

Rescuing the Truth: Exploring Sweden's 2018 General Election

Fabian Sivnert looks at the misuse of the term 'fake news' and how to reclaim it

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When President Donald Trump disagrees with any news or commentary about himself, he uses the term 'fake news' to attack and discredit the source. The phrase has now become the scapegoat for modern politicians, but what does it really mean? In a modern democracy, many voters get their news from social media rather than television, radio or newspapers. Given this shift in news consumption among voters, new battlegrounds are being explored by political parties, businesses, lobbyists and other countries to reach them via social media.

Twitter is one of the most popular platforms for sharing news during elections. If one can control or influence the news articles and opinions shared over social media, whether through trending hashtags, likes, or retweets, public opinion can be nudged in particular directions. For example

in Britain, a radical right party like the UK Independence Party (UKIP) would clearly benefit from trending topics highlighting the negative effects of immigration, whereas the Green Party would gain traction from trending topics addressing global warming.

‘Junk news is defined as information that is deliberately misleading and contains subject matter that is deceptive or incorrect’

There is a problem however. How can one evaluate the influence of fake news when the term is constantly misused by Trump to discredit trustworthy news sources? The answer is simple: we need to re-invent and reclaim the term. As it stands, fake news is used as a shield to deflect and discredit criticism, irrespective of its validity. Trump’s attack on journalists for their ‘false claims’ regarding the size of the inaugural crowd is an excellent example. The term fake news, in other words, has become toxic and can no longer be used in a constructive way. It is time to

leave this term behind and create a more precise name for what fake news really is: deliberate, misleading information. In the light of this, the Oxford Internet Institute has coined the term ‘junk news’.

Junk news is defined by the institute as a source of information that is deliberately misleading and contains subject matter that is either deceptive or incorrect, purporting to be real news concerning politics, economics or culture. In contrast to fake news, the term junk news is not tied to a controversial political figure but rather denotes a methodological typology consisting of five categories which the institute defines as follows:

Professionalism: These news outlets do not employ the standards and best practices of professional journalism. They refrain from providing clear information about real authors, editors, publishers and owners. They lack transparency and accountability, and do not publish corrections.

Style: Content uses emotionally driven language with misleading

headlines, excessive capitalization, unsafe generalizations and logical fallacies.

Credibility: There is a reliance on false information and conspiracy theories. There is no consultation with sources and no fact checking

Bias: Reporting is ideologically skewed or hyper-partisan, and news reporting often includes opinionated commentary.

Counterfeit: These sources mimic established news reporting. They use counterfeit fonts, branding and style. Commentary and junk content are disguised as news, with references to news agencies and credible sources, and headlines written in a news style with date, time and location stamps.

For a news source to qualify as junk news it must meet at least three out of these five criteria.

Using the term junk news has clear advantages over its imprecise alternative when discussing misleading and deceptive information. It is a quantifiable and falsifiable term

that can be used by politicians, policymakers, and academics without the danger of them being associated with Trump.

To provide tangible evidence for the applicability of the junk news definition we can look at research by the Oxford Internet Institute into the 2018 Swedish general election. Its study explored the impact of junk news on social media and looked at the type of content Swedish voters shared over Twitter during the campaign.

By using the junk news definition, the institute was able to find the following:

- Nearly 25 per cent of the shared URLs, or web addresses, could be classed as junk news.
- Compared with other European countries the Swedish election campaign was characterised by a high proportion of junk news: one in two shared news sources were identified as junk, compared with one in four in the UK, France and Germany.
- Eight out of the top ten junk news sources were domestic.
- The top three junk news sources were domestic and

attempted to mimic the look and feel of established news sites.

- All of the junk news sites were exclusively clustered in support of the extreme right.
- Russian sources made up less than 1 per cent of all shared sources.

In light of these findings, the impact of junk news during the Swedish election may have been far more wide-ranging than for any other democratic country to date.

In contrast to the 2016 US election, where allegations of Russian interference through social media are still being investigated, the Swedish election highlights how junk news may be both a domestic and a foreign phenomenon. This finding should cause politicians and policymakers to reframe their approach to junk news and implement policies that increase domestic journalistic integrity and the public's immunity to fake information. Secondly, identifying junk news sources is becoming increasingly hard as they try to emulate the look and feel of established news sources. The

average reader may be unaware that the source of the information they are receiving is not legitimate.

Finally, the shared content labelled as junk news (nearly 25 per cent) during the Swedish election forces us to ask a fundamental question about modern democracies: if enough voters are influenced by but also are unaware of their junk news consumption, can a country still claim to have a legitimate democratic election?

In a world in which political strategies of misinformation can overwhelm the truth, there is only one way forward: governments, academics, journalists, and policymakers must address the worrying amount of junk news sources as a matter of urgency. If not, we must accept that we are entering into a new era where elections are no longer democratic but are up for sale to the highest bidder.

About the author(s)

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