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Fact-checkers and the news media

A Nordic perspective on propaganda

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ABSTRACT

Combatting disinformation and propaganda has become an increasingly common task in Nordic newsrooms. The independent fact-checking organisations are currently joining forces with journalists in keeping the public informed. To better understand what these organisations do and how they do it, this study investigates the fact-checkers' challenges and interrelations with traditional journalistic institutions, media literacy organisations, and associated national policymaker institutions in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The study is based on 18 in-depth interviews, and the findings show that fact-checking journalism is considered an important counterpart to traditional news media. However, there are many challenges in countering disinformation in the Nordics – both socioeconomical and policy related – that should be considered when discussing how to maintain and improve on the resilience against disinformation and propaganda in the Nordic media welfare states. The study aims to bring some of these challenges to the fore.

KEYWORDS: fact-checking, propaganda, disinformation, resilience, media welfare state

Introduction

In this article, I examine how Nordic fact-checkers work with other closely related stakeholder organisations to counter disinformation in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The fact-checker organisations studied are: Norwegian Faktisk.no (founded in 2017), Danish TjekDet (founded in 2016), Swedish Källkritikbyrå (founded in 2014 as Viralgranskaren), and Finnish Faktabaari (founded in 2014).

Three concepts with similar meanings can be found under the umbrella term Information Disorder – or the effect of how online platforms affect the supply of information: disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), disinformation is spread with the intent of harming others; misinformation is the unintentional sharing of false information; and malinformation is true information, but with a harmful intent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; SitraFund, 2022).

In the study, I conducted 17 in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews with Nordic professionals working with fact-checking and related activities. The main part of the study focuses on the four largest Nordic fact-checking organisations, comparing their work to those of legacy media, which are represented by well-informed executives of the four Nordic journalist unions. Because the four fact-checking organisations are also actively engaged in media and information literacy (MIL) work, four national MIL-expert interviewees were chosen to provide complementary insights into prevalent challenges within this closely related subject area. Finally, interviews with representatives from policymaking institutions with different areas of expertise were added to provide a broader perspective on disinformation issues in the Nordic region.

Sharing a common democratic corporatist tradition (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are often characterised as media welfare states (Enli & Syvertsen, 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Another commonality among the Nordics is that they have been particularly resilient to disinformation. Humprecht and colleagues (2020, 2021) have demonstrated that the Nordics are consensual, media-supportive, and resilient societies due to low levels of polarisation and populist communication, high levels of trust, and strong public service media. However, in their follow-up study, resilience-promoting factors were identified as being country specific, where “the political, media, and economic environments play a major role in how citizens react to disinformation, and policy solutions to tackle the problem must be tailored to the particular social environment” (Humprecht et al., 2021: 2). This necessitates a more in-depth qualitative examination into how these country-specific environments appear in the Nordic countries, as well as what specific challenges and solutions emerge in the Nordic approach to countering disinformation and promoting resilience.

Research aims and objectives

The aim of the study is to explore the above differences and challenges as seen from the perspective of the four Nordic fact-checker organisations. These organisations are all less than ten years old. They are all dedicated to combatting disinformation, but there have been few studies on how this is accomplished and how their work relates to that of other epistemic institutions such as media literacy organisations, legacy media, and associated national policymaker institutions.

The study’s objective is to comprehend the relations between these organisations with respect to fact-checkers, recognising parallels in their work and discerning the challenges and solutions that are specific to the Nordic social

environments. The main research question is: How do fact-checkers, policy-makers, and journalist trade unions view the role of fact-checking journalism in countering disinformation in the Nordic countries?

Reviewing and analysing key themes from the interviews, I focus on the roles of the fact-checkers and their relationship with the other stakeholders. Furthermore, I aim to deduce how the fact-checking work can be considered as contributing to the attested Nordic resilience to disinformation. The empirical material, the method, and the rationale for selecting the respondents are presented next.

Method and material

To gather comparable cross-national empirical data, in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with prominent executives in comparable roles in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The material for this study comprises 18 interviews conducted over Zoom that were 45–60 minutes long each. I conducted most of the interviews in the respondent's native language, then translated the transcripts into English and coded and thematically analysed them according to the overarching themes. An exception is the interview with the Finnish MEP, which was conducted by colleagues in the CORDI project (www.cordi.blog). To clarify some points, an additional interview with an experienced freelance journalist, who is well-published in several Nordic media outlets, was added.

A single interview guide was used for all interviews, focusing on topics related to disinformation and fact-checking. Three broad questions were posed to all interviewees: what their key challenges are; what viable solutions to these difficulties already exist; and how researchers can help. To round out the data-gathering process, an extra group interview was held with all the fact-checkers present, to clarify concerns not included in the initial interview material.

The thematic analysis started with an initial list of codes that were created inductively based on the topics that emerged during the reading of the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These codes related to the interviewees' social, technological, epistemological, economic, and political challenges. The initial codes were then combined and rearranged in the secondary-cycle coding, forming themes conceptually related to the available literature on the subject (Saldaña, 2009). These themes align reasonably well with the resilience-promoting factors used by Humprecht and colleagues (2021: 2): “the political, media, and economic environments”, or the dimensions, as they are called in their study.

The four groups of interviewees represented different strata of society. They include fact-checkers, media information literacy specialists, the established news media, and policymakers. With the fact-checkers being the main research-subject, their interviews were conducted first, to learn more about how the Nordic fact-checkers operate and how their responsibilities compare to those of journalists at conventional media outlets.

The journalists and news media were represented by the Nordic journalist unions, as their executives have a deep understanding of the journalistic work conducted across the field, both commercial and public service media.

MIL institutions were incorporated because they could provide information and viewpoints on disinformation in relation to various age groups and demographics. Also, since the fact-checkers are also involved in MIL work, I wanted to study how much the organisations' activities and areas of collaboration overlap.

Finally, interviewees at ministry and EU levels provided deeper insights into policymaking, since they have a regulatory and legislative role that influences the funding and policy of all the organisations involved.

The material's shortcomings are mostly in this last segment, primarily due to the policymaking and ministry-level sectors in the Nordics being disparate, which made it difficult to find comparable respondents. The original plan to interview Stratcom responders from all four countries became undoable, due to the secrecy of the organisations engaged in psychological warfare. The single Stratcom interview was therefore included as part of the policymaker segment. The Nordic Council of Ministers was included since they were expected to present a broad understanding of the challenges from a MIL perspective; however, it would have been more fruitful to approach the four ministers of culture directly.

Ideally, newsroom journalists and editors-in-chief of both commercial and public service media organisations would also have been included. A follow-up study covering Nordic public service media institutions is forthcoming to address some of these shortcomings. All interviews were preceded with a written agreement of consent, and the interviewees have been anonymised. Table 1 lays out the details of the interviewees, including the alpha codes used to identify them for quotes cited in this article:

TABLE 1 Interviewees

Segment	Organisation	Position	DATE	Country	QuoteID
Fact-checker	Källkritikbyrån	Fact-checker	29 Sept.2021	Sweden	FC-SE
	Faktisk.no	Fact-checker	6 Oct. 2021	Norway	FC-NO
	Faktabaari	Fact-checker	11 Oct. 2021	Finland	FC-FI
	Tjekdet.dk	Fact-checker	2 Nov. 2021	Denmark	FC-DK
Journalist union	Swedish Union of Journalist [Journalistförbundet]	Senior executive	21 Mar. 2022	Sweden	JOU-SE
	The Union of Journalists in Finland [Journalistiliitto]	Senior executive	6 Apr. 2022	Finland	JOU-FI
	Norwegian Union of Journalists [Norsk Journalistlag]	Senior executive	11 Apr. 2022	Norway	JOU-NO
	The Danish Union of Journalists [Dansk Journalistförbund]	Senior executive	21 Apr. 2022	Denmark	JOU-DK

	National Audiovisual Institute [KAVI]	Senior adviser	4 Nov. 2021	Finland	MIL-FI
	The Swedish Media Council [Statens Medieråd]	Senior adviser	30 Nov. 2021	Sweden	MIL-SE
MIL	The Norwegian Media Authority [Medietilsynet]	Senior adviser	1 Apr. 2022	Norway	MIL-NO
	Media Council for Children and Young People [Medierådet for Børn og Unge]	Senior adviser	27 Apr. 2022	Denmark	MIL-DK
	Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency [MSB]	Head of department	8 Dec. 2021	Sweden	POL-SE
Policymaker	Nordic Council of Ministers [Nordiska Ministerrådet]	Senior Adviser	10 Dec. 2021	Denmark	POL-DK
	European Parliament	MEP	20 Jan. 2022	Finland	POL-FI
	The Storting, Norwegian Parliament [Stortinget]	Member of Parliament	6 May 2022	Norway	POL-NO
Journalist	Freelance journalist	Journalist	9 Dec. 2021	Finland	FJ-FI
Group	Group interview with all fact-checkers.	Fact-checkers	7 Nov. 2022	All	FC2-NN

Defining characteristics of the Nordic countries

In the Nordic welfare states – or the Nordic *media* welfare states (Syvertsen et al., 2014) – the press and public service news media have traditionally been critical in supporting the resilience to disinformation. However, the media logic is changing (Asp, 2014). The market for professional news shows considerable variations in the business models across the Nordics. Media policies for supporting commercial news media are radically different, which means that “the Nordic region is not as homogeneous a region in the media field as one can sometimes be led to believe” (Ohlsson et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, the four Nordic countries studied are doing well according to several important indicators. They are in the top five, together with Estonia, in the Reporters Without Borders (2022) *Freedom of the Press Index*. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021), the Nordics are also among the top five in terms of general trust in news. Moreover, the confidence in the national governments is high, with all four countries in the top eight of OECD indicators (OECD Data, 2023).

State of propaganda and disinformation today

Since 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, Russian propagandists have been ramping up their narratives, using different types of computational propaganda (Dawson & Innes, 2019; van Herpen, 2016; Volchek & Sindelar, 2015) and massive bursts of multichannel disinformation feeds, creating firehoses of falsehood (Paul & Matthews, 2016) using artificial intelligence-based bots and trolls and paid-for coordinated political human influencers (Woolley, 2022). These forms of computational propaganda aim to trick people into ignoring their cognitive abilities (Bradshaw et al., 2020; Gorwa, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2018), providing fertile ground for the spreading of propaganda, not just vertically but horizontally, as presented in the Ellul (1973) taxonomy, as misinformation spreads among the citizens themselves. As I show, these phenomena are also common in the Nordics.

With the dominance of Facebook as a platform for sharing news, citizens become more isolated due to algorithmic filter bubbles and echo chambers (Beam et al., 2018; York et al., 2020), and we risk “our capacity to govern ourselves as reasonable democracies” (Benkler et al., 2018: 4). As explained by Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen, Facebook’s new recommendation algorithm has had radical consequences for the epistemologies of digital journalism and the development of misinformation and disinformation online (Joint Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media, 2022).

Disinformation, polarisation, and audience fragmentation (McNair, 2018) have been increasing rapidly alongside the platformisation of society and journalism (Poell et al., 2019). As financial resources continue to decline, “adherence to the core journalistic tasks of source verification and fact-based reporting become increasingly difficult” (Mayerhöffer et al., 2022: 37). Furthermore, a decline in media pluralism (Karppinen, 2013) and concentration of ownership is contributing to a general distrust of news media, increasing vulnerability to disinformation (Leith, 2022). As the dissemination of news moves from traditional news media to online (alternative and social media) platforms (Ekström & Westlund, 2019), independent fact-checkers are particularly needed.

What the fact-checkers do

Professional fact-checking is not restricted to the traditional news organisations (Graves, 2018; Graves & Anderson, 2020); independent fact-checking organisations conduct a large portion of the fact-checking of online social media.

The global media logic (Altheide, 2004) has changed dramatically since the fact-checker phenomenon began in the early 2000s and developed during the 2004 American elections. With a surge of propaganda and in the ongoing war in Ukraine, the work of international fact-checkers has assumed unprecedented global importance (York et al., 2020). Consequently, the independent fact-checking organisations have found a natural niche, as “the practises and the discourse of these new journalistic actors offer an exceptionally clear view of

systemic changes in the news media”, as argued by Graves (2012: 291). Correspondingly, the EU Commission has updated the code of conduct to emphasise the importance of fact-checkers in combating disinformation (European Commission, 2021b).

The International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) (www.poynter.org/ifcn/) works as a certification agency that gathers international fact-checking organisations from around the world. A commitment to the IFCN code of principles is required to be accepted as verified signatories (IFCN, 2023; European Commission, 2022). A newcomer in the global fact-checker consortium scene is the European Fact-Checking Standards Network, (EFCSN) (www.eufactcheckingproject.com). It is an answer to the EU’s call, “Integrity of social media” (European Commission, 2021a), and it is thus an EU-supported effort. The 44 European founding members raise the standards of best practices pertaining to issues of fact-checker independence, transparency, and methodological and journalistic quality. The Nordic fact-checkers adhere to these principles in their work, and all except the Finnish fact-checkers are members of both the IFCN and the EFCSN. There was general agreement of what fact-checking is among the interviewees, and they laid out the following basic premises of fact-checking: it is a subgenre of investigative journalism; it has publishing in mind (i.e., writing stories); it checks claims, not opinions; it uses classic news criteria for selecting claims with local relevance; it finds the balance of virality and importance; and in addition to just checking claims, it also provides context about the check.

The Nordic fact-checkers have similar working methods: monitoring the media, spotting claims, checking claims, and lastly publishing and spreading the checked claims online. The size of the organisations varies greatly: Norwegian Faktisk.no has thirteen full-time staff and Danish Tjekdet.dk has nine full-time staff, all working in a traditional newsroom setting. Finnish Faktabaari has three–five staff members, and Swedish Källkritikbyrån has three. Tjekdet.dk, Faktisk.no, and Källkritikbyrån are official third-party fact-checkers for Facebook, who provides them with a special feed of potential check-worthy claims and pays for fact-checked and labelled articles.

Though the essence of what the fact-checkers do is investigating and verifying claims, teaching and promoting MIL is also an important aspect of their work. All four organisations, with considerable knowledge of digital information literacy, contribute to and actively collaborate with the national Nordic MIL organisations (Media Council, 2021; National Audiovisual Institute, 2021; Norwegian Media Authority, 2022; Swedish Media Council, 2022).

Challenges for the Nordic fact-checkers

The findings are presented as follows: The media environment is described with quotes and comments from the material that relate to the roles and importance of the fact-checkers. These findings are then followed by the challenges they face in relation to issues of socio-political consciousness. Then the journalists’ views of the fact-checkers are presented. The political environment is related to emergent issues on propaganda and trust in media and society. The economic

environment relates to how the fact-checkers are funded and what they say about their relationship with their owners. This is combined with a presentation of the criticism directed at fact-checkers while discussing problems such as media plurality and independence from Facebook. Lastly, a short summary of key MIL and policymaker comments is presented. In this way, the results are coupled with the media, economic, and political environments used as analytical dimensions by Humprecht and colleagues (2020), albeit with modified subdivisions.

Views on the roles and importance of the fact-checkers

Of the four fact-checkers, Faktisk.no has the most elaborate organisation, and the Norwegian respondents found their fact-checking work useful in many ways. They monitor the relationship between the newspapers and politicians, following up on issues of framing and representation:

I think that there are several political parties who have made it almost a regular programme to criticise the media. [...] I think it is very important that you have an environment like Faktisk that has a distance from the individual editors and can verify claims made in the media, but can also analyse the framing used by the media. (JOU-NO)

Respondents in all four countries agreed in different ways that the fact-checkers have a critical and even sharpening function in overseeing the work of journalists:

I think it can be aggravating for us journalists out there that there is a body that will be able to reveal our mistakes if we are inaccurate in the work. It's a bit like being caught with your pants down, isn't it? If you as a journalist are caught in gross factual errors, it's terribly embarrassing. (JOU-NO)

The Norwegian Member of Parliament (MP) had similar comments from a politician's perspective:

While we as politicians often perceive Faktisk.no as a little bit of a pain in the ass because they may investigate some of the claims we make in debates, I must be honest, I think it has perhaps been one of the most important factors that the media industry itself has implemented in the last few years. It helps to create an awareness among journalists and politicians that we must go the extra mile and be sure of our claims beforehand, because we know Faktisk.no can come after us. It has a good preventive effect. And it is important that it is the media houses themselves that have taken the initiative and funded Faktisk.no. (POL-NO)

The Norwegian fact-checkers were active during the previous municipal elections in Norway, when a seemingly legitimate website named *Sørlandsnyhetene* disseminated a lot of misinformation, potentially polarising the electorate. The importance of Faktisk.no was recognised, and their collaboration with the media houses similarly acknowledged:

I think that was a wake-up call for many in Norway because people thought that in the world's most free-press and enlightened country, something like this couldn't happen. But it happened, and I think that put a dent in us. [...] This establishment of Faktisk has happened in close cooperation with the industry organisations. It has been undividedly positive. (JOU-NO)

Socio-political consciousness and resulting challenges for the fact-checkers

In the material, there were many comments on topics relating to epistemological and socio-political issues. The socio-political consciousness describes an individual's ability to critically analyse the political, economic, and social forces shaping society and their own role in society. Some groups are hard to reach by fact-checkers. Questions about reach and impact was a recurring theme when discussing challenges with how the fact-checkers work:

How does one do a fact-check so that it has the greatest possible impact? [...] With those sitting on the fence, followers, or relatives, who do not really know what to believe, how do you write so that you reach them? (FC-SE)

In Denmark, young people are accustomed to using digital media, whereas older people are more prone to be affected by disinformation (FC-DK). There are also significant differences between children with highly educated parents and those from socioeconomically vulnerable areas. Children with well-educated parents often have a greater critical ability (MIL-SE). This was confirmed by the Norwegian fact-checker:

We know we are most likely to reach the highly educated middle class who are the people that don't really need fact-checking. What would be very useful to know is, are there demographic commonalities between the people sharing and being more susceptible to disinformation, and how can they be reached. (FC-NO)

As journalists also tend to focus on the middle class, some people become outsiders:

Our society is already so complicated that it is difficult to understand what is being said in the media about society. And this also applies to the authorities [...]. And when citizens feel that the authorities are against them, they feel that the media is against them as an institution. (JOU-FI)

For the Danish fact-checkers, this marginalised part of the population is mostly unreachable or even invisible from their position:

With a post on Facebook that has many shares, there are still a lot of people who haven't seen it. And I think that creates a problem, sometimes we have [...] two audiences. We have friends that all pretty much never share anything misinformative. But on the other side, on track two, there are 80,000 people that have seen a certain (fake) claim. (FC-DK)

The shared issues that form these outside groups gather people of different kinds:

It was a weird mix. We had some people called Men in Black, who made big processions with torches, and walked through the streets of Copenhagen and things like that, some of them neo-Nazis, part of them were football hooligans, but they were then supplemented by what you can call the slightly more alternative healing hippies united in the same demonstration. (JOU-DK)

This type of a shared cause creates eerily similar discourses across groups and forms a breeding ground for disinformation:

When you then see someone who is angry at the establishment, then you know where he will be positioned and who his bed mates will be. And this has shocked many when you see that the soft Yoga people suddenly join forces with right-wing extremist people who talk about the Jewish world conspiracy. (FC-SE)

This group phenomenon was recognised across the interviews, whereby citizens frequently regard themselves as experts in whatever topic they are interested in and do a lot of research, but tend to choose the news sources that fittingly confirm their preconceptions:

It is the same mechanics. You create little bubbles where you agree on something or other. And then inside that bubble you reinforce to each other that you are right. Then you try to make a mission towards the rest of the world and convince them with arguments that hold some disinformation. For some, it may be a basic need to be in opposition to the power. (JOU-NO)

Hence, the confirmation biases and the desires to be a part of and belong to a movement are strong. As for some organisations, once you are inside, facts no longer matter (FC-SE). This makes people unreachable by the fact-checkers:

I think there is a subset of the population that is so convinced that what they want to believe is also true. They are not reachable by fact-checkers. And I don't think it's even worth the effort to try. (FC-NO)

People isolating themselves into smaller groups wall off sensible critique from the rest of society. The fact-checkers worry that the development of encrypted communication on platforms such as WhatsApp will make their work difficult, since the technology development generates hermetically sealed echo chambers:

I worry more about insular communities being allowed to ferment on their own, spreading their misinformation in ways that we cannot monitor or access. Something like "stop the steal" groups – you could imagine if no one knew about them, and then they would just explode in the open. (FC-NO)

According to the interviewees, there are no easy explanations to why these socio-political consciousness issues arise:

It's not simple. There can be different groups here, for example, because of a language problem or immigration background. The fact that you absolutely do not understand the language that is used, your trust in society has been disturbed for some reasons, for example, or then it's just that your media literacy is bad. (JOU-FI)

The freelance investigative journalist witnessed the same phenomenon in the newsrooms – it has become a problem with readers' trust and the relevance of the traditional media institutions:

Then suddenly, you have a very different worldview than most people. After that, you distribute and attempt to persuade people to believe it. Then you start to distrust the media, the so-called established media. And that's where the big crisis with media lies today, in that you must make yourself relevant to people who do not believe at all in what you are talking about. (FJ-FI)

Much of the overall problem with these issues lies in the domain of psychosociology, and as such, is outside the scope of this study; however, the phenomena do also create challenges for the fact-checkers:

Humans are not only rational beings, but pretty much also emotional beings. So, I think that a lot of these things are psychological issues that, therefore, become very complex. (JOU-SE)

Replacing facts with emotions has been a trend since the 1990s in leading Finnish news media:

The importance of knowledge and the importance of science was often emphasised, until it dramatically started to decrease when we started talking about the relevance of feeling. [...] But feelings shouldn't be confused with knowledge and science. And the information that is distributed in the professional media is based on the best information available now; you should not mix emotions with that. (JOU-FI)

Fact-checkers interrelationship with journalists and traditional news media

As mentioned, the fact-checkers view their activity as being a form of investigative journalism, but since they are young organisations in comparison with traditional news media, it has taken some time for traditional newsroom journalists to understand their roles:

Investigative journalism is usually considered journalism that brings new things to the fore, things that have not been known before. The fact-checkers work by checking existing information, in other words, someone's claim. They check whether it is true and to what extent it is true. (JOU-FI)

The Swedish journalist union representative define the fact-checkers as journalists:

I have seen them as journalists, it's just that they might work in a different way. Källkritikbyrån wrote a debate article a week ago about this: why don't we have fact-checking in Sweden, or that there is a lack of it. It [has] sort of, died in Sweden after Faktiskt.se. (JOU-SE)

Faktiskt.se was a Swedish fact-checker coalition of seven separate newsrooms that worked together to monitor the Swedish elections in 2016. Why it became inoperative was unclear for the Swedish journalist union respondent, but it may have been an issue related to their collaboration affecting media pluralism:

I also think that it may have been that they were afraid it would be perceived, that when all the mainstream media comes together in a super editorial office where they decide what is true and what is not, instead of it being a diversity of voices [...] that the collaboration itself could be perceived as problematic. (JOU-SE)

With more pressure from budget cuts and layoffs, there is less time for fact-checking in the traditional news media. Traditionally, journalists were double-checking their stories, but the newsroom working principles have since changed:

A journalist's task is to check the facts. In the good old days there were always two steps – two people checked the facts. Today, because of lack of resources, fact-checking is weakened. (JOU-FI)

“I think there is a huge need for fact-checkers. The media houses cannot monitor the social media platforms – there are absolutely no resources for it”, said the freelance journalist (FJ-FI). Therefore, the largest newspapers in Europe have specialised fact-checking divisions on staff:

I think fact-checking is the basic starting point for all reliable media. The big media companies have their own fact-checkers. I've heard that Der Spiegel has many fact-checking departments. (MIL-FI)

The technical challenges for fact-checkers are now becoming challenges also for the newsrooms. Hence, the traditional two-sides-to-every-story approach is not always valid:

I think more competence is needed. You need to be on your toes all the time [...] and have working knowledge about how to present issues and news about conspiracies, so you don't end up like there are always two sides to a story, you always need to hear all sides. But no. There is only one side which is true, the other one is false. (JOU-SE)

Trust in media and society, effects of propaganda

The Swedish journalist union thinks they may have to update the journalists' guidelines to better meet the requirements from an increase in external influencing attempts:

I think that more newsrooms need to have more expertise in these matters than previously. Journalists must constantly ask themselves: Why am I getting this information? (JOU-SE)

The increase in disinformation and propaganda changes the newsroom dynamics, and so sophisticated infiltration attempts have happened since:

There are much more refined ways, and I don't think we are prepared for that. We had an example at Sveriges Radio, where an individual reporter was unprotected – someone wanted to get into the reporter's private life – and how [to prepare for how] this could possibly affect [the reporter]. Or if someone could infiltrate the editorial office. (JOU-SE)

In Finland, there has been similar discussions, the threat of an undercover journalist seeking refuge is taken seriously:

What happens if we receive people in need of help, like journalists from Russia? We will not be able to identify who are genuine journalists. [...] It sounds awful, but spies can use the journalist profession as a cover story. (JOU-FI)

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine taking place during the time of the interviews, the force of Russian propaganda was discussed in several interviews:

I think that this Russian propaganda has now done the Finns a favour. [...] People (and journalists) have woken up: It is really possible that you can brainwash entire nations like this. (JOU-FI)

Consequently, the free media is seen as a “security of supply” factor in Finland (National Emergency Supply Agency, 2023):

Security of supply means, for example, that we have enough grain or water. And security of service is also the fact that we have enough information available, so that if we don't have it, we can end up with a media like that in Russia. (JOU-FI)

According to the leading Swedish strategic communication expert who has been following the Nordic media for a long time, contrary to previous belief, being prone to misinformation is not always political in nature:

Earlier, we thought that there was a right and left focus here – that it had to do with politics. Vulnerable groups today are groups that lack trust in the state and society, be it because of environmental issues, animal rights issues, or similar things. (POL-SE)

The influx of propaganda then lends itself easily to self-produced and reproduced disinformation that spreads horizontally by and among the citizens:

The propagandists don't have to produce [propaganda] themselves anymore. You can no longer say it's right-wing or left-wing extremism, but rather, they are the ones who have low confidence in the functioning society, and they are everywhere. You won't find a single coherent group anymore. (POL-SE)

This is where the foreign information influence is used. Influencing and empowering politicians is done by first targeting their constituents:

So, to be able to do this, nowadays you must attack both the decision-makers and the population at the same time, because otherwise, the decision-makers won't be able to push their decisions. (POL-SE)

Due to a lack of trust, shifting media logic, and occasional budgetary constraints that compromise media integrity, disinformation is propagated unintentionally by the citizen-consumers, thereby weakening the national resilience and trust in journalism:

Their agenda is to show that Swedish society doesn't work, and they want to create a distance between the population, the leaders, and journalism, and say that [you can't] trust our journalists, you can't trust our leaders. (POL-SE)

The Stratcom expert emphasised the need for fact-checkers in this situation, since they add another line of defence against propaganda:

I think fact-checkers are very important, and I wish that we could find a way to help finance them without government influence; they fulfil a very important function. But that function only works if it is self-financed, if there are other actors behind it who can finance the service. And we at our department, we have no direct [...] cooperation with any fact-checker. I judge that they don't want it. They want to be independent. (POL-SE)

Consequently, the funding of the fact-checkers becomes an important topic, that is, ensuring they are self-funded independent organisations.

Economic reflections – funding the fact-checkers

The main concerns for the fact-checking interviewees regarded the funding of their work. In Norway, Faktisk.no has managed to find a working solution with their owners, the largest public service media, and commercial media in Norway (Falch-Nilsen, 2017):

The NRK and TV2 are owners and members of the board; we have our own journalists. No conflict there. They can publish all our content for free. That generates traffic and readership. Some of our material is used for seminars, workshops, and other educational stuff, and used as a resource in the newsrooms. Finally, funding a fact-checking organisation gives a PR benefit for the owners. The relationship is the same with all owners. (FC-NO)

There have been efforts made in Denmark and Finland to create similar collaborations, but without success, as explained by a fact-checker for TjekDet:

Yeah, well, the media industry here has for many years been in one big war. They don't collaborate. Our chance of being financed the way that is done in Norway equals 0 per cent. [...] Back in 2016, we asked the old, established media houses whether they want to participate in a model totally like Faktisk.

The old media houses rejected the invitation, saying “we don’t want you to fact-check us and own you at the same time”. We tried it twice. (FC-DK)

In the follow-up interview, it was confirmed that from January 2023, the state will also finance TjekDet, effectively specifying their work as a public service.

The Norwegian solution was regarded as the optimum economic model at Faktabaari in Finland, but it has not been achievable in practice. Compared with Norway, the number of potential collaborators in Finland is small, and the competitive environment is harsh:

When you realise that Faktisk was set up by six different media houses, we don’t even have that many. (FC-FI)

The origin of the funding is also important for the credibility of the fact-checkers:

The only thing I want from government agencies is that they should facilitate in every possible way that the media can flourish, that more media can appear. And that includes money, but [our] money can’t come from anywhere either, because it also affects credibility. (FC-SE)

In Sweden, Källkritikbyrån is making a living by combining several different income sources, and the interviewee was content with their financial model:

You can build collaborations and lectures and so, to get money to do what we really want: to sit and fact-check things. Our money stems from many places. (FC-SE)

In Norway, the intricate relationship with the owners of Fatkisk.no has been successful in achieving synergy, even though some serious doubts about integrity have been raised concerning media pluralism because of the close working relationship with their owners:

Our owners exercise very little control of our editorial profile, and we have, according to our statutes, full independence from the owners. But there is the overarching issue with media pluralism in Norway, that has more to do with the way the big corporations are buying all the local independent papers. I guess in one way, you could say that the fact that we’re owned by so many other corporations, we also contribute to this sort of more general streamlining. But because we have a different visual profile, a different journalistic profile, I don’t think that that kind of argument holds. (FC-NO)

Additionally, the partnership with Facebook has sparked debate and criticism in the traditional media.

Facebook-funded fact-checking and journalistic independence

Meta’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program provides money for some. The critique of collaboration with Facebook, however, relates more to issues of the fact-checkers helping Facebook, which has been seen as contested service:

The question of receiving funding has not been something we've been criticised much for. It has more to do with the fact that everyone knows that we are using a system with an algorithm. One of the critics from a national paper said: now they are using private big tech company tools that can control our public democratic debate [...] with an algorithm. That has mostly been the problem, not the money. (FC2-DK)

Similarly, with Faktisk.no, there have been some concerns about conflicts due to the third-party fact-checker relationship with Facebook. Again, issues are not so much about money as about possible censorship:

In the beginning, there was quite a bit of criticism also from established media institutions. The main criticisms were that labelling Facebook posts was akin to censorship. The criticism really took off when a couple of pieces from one of the tabloid newspapers were labelled as part of the fact-checking programme, and that this was considered censorious. There was also a bit of criticism about getting money from Facebook, but that was usually more fringe, I would say, and it's also a criticism that has subsided over time. (FC2-NO)

Meanwhile, the feed of claims served via the proprietary Facebook third-party fact-checker software contains a lot of redundant data:

90 per cent of the content has no relevance for us. I think the problem is that it takes time for the algorithm to learn what we want. Now it must learn Danish, Norwegian, Swedish. (FC2-DK)

It gets you an automated content feed of things that might be fact-checked by us, but it's completely worthless. We have not seen anything with value there for years. (FC2-NO)

At the outbreak of Covid-19, there was a lot of disinformation, providing the fact-checkers with work and substantial income. Since the money is paid per article, the Facebook partnership is no longer considered substantial, either by Faktisk.no or TjekDet.

Views from the MIL expert interviewees

There were several issues raised by the MIL and policymaker respondents; however, these will be discussed in a follow-up study. The national MIL institutions work closely hand in hand with both the fact-checker organisations and with the national public service broadcasters. In general, they clearly recognise the need for fact-checking journalism. One key point made in terms of MIL by the Finnish interviewee was that MIL is too often considered a quick fix and an easy solution – a silver bullet. A lack of long-term commitment to the funding for MIL projects increases the importance of the work done by the fact-checkers (MIL-FI; MIL-SE).

Discussion

This study shows that there are both differences and similarities between the Nordic countries in terms of the factors promoting resilience to disinformation. In reviewing the findings of how the Nordic fact-checkers and related stakeholder organisations discuss their roles and contributions in countering disinformation, we use three dimensions as defined by Humprecht and colleagues (2020) in their framework: the media environment, the political environment, and the economic environment.

The media environment

The general need for fact-checkers is recognised by both legacy news media and policymakers. Also, the journalist organisations have adapted to coexisting with the fact-checkers and have been compelled by an increase in propaganda to deal with similar challenges and hybrid influences as the fact-checkers do. There is an understanding among the interviewees that Nordic fact-checkers are important and that they should be funded in a way that allows them to stay as independent as possible.

The political environment

However, based on the interviews, it seems that facts and fact-checked information are often ignored, whereas emotionally engaging disinformation seems to be easily assimilated. The influx of propaganda via social media lends itself to self-produced and reproduced disinformation that spreads horizontally (see Ellul, 1973), bad news travelling faster than the good worsens the situation (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, the traditional news media is struggling with meeting economic demands, competing with the platforms for visibility and having difficulties reaching out to those who would need reliable news the most. As a result, a divide is created between the informed and the misinformed groups of people, where the latter is more easily affected by disinformation and political manipulation attempts on social media. Furthermore, with increasing disinformation, there no longer necessarily exists two sides to every story. Consequently, there is an growing demand for fact-checking skills and security solutions in the newsrooms. Moreover, there is a need to harmonise funding policies for the traditional news media in order to maintain quality in a decreasing market. Likewise, the external funding of independent fact-checkers is important.

The economic environment

The fact-checking and MIL work is essentially and conceptually similar across the four organisations; the differences lie mainly in how the actors are funded and how the legacy media view them. The smaller actors in Finland and Sweden have found a functioning niche and produce a lot of important educational material as part of their MIL activities (see Kivinen et al., 2022). Their much

larger colleagues in Denmark and Norway are expanding, with an increasing demand for their work.

Faktisk.no is collaborating with its closest partners and has benefited from the synergy with its owners. TjekDet has, due to national circumstances, developed in the opposite direction, cultivating its independence. Consequently, TjekDet is now considered a public service organisation and is state funded from 2023.

Conclusions

To conclude, I agree with Humprecht and colleagues (2020, 2021), that policy solutions to tackle the resilience problem must be tailored to the particular social environments, also in the Nordics. However, there is no quick and easy policy solution to tackle these problems. Therefore, I argue that there is a need to revitalise the Nordic media welfare state overall; harmonise the media support policies to ensure a healthy media landscape and public service media where the journalistic ethos can prevail; regulate the social media platform recommendation algorithms; and recognise the importance of the work of independent fact-checkers and the EFCN and IFCN. Finally, long-term support for critical MIL education is vital, to help citizens form factual considered opinions.

According to the findings, all respondents consider fact-checking journalism an important counterpart to the traditional news media. With the rapid advancement of generative AI, discerning artificially generated text, images, voice, and video from factual content is becoming increasingly challenging. Hence, the specialised forensic skills and services provided by the fact-checkers are essential in debunking disinformation and defusing propaganda in all democracies, not just the Nordic ones.

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