to come before traditional Swedish values.

Instead, the political leadership was reported as focusing on climate activism, multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ rights, and so on. According to RT and Sputnik, this in turn tended to fuel antagonism between groups, creating polarization and heated confrontation, along with serious social problems that remained unresolved. Furthermore, it was alleged that the efforts by the leadership to identify itself as key representatives for the defense of free speech and freedom of religion were in fact an attempt to cover up Sweden’s murky past and to avert attention from controversial issues. Moreover, the Swedish government seemed oblivious to the threat that the large number of immigrants posed to the Swedish native population. A term never explicitly mentioned but repeatedly hinted at was *replacement theory*, of which the Swedish government were depicted as completely oblivious. The term is used by white supremacists for immigrant populations (in the Swedish case Muslims) seeking to outnumber the native population.

THE MASTER NARRATIVE COMPRISES FOUR NARRATIVES

The Liberal Left: A Threat to Traditional Sweden

Looking more closely at the components of the master narrative, four narratives were inductively identified and analyzed. The first was the narrative, “The liberal left: A threat to traditional Sweden”. It told of a series of political and social conflicts for which a leftist government and its supporting left-leaning authorities and institutions were to blame. The leftist establishment, including the government, was depicted as indecisive, incompetent, and even ignorant in the face of rising crime rates, mass migration-related problems, and, perhaps most notably, the pandemic.

The liberal left establishment and its ideas were presented as elitist and rarely anchored among the citizens. In numerous plots, citizens’ opinions

as presented through tweets and Instagram messages provided evidence of the divisions between the leftist elite and the citizens. Boasting of the country's long history of defending freedom of speech, and social and human rights, while ignoring current controversial or problematic issues affecting citizens, the liberal left was depicted as hypocritically deceiving its own people. This was also a message in line with RT and Sputnik's journalistic ethos of calling the audience's attention to an unreliable government and to the underlying intentions of powerholders. The RT slogan "question more" is a well-known expression of this approach.

The liberal left was reported as giving all its attention to climate change activism, multiculturalism, feminism, and LGBTQ+ issues. The establishment was said to be supported by the mainstream media and the Swedish Church—a troublesome libertarian with progressive ideas and a diminishing membership. Consequently, and adding all this together, there are a growing mistrust of the authorities, an increased individualism and indications of increased threats to people's individual well-being—all of which appear to be taken lightly by the leadership or represented as challenges that are beyond its competence to identify and manage. A series of plots in Sputnik and occasionally in RT demonstrated the clashes Sweden experienced between freedom of speech and freedom of religion, mainly as a consequence of what was talked of as the nation's large and growing Muslim community. The leftist political authorities did not figure in this context and were rarely heard to acknowledge the tensions between the two principles of freedom. This was only one instance where they appeared incapable of defending core pillars of Swedish society.

Obsessive Gender Concerns Leading Sweden Astray

The second narrative identified Sweden as a society preoccupied with gender concerns. Sweden was frequently depicted as a feminist country with questions concerning gender permanently on the news agenda. However, this was a multifaceted narrative where the often talked about consensual Swedish mentality revealed its true face by being conspicuously absent. Issues of gender and feminism were shown to be heavily contested, and were depicted as creating conflict rather than national cohesion. These conflicts were closely related to the far-reaching liberal ideas that permeated Swedish society, and added to the picture of an incompetent government and mistrust of leading public institutions. First, it divided people into opposing groups: men against women, feminists against LGBTQ+

groups, and right-wing traditionalists against liberals. Second, it caused mental illness, especially among young people who were utterly confused and distressed about their sex. Third, Islam had taken on such a major position in Swedish society that it had become impossible to maintain Swedish feminist values and ways of life. Muslim and Swedish traditions were incompatible with regard to gender equality, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, and in most cases Swedish views on gender were forced to stand aside to give room to members of the Muslim community. Finally, the heavy focus on gender issues tended to weaken Sweden not only domestically, but also internationally—the police, the armed forces, and the fire brigade were being feminized, and two female foreign ministers in a row had seriously jeopardized Swedish foreign relations by insisting on a so-called feminist foreign policy—and through diplomatic blunders.

Islamic Takeover and the Selling Out Sweden

The sampling of the news items for the empirical analysis did not specifically include themes on immigration, Islam, or Muslims in Sweden, but there was a narrative about the growing influence of Islam on Swedish society. A leading theme of this narrative was efforts, spurred on by the so-called mass-immigration of 2015, and anxious and insecure Swedish leaders, by Islam and the Muslim community to take over in Sweden, marginalize Swedish culture, and devalue and push national traditions and values aside. The narrative told how the Swedish authorities treated Muslims and Islamic customs and values as exposed and vulnerable, their rights subordinated and under threat, and therefore this supposed homogeneous group as in need of unconditional support. Swedish norms and values were downgraded in what was portrayed as a zero-sum game. Driven by the misconception that it was promoting democracy, integration, and liberal values, the government acted in ways that spurred denationalization tendencies. This also applied to the Swedish Church, which was an accomplice in the selling out of Sweden—not only out of respect for the Islamic faith, but in line with its liberal stance and engagement with Muslim immigrants. Despite growing crime rates targeting citizens referred to as “Swedes” or “Christians”, the state and state agencies ignored protest from the public, remained passive, and seemed incapable of protecting or unwilling to defend core Swedish values—even when it came to respect for Swedish rule of law.

Swedish Liberal Defiance During the Pandemic

News pieces about public health were almost entirely centered on the Covid-19 pandemic, and much of this coverage comprised the narrative on a collective national defiance against various social restrictions, such as freedom of movement. The narrative about the pandemic gave an indication of how crisis coverage might add to routine narratives constructed with the intention of doing harm. Key to the narrative on how Sweden was affected by and managed the pandemic were the connections made to the unreasonably liberal approach chosen by the Swedish government. The liberal strategy for managing the pandemic, which included the decision not to introduce a lockdown, gave room for the Russian state media to underline the leadership's incompetence and hypocrisy, and show it to be morally dubious. The Swedish government opposed scientific experts and ignored the gravity of the situation.

However, contrary to what RT and Sputnik's international audiences might have assumed, Sweden, so often characterized as consensual in crises, was depicted as riven by conflict over the choice of strategy. There appeared to be deep disagreements between the scientific experts and the public authorities. The government was more or less absent from the coverage and rarely appeared as a decisive authority working to protect the people from an existential threat. Like the government, Swedish citizens were depicted as ignorant and at times careless. There was evidence that while most European citizens isolated themselves and stayed at home to avoid infection or spreading the disease, Swedes were crowding into cafés and organizing parties seemingly oblivious of the dangers and the high risk of contamination. Having imposed unconventional, odd, and incomprehensible measures for which the real aims were concealed, Sweden was positioned as a black sheep, isolated and marginalized from Europe and the rest of the world. Foreign and domestic commentators used Sweden as a bad example of how to manage the pandemic and warned that Sweden was about to face a tragedy that no one seemed to either want or be able to stop. This was liberalism pushed to the extreme and leadership that had hit rock bottom.

The narrative portrayed Sweden as an unreliable and disloyal EU member state and international partner. This was in line with the Russian master narrative about Sweden not being the kind of country that it appeared to be, and that there were hidden, darker sides to Sweden that the pandemic had brought to light. In the case of the pandemic, it was not

controversial to argue that Sweden was deviant in its approach to and its management of the Covid-19 crisis. Several scholars have pointed out that Sweden’s approach differed from most states, and deviated substantially from that, for example, of Denmark and Norway (Pamment, 2021, pp. 80–110; and Bergman & Hedling, 2022, pp. 41–43). In this sense, the narrative about Sweden as the odd one out leading to negative responses from allies and neighboring states demonstrates how the construction of harmful narratives can target a state’s reputation and work to alienate a state from its former partners, thereby amplifying the criticism and opposition.

STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES

The narrative analysis showed how Russian disinformation was constructed by way of news coverage in the international news outlets of state media, and demonstrated the main messages about Sweden. The analysis also highlighted how disinformation rarely contained outright untruths or “fake news”. Nonetheless, the way in which the news stories were told indicated that, while not fabrications or lies, they comprised strategic narratives with malign intent, aiming to destabilize a foreign state, which is also what studies of other countries’ exposure to Russian disinformation have found (see e.g. Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; Hoyle et al., 2021; Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019). Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) talk about this with reference to three strategies: suppression, destruction, and direction (see Chap. 1). In order to capture the storytelling techniques used to turn news coverage into harmful narratives, and how the news coverage deviates from established journalistic norms, I return to the techniques introduced in Chap. 2 and discuss them in light of what has been identified throughout the analyses and across the narratives.

The Narrative Perspective from Within

In general, Sputnik’s and RT’s news coverage about Sweden took an insider perspective (see also Yablokov & Chatterje-Doody, 2022). This means first and foremost that the sources, be they actors or media platforms and institutions, tended to be domestic. Russian news sources were seldom used, and other foreign sources only occasionally. Instead, stories were built on information gathered primarily from secondary sources in the Swedish broadcast media, old media, and public officials (see Chap. 5).

The narrators of (the storyteller and the perspective from which the story was told) and the actor(s) in the stories were also overwhelmingly Swedish. However, although they were often used as sources of information (the actors in particular), they rarely participated in the story in the sense that they moved the story forward. Instead, they were the objects of the articles, in that they were talked about or referred to. The dominance of domestic narrators telling the stories from a domestic point of view created what Yablokov and Chatterje-Doody (2022) refer to as an insider perspective. RT and Sputnik appeared to be Swedish news platforms representing a Swedish take on the news, which was also mainly domestic, most often taking a critical standpoint. The channels—Sputnik in particular—appeared to provide an arena for the articulation of ideas—platforms where several opposing ideas were expressed, demonstrating that there were serious conflicts between parties and actor groups in Swedish society. The style, which sought to develop a sense of both geographical and psychological proximity to events, added to the insider perspective. It was the kind of domestic and personal style that signaled that “it could have been me or my family”.

Sputnik articles with few exceptions carried a journalist’s byline. A reporter named Igor Kuznetsov was the author of 12% of the material, and mainly wrote about gender issues in relation to religious matters. Mostly however, the stories were written from the perspective of someone made to represent Sweden or “the Swedes”. The State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, for example, appeared as source, actor, or narrator in articles about public health. This merger and confusion of the role of journalist, participant in the events, and the sources was a storytelling technique where Sputnik differed from western journalistic practice. Future research would do well to critically scrutinize this tendency.

The insider perspective was similar to what Moore and Colley (2022) write about with reference to RT and RT America in their study of Russian and Chinese propaganda models and the 2020 US election. They refer to the RT propaganda model as one of “partisan parasite”, by which they mean that RT lends support to a specific candidate in another country’s election (partisan) and “seeks to imitate a domestic media outlet in another country’s media ecology” (18). RT thus covered the election in a way that resembled a US news source and concealed its propagandistic perspective. Moore and Colley conclude that:

...[RT] frames issues in a partisan way that mimics US right-wing news media, giving the impression it is a domestic participant in the US culture wars, fighting against “woke” liberal elites, rather than an external observer.... It tries to “punch upwards” against “liberal elites” on behalf of ordinary Americans, frequently using satire as a means to achieve this.... Cultivating an image as an insider in US politics is necessary for this satire to work. Otherwise, it would be too obvious that RT is an external product of the Russian state, not an authentic domestic news source. (Moore & Colley, 2022, p. 18)

The Instigation of Polarization

The second technique observed is the attempt to incite polarization among the audience. By polarization we mean that opposing views are structured as diametrically opposed, where one side ignores the other, takes no interest in listening to the opponent’s arguments, and the public sphere is characterized by two (or more) poles of separate and seemingly incompatible views. There is little incentive to engage with and understand the views of other opinions. The term is most often used negatively to refer to a problematic situation alleged to cause a weakening of democracies. This is due not to groups or citizens being divided on an issue or an ideological package, but to the lack of interest or respect for opponents and a lack of ambition to reach a shared understanding.

The storytelling techniques identified in the Sputnik and RT coverage show signs of fueling such divisions of opinion that might lead to polarization. The narratives were often built around confrontations between different groups in Sweden positioned as opposed to one another, indicating what little prospect there was of ever reaching agreement. Actors were depicted as representing incompatible interests. In a confrontation between two parties, one would be assigned the role of inferior and less valued, and the other as superior, thereby creating an ingroup and an outgroup. Muslims were repeatedly depicted as an outgroup trying to become an ingroup, but the narratives told of resistance to such inclusion. Muslims and Swedes were depicted as having such different morals and values that only the most naive would think that they could ever be able to coexist.

Several articles start out by launching a radical, new or daring idea or principle before making a sharp turn using words such as “however”, “meanwhile”, “despite”, or a similar transitional term, after which more or less fierce resistance and opposition to the novelty were expressed.

There are formulations such as: “this did not go down well with users” (readers, the public, people); “public opinion is still divided” or “triggered an outcry of indignation”. This is followed by numerous quotes and references to quotes from people vehemently opposed, expressing themselves in emotional language. This structure is used to highlight the tensions and divisions between the Swedish establishment and “ordinary people”. It adds to the message of internal disagreement in Sweden that cannot be easily resolved. Official spokespersons in the news who were reported as having given rise to the disputes and conflicts were depicted as totally oblivious to the responses their actions might produce, and thus unprepared to deal with the storm of negativity. They did not know how to manage the situation. Matters seemed to be in the hands of no one or in the hands of incompetent leaders and managers. The rhetorical device of a “however”, turning the perspective over to the side of the public, served as a breaking point of the story, like a climax. People were often referred to as netizens, and the sources for their voice were taken from social media outlets.

There were also cases where the transition word “however” or “despite” was followed by an often-repeated standard paragraph, sometimes close to the topic of the report, sometimes stretching the topic to a seemingly unrelated topic, but in either case aiming to position the story in a wider context. The news reports were positioned and given a perspective within familiar and repetitive themes, which normally provoked a reaction and therefore might add fuel to an already emotionally charged issue and spur an already angry group of people. Such standard paragraphs might include descriptions of how Greta Thunberg was causing controversy, the Church of Sweden was losing worshippers or pushing a more liberal agenda, traumatic experiences of mass immigration in 2015 and since or Sweden’s outlier *laissez-faire* approach to the pandemic. The extract below is an example of such an end-paragraph from an article that Sputnik published on December 25, 2019, in which various topics were linked. This type of formulation might not contain polarizing features as such, but invites readers to engage with complex issues in a simplified way, and might implicitly call on readers to take a side and refuse to acknowledge the other.

The Church of Sweden is known for its liberal position on issues such as homosexuality, mass immigration, and climate change and is often blamed for its perceived “activist” position. Archbishop Antje Jackelén has sparked controversy by attacking the “Patriarchy” and “destructive masculinity”,

most recently in her Christmas message. In contrast, Bishop Eva Burne stirred outrage by claiming she had more in common with Muslims than the so-called “Christian right”. (Sputnik December 25, 2019)

Another way in which RT’s and Sputnik’s news coverage can be said to have had a polarizing effect is the use of emotionally charged messages and moralistic or emotional words in headlines, sub-headlines, or the main text. Articles are imbued with emotive language and use words or phrases such as: “outrage”, “uproar”, “controversy”, “controversial”, “gamble”, and “deadly experiment”. Overall, the language of the news coverage is expressive, strong, and hostile rather than subtle and neutral. This emotionality factor inflates the image of Sweden as polarized and characterized by chaos, both of which were alleged to afflict Swedish society.

An illustrative example of the polarizing effect is an article headlined: “Is Sweden Facing ‘Herd Immunity in May’ or Disaster With ‘Ugly Death Rates?’” (Sputnik April 17, 2020c). The article describes a serious conflict between two medical authorities in Sweden arguing about the appropriate strategy for dealing with the pandemic. A professor at the Karolinska Institute is quoted from a piece on Norwegian public service television (NRK), saying that the strategy of the state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, was a “dangerous experiment”, and that disaster was lurking around the corner. She argued that “It will explode in our faces”, and that there would be very ugly death rates in Sweden. Tegnell, who was said to be arguing that herd immunity was the only way to stop the epidemic, was depicted as rather lonely in holding such a view. The debate was said to be “hot” and “a significant proportion of Swedes believed the current line must be tightened”. The story was typical in that it was based on a piece broadcast or published in a local or Nordic news outlet. The article was a typical copy paste set-up, with one or two pieces of information brought in from another source, such as a review or a recap of a locally broadcast program, serving as the vehicle for the entire article (on media-centricity see Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021, p. 178).

Emotional Language

It is noted above how Sputnik and RT use emotional language to stress the seriousness of a problem or a conflict between parties. Research has shown the efficacy of emotional language for persuasion and for influencing audiences. Anger, for example, writes Weeks, “encourages partisan,

motivated evaluation of uncorrected misinformation that results in beliefs consistent with the supported political party” (Weeks, 2015, p. 699 in Tucker et al., 2018, p. 44). Thus, a previously held political opinion might be further established, and critical thinking might be reduced in a person if messages are emotionally laden. Emotionally charged messages also “have a higher probability of becoming viral” (Berger, 2011 in Tucker et al., 2018, p. 44), and seem to encourage the spreading of messages on social media. Brady et al. (2017) found that including “moral-emotional” words in tweets on three politically polarizing issues (gun control, same-sex marriage, and climate change) made these messages significantly more likely to be shared on Twitter. Several studies on the use of Twitter and the sharing of messages show that emotionally charged tweets, be they upsetting, pleasing, entertaining, or provocative, tended to be shared more frequently—especially messages that were inaccurate or exaggerated (Chadwick et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2018; Rudat et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2015; for more on emotional responses to RT coverage, see also Chatterje-Doody & Crilley, 2019).

Overlaps

The third, and perhaps most significant, technique identified is how themes repeatedly overlap with each other so that narratives appear inter-related and problems interconnected. It might be argued that this is a consequence of the research methodology, where the analysis seeks patterns in the messaging that once determined cannot be kept separate. While this might be the case to some extent, there are also overlaps that would have been identified regardless of the qualitative method used. Plots (the narrative of one news item) that serve as links between narratives tend to lack actors or are presented in passive tense (“it has been noted that”). Facts that emanate from different subjects are brought together so that although the content of each is accurate, their combination twists the message into a biased or denigrating account.

On October 21, 2020, Sputnik posted an article under the headline “Swedish State Epidemiologist Pins Faster Covid-19 Spread on Larger Immigrant Population”. Immigration was being connected to the pandemic and framed as speeding its spread, although none of the quotes in the article indicated this. State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell had said that the “spread is greater and faster among these populations”, pointing to populations in the cities from foreign countries. He did not mention

immigration. In this and similar ways, different “facts” were added together, which one by one might be true but when put together made the news report speculative, and stressed tensions and problematic differences between “Swedes” and “immigrants” (Sputnik October 21, 2020f).

Stories covering Greta Thunberg (climate change) and Covid-19 (public health) were another common overlap between narratives. Sputnik (March 18, 2020a) published a confusing and quite unbelievable story in which foreign correspondent Magda Gad’s allegedly inhumane values and ideas were mixed with opinions about Greta Thunberg. This news piece is a good example of how Sputnik capitalizes on a respected and famous Swede—an award-winning female journalist to demonstrate cleavages between people in Swedish society—aligning strongly negative opinions about Greta with revelations about Swedes’ murky values and low morale, which were reported to have surfaced during the pandemic. The article mixed criticism of Gad with the global role that had been ascribed to Greta for her work on climate change. The article opened with a big picture of Greta with a thwarted facial expression, and it was stated how Gad had called her the Prophet of the Century, which was actually an epithet of the Swedish Archbishop of Sweden not invented by Gad. The thin connection made between Gad and Greta was the former’s explanation of activism, that when the right people died things started moving in an anti-capitalist and environmentally friendly direction. The story then moved on to cover protests about the expression “the right people”.

A similar overlap occurred when Sputnik reported that Greta Thunberg had been invited to speak to the European Parliament despite Covid restrictions, which prohibited even European Parliament staff from assisting the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to attend or be in the building. The president of the European Parliament’s spokesperson defended the invitation but the article sided with the criticism. Greta was referred to as an “eco warrior”. The problem was not Covid-19, which made it difficult for the Parliament to function or the MEPs to meet in session. It was that a 16-year old activist was being given special privileges that allowed her to enter the Parliament when not even the permanent (adult) staff were allowed to do so.

The Parliament was allowing itself to be run and influenced by a little girl who had started an activist network: “If the European Parliament grants an exception to Greta Thunberg, this house will not be taken seriously”, one MEP claimed. This was a question of justice and equality, and it made the European Parliament look ridiculous—an institution not to be

taken seriously. The article ended with the most recent update on the number of people infected with Covid-19 in Europe. The sentence started with “Meanwhile...”, indicating that while the European Parliament was busy welcoming and defending the welcome of a teenage climate activist, the deadly pandemic was spreading across Europe.

There were also connections made between Covid-19 (i.e. public health) and gender. In an article with the headline “Holy Matrimony vs Social Distancing: Sweden Sees Spike in Divorce Filings Amid COVID-19 Pandemic” (Sputnik September 16, 2020e), it was reported, partly based on statements from a Swedish psychologist and a Swedish demographic historian, that the number of divorces across the world had increased due to Covid-19 restrictions. Increased uncertainty, remote working, and anxiety were reported to be the causes. Even though these were worldwide problems, the article centered on Sweden. The story ended with a paragraph repeated in numerous articles:

Sweden’s controversial no-lockdown strategy continues to polarize the global public, with some berating it for “unnecessary” deaths and others crediting it with keeping the economy afloat and avoiding market crashes.

In a rather contradictory way, Sweden’s no-lockdown strategy, which included social distancing, was being criticized and it was being argued that marriages were breaking down because people were spending so much time together at home. The point could also be that marriages ended despite the open society policy during the pandemic—the landmark of the Swedish strategy. In other words, that the downfall of Sweden was inevitable regardless of supposedly open strategies; and not only did marriages break down, but the saving of the economy, which was the cause of the no-lockdown policy, was also a failure.

Finally, it should be noted that there were also plots that lacked any kind of structure, were unrelated to the coverage, did not work as either a link between narratives, overlap or fit into any kind of grander narrative scheme. The sequential ordering was strange and confusing as pieces of unrelated information were connected to one another. It was impossible to get a grip of what the message and problem were, who had said what and when, or whether people shared the same view. A jumble of statements and ideas was presented, sometimes unrelated, sometimes contradictory. It appeared as if Sweden had turned head over heels when it came to liberalism, no one or nothing could be trusted or taken seriously. The

only thing that could be told for sure from analyzing these plots was that Sweden was an absurd and chaotic place

Misuse of Key Concepts and Choices of Words to Name Phenomena

The storytelling techniques that fueled conflicts between parties and sought to highlight antagonistic groups in Sweden tended to make use of concepts in an insensitive or provocative way. Key concepts, such as herd immunity or Darwinism, and emotionally charged words, such as unrestrained immigration, mass migration or Greta as eco-warrior, and gender-related terms were pitched into the stories and sometimes used inaccurately or their original meanings confused.

One of the most frequently used concepts in the coverage of the pandemic was herd immunity, and connected to it was a forceful critique delivered by various Swedish and foreign voices. It tended to be connected to great levels of uncertainty, inconsistency, indecision, controversy, and disagreement between national experts and decision makers. In one Sputnik article, the state epidemiologist was depicted as being at odds with his regional counterpart: “Despite contradictory messaging on the desirability by the Swedish authorities, and some Swedish regions such as Norrbotten County openly embracing the idea of herd immunity as a goal, Tegnell insisted that a ‘genuine’ herd immunity strategy could be disastrous...” (Sputnik October 21, 2020f). Another article stated that: “Swedish authorities have repeatedly hailed herd immunity as the ultimate means to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus”. This was referred to as Sweden’s “maverick approach”, which had been “slammed” abroad as well as at home. When Poland’s prime minister called Sweden’s approach Darwinist, Ivar Arpi, a writer at *Svenska Dagbladet* (“one of the country’s leading dailies”), asked: “How many must die for the sake of herd immunity?” (Sputnik May 15, 2020d). By not making a distinction between the state of herd immunity in a population, which is highly desirable, and employing herd immunity as a strategy to put a stop to the spread of the virus, Sputnik made it seem as if the Swedish authorities were willing to sacrifice Swedish lives by allowing the virus to spread unabated.

Sensitive phrases in connection with immigration issues and the Muslim population in Sweden were also misused. The Swedish experience of mass migration in 2015 was referred to over and over, and appeared in numerous contexts. Other terms evoked the image of Sweden as a society in chaos, often because of immigration, and terms such as “vulnerable areas”,

“unrestrained immigration”, “ghettos”, and “no-go areas” were frequently used.

Mockery by Way of “citations” and the So-called

Sarcasm, mockery, ridicule, jokes, and exaggeration make up a powerful set of rhetorical moves that scholars find being used by producers of disinformation with the intention to belittle and defame. Among this study’s material were a plethora of articles written in a predominantly sarcastic and ironic tone. The language was scornful and key words and concepts were at times marked with scare quotes,¹ or preceded by the phrase “so-called”. Terms such as patriarchy, destructive masculinity, or herd immunity were placed in scare quotes—“patriarchy” and “the so-called herd immunity approach”—to signal a kind of moral distancing, suggesting partisanship or insinuated aversion. This indicated that the issue at hand was doubtful and not to be trusted, as though it was claimed but not proven, and a critical reader/viewer would do best to mistrust the information. The coverage put numerous terms and phrases in scare quotes. Gender and crime issues seemed to be particularly targeted with examples such as “gender equal snow ploughing” and “feminist foreign policy”. Jonathan Chait (2008) puts it succinctly: “the scare quote is the perfect device for making an insinuation without proving it, or even necessarily making clear what you’re insinuating”.

Lastly, several pieces on the climate topic had a vocabulary that was sardonic and insinuate doubt whether the world was experiencing warming. This doubt was substantiated by discrediting Greta Thunberg and her climate activism, with claims that she and her mad cult were excessively alarmistic about climate threats, or “climate threats” (scare quotes). She was given numerous different kinds of derogatory and deceptive epithets, suggesting that she was mentally ill, a spoiled child, controlled by the establishment, used by her famous parents, dangerous or not to be taken seriously, but then occasionally a respected activist, a heroine or a brave young woman with access to the mightiest world leaders. The narrative

¹“Scare quotes (also known, even more colorfully, as ‘shudder quotes’ and ‘sneer quotes’) are identical to standard quotation marks but do precisely the opposite of what quotation marks are supposed to do: They signal irony and uncertainty. They suggest that words do not quite mean what they claim to” (Garber, 2016).

structure was similar to that used in conspiracy theories and the various epithets used created confusion as to who the person was.

Use of Experts

Lastly, I touch on the storytelling technique in which scientific experts, some well-known and others less so, played an important role in driving the narrative forward as they conveyed convincing and credible messages enticing to the audience. Whether they participated as actors or were referred to, their expertise added weight to the story. They provided an inside perspective and gave informed statements or accounts about Sweden, most often confirming or explaining its decline. With regard to the pandemic, experts made apocalyptic estimates of the spread of Covid-19, criticized the Swedish strategy and leadership making harsh accusations against the authorities for lying to and deceiving the public, and stressed the severity of the situation. Experts appearing on RT news were for the most part treated with respect by the anchor, but if the views of an invited expert tended to deviate from the RT line of argument he or she would be more sharply questioned or made to appear self-contradictory.

The Swedish professor, Agnes Wold, figured several times as an expert in the coverage about the pandemic. Her statement in a television interview that fortunately the virus only killed elderly people was reported as having sparked conflict among the Swedish public. In an interview in *Aftonbladet*, she is quoted as saying: “My policy is to keep people away”. It was reported that: “Wold’s unfortunate phrasing made many of her compatriots see red” and in a series of Tweets people expressed their anger at her statements. There were also statements by other experts who agreed with Wold (Sputnik March 30, 2020b). The depictions of Wold as self-centered, drastic in her medical assessment of the disease and too blunt in her delivery of advice to the public stood in stark contrast to how other experts were presented, even though their views were similar.

Seen over a longer period, it was found that Swedish experts as a group appeared divided and opposed to the authorities, demonstrating that the Swedish research community and national leadership were deeply at odds. Some experts interviewed on RT were assigned different academic titles depending on the context in which they appeared. The same expert could thus serve as a human rights expert in one story and then as a medical expert in another. On the one hand, the experts represented the

establishment and as such were scrutinized by the news media for the sake of ordinary people. On the other hand, they represented competence and knowledge, which could be brought to the people with the help of the news coverage, thereby sidestepping the elites. This indicates that the use of experts might bring not only insights and scientific explanations to complicated questions, but also create confusion and strengthen Sputnik's and RT's anti-establishment positions. More research is required on how experts are used to assist media with malign intent to appear credible and trustworthy.

DISINFORMATION AS AN EVERYDAY SECURITY PRACTICE

This study has analyzed how international news media organizations are used for security purposes by way of disinformation. Harmful and deceptive news narratives were found to share properties with regular news coverage but were also seen to deviate from the mainstream journalism of liberal societies. The structure of the news coverage analyzed indicates that the construction of the news plots was highly routinized and followed a repetitive and continuous pattern. Disinformation was enacted as an everyday security practice. When all the plots and narratives are added together, they result in a denigrating image of the target nation, summarized in the master narrative of Sweden as a failing state victim of liberal ideas.

The messages took the shape of separate pipelines into which a variety of topics were placed, molded by storytelling techniques, and from which a limited set of narratives emerged, thereby strengthening the harmful messaging: the danger and threat of Islamism, a liberalism that has run amok, a national leadership no longer trustworthy and failing to maintain a sense of national unity; and loss of the national heritage. This is also the result of the overlap and interconnections created between topics, as various news events were connected to a limited number of narratives.

Seemingly unrelated news topics therefore ended up strengthening the same narrative or being framed as similar problems. In this sense, and in the highly routinized coverage, Sputnik and RT deviated from mainstream journalism. This is also identified in the studies by Wagnsson and Barzanje (2021) and Hoyle et al. (2021). The news material analyzed was smaller in scope than that used in the previous studies and covered a later time period (July 2019 to January 2021), but the findings are strikingly similar. This further strengthens the conclusion that the RT and Sputnik news

coverage was made up of a relatively fixed set of narratives stretched across multiple news stories (plots).

Moreover, studies on particular news events covered by Sputnik and/or RT showed similarities in the storytelling techniques that deviate from other international 24/7 news outlets (see e.g. Birge & Chatterje-Doody, 2021; Moore & Colley, 2022). These include the heavy domestication of news, in which the coverage of events in a foreign country resembles the domestic coverage of news media and draws entirely on domestic sources. Other deviations concern the phrasing of the questions by the interviewees, and the use of mockery and irony to indicate a skeptical attitude to and disbelief of statements, especially those of “elite representatives”.

These were all features that led to the news narratives being labeled disinformation. They highlight the everyday practice of disinformation as deceptive, in that it naturalizes news plots and conceals how the messages distort information. What at first appears to be extraordinary or striking when covered by the news comes to be taken for granted as normal and natural, and part of the everyday. The repeated use of the same narrative structure and framing can influence audiences to gradually accept and give credibility to the distorted messaging. Disinformation as an everyday practice also means that far from all of the news stories are spectacular, provoking, violent, or dramatic. Instead, they are for the most part mundane and ordinary—or made to appear so. The use of news broadcasting for disinformation, the repetitive format and the continuity in style of reporting over time align with the media habits of the established audience, and this familiarizes them with the narrative structures of this type of news.

Global and national crises, unexpected incidents, dramatic events, and key political moments such as elections should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the kind of disinformation in which RT and Sputnik are engaged. The disinformation practiced through intensive attacks on specific public agencies at certain moments in time or efforts to amplify domestic tensions and disagreements in the format of campaigns also pose serious threats to the stability of democratic societies and to the trust between citizen and government. However, it is important to see these campaigns and peak moments of disinformation as part of a long-term and strategic security threat rather than as disparate crises. An important finding of this study is that the narratives of RT and Sputnik remained the same for the pandemic crisis as for the day-to-day coverage of national events (see Chap. 3).

This book has centered on disinformation as an everyday practice performed by the Russian state-affiliated media, RT and Sputnik, through the construction of harmful narratives about Sweden. However, the harmful narratives of these news outlets have also been found to target many other Western countries. Everyday disinformation against European and Western states has thus been enabled by international news organizations linked to an authoritarian regime. Before its objectives turned to defense and security, RT started out as an international 24/7 news broadcaster with public diplomacy ambitions in many respects similar to other global networks such as CNN or BBC World. In the past decade, both Sputnik and RT have worked to disseminate disinformation as tools of the Russian defense forces. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the European Commission decided to implement a ban on these media outlets in the European Union. RT America has also been closed down.

However, the media outlets of other authoritarian regimes are also known to feed the news media system with disinformation. Turkish media outlets, for example, have spread disinformation about Sweden in their networks—messages that were picked up by Al Jazeera, the Arabic-language global news network stationed in Qatar (Hamdan, 2023). This is yet another indication of the importance of disinformation by way of international news coverage to states' stability, security, and international reputation. Malign media organizations and agencies with intent to do harm become part of the same news media networks as liberal news journalism and capitalize on liberal journalistic principles to spread their messages and appear trustworthy and reliable. They participate in the international news journalistic ecosystem and interact, exchange, distort, and disseminate news with other actors in the system, making it difficult to distinguish malign actors from liberal media organizations. This can make it difficult to assess the impact they have on domestic audiences in target countries.

Moreover, the interactive nature of the news media system causes disinformation to be performed in narrative alignment with domestic media outlets rather than directly consumed by the domestic audience of the target country. Domestic fringe media might welcome the messaging of these news flows and the two become mutually reinforcing. It will be important to continue to pay attention to how civilian institutions such as news media organizations might be used for malign purposes, and to develop resilience against disinformation perpetrated by international news journalism.

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