

Report

Investigation into foreign informational influence

An analysis of the Norwegian municipal administration and county authority elections in 2019

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Investigation into foreign informational influence

An analysis of the Norwegian municipal administration and county authority elections in 2019

SUMMARY

The report describes a systematic investigation into possible targeted attempts at informational influence by foreign actors on various digital platforms in connection with the Norwegian municipal administration and county authority elections held on 9 September 2019. The study builds on quantitative and qualitative analysis of data collected from a selection of public Facebook pages, Twitter, mainstream media and alternative media. No clear signs of foreign influence have been found, despite the fact that in many ways the debate climate is ideal for actors with these kinds of intentions. However, it has been proven that actors who in our data material appear to be Norwegian users also participate in more covert, extremist online forums, and that some of them are involved in networks that systematically transfer content from extremist websites. These actors deliberately moderate their language when posting on media that reach a broader audience and make efforts to camouflage this type of activity. This illustrates that it can be extremely difficult to distinguish between foreign influence and other suspicious activities online. Although no influence has been demonstrated in the limited material we have studied, more research-based knowledge is needed in this important area. A methodological basis has been developed that ought to be further developed for future elections and processing of larger volumes of data.

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1 Introduction

Informational influence poses a major and growing challenge for confidence in democratic processes and institutions. Informational influence includes the spread of fake news and disinformation, often with the intention of causing confusion and doubt about facts. Interference in democratic elections by, for example, spreading fake news, by both state and non-state actors, has received considerable international attention in the wake of the 2016 elections in the USA.

This report describes the results of a systematic charting of and investigation into possible targeted attempts at informational influence by foreign actors, state and non-state, on various digital platforms in connection with the Norwegian municipal administration and county authority elections held on 9 September 2019.

In this project, we have not observed any unequivocal indications of foreign informational influence in connection with the election. These findings are consistent with observations conducted by the fact-checking service Faktisk.no and Facebook, which, when contacted by us, informed us that they have not identified any suspicious activity during the time period of our investigation.

However, we did find indications of seemingly Norwegian users who also participate in covertly and openly extremist forums on other websites in the material we collected. Some of these are involved in networks that systematically transfer content from these kinds of extremist websites. These actors deliberately moderate their language when posting on media that reach a broader audience, including on what are often referred to as alternative websites, and make efforts to camouflage this type of activity. However, it cannot be proven that they have a foreign background or connection.

Mandate

The project has been carried out on commission from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. In June 2019, the Government launched a plan of action to strengthen resilience to influence and hybrid threats in the conduct of the municipal administration and county authority elections held in the autumn. The plan of action was prepared by a broad interdisciplinary working group with representatives from relevant ministries and actors, led by the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. The current project is part of this plan of action.

The Ministry's description of the assignment points out that "a number of attempts have been discovered in recent years to spread disinformation on the internet for the purpose of influencing opinion and hence election results, by state as well as non-state actors". This is information based on threat assessments carried out by the Norwegian Intelligence Service and the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST). These threat assessments highlight in particular Russian attempts at influence as a threat through attempts to undermine political processes and increase polarisation in Europe. In addition, foreign intelligence is involved in spreading disinformation, rumours, half-truths, and smear campaigns through social media in Western countries. In order to be able to prevent and understand the extent of informational influence by foreign actors in an election year, the client has requested an external mapping and analysis of targeted attempts at informational influence by international actors in the run-up to and during the Norwegian elections in 2019. The objective is to help to increase insight into and understanding of the role of foreign actors and the need for response countermeasures that target these actors.

The project was carried out within a short period of time (August to November 2019) and with a relatively limited budget. The time and cost constraints, combined with restrictions ensuing from data protection regulations, further limited the scope of data that we were able to analyse. Despite the fact that the data material was fairly limited, we believe it can provide a good indication of whether informational influence campaigns took place during the Norwegian elections.

Definitions

In the report, we use the following definitions: *Informational influence* means activities carried out by foreign powers or non-state actors with the intention of influencing target groups' perceptions, behaviour and decisions in a way that benefits the foreign actor.¹ *Influence campaigns* are coordinated campaigns by a foreign power or non-state actor consisting of a variety of activities, the purpose of which is to influence decision-makers or public opinion within a country, or decision-makers or public opinion abroad who are of significance to the country concerned.² *Disinformation* is false or manipulated information that is spread deliberately to mislead the target audience, and is regarded as one of several techniques for informational influence.³ *Fake news* is fabricated or unverified content that is deliberately presented as verified news with the aim of deceiving readers, usually with an ideological, political or financial motive.⁴

The structure of the report

The report consists of five chapters.

- Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the background and context for the project.
- Chapter 3 describes the analytical framework for the project, including methods, the project team's expertise, and delimitations and ethical assessments.
- Chapter 4 presents the analyses that were performed and the findings.
- Chapter 5 contains a review of the existing guidance and recommendations to counteract unwanted informational influence, focusing on those that are relevant in a Norwegian context and for the Norwegian authorities and population.
- Chapter 6 provides a summary and discussion of the significance of the findings and the need for further work.

2 Background

Informational influence in a digital society is complex and difficult to pin down. Actors who spread disinformation and fake news naturally tend to conceal their tracks. It has also been pointed out that so-called malicious actors have changed their tactics over the years, preferring now to focus on small, local operations that are harder to detect and identify.⁵ As a starting point, it has therefore been important to look at studies conducted in other countries, also in view of the fact that this is the first such study in a Norwegian context.

2.1 The general election in Sweden in 2018

No attempts at foreign influence were found in connection with the 2018 parliamentary elections in Sweden. The Swedish authorities conducted several investigations: The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) sought to identify foreign influence on the parliamentary election via the internet. They investigated whether Russian state-sponsored media and automated accounts had spread disinformation in support of the Sweden Democrats

¹ Pamment J, Nothhaft H, Agardh-Twetman H & Fjallhed A (2018). *Countering Information Influence Activities – The State of the Art*. Lund University: Lund, p. 14.

² Pamment et.al. (2018), p. 14.

³ The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency – MSB (2019). *Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicators*. MSB: Karlstad, p. 19.

⁴ Brandtzaeg, P. B., Følstad, A. & Chaparro Domínguez, M.Á. (2018). [How Journalists and Social Media Users Perceive Online Fact-Checking and Verification Services](#). *Journalism Practice*, 12(9), p. 1109–1129.

⁵ See https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_report_on_disinformation.pdf

(SD) or Alternative for Sweden (Afs).⁶ They also analysed campaigns from right-wing, non-state actors, and whether Russian actors were involved in international online campaigns to smear Sweden.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found the following:

- The actors they studied are involved in smearing Sweden’s reputation, but the focus was on influencing international audiences, and not the election in Sweden.
- No use of bots (automatic robots online) or reinforcement of other people’s messages by Russian actors was registered.
- The most extensive activity they found was linked to undermining confidence in the election through allegations of electoral fraud.
- They also registered that the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir was trying to influence election turnout among the Muslim community in Sweden.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) conducted an analysis⁷ of the use of bots on Twitter in connection with the election, and an analysis⁸ of digital discussions in connection with the election. Neither study found evidence that could indicate foreign influence.

2.2 International main actors

In 2017, Oxford Internet Institute mapped what they call “computational propaganda” using algorithms, automation and real online profiles in Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Poland, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine and the USA.⁹ In their 2019 report, they documented manipulation of social media in 70 countries and identified seven countries that engaged in manipulation of social media abroad, namely: India, Iran, China, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela.¹⁰ A threat assessment by US intelligence agencies highlighted Russia, China and Iran as actors in connection with election influence.¹¹ In respect of election influence by foreign state actors, Western security services have identified Russia as the most active actor in political influence in general.¹² China is also engaged in significant political influence, as are a number of other, smaller actors, with Iran highlighted as the most important. In terms of influence on democratic elections via the internet and through social media in particular, Russia is the most active by a clear margin. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that no influence was documented in Sweden in 2018 or in Germany in 2017. Despite widespread influence and hacking by Russia in advance, the German security services found no influence on the actual general

⁶ Colliver C, Pomerantsev P, Applebaum A and Birdwell J (2018). Smearing Sweden – International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election. ISD: London.

⁷ Fernquist J, Kaati L, Akrami N, Cohen K and Schroeder R (2018). Automatiserade konton – En studie av botar på Twitter i samband med det svenska riksdagsvalet 2018 [Automated accounts – A study of bots on Twitter in conjunction with the 2018 Swedish General Election]. MSB: Karlstad.

⁸ Fernquist J, Kaati L, Akrami N, Pelzer B and Cohen K (2018). Digitala diskussioner om genomförandet av riksdagsvalet 2018 [Digital discussions on the conduct of 2018 general election]. MSB: Karlstad.

⁹ Woolley SC and Howard PN (2017). Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary. Working paper no. 2017.11. Computational Propaganda Research Project – University of Oxford: Oxford.

¹⁰ Bradshaw S and Howard P N (2019). The global disinformation order – 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation. Oxford Internet Institute: Oxford.

¹¹ Director National Intelligence (2019). Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community. Statement for the Record to the Senate Select Committee in Intelligence. DNI: Washington.

¹² Karlsen GH (2019). Divide and Rule – Ten Lessons about Russian political influence activities in Europe. Palgrave Communications: London.

election in 2017.¹³ They attribute this to comprehensive preventive measures and warnings against interference.

Few or no attempts to exert an influence via the internet have been registered from other state actors in Europe. The Norwegian Intelligence Service and the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) have demonstrated that Russia is the main actor behind attempts to influence Norwegian politics.¹⁴

2.3 How is digital informational influence of elections carried out?

The project built on knowledge about how digital informational influence of elections has been carried out previously. Information about covert influence activities is difficult to document. We therefore based our analyses on what was available from credible sources. These point out that Russia is the most likely state actor. This will be reflected in the subsequent description. In addition, we will also take into account other state actors, non-state groups, activists and individuals. The focus on Russia does not exclude other actors, but the following description of their activities has been used to focus our data collection and analysis.

Russian informational influence on the US presidential elections in 2016 has been well documented in the so-called Mueller Report,¹⁵ two detailed reports to Congress based on extensive data material from major computer companies,¹⁶ and a series of charges against Russian actors.¹⁷ The Senate recently published a report on Russian interventions against electoral infrastructure¹⁸ and another on the use of social media in connection with the 2016 elections.¹⁹ It is pointed out that the influence activity is still ongoing, with a continuation and development of existing techniques in the run-up to the next election in 2020.²⁰

The main actor on the Russian side is the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which is described as an online troll factory based in Saint Petersburg. It is characterised as a sophisticated marketing company that uses advanced digital influence techniques. The IRA's main activity is using social media to influence opinions and to a lesser extent digital advertising.

In addition, in a number of instances, political commemorations and actions were carried out, organised by recruited American citizens. On social media, they appear to be American, using either fake profiles or stolen identities. The operators were instructed to create conflict and support dissatisfied and radical groups. According to the indictments, the US authorities believe that the strategic goal was, and still is, to sow discord

¹³ Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution – BfV) (2018) Verfassungsschutzbericht 2017 [Report on Protection of the Constitution]. BfV: Cologne, p. 270–271, 276.

¹⁴ Karlsen GH (2019).

¹⁵ Mueller R S (2019) Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election. U.S. Department of Justice: Washington D.C.

¹⁶ See DiRiеста R, Shaffer K, Ruppel B, Sullivan D, Matney R, Fox R & Albright J, Johnson B (2018) The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency. New Knowledge: Austin; Howard PN, Ganesh B, Liotsiou D, Kelly J, Francois C (2018). The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018. Computational Propaganda Research Project. Oxford: University of Oxford.

¹⁷ See U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (2018). Case 1:18-CR-32-DLF, Indictment, document 1, filed 16 Feb 2018; U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia (2018). Case 1:18-MJ-464, Criminal Complaint, filed 28 Sep 2018; U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (2018). Case 1:18-CR-215-ABJ, Indictment, filed 13 July 2018; and U.S. District Court for Western District of Pennsylvania (2018) Case 2:18-CR-263-MRH, Indictment, filed 3 Oct 2018.

¹⁸ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019). Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure. U.S. Senate: Washington D.C.

¹⁹ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019). Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media. U.S. Senate: Washington D.C.

²⁰ Francois C, Nimmo B and Shawn E (2019). The IRACopyPasta Campaign. Graphika: New York.

and discontent in the political system, create social and political polarisation, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and influence US elections.²¹

In addition to the IRA's informational influence, two other parallel activities took place that were intended to influence the election:

- A comprehensive mapping and attempted intrusion into the digital election infrastructure and voter databases to undermine confidence in the electoral process. According to the investigation, however, this was unsuccessful.²²
- The most serious was hacking and leaking of compromising e-mails and documents. Clinton's electoral campaign organisation and the Democratic Party's systems were attacked, and material was leaked via fake profiles such as DCLeaks and Glucifer 2.0. The material was then distributed via other profiles, mobilisation of actions and voter groups, and dissemination to the media. This spreading of compromising material was linked to the IRA's activities, and they reinforced each other.²³ Based on the documentation above, we have a detailed understanding of how the informational influence was performed. The IRA's campaign was targeted to influence dissatisfied and radical groups, and therefore made use of topics that were already controversial and polarising, such as gun laws, issues related to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, immigration, use of the Confederate flag and minorities. Using this strategy, the IRA succeeded in escalating the existing polarisation. The IRA also exploited situations that arose during the election campaign, such as allegations of police violence or violent demonstrations. These polarised topics were exploited to demonise opponents and to create and reinforce solidarity within three specific groups: blacks, the political left, and the political right. In view of this, this project's analyses have therefore been focused on polarised topics in the social debate in Norway.

The IRA's informational influence took place on a large number of social media platforms. Before 2016, Russian informational influence was mainly associated with Twitter, whereas during the US elections they made use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Vine, Grab, Meetup, VKontakte, LiveJournal, games like Pokemon Go, and music apps.

It is estimated that the IRA reached 126 million users on Facebook, 20 million users on Instagram, 1.4 million users on Twitter, and that they uploaded 1,100 videos to YouTube. Furthermore, it is estimated that fake IRA profiles on Instagram generated a massive 187 million engagements, compared with 77 million engagements on Facebook. The calculation of social media engagements (likes and comments) for Instagram may be somewhat inflated through the use of "click farms" (fake, paid-for likes). Some of the fake IRA profiles on Facebook and Instagram had over 100,000 followers. The most followed profiles were controlled by active individuals who participated in discussions, engaged the target audiences, and responded to influencers and the media. Bots were mainly used on Twitter. Bots automatically tweet headlines and retweet from other Twitter accounts.

The extensive use of Instagram and YouTube during the US presidential election campaign meant that we considered including Instagram and YouTube in this project, but analysing graphics and images is significantly more resource-intensive than analysing text. The time and resource limits of this relatively small project precluded such a comprehensive study. We have therefore focused on Facebook and Twitter when it comes to social media.

The investigation of the US elections identified extensive collaboration, coordination and sharing of material across the various social media platforms. In addition to social media, the Russian influence campaigns were

²¹ U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia (2018). Case 1:18-MJ-464, Criminal Complaint, filed 28 Sep 2018, p. 6.

²² U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) (2018) Russian Targeting of Election Infrastructure During the 2016 Election: Summary of Initial Findings and Recommendations.

²³ U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia (2018) Case 1:18-CR-215-ABJ, Indictment, filed 13 July 2018.

operated via blogs, websites and think-tanks that produced more nuanced, academic articles and content. In addition, they bought advertisements on social media and websites, albeit to a relatively small extent. No direct attempts to gain coverage in established media were identified, and the analyses that have been done to date have not included these media channels. Nevertheless, we must be aware of the fact that established media can pick up stories, disinformation or attempts at informational influence from social media or websites and pass them on to their readers. The influence campaign had a dedicated analysis department that studied the social debate in the USA and American users' activity on social media. They also sent an analysis team to the USA to collect information at the beginning of the election campaign. Through this kind of analysis work, the IRA has probably built up in-depth understanding of the media landscape, the actors and the political debate. Based on this knowledge, they were able to give their influence operators on the various media channels detailed instructions on how best to influence different target groups in the American population. In this project, we must therefore assume that both state and non-state actors that want to exert an influence will probably have good knowledge about topics of conflict, channels and target groups, should they want to influence the election in Norway.

Based on relevant research²⁴, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), which corresponds to the Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) in Norway, has developed a manual²⁵ on how to counteract unwanted informational influence. They have described six different strategies that are most commonly used in influence campaigns:

- Social and cognitive hacking, which exploit social relationships and thought processes
- Fake identities, which hide the real source of information
- Technical exploitation, use of bots, deepfakes,²⁶ artificial intelligence, etc.
- Disinformation, use of false or manipulated information
- Malicious rhetoric, to mislead, deceive or deter others from participating in the debate through intimidation
- Symbolic actions, such as leaks, hacking or demonstrations to reinforce a message

In this project, we based our analysis of informational influence on the background described above.

2.4 Elections, political communication and the role of social media

Social media constitute a growing arena for political communication where in theory anyone can post content, including people that spread propaganda, disinformation and fake news, not least in connection with elections. Although the mainstream media are still important, both as sources of political information²⁷ and as campaign instruments, social media²⁸ offer new opportunities to spread campaigns. Social media have become important sources of political news and information, especially for young voters who spend a lot of time on these platforms.²⁹

²⁴ Pamment J, Nothafth H, Agardh-Twetman H & Fjallhed A (2018). *Countering Information Influence Activities – The State of the Art*. Lund University: Lund.

²⁵ The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency – MSB (2019). *Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicators*. MSB: Karlstad.

²⁶ See for example. <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/snart-er-det-umulig-a-vite-om-det-man-ser-er-ekte/71138188>

²⁷ Moe H & Sariakassen H (2019). Norway. In: Newman N, Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A & Nielsen RK (Eds.). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*, p. 65–66.

²⁸ Lilleker, DG, Tenscher J & Štětka V (2015). Towards hypermedia campaigning? Perceptions of new media's importance for campaigning by party strategists in comparative perspective. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(7), p. 747–765.

²⁹ Newman, N, Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A & Nielsen RK (Eds.) (2019). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

On social media, election campaigns have the potential to be much more targeted, right down to the group and even the individual level, compared with the mainstream media and traditional election campaigns,³⁰ affording both opportunities and challenges. There has long been growing use of micro-targeting in election campaigns, and the successful campaigns run by Barack Obama and Donald Trump have further increased the focus on micro-targeting.³¹ During the Dutch election campaign in 2017, before the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook offered political parties advice on how best to use Facebook for micro-targeting. Facebook possesses detailed data on a large number of people and voters around the world, and thus has the ability to tailor and target messages down to very small groups. They also have the infrastructure and expertise to use the data. Expertise, infrastructure or sufficient data are required to work out who to target and with what kind of message. In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, a critical spotlight has been turned on micro-targeting and, among other things, the EU has proposed both more transparency and greater restrictions on the use of micro-targeting in connection with elections.³²

Populist and far-right parties and their politicians often have the most followers on social media.³³ Social media make it easier for these political actors to meet like-minded people, thanks to both the algorithms and the network structures in social media. In addition, these groups can steer clear of the mainstream media that often give them unfavourable press coverage. A survey conducted by the Norwegian Media Authority in 2019 shows that eight out of ten Norwegians trust Norwegian media,³⁴ while the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019 found that 46 per cent of Norwegians trust news in general and 61 per cent trust the news media they use. Reuters also emphasises that groups and voters with political opinions linked to the far right of the political spectrum and those who have strong opinions on immigration tend to have the greatest distrust of news.³⁵

The new opportunities social media afford may therefore explain why actors from the extreme right and the extreme left are more active on social media than more moderate actors.³⁶ Social media provides them with an arena to spread their message and a place for like-minded people to gather. Due to the high level of activity on social media profiles on the far right and the far left, these may also be more susceptible to disinformation and influence from external actors. Experience from the USA suggests that the outer wings there were the primary target for Russian influence.

The business model for social media is to earn money from user engagement, which in turn attracts greater interest from advertisers. This is why social media rely on content that evokes user engagement.³⁷ Social media are therefore highly suitable for spreading disinformation too. Social media content that arouses user engagement and often goes viral is usually “interesting”, i.e. it is surprising, sensational or emotion-driven.

³⁰ Christenson DP, Smidt CD, & Panagopoulos C (2014). Deus ex Machina: Candidate Web Presence and the Presidential Nomination Campaign. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67(1), p. 108–122.

³¹ The Norwegian Data Protection Authority (2019). *På parti med teknologien [Joining forces with technology]*. Retrieved from <https://www.datatilsynet.no/globalassets/global/ompersonvern/rapporter/pa-parti-med-teknologien.pdf>

³² European Commission (2018). Code of practice on disinformation. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-singlemarket/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>

³³ Magin M, Podschuweit N, Haßler J & Rußmann U (2017). Campaigning in the Fourth Age of Political Communication. A MultiMethod Study on the Use of Facebook by German and Austrian Parties in the 2013 National Election Campaigns. *Information, Communication & Society* 29(11), p. 1698–1719.

³⁴ The Norwegian Media Authority (2019). *Åtte av ti har tillit til norske medier [Eight out of ten trust Norwegian media]*. Retrieved from: <https://medietilsynet.no/om/aktuelt/atte-av-ti-har-tillit-tilnorske-medier/>

³⁵ Moe H & Sariakassen H (2019). Norway. In: Newman N, Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A & Nielsen RK (Eds.). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, p. 65–66. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

³⁶ Engesser S, Ernst N, Esser F & Büchel F (2016). Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(8), p. 1009–1026.

³⁷ Stark B, Magin M & Jürgens P (2017). *Ganz meine Meinung? Informationsintermediäre und Meinungsbildung – eine Mehrmethodenstudie am Beispiel von Facebook. [I second that!? Information intermediaries and opinion formation – a mixed-methods study taking the example of Facebook.]* Düsseldorf: LfM.

Producers and distributors of disinformation and fake news cultivate these very elements precisely to increase the spread via social media.³⁸

Another reason why social media are ideal for distributing disinformation is the possibility of hiding the original source of the content through, for example, fake profiles. The way the content is presented in social media newsfeeds makes it difficult to recognise and remember the original sources³⁹, since everything looks the same, regardless of whether it comes from a respected national newspaper or an unknown blog. There is also a psychological element here. People use social media quickly, often on small devices, such as mobile phones, on the go, and thus are more easily “tricked” because they handle the information streams in a superficial way.

Social networks also play a role. Since we often trust our friends on social media, actors can influence us by spreading disinformation within our networks.⁴⁰ Distributors of disinformation often take advantage of these psychological and social effects by using camouflage techniques. They can spread disinformation using social bots that resemble real users, where it is virtually impossible to distinguish a bot from a human being on social media.⁴¹ Another possibility is to fake and/or manipulate the websites of well-known, reliable news websites to deceive the readers.⁴²

2.5 A backdrop of digital psychology, economics and power

Political communication through social media occurs in a context of digital power, where a handful of actors can determine the rules of play (such as user agreements), the underlying algorithms and the technologies, and where users have limited real ability to understand the purpose and consequences for themselves. Artificial intelligence algorithms affect the information we are exposed to, without us as users seeing or being aware of which data are being used to influence us.

In the digital sphere, we are increasingly surrounded by algorithms that both narrow down and expand the sphere of possibilities in the form of options, advice or nudges in different directions. It is difficult to know how well we are able to make independent choices under this kind of algorithmic influence. The major technology companies know a lot about us, whereas we know little about them. Personal information has become a valuable commodity for a wide range of (unknown) users and actors.⁴³ The purpose of this radical new form of “surveillance capitalism” is to predict and influence human behaviour as a means to generate revenue and market control. While the potential for surveillance was previously reserved for a state-run “Big Brother”, private companies now have unprecedented opportunities to gather and analyse information about

³⁸ Marwick A & Lewis R (2017). *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Report*. New York: Data & Society Research Institute.

³⁹ Kalogeropoulos A, Fletcher R & Nielsen RK (2018). News brand attribution in distributed environments: Do people know where they get their news? *New Media & Society*, 21(3), p. 583–601

⁴⁰ Sadeghian A, Zamani M & Shanmugam B (2013). *Security Threats in Online Social Networks*. 2013 International Conference on Informatics and Creative Multimedia; Ireton C & Posetti J (2018). *Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training*. Paris: UNESCO.

⁴¹ Zannettou S, Sirivianos M, Blackburn J & Kourtellis N (2019). *The Web of False Information: Rumors, Fake News, Hoaxes, Clickbait, and Various Other Shenanigans*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/1804.03461>

⁴² Bennett WL & Livingston S (2018). *The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions*. *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2), p. 122–139.

⁴³ Zuboff S (2015). *Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization*. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1), p. 75–89.

users of digital services. This is a kind of “Big Other”, where we are influenced by data and systems that we as users do not have an overview over or knowledge of.⁴⁴

The advance of this new surveillance capitalism is particularly relevant for young people in view of the fact that online algorithms also shape identities, which could represent a major challenge in the future when assessing the risk of illegitimate influence on tomorrow’s voters.⁴⁵

During the project period, the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) performed an experiment where they influenced young people via social media in order to manipulate the results from the school elections at Lillestrøm Upper Secondary School. In the ensuing debate, it has been claimed that “Norway is powerless against organised electoral interference.”⁴⁶ There is no theoretical or empirical evidence to either substantiate or disprove this dramatic claim. What we do know is that the line between commercial and political interests and influence becomes very unclear on digital platforms. The reason for this is the chaotic mix of commercial, political, interstate and criminal motivations, all of which are vying to catch the users’ attention. Knowledge about digital power exercised through digital psychology and economics is therefore an important backdrop to understand digital informational influence.

3 Analytical framework and methodical approach

Studying informational influence by international actors is very challenging. The ambition for this project has therefore been delimited to identifying possible targeted, coordinated influence activities by foreign actors via a selection of mainstream, alternative and social media. On the internet, these media represent a massive, interactive stream of electronic information where actors aiming to exert an influence will want to avoid being exposed. Thus, even if we limit ourselves to certain media, platforms and modalities (text and not images), the challenge is still akin to looking for a needle in a haystack.

In order to be able to select an appropriate sample of media and information for analysis in this project, we used computer tools. The tools we used helped us collect and structure relevant data from open sources on the internet (for example, Facebook, Twitter). We also used qualitative and quantitative methods to systematically analyse the data, with a view to identifying patterns and any suspicious activity. The time period for the data collection was 5 August to 22 September 2019.

The project participants have combined expertise in methods for mapping social media and digital platforms in general and analysing informational influence in particular. The technical part of the project was carried out by key personnel from SINTEF Digital who have expertise and broad experience in systemisation, advanced data analysis, search technology, machine learning and artificial intelligence. In connection with the qualitative analysis, SINTEF Digital also contributed social scientists with specialist expertise in civil protection and international relations, and experience in and knowledge of qualitative methods, society and politics.

The partners from the University of Oslo, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) and Karlsen Consulting contributed specialist expertise on new and traditional media, the role of social media in

⁴⁴ Zuboff S (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Hachette: New York.

⁴⁵ Brandtzæg, P B (2019). Det algoritmiske selvet: Identitet blant barn og unge på internett – før, nå og i fremtiden. [The algorithmic self: Identity among children and young people on the internet – in the past, now and in the future]. In the newsletters *Voksne for barn [Adults for children]*, p. 76–91. Retrieved from: <https://www.vfb.no/artikler/barn-i-norge-2019/>

⁴⁶ Flydal E F & Lien M S (2019, 17.09). Jusprofessor advarer etter NRK-eksperiment: - Norge er maktesløse mot organisert påvirkning av valg [Law professor issues warning after NRK’s experiment: “Norway is powerless against organised electoral interference”], VG. Retrieved from: https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/70L5a3/jusprofessor-advarer-etter-nrk-eksperiment-norgeer-maktesloese-mot-organisert-paavirkning-av-valg?utm_source=vgfront&utm_content=row-2

political communication, democracy processes, strategic communication, influence operations from international actors, and qualitative research methods.

Our point of departure was an understanding of the threat landscape and the actors involved (as described above), identification of relevant data, expected markers, and empirical patterns that may indicate findings of unwanted interference. At the same time, the approach was data driven because it is the data we collected that will provide indications of possible informational influence in connection with the election.

Based on the mandate for the project, we focused on two overarching research questions:

- (1) **Were there foreign informational influence campaigns in the run-up to and during the Norwegian local elections in 2019, and if so, how did they work?**
- (2) **If there was foreign informational influence, how much disinformation was there in Norwegian media in connection with the election?**

In order to investigate the research questions, the project work has adopted an approach combining closely linked quantitative and qualitative analyses. However, the degree of interaction varied in the different phases. Figure 1 shows the four main activities: topic capture, data capture, quantitative analysis of raw data, and qualitative content analysis.

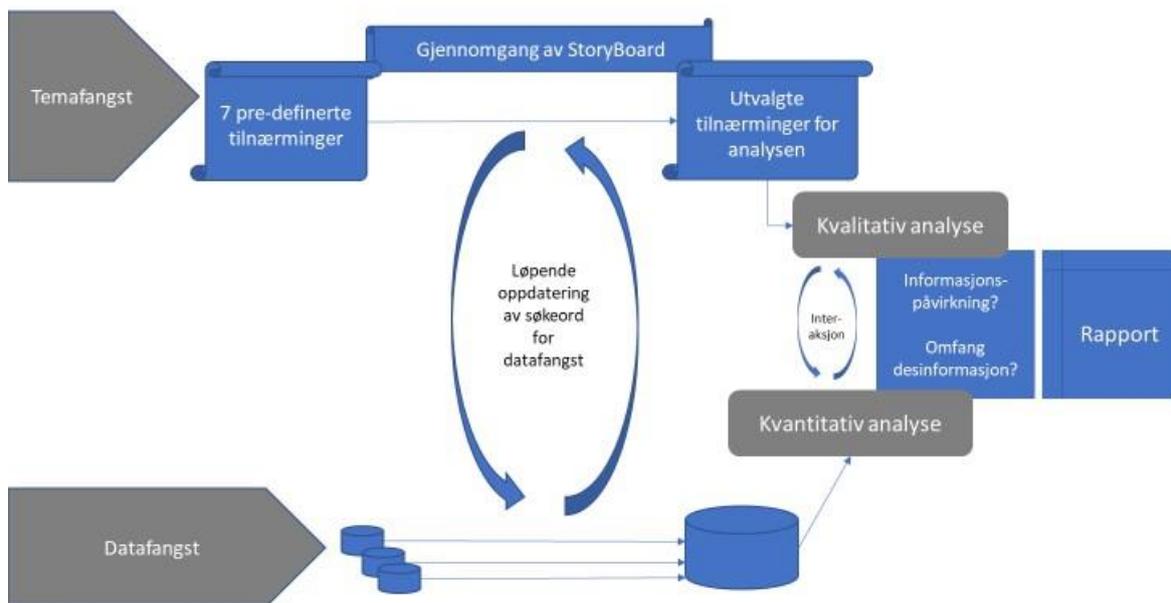


Figure 1: Main activities and basic elements in the execution of the project from August to November 2019

Topic capture was conducted before any data were collected. In this phase, we identified seven relevant approaches for informational influence in a Norwegian local election as the starting point for our data collection and analysis. The identification built on existing research, previous experiences with online informational influence from other countries, and an assessment of the current political debate (see chapter 2). In some cases, the approaches may overlap. Increasing polarisation and level of political conflict: Particularly relevant topics are road tolls, immigration, climate change and wind power, where people have conflicting opinions. Influence in this respect often involves supporting groups on both sides of the conflict, and may also include the use of intermediaries or proxies.

1. Reinforcing the centre–periphery conflict: This applies primarily to the relationship between Finnmark in the far north of Norway and the central authorities, including relations with Russia, and the recent county mergers. In a broader sense, this will apply to centre–periphery issues and regional policy in general.
2. Influencing topics and supporting candidates and parties that are sympathetic to Russian interests. Particularly relevant topics are sanctions against Russia, allied military presence and exercises in Norway, Norwegian and allied intelligence activities, missile defence, the Globus radar in Vardø, and relations with the USA.
3. Attempts to influence confidence in the electoral process, election results, elected candidates and parties, and the political system and the Norwegian authorities more generally, including unfounded allegations of electoral fraud.
4. Attempts to reduce voter turnout. This can be done by influencing willingness to vote, or by spreading false information about the practicalities of voting.
5. Spreading compromising information that is either made up or has been obtained illegitimately, for example by hacking, tapping and fake videos and other material.
6. Targeted advertising related to the topics listed above.

As part of the topic capture, the seven approaches were operationalised by collecting relevant thematic search terms and compiling a list of search terms, which were then used to index and analyse the data material. The search terms were used in the real-time analysis of Twitter, as the project’s framework required a delimitation of what to reap (see Annex A for a more detailed description and the complete list of search terms).

In order to investigate the dissemination of disinformation more specifically, a set of reinforcing words and phrases was also compiled. Existing research shows that certain words and phrases are very typical of disinformation on the internet.⁴⁷ We manually identified the characteristics of disinformation that differ from the mean value, and operationalised this for indexing and further analysis of the data (see Annex B for a more detailed description and complete list of keywords). We then performed searches on the data material for the combination capital letters, multiple exclamation marks and/or question marks, since fake news often contains these elements to attract attention.⁴⁸ Based on this operationalisation, it was possible to perform searches in the data material with the aim of flagging possible suspicious information.

Parallel to this, the project team has also made use of the StoryBoard service. This is a tool for analysing social media content that helps journalists, editors and media analysts get a full picture of which stories are being shared on social media. This is one of the tools most major media providers in Norway use to measure the spread of news stories on social media.

Data capture was performed continuously from project start-up using both commercial software and proprietary computer tools to harvest data where the processes had to be customised for the different digital platforms. Due to time and resource constraints, the sample of digital platforms from which data were collected was limited to some of the most central platforms with the greatest potential to influence voters. The project

⁴⁷ See for example Chong, M (2019). Discovering fake news embedded in the opposing hashtag activism networks on Twitter: #Gunreformnow vs. #NRA. *Open Information Science*, 2019(3), 137-153; Horne, BD & Adali, S (2017). This just in: Fake News packs a lot in title, uses simpler repetitive content in text body, more similar to satire than real news. *The Workshops of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media. AAAI Technical Report WS-17-17: News and Public Opinion*, 759–766; Blaine, T & Boyer, P (2018). Origins of sinister rumors: A preference for threat-related material in the supply and demand of information. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 39(2018), p. 67–75.

⁴⁸ The Norwegian Media Authority (n.d.). Stopp. Tenk. Sjekk. [Stop. Think. Check] Retrieved from: https://medietilsynet.no/mediebildet/slik-avslorer-du-falskenyheter/#anchor_8308

studied social media (a selection of public Facebook pages and Twitter), mainstream media (NRK, VG, Aftenposten and E24) and alternative media (Resett, Document and Human Rights Service).

The data collected from the different sources were then indexed across the data material. This enabled a transverse analysis to observe spread and activity across the different platforms and to identify targeted attempts at informational influence. A major challenge in this project was that the collected data, especially from social media, were highly unstructured and of varying quality. Repeat collections resulted in duplications of comments, and there were complications in connection with websites that support free form in comments linked to standardisation of the data format, due to the wide variation in language and syntax. For example, coding of buttons in comments sections can pose a challenge when multiple comments are to be collected from different platforms. Vespa⁴⁹ was used as the main tool for data storage, searching, ranking, and sharing the collected data. Vespa is optimised for machine learning, has excellent options for continuous adjustment in respect of findings and trends in the data material, and can also index and search in real time at the same time.

The **quantitative analysis** is based on configuration of functions in Vespa and a search engine connected to a graphical user interface. This interface was also used for the **qualitative analysis**, which was also a central part of the project. Many previous studies of disinformation have focused on the content of fake news articles, posts or tweets, but barely look at the comments on Facebook or websites.⁵⁰ In addition, most studies to date have been quantitative studies rooted in computer science, compared with only a handful of qualitative studies.⁵¹ The close link between the quantitative and qualitative analysis in our project means that our analysis goes further than most previous studies.

Our methodical approach and the sample of digital platforms are described in more detail in Annex C.

3.1 Limitations and ethical considerations

In addition to limitations related to the data collection per se, the project has had constraints linked to ethical and security aspects related to freedom of expression and data protection.

From a freedom of speech perspective, it is difficult to distinguish informational influence in general from unwanted, illegitimate informational influence. In addition, there is not always a clear line between fake news and non-fake news. Open public debate and diversity of opinion are a prerequisite for democracy, not least in connection with free, democratic elections. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate to disagree with the Norwegian authorities or be critical of Norwegian politics and democratic practices. It is also legitimate to agree with the views of foreign states, such as Russia, and be critical of Norwegian policies towards other states. The project has therefore been wary of and sought to avoid doing anything that could be (mis)interpreted as a mapping or ranking of opinions during the electoral campaign.

Data protection has posed a challenge, because collecting data from various digital platforms, such as social media and news media, involves collecting personal data. The collection of personal data requires strict data protection and security measures. The project and various security measures carried out as part of the project

⁴⁹ See <https://vespa.ai/>

⁵⁰ See for example Horne BD & Adali S (2017). This just in: Fake News packs a lot in title, uses simpler repetitive content in text body, more similar to satire than real news. *The Workshops of the Eleventh International AAI Conference on Web and Social Media*. AAI Technical Report WS-17-17: *News and Public Opinion*, 759–766. Vosoughi, S., Roy, D. & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science* 359, 1146–1151; Chong, M (2019). Discovering fake news embedded in the opposing hashtag activism networks on Twitter: #Gunreformnow vs. #NRA. *Open Information Science*, 2019(3), 137–153.

⁵¹ Zhou X & Zafarani R (2018). Fake News: A survey of research, detection methods, and opportunities. arXiv preprint arXiv:2492706 (2018).

have been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). In addition, a data protection impact assessment (DPIA) of the entire project was carried out and approved prior to project start-up.

Legal aspects, for example related to provisions in the Election Act and the legality of specific utterances, fall outside the objectives and design of this project.

The project only uses data from a limited period of time before election day and immediately afterwards. Data were collected from 5 August to 22 September. The data collection start date was determined by the final approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Data collection continued for a few weeks after the election in order to capture any incidents of significance after the election. The technical data collection was restricted in that it was not possible to collect all the data in the period, only a selection. Of course, all these restrictions may result in the omission of data that ought to have been collected and analysed. Nevertheless, this was considered a necessary limitation in view of the resources and time available to the project.

4 Analysis

The purpose of this project was to investigate possible unwanted and/or illegitimate informational influence by external state and non-state actors in connection with the 2019 local elections. We sought to detect known influence tactics and identify new patterns of influence based on the data analysis, which could indicate human or (semi-)automated influence. Indications may include characteristics of the content of the message and narratives that are used, as well as identification of bots in the quantitative data analysis. Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw any certain conclusions about some of the findings.

Experience from similar investigations of other elections shows that it is very demanding to connect specific instances of disinformation and influence campaigns to individual actors. The people who spread disinformation and fake news also naturally tend to try to conceal their tracks. To shed light on the research questions, we therefore conducted a number of different analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, which are described below.

4.1 Scope of the number of shares of news stories on Facebook during and immediately after the Norwegian election in 2019

An analysis of the most shared stories on Facebook during the election campaign in the period from 8 August until 13 September, shortly after the election, was conducted to analyse which news stories generated the most traffic and attention on Norway's most widely used medium. We also wanted to study user traffic and the attention paid to the stories shared on Facebook by alternative media. In addition, this kind of Facebook analysis might help us find news stories shared by suspicious foreign actors.

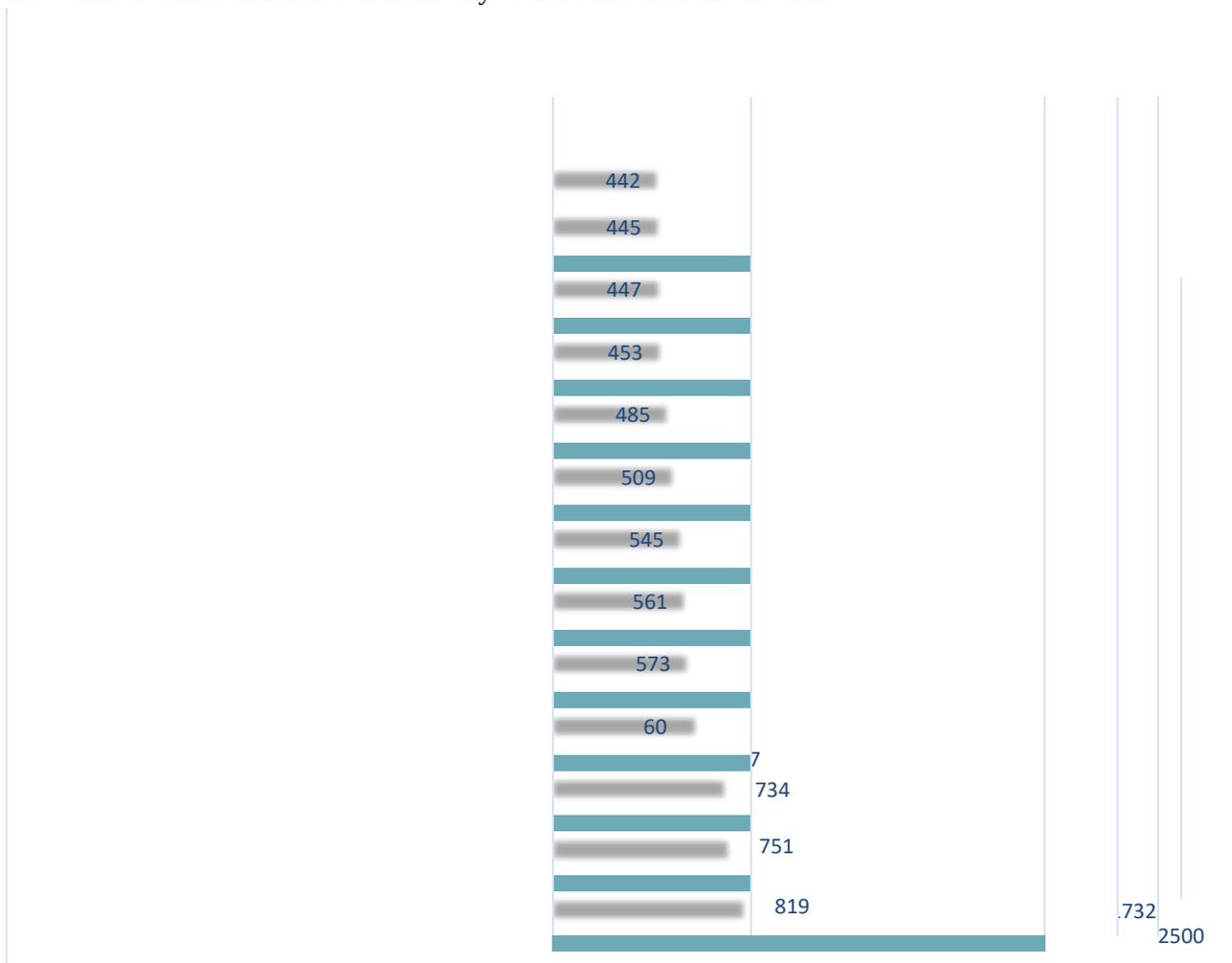
Alternative media are here defined as Resett.no, Rights.no and Document.no (see Annex C), while the mainstream media are defined as professional media operators such as TV2.no, NRK.no, Dagbladet.no (DB) and VG.no. In the searches, there were also hits on Steigan.no, Miff.no and Lykten.no. These websites can be characterised as closer to alternative media than mainstream media, but nonetheless differ from typical alternative media.

We used StoryBoard to conduct this analysis. We developed a customised user interface that aggregated data from StoryBoard in order to observe developments and trends in the media in general and to look for patterns in the sharing of news on social media, including on platforms we were not intending to collect data from. The sample of data material collected between 8 August and 13 September comprised a total of 2,759 news stories

shared on Facebook. Note that in this analysis, we only focused on news stories shared on Facebook. We did not measure shares on other social media or likes on Facebook.

Among the 20 most shared news stories on Facebook in the StoryBoard data (see Figure 2), most were from the large, mainstream media platforms, such as NRK, VG, TV2, Vårt Land (the *Verdidebatt* debate forum) and DB (Dagbladet). In addition, we found one story copied from the entertainment website Newsner. According to Faktisk.no (Norway’s fact-checking service), Newsner produces click-bait and share-friendly curiosities on an ongoing basis for the sole purpose of being spread on social media.⁵² Newsner is similar to the websites Sosialnytt and OnlineNytt.

Among the 20 most shared stories on Facebook, we find content concerning Anne Grete Preus’ death, a sudden increase in dog deaths, health, and immigration. The dog disease that spread in Norway in the late summer received a great deal of media coverage and attention immediately prior to the election, starting on 4 September. Norwegian singer Anne Grete Preus’ death on 25 August 2019 was another incident that attracted a great deal of media attention both on social media and in the mainstream media, also in the final days leading up to the election. These news stories, as opposed to typical election issues, therefore dominated the list of the most shared stories on Facebook in the days before and after the election.



⁵² Faktisk.no (2018, 07.09). Innsikt: En dårlig sommer for løgnfabrikkene [Insight: A bad summer for the lie factories]. Retrieved from: https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/XEN/en-darligsommer-for-lognfabrikke?fbclid=IwAR1UrojabkKngOK0LBFOnRIKp1TTkvcX1XDjJGJC6_4jFkV3vEXT32-LSow

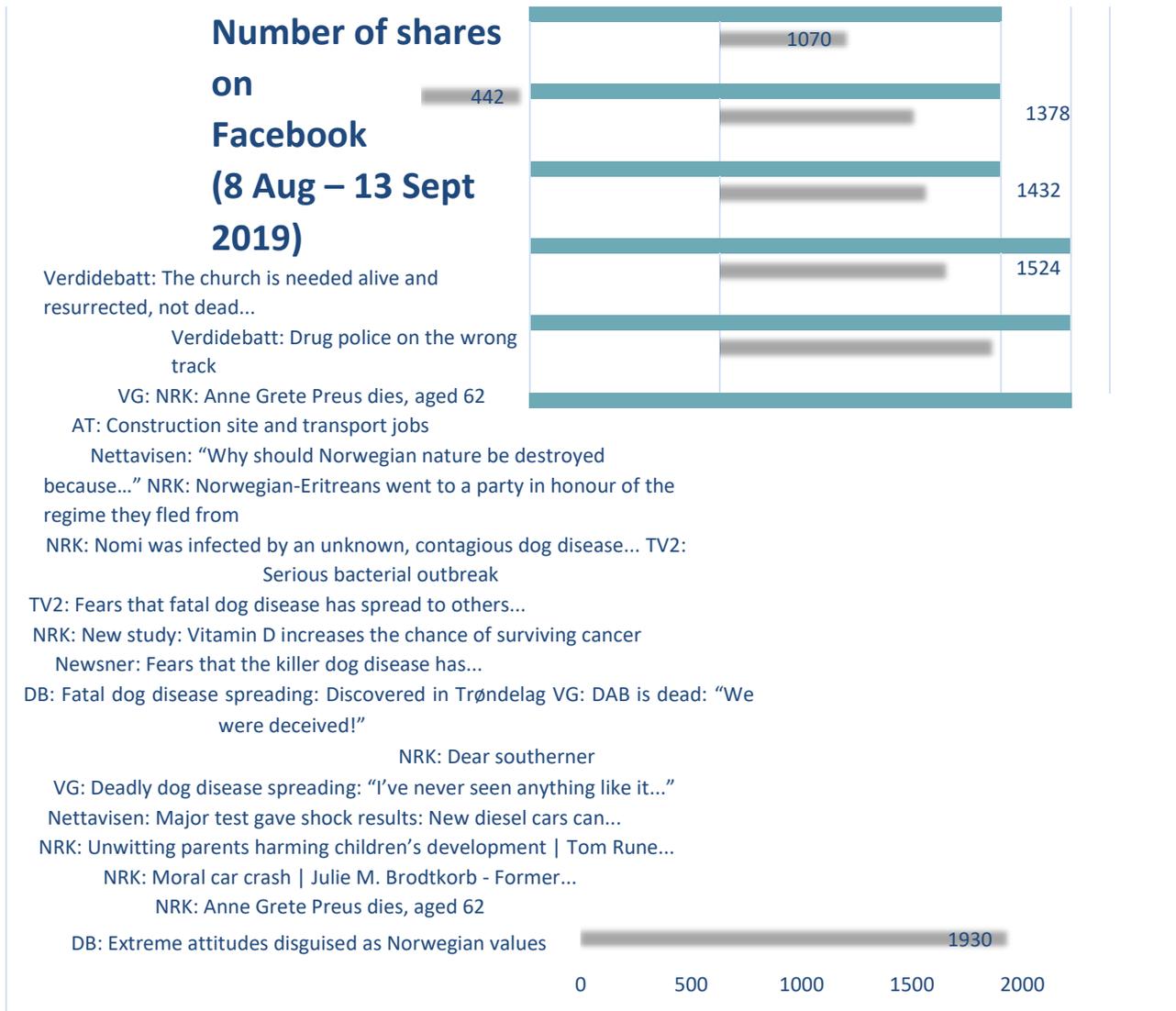


Figure 2: The 20 most shared stories on Facebook according to data analysis from StoryBoard during the period from 8 August to 13 September 2019

The data from StoryBoard did not indicate that Facebook shares were triggered by foreign campaigns.

However, when we manually reviewed the 100 most shared stories on Facebook, we found shares from alternative media such as Document.no, (five stories in the top 100) and Resett (only one in the top 100). The website Lykten has two stories in the top 100 most shared news stories on Facebook in Norway:

- 226 Facebook shares (13 August 2019): “Muslims celebrate a holy day by torturing cows to death”⁵³

⁵³ Lykten.no (2019, 13.08). Muslimer feirer høytid ved å torturere ihjel ku [Muslims celebrate a holy day by torturing cows to death]. Retrieved from <https://www.lykten.no/islam/muslimer-feirerhoytid-ved-a-torturere-ihjel-ku>

- 206 Facebook shares (21 August 2019): “While immigrants get free housing, one homeless Briton dies every 19 hours in the UK”⁵⁴

Note that this applies to the number of shares, but that we have not made a manual assessment of the context of the share; for example, sometimes stories are shared to ridicule the original poster. Lykten.no is a relatively small, national-conservative media channel, which mostly publishes articles criticising immigration and the Norwegian Labour Party (Ap). On its website, Lykten describes itself as a corrective to editor-controlled media that wants to play a role in the “information war”. The website was previously called “Ordet er mitt” [“The Word is Mine”], and prior to that “Frie ord” [“Free Words”]. In March 2019, a story published on Lykten claiming that 75 per cent of the Socialist Left Party (SV)’s members of parliament have never had a job, was very widely shared. Faktisk.no fact-checked the allegation and concluded that it was false.⁵⁵

To gain greater insight into the extent of sharing in the period before and immediately after the election, we also compared the sharing of news stories from alternative media and mainstream media. It is interesting to note that Document.no had more news stories shared on Facebook than TV2. The general trend is that the mainstream media get the most shares of their news stories on Facebook. However, alternative media, such as Resett.no, Rights.no and Document.no, and others, such as Steigan.no, Miff.no and Lykten.no, have significant and probably growing news spreading on Facebook.



Figure 3: Comparison of different media in terms of total number of shares on Facebook during the election campaign, according to analysis of data from StoryBoard in the period from 8 August until 13 September 2019

In this sample, we found no evidence of foreign interference on Facebook.

⁵⁴ Lykten.no (2019, 21.08). Mens innvandrere får gratis bolig så dør en hjemløs brite hver 19. time i Storbritannia [While immigrants get free housing, one homeless Briton dies every 19 hours in the UK]. Retrieved from:

<https://www.lykten.no/notiser/mens-innvandrere-far-gratis-bolig-sa-dor-en-hjemlos-brite-hver-19-time-i-storbritannia/>

⁵⁵ Nei, det stemmer ikke at 75 prosent av SVs stortingsrepresentanter aldri har hatt en jobb [No, it’s not true that 75 per cent of Socialist Left Party (SV)’s members of parliament have never had a job], Faktisk (2019)

<https://www.faktisk.no/faktasjekker/zZQ/nei-det-stemmer-ikke-at-75-prosent-av-svs-stortingsrepresentanter-aldri-har-hatt-en-jobb>

4.2 Quantitative analysis of the collected data material

4.2.1 Cross check against known bots

Based on the knowledge that use of bots is a strategy often used in influence campaigns, primarily on Twitter, we conducted an analysis of the Twitter data to cross-check the collected data material against known Russian bots that have been identified in connection with the spread of disinformation. In order to be able to search efficiently through known bots in the existing data material, we created a list of Russian bots using data from:

1. Lists published by Twitter consisting of usernames from the IRA (a known Russian troll factory) and Russian bots from 2019. This was combined with a list of well-known IRA bots, resulting in a total of 160 usernames
2. 2,848 username and Twitter handles from some 3 million tweets from a previous analysis conducted in the USA (“The FiveThirtyEight story”). These usernames were added to the data material from point 1

This resulted in a combined list of 2,998 known bots, which we then searched for in our data material. We used direct searches (exact string matching), but also performed wildcard searches, to be able to capture references and cross-references. The cross-reference search found no exact matches and only false positives. Thus, we found no known bots in our data material. One possible explanation may be that Twitter has already suspended these accounts.

4.2.2 Cross-check against websites associated with unserious content

As already mentioned, the line between fake news and non-fake news is not always distinct. It is also not always easy to identify disinformation where, for example, a news story may be partially true and disguised as verified news, even though it is not. To investigate whether there was systematic dissemination of disinformation, we therefore conducted an automated cross-check data analysis to locate where in the data material we might possibly find websites associated with unserious content.

To this end, a list was compiled of websites known to spread disinformation, sensationalist or joke content, or manipulated information, websites classified as lie factories or websites known to have tried to spread political messages often on false grounds (see Annex D). These were identified by previous reviews of less credible websites conducted by Filternyheter,⁵⁶ Faktisk.no,⁵⁷ hanspetterinfo,⁵⁸ and a review by Petter B. Brandtzæg.⁵⁹ Most of these websites are located on the far right wing, publish anti-immigration propaganda, and often contain poorly verified news stories with diffuse sources. Some of these websites cannot be contacted, and it is therefore unclear who is actually behind the news stories. Most of these websites have not committed to adhere to the Norwegian Press Association’s Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press. In addition, several of the websites publish information that is fictional or appear to be humour websites.

This was cross-checked against our data material with comments from the Norwegian election, which had two main sources for user-generated content on Norwegian news websites and their comments: Disqus and

⁵⁶ Filter Nyheter (2017, 26.08). Dette er de norske nettavisene du bør være på vakt mot i valgkampen [Be wary of the following Norwegian online newspapers in the election campaign]. Retrieved from:

<https://filternyheter.no/dette-er-de-ni-norske-nettstedene-du-bor-vaere-pa-vakt-mot/>

⁵⁷ Faktisk.no (2018, 19.06). Innsikt: Løgnfabrikker laget Norges mest delte saker i mai [Lie factories made Norway’s most shared stories in May]. Retrieved from: <https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/bA/lognfabrikker-laget-norges-mest-delte-saker-i-mai>

⁵⁸ hanspetter.info (n.d.). Svartelisten.net. Retrieved from: <https://hanspetter.info/svartelisten/>

⁵⁹ Brandtzæg, P B (2017, 11.08). Radikaliseres Norges befolkning på Facebook? [Is the population of Norway being radicalised on Facebook?] Debate article published in *Dagbladet*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/radikaliseres-norges-befolkning-pa-facebook/68583360>

Facebook comments plugin. *Disqus* is a worldwide hosting service for blog comments for websites and online communities that use a network platform. Several of the Norwegian online newspapers use this service. *Facebook comments plugin* is a worldwide hosting service used by several blogs and online newspapers, where people can use their Facebook profile to comment in the comments sections.

We identified many of the users on these websites as also active in the discussions that are reflected in our data material from around the election time. In some cases, however, these kinds of analyses are not entirely precise, because they do not involve a manual assessment of each individual search match. This meant that individual Disqus profiles were flagged in our analysis that were not necessarily representatives of the less credible sites, but represent an individual actor with the same name. In some cases, it was also impossible to determine whether the actor was a robot, or find more background information that could provide more information about the profile. One of these profiles could not be investigated as it was in “private mode”. Irrespective of this, this profile is abnormally active, with over 5,000 registered comments on a variety of issues.

Nevertheless, we identified credible instances of sharing of content from the right-leaning blog Derimot.no in Resett.no’s comments section. What is interesting about these shares from Derimot.no is that they are predominantly by one single profile. This profile is also active and shares information on Resett. They have no followers, but are registered as having made 2,000 comments. In the comments on Resett, the user is very active in defending Russia, although this in itself is not necessarily suspicious. What caught our interest was the high activity in terms of the sheer number of comments, but more in-depth investigations suggest that this is not a systematic attempt at foreign informational influence. Beyond this, sharing of content from Derimot.no on Resett, for example, indicates that there is some spreading of more clearly right-wing and immigration-critical argumentation on alternative media. This is not surprising and can certainly not be taken as indicating foreign involvement or influence.

In addition, graph pattern matching was performed to analyse dissemination and sharing by multiple sources of disinformation.

We identified several conspiracy theories in comments linked to the less credible websites, because they had the most instances of shocking and negative content, combinations of many exclamation marks, question marks and block capitals, and were written in poor Norwegian. The graphs were constructed based on a set of users identified by manual searches in the data material. Among this sample of users, another so-called breadth-first search was conducted with $n = 5$ in recursion depth of followers, both for whom the profile follows and who they are followed by. We then defined a set of users that we used as the basic users for further searches. To identify these users, we searched manually through posted comments using the tools developed for this project. After prefiltering for language and characters, we found several recurring terms in the data material such as: “Greta Thunberg” combined with “George Soros”, “globalist” or “*Jew*”⁶⁰, and we added these with users who were identified in the prefiltering. The combinations of keywords were chosen on the basis of very many references in the data material of conspiracy theories and especially untrue statements about Greta Thunberg, globalists, including global conspiracies over alleged ties to the billionaire George Soros.⁶¹ Figure 4 shows the constellation of users included in our collected data and other internet users who were also recognised as actors involved in the spread of disinformation with content from conspiracy theories from external sources (each user is represented with a blue node in the figure).

⁶⁰ Wildcard extension, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glob_\(programming\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glob_(programming))

⁶¹ These allegations have previously been checked by Faktisk.no, see <https://www.faktisk.no/artikler/kRV/skulk-soros-og-utnyttelsepastandene-som-spres-om-greta-thunberg>

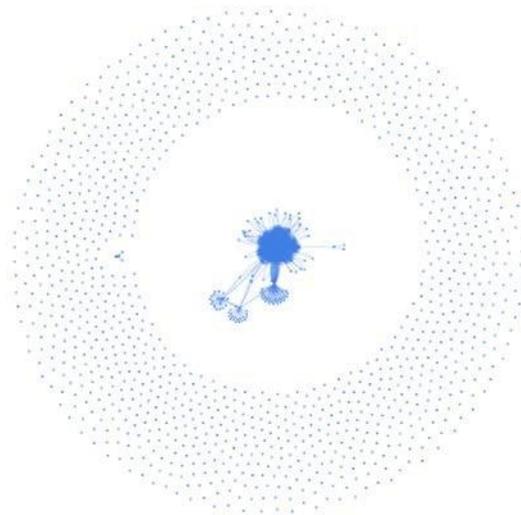


Figure 4: The constellation that has spread conspiracy theories and references to conspiratorial media

The sphere of individual users located around a core of linked users are closed profiles that have been identified as potential posters of disinformation in our data material, but that we have not identified as interrelated. This is because in this project we did not have a mandate to investigate closed profiles, due to data protection rules. We therefore focused on analysing the relationships between users with a public profile, both whom they follow and who they are being followed by. This could then be used to see how semantically similar messages spread through various media. The relationships between the public profiles are shown in the following figure:

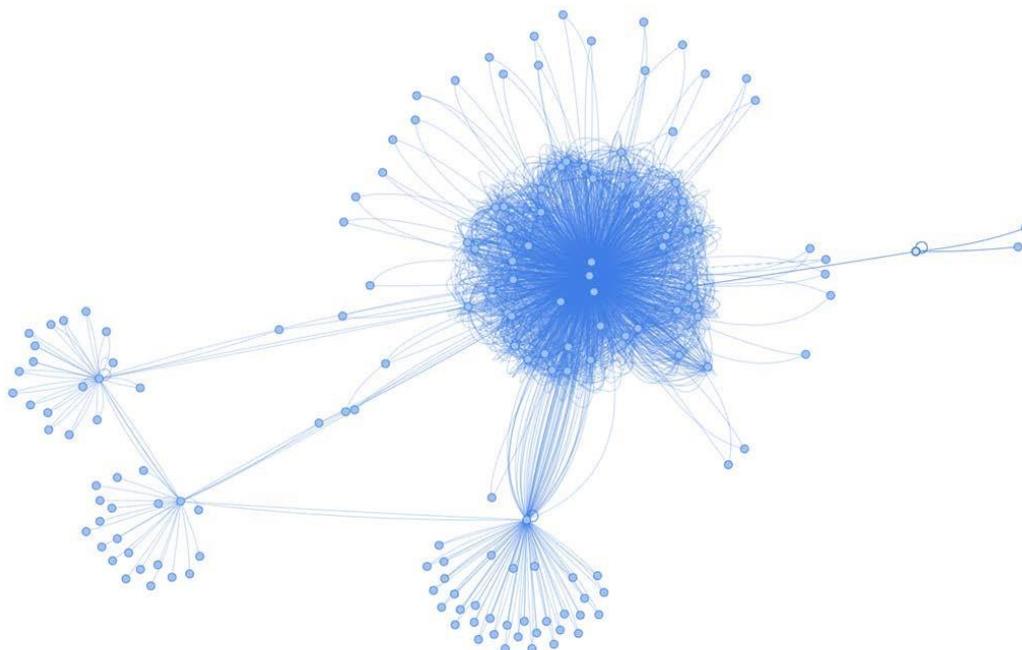


Figure 5 Close-up of the spreading constellation between users with a public profile

Figure 5 shows that there is a handful of super-users, who are followed by very many other uses and from whom similar messages are spread. Another feature that is illustrated is that there are some links between the

super-users that only follow and are followed by the super-users. Several of these profiles have posted relatively little themselves, but they have been active in the same channels as the super-users. In this search, five online communities were overrepresented: resett.no, document.no, rights.no, xstra.no and akroma.no. The latter two are less used by the wider public and are significantly more extreme and crude in the exchange of opinions.

Of the users who were only picked up by the profiles that spread conspiracy theories, many self-censor when commenting on Resett, Document and Human Rights Service, compared with when they post on less moderated websites. Among other things, many users complained that Document and Resett censor as much as the mainstream media, and there were calls for other users to be more considerate of Resett and moderate their language to avoid the website being criticised by the broader “politically correct” community.

A further analysis of some of these users with a public profile shows that many of them are extremely active and often post an average of eight or nine times a day in periods of seven to nine years, with large variation between the days. These users tend to spread similar messages, albeit with some differences, and they often copy the super-users identified in the graphs, but we cannot prove that any of these actors are foreign. We managed to identify several of the users based on their user history and because they have a public profile, and all of these appear to be Norwegians with a Norwegian IP and residential address. Among several of the pages that were captured in the graph searches and that were not among the pages we originally intended to collect data from, we also found parallel encrypted channels. Several users, but also some pages, forums and moderators, encouraged people to make active use of them, and two services in particular were promoted: the Matrix protocol, such as in riot.im⁶², for example, and browser dissenter.⁶³ Both within the encrypted channels, but also on public pages, there were calls to both spread disinformation and manipulate open polls. This testifies to a form of organised behaviour practised by both individuals and larger groups.

We also detected some anomalies, where a trend was identified that appeared to start from nowhere, and where users in our stored data material spread information about and shared links to both the Facebook page and website of the controversial website Sørlandsnyhetene. Among the users we identified as spreaders, we found no further references to the websites once the municipal elections were over. The relationships among the spreaders are as follows:

⁶² See <https://about.riot.im/>
⁶³ See <https://dissenter.com/>

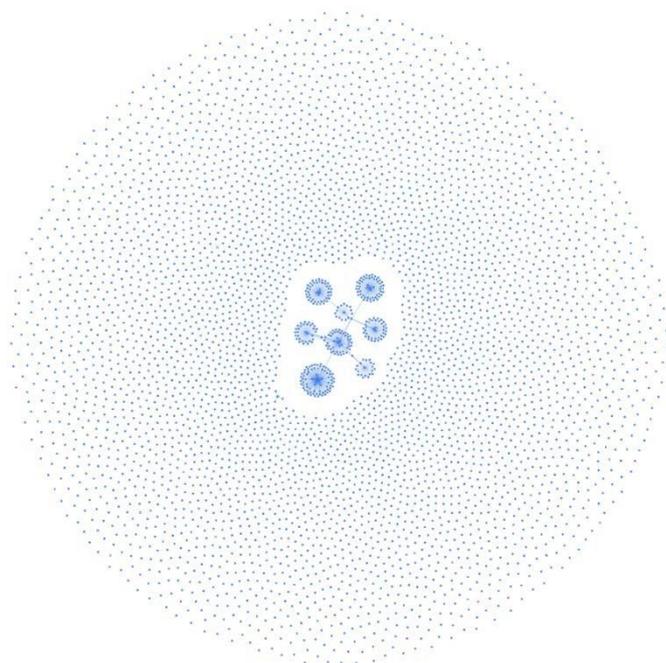


Figure 6: Users who have shared information about and links to Sørlandsnyhetene

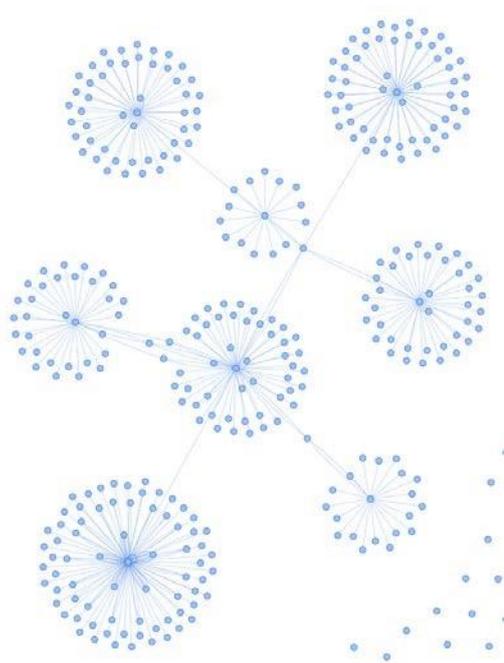


Figure 7: Excerpt of the constellation between users with a public profile from Figure 6

As demonstrated in Figure 6, there were very many closed profiles that we could not map due to data protection rules. These are illustrated as individual nodes located in a sphere around the super-users and their networks. A closer look at the relationships of the users with a public profile (Figure 7) shows that, unlike users who spread hate speech and conspiracy theories, these are often organised into one-way relationships. This means there are some super-users who have very many followers, but who themselves only follow one or two users. These users who are followed by the super-users connect the super-users with other super-users without themselves following others or having other followers. These accounts are often accounts that have few posts and are otherwise reasonably anonymous in their online presence. The super-users have very many posts and are far more active than an average user.

This quantitative analysis thus indicates a form of organised network activity for the spread and sharing of content, with a marked difference in the level of activity in these networks before and after the elections. It also indicates that controversial content is transported between websites that have a more moderated tone in the public sphere (and which includes our data collection as described in Annex C), and a more closed, unfiltered constellation of websites that appear to systematically promote and spread disinformation, etc.

It is difficult to judge whether this is a deliberate mode of operation intended to influence elections specifically, or whether it is a more generic feature of the more covert information flows and shaping of opinions on the internet, since we lack detailed information. Against this backdrop, we cannot prove that there is foreign election influence, but nor can we rule it out.

4.3 Qualitative analysis of the collected data material

Parallel to the quantitative analyses, we also adopted a more qualitative approach to the data material, in order to investigate whether there have been any instances of foreign informational influence. This is an important approach, since quantitative analyses based purely on word counts cannot tell us anything about the context in which the words are used. Context is decisive to interpret and understand the quantitative findings. Since it was not feasible to undertake a qualitative analysis of all the data we had collected, we used the proprietary

graphical user interface for Vespa (see Annex C) to select a sample from the data material based on the thematic search terms that had the highest frequency for each platform. For our qualitative analysis to find out whether there were any indications of suspicious activity or targeted informational influence, we used seven approaches and strategies often used in informational influence campaigns and systematic dissemination of disinformation as our starting point.

Because agents seeking to influence people on digital platforms want their message spread as widely as possible to gain maximum attention,⁶⁴ we focused primarily on strategies that are expected to attract attention. For example, content that is surprising and/or shocking, emotional content, content that refers to individuals, and negative content all tend to catch people's attention. Using these focus areas as our starting point, we analysed the data material in respect of argumentation techniques and genre (for example, emotions, negativity, entertainment, ad hominem) and whether the post attacks institutions or the electoral process, in addition to use of language. Suspiciously bad Norwegian with, for example, incorrect syntax and semantics, and possible direct translations from other languages have been a central indication.

Based on the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's list of strategies for informational influence, we also looked for malicious rhetoric intended to mislead, deceive or deter others from participating in the debate through intimidation and/or calls for demonstrations or other active actions. We also examined whether there were indications of messages that were repeated by a few users and users who stood out with unusually many posts. To investigate whether there was deliberate spread of disinformation, we looked for systematic use of reinforcing words that may indicate disinformation based on our list of keywords.

4.3.1 Twitter

Twitter was analysed from the perspective that it is used as a channel whereby messages are spread in order to influence people. Several searches were made on the most commonly used thematic search terms, and we then assessed whether there was systematic use of reinforcing words based on our list of keywords. As was the case with the cross-check analysis for bots, no suspicious activity was found that we considered worth analysing any further.

4.3.2 Facebook

We examined the Facebook pages of political parties, politicians, and county and municipal authorities. The project did not have the resources to include the pages of individual candidates who ran in the municipal administration and county authority elections, due to the sheer number. We therefore only looked at the pages of the party leaders, members of the government and other key national politicians in the opposition. These politicians also played a central role in the election campaign and could thus also have been a possible target for illegitimate informational influence.

Political parties

On the pages of the political parties, we identified 11,107 comments containing at least one search term from our list of thematic search terms. The Conservative Party (H), the Green Party (MDG), the Progress Party (FrP), People's Action No to More Road Tolls (FNB), the Christian Democratic Party (KrF) and the Labour Party (Ap) have the most comments on their Facebook pages. In terms of comments that contain at least one keyword that may be an indication of disinformation, the Conservative Party (H) is the clear leader, followed

⁶⁴ Acerbi A (2019). Cognitive attraction and online misinformation. *Palgrave Communications*, 5(15), p. 1–7; Bessi A, Scala A, Rossi L, Zhang Q & Quattrociocchi W (2014). The economy of attention in the age of (mis)information. *Journal of Trust Management* 2014, p. 1–12.

by the Progress Party (FrP), the Green Party (MDG), the Christian Democratic Party (KrF), the Centre Youth and the Liberal Party (V).

There is a strikingly high level of discussion in the comments on these Facebook pages. Many people argue and react to other users' comments, which in many cases creates a real dialogue. There are often positive comments, praising the parties and politicians, and highlighting their achievements and wishing them good luck in the elections. Most of the comments are well written and very rarely contain obscenities or insults, and there are few spelling mistakes or English terms. Criticism is usually relevant and factual. When users discuss politicians, they usually discuss the parties, not individual politicians. Ad hominem is therefore rare, with one exception: Siv Jensen appears relatively frequently. We did not find indications of the use of automated bots.

Based on the thematic search terms with the highest frequency, we identified a number of dominant topics in Facebook comments: the environment / climate change / energy, road tolls, elections / democracy, and immigration (see Figure 8). It is interesting that the most important topic in a local election is related to national and international climate policy. Climate change and road tolls are clearly interlinked in the Facebook comments, with many users addressing both topics in their comments.

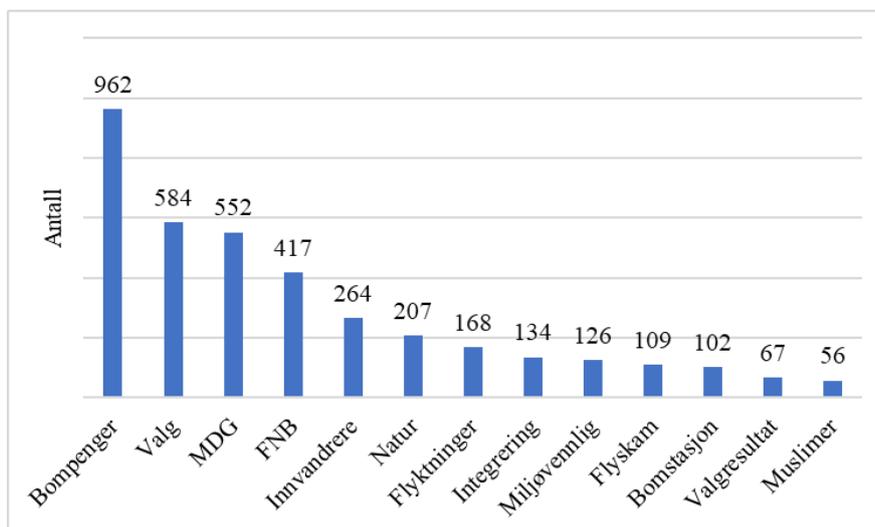


Figure 8: Number of posts with hits in our list of thematic search terms

When it comes to the environment / climate change, it is conceivable that actors who want to exert an influence will publish and spread content that sows doubt about anthropogenic climate change and thus aggravate an already polarised debate. Climate change sceptics are certainly active in the debate, especially on the Green Party (MDG)'s Facebook page and especially in comments containing the word "climate crisis" ["*klimakrise*"]. However, only 41 of over 11,000 comments from these Facebook pages contain this word. In addition, there are a number of comments describing anthropogenic climate change as a "lie" ["*løgn*"]. However, only a few comments contain specific terms that are commonly used by climate change sceptics, such as "climate hysteria" ["*klimahysteri*"] or words that express a particular attitude towards climate change, such as "flight shame" ["*flyskam*"] or "environmental shame" ["*klimaskam*"]. Much more common are neutral concepts, such as "power companies" ["*kraftselskap*"], "greenhouse gases" ["*klimagasser*"], "environmentally friendly" ["*miljøvennlig*"] or "natural diversity" ["*naturmangfold*"]. On the other hand, even such seemingly neutral terms can be used to express bias (for example, by using irony) or to communicate that you disagree; for example, one person comments that they prefer climate-friendly travel as a result of brainwashing. There is much to suggest that the comments expressing climate change scepticism were made by real users, and there are no indications that these are part of targeted campaigns to destabilise democracy in Norway. We know that

there are many climate change sceptics in Norway⁶⁵, and the quantitative analysis has not revealed any indications of foreign influence.

The discussion about road tolls has dominated the election campaign in Norway in 2019 and the comments on social media. Opponents of road tolls arouse opposition and disagreement in various parties, especially the Progress Party (FrP) and People's Action No to More Road Tolls (FNB). Almost all the parties, and especially the Green Party (MDG), are widely criticised for wanting to increase the number of toll points and the toll rates. These are topics that also touch upon social inequality: the average citizen or “the weakest” must pay extra, even if they cannot really afford it, and despite the fact that Norway is the richest country in the world. The discussion is linked to the use of Norway's oil revenues (should we spent the money today or save it for future generations). The discussion is relevant and factual, and there are no signs of illegitimate influence. That said, the political actors are often accused of failing to fulfil their campaign promises after election. It has happened before and will happen again after this election; the promises can therefore not be believed, according to the commenters. These kinds of views are quite common.

Immigration and the debate about whether Norway should accept more refugees also dominate the comments. Some users ask about specific parties' position in the immigration debate. Some feel threatened by immigration and point to problems in their own country, the cost of immigration and child poverty, but these kinds of negative comments are much rarer than would be expected if they were part of a foreign destabilisation campaign. The comments are usually factual and to the point, and are not hateful. Approximately equal numbers of comments highlight the negative and the positive sides of immigration. The positive comments stress that immigrants become taxpayers, for example. Other comments point out that this is a national issue that does not concern the local elections. All in all, the comments on immigration are relatively factual and are not characterised by hateful rhetoric, suggesting that these comments are not part of a destabilisation campaign. Quantitative analyses based on pure word counts have certain limitations, and the context in which the words are used is decisive to be able to interpret and understand the quantitative findings.

With regard to reinforcing words in the list of keywords that may indicate disinformation, there are few of these in the comments. We only have 621 hits in our sample of Facebook pages, out of over 11,000 comments. Most of the words are in the category “threat-based”, where the use of words related to threats can be a strategy to attract as much attention as possible. At the same time, the fact that we find most keywords in this category may also be because this category contains the most words (see Annex B). There are no indicators in our material that these words are being used to spread disinformation. Comments related to “violence” [“vold”] often address animal police and animal cruelty, comments related to “sick” [“syk”] refer to sickness in the literal sense and the impact of sickness absence from work, and most comments related to “terrorists” are about fighting terrorism.

The use of keywords from the category “Gossip and celebrities” on the political parties' Facebook pages is mainly due to the frequent use of the word “free” [“gratis”]. This serves to illustrate some of the limitations of a quantitative analysis. The use of certain words is not necessarily proof of disinformation, even though they may be an indicator of disinformation. The word “free” [“gratis”] was included in the list of keywords because it was related to cases of fraud linked to Bitcoin identified by the fact-checking service Faktisk.no. On political parties' Facebook pages, “free” [“gratis”] was very frequently used in comments to express what ought to be free (for example, school meals, core hours in the SFO after-school programme) or what ought not to be free (for example, workforce, privileges for immigrants). These are perfectly normal comments from normal users, and these examples show that individual words must always be assessed in context.

⁶⁵ YouGov (2019, 15.09). International poll: most expect to feel impact of climate change, many think it will make us extinct. Retrieved from: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/science/articles-reports/2019/09/15/international-poll-most-expect-feel-impact-climate>

Another interesting term in respect of foreign influence is “fake news”. People use the term in different contexts and have different understandings of what “fake news” is. In the comments about the political parties, the term is used very rarely and mainly to imply that different parties (primarily the Centre Party (Sp) and the Progress Party (FrP)) spread misinformation. Sometimes, other users are also accused of pushing fake news, although this is also very rare and in some cases connotes irony. In summary, we found no systematic use of these reinforcing words.

National politicians

In respect of national politicians’ Facebook pages, we found 11,985 comments with hits in our list of thematic search terms. Most comments containing at least one search term are from the Facebook pages of Sylvi Listhaug (with the highest number by a wide margin), Bjørnar Moxnes, Erna Solberg, Audun Lysbakken, Une Bastholm and Siv Jensen. The pages with the most comments containing at least one keyword that may indicate disinformation are Sylvi Listhaug (again, with the highest number by a wide margin), Audun Lysbakken, Erna Solberg, Bjørnar Moxnes, Siv Jensen and Jonas Gahr Støre. Although these politicians are not running for election, it shows that national politicians play an important role in the election campaign and create engagement in connection with local elections too.

The relatively high general level of discussion is also confirmed on the politicians’ Facebook pages. As was found on the parties’ Facebook pages, the comments here do not generally contain many personal insults. However, there is a tendency to base own comments less on arguments than was the case on the political parties’ pages. The party pages appear to be the preferred place for discussions of election debate topics, while discussions on individual politicians’ pages focus more on the politicians themselves. This is not surprising and demonstrates a greater degree of ad hominem on the Facebook pages of individual politicians. Again, the vast majority of the comments contain no spelling mistakes or English terms that could indicate large-scale use of bots or foreign actors pretending to be Norwegian.

Figure 9 shows the most commonly used thematic search terms on politicians’ Facebook pages. Not surprisingly, the dominant topics are the same as on the party’s pages: the environment / climate change / energy, elections / democracy, immigration (especially important words are immigrants, Muslims and refugees) and road tolls. The comments are largely the same as on the parties’ Facebook pages, but with some differences.

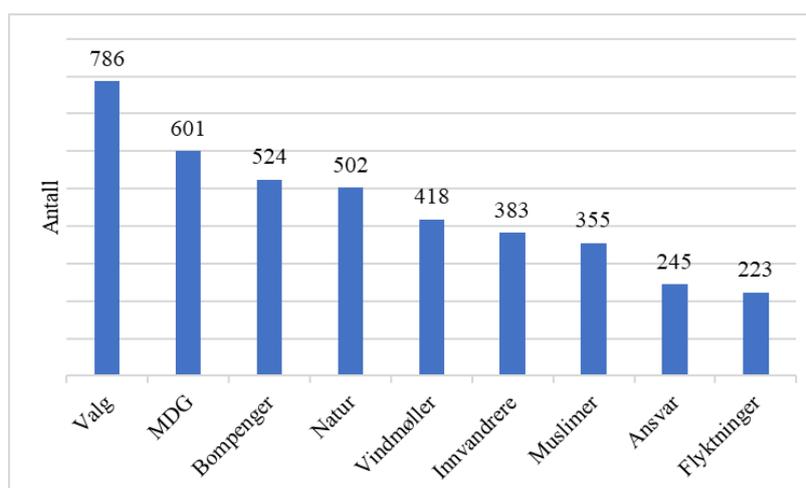


Figure 9: The most commonly used thematic search terms on Norwegian politicians’ Facebook pages

For the topic “elections” [“valg”], we see many positive comments praising the politicians and wishing them “good luck” or “have a good election”. We can safely assume that these kinds of supportive comments are not

destabilisation attempts. However, critical comments dominate where politicians are criticised in general, often unrelated to questions about specific political issues. The criticism is directed either at individual politicians on their pages or at politicians in general, with a particular focus on broken election campaign promises. These kinds of comments express a lack of trust in the political elites. Nevertheless, there is little in our data to suggest that this is part of a destabilisation campaign; rather they appear to be ordinary citizens who want to express dissatisfaction with the politicians' work.

Climate change is the most important environment-related issue on the politicians' Facebook pages. Many users point to the hypocrisy of certain politicians (for example, Audun Lysbakken and Bjørnar Moxnes) calling for greater environmental protection, while they often fly themselves. There is also a general discussion about whether to fly or not. Other users regard this discussion as ridiculous. Like the parties' Facebook pages, climate-sceptical statements are generally found in comments that contain very specific terms, such as "climate crisis" [*"klimakrise"*].

When it comes to road tolls, there are only a few positive comments. The vast majority are against road tolls, and this is also reflected in the negative tone in the discussion about broken election campaign promises to abolish road tolls. Furthermore, politicians, especially from the Progress Party (FrP), are criticised for lacking expertise in political work. Others are critical of the fact that road tolls are the most important issue for so many voters and argue that other issues, such as, for example, climate change and immigration, are more important. This shows once again that road tolls and the environment as topics are linked.

The discussion about immigration on the politicians' Facebook pages is somewhat more negative than on the parties' pages. The negativity is particularly pronounced on the Facebook pages of Progress Party (FrP) politicians. Many commenters express common prejudices about immigrants, such as that they do not work, that they live at the expense of Norwegian taxpayers, that they receive special privileges and help that Norwegians do not receive, and that they are criminal. Nevertheless, the discussion is almost always relevant and fact-based, without insults, and there is a significant number of users who contradict the people who are opposed to immigration.

Although there are far more comments containing our keywords on the Facebook pages of individual politicians than on the pages of political parties (1,124), this is a small number compared with the total number of comments (almost 12,000). The four most frequent keywords are "free" [*"gratis"*] "lies" [*"løgn"*], "sick" [*"syk"*] and "domination techniques" [*"hersketeknikk"*]. It is interesting that most of the keywords indicating disinformation in the comments on politicians' pages do not belong to the category "threat-based", but rather to the category "gossip and celebrities", in contrast to the party pages. Here there are the most hits for the term "free" [*"gratis"*], followed by "earn money" [*"tjene penger"*] and "investment" [*"investering"*]. Once again, "free" [*"gratis"*] is widely used, but there is no evidence to suggest that it is being used in an influence campaign, although some of these comments criticise (supposed) privileges afforded to immigrants (things and/or services that they purportedly get for free). In the majority of the comments, the word "free" [*"gratis"*] is used in the context of public benefits that ought to be "free" for the entire population, such as free school food and the abolition of road tolls. When the word "sick" [*"syk"*] is used, in the vast majority of cases, it refers to sickness in the literal sense, for example, what happens if employees have prolonged sick leave. "Sick" [*"syk"*] is used so rarely about individual politicians or the "system" that we can exclude disinformation campaigns or attempts at informational influence activities. The term "domination techniques" [*"hersketeknikk"*] is often used to criticise politicians, but indicates nothing other than normal use of a fairly common Norwegian term.

Again, it must be noted that while the use of certain words *may* indicate disinformation campaigns, it cannot be concluded that they always *do*. It often turns out that comments containing these kinds of words do not contain disinformation, but rather are relevant contributions to the discussion or use the terms in a completely

different context than would be expected if it were a case of disinformation. Based on these results, we conclude that there are no indications of systematic use of reinforcing words connected to disinformation and destabilisation.

Municipalities and county authorities

In the data material from the Facebook pages of all the municipalities and county authorities in Norway, there were very few hits for the thematic search terms and search terms that could indicate disinformation. Compared with the political parties and politicians, there are far fewer comments: a total of 5,967 on the pages of the municipal authorities and only 94 on the pages of the county authorities.

Our thematic search terms that occur most often on the county authorities' Facebook pages are "election" ["*valg*"], "fly" ["*fly*"], "cooperation" ["*samarbeid*"] and "ID" ["*legitimasjon*"]. Based on the hits for the search terms, we see that the environment and the election are the most important topics. Furthermore, there are relatively many comments about different regions, which is hardly surprising on municipal authorities' Facebook pages. Compared with other platforms, immigration and road tolls are not important topics. In addition, the keywords that may indicate disinformation are very unusual on these pages.

Based on these results, we can say that there are no indications of illegitimate informational influence on these pages.

The Facebook pages of the county authorities have almost no comments containing our thematic search terms. The few cases that stand out are obviously irrelevant in terms of foreign influence. Overall, the material indicates that the Facebook pages of the municipalities and county authorities do not contain discussions of controversial issues that are suitable for influence activities.

4.3.3 Mainstream media

The mainstream media are still important sources of news in Norway.⁶⁶ We examined some of the largest Norwegian media with nationwide coverage. In terms of scope, the data basis varies between the different media. Nettavisen and Dagbladet are among the five largest Norwegian nationwide media channels,⁶⁷ but no longer have comments sections and were therefore not included in the sample. Nettavisen encourages its readers to write in, and Dagbladet has a comments section on its "*Din Side*" [Your Page] page, but has very few comments. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) has removed the comments sections for its articles, but has retained the comments section on NRK Ytring, which we have included in our sample. The data basis also varies depending on how active the users are in the various comments sections. The data material we collected from VG is by far the largest, followed by Aftenposten, NRK and then E24. For E24, the data collection resulted in a total of only 87 posts. Unlike other websites, few users engage in E24's comments sections, providing a thin data basis. The analysis of the comments we collected from E24 suggests that there is nothing suspicious that might indicate illegitimate informational influence. The analysis of VG, Aftenposten and NRK is described below.

VG

An analysis of the data from the national tabloid Verdens Gang (VG) shows that the comments and discussions are generally relevant, factual and related to the main topic, although there are some exceptions where strong language, block capitals, multiple exclamation marks and question marks are used. We collected around 20,000

⁶⁶ Moe H & Sariakassen H (2019). Norway. In: Newman N, Fletcher R, Kalogeropoulos A & Nielsen RK (Eds.). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, p. 65–66.

⁶⁷ See <http://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/avis/253> for newspapers and <http://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/tv/219> for television.

posts from VG and conducted a content analysis of the dominant topics of debate on VG’s website. The most frequently mentioned thematic search terms are shown in Figure 10:

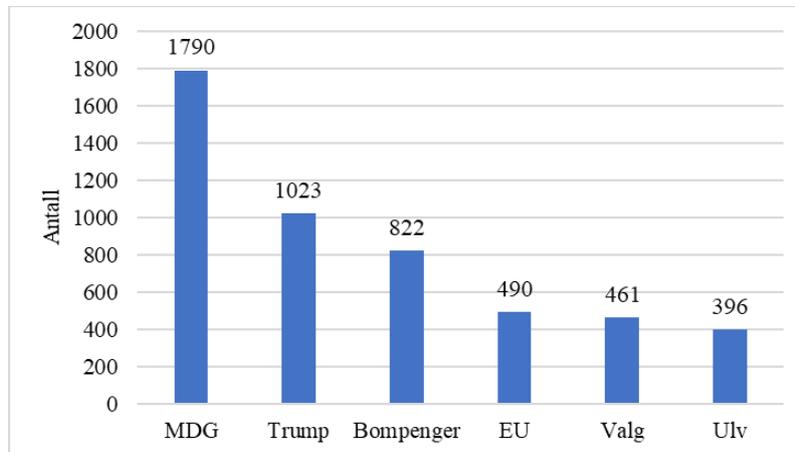


Figure 10: Thematic search terms with the highest frequency in the data material from VG

The thematic search term that occurs most often in the data material from VG is “MDG” [“the Green Party (MDG)”], which was included in the operationalisation of our first approach, “Increase polarisation and level of political conflict”. There is a predominantly negative tone in general, with a high degree of criticism of the Green Party (MDG), both relevant and irrelevant. The rhetoric is marked by attacks on the party, ascribing characteristics such as brainwashing, climate hysteria, fanatical, sect and out of touch with reality. Although there is predominantly negative mention, there are also countervoices in the debate with reactions to what is perceived as bullying, sharing of opinions, and support for the Green Party (MDG). The debates revolve around a number of issues and are primarily linked to climate change and the environment, where there are people who do not believe there is a climate crisis and people who believe it is urgent to do something about climate change. There is also discussion linked to road tolls, including whether tolls have any positive impact on climate change, and the oil industry, where scepticism is voiced about moving away from oil production and concerns about jobs. The most prominent topic, however, is the election. Discussions largely revolve around the opinion polls ahead of the election and the election results, but there are no attacks or attempts to sow doubt about the election results or the electoral process. To the extent that ad hominem was found, it was aimed at Lan Marie Berg, but there is no obvious system to it. On a general level, although the rhetoric is often harsh in mentions of the Green Party (MDG), it does not appear to be an attempt to deter others from participating in the debate through intimidation. Nor are there any users who stand out with unusually many posts or repetition of the same message. The discussion appears to be populated by ordinary users who express frustration and criticism, which is not uncommon in connection with polarised topics.

In VG’s comments sections, the word “Trump” is high on the list of thematic search terms. Trump is included in our third approach: “Influencing topics and supporting candidates and/or parties that are sympathetic to Russian interests”. The VG articles are generally about Trump and the Trump administration’s foreign policy and are not related to the election in Norway. Among the topics addressed are Greenland, Boris Johnson / Brexit, and meetings with the Taliban and Iran. There is wide variation in the topics in the comments sections, usually reflecting the content of the article that is being commented on. The arguments are generally moderate. Some commenters have a tendency to use block capitals, multiple exclamation marks and question marks, but not in a way that indicates the spread of disinformation. Nor are there any comments in English or suspiciously bad Norwegian. In general, the topics of debate are related to disagreements over Trump’s fitness as president, Norway’s relations with Russia, including that Norway should be wary of Russian interest in the far north, and increased funding to the Norwegian Armed Forces and the goal of spending 2% of GDP on defence, Norway’s

good relationship with Russia, and that Norway should not follow the USA. As was the case in discussions concerning the EU, the comments reflect well-known arguments regarding Norway and Russia.

Another topic that was widely discussed in the data material from VG was road tolls, where the search words “road tolls” [“*bompenger*”], “FNB” [People’s Action No to More Road Tolls] and “toll station” [“*bomstasjon*”] figure highly. Most of the articles in VG were about the dispute over road tolls in the run-up to the election. In contrast to the findings for the search term “Trump”, the comments on this topic often mention the political parties, party leaders and the election. A large number of the comments contain criticism of the parties in government, but also the Labour Party (Ap), the Green Party (MDG) and the Socialist Left Party (SV), plus the significance of People’s Action No to More Road Tolls (FNB)’s progress in opinion polls and its role as a one-issue party. The topic of road tolls is often linked to climate change and whether tolls have any positive impact on climate issues. There is little ad hominem, but where it does occur, it is usually focused on Erna Solberg. Although the comments reflect a highly polarised topic in Norway, where people use harsh rhetoric, there are no indications in the data material of interference from foreign actors or targeted informational influence, in terms of language use, users or ad hominem.

The search term “EU” also occurs frequently in the VG dataset. Based on the list of search terms, the term “EU” has been categorised under the topic of wind power, as a result of the much-discussed Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER) and the EU’s Third Energy Package. However, most mentions of the EU are related to Brexit and Boris Johnson’s attempts to get the UK out of the European Union on 31 October 2019. The comments reflect the divide in the Norwegian social debate about the EU, with strong views for and against the union, in terms of both the UK’s and Norway’s relationship with the EU. Related to the UK and Brexit, these views pertain to British politicians showing contempt for the people, not following up on the referendum, and that this is a threat to democracy, on the one hand. On the other hand, new opinion polls show that the majority want to remain in the EU and that voters were misled by the Leave campaign. Not surprisingly, many of the comments mention Norway’s relationship with the EU and the Norwegian referendums on EU membership in 1972 and 1994. The comments reflect arguments against the EU related to the issue of sovereignty and self-rule, and arguments for the EU and EEA, with a focus on economic benefits, cooperation and a united EU as central to peace. The topic is partially related to Norwegian political parties where the Conservative Party (H) is generally criticised for its stance on the EEA Agreement and Norway’s relationship with the European Union in general. Most of the comments are based on relevant, factual arguments and use moderate language. There are some exceptions, describing the EU as corrupt, dictatorial and a threat to democracy, and that VG is a piece in a cynical game being played by the power elite. However, the content analysis finds no indication of any attempt at informational influence; this is real dialogue between users and reflects well-known arguments for and against the EU. In general, the Norwegian is relatively good, and there are no indications of direct translation from other languages. Furthermore, there is very little ad hominem, apart from some focus on Erna Solberg and Siv Jensen.

In general, there are few hits for reinforcing words from the list of keywords that indicate threat-based information, information that plays on sex or arouses disgust. These words are largely used in connection with topics related to the EU, climate change, Trump and road tolls. The term “fake news” is the most frequently used reinforcing word in the VG material. This is mostly in connection with the experiment performed by the TV documentary programme “Folkeopplysningen” in connection with the school election at Lillestrøm upper secondary school, where many people are positive towards the experiment, but where some people believe NRK is engaged in creating “fake news”. Otherwise, “fake news” occurs in the context of Trump and climate issues, where, among other things, the Green Party (MDG) is accused of promoting fake news about the climate crisis. Another word that figures highly is “dangerous” [“*farlig*”], which is in itself a relatively commonly used word in Norwegian and which is not necessarily directly threat-based. In this context, it is linked to the Green Party (MDG), fake news, and the EU as a threat to democracy.

Based on the strategies and techniques for spreading information described above, we found no indications of foreign actors or attempts at systematic informational influence.

Aftenposten

Our data basis for Aftenposten is not as large as that from VG, and this may be due to Aftenposten's paywall, meaning that fewer users comment on articles. In general, there are no indications of foreign attempts at informational influence. An analysis of the most talked about stories revealed largely relevant, fact-based argumentation and moderate language, with the exception of a few heated exchanges of opinion. The content and use of language can be characterised as emotional, but does not indicate anything other than a dialogue and exchange of opinion between ordinary users.

Based on the list of search terms, the dominant topics are immigration and climate change, both of which are included in the "Increase polarisation and level of political conflict" approach. In contrast to VG, there are few comments about road tolls. The topics being debated are also not related specifically to the election, political parties or politicians, except for the focus on the Green Party (MDG) in the discussion of climate change. Otherwise, the search term "election" ["valg"] occurs mainly in connection with comments on the experiment conducted by the NRK TV programme Folkeopplysningen on elections and influence.

Climate change and/or the environment is most frequently discussed in the context of "Greta Thunberg", "the Green Party (MDG)" and "climate crisis" ["klimakrise"]. Many of the comments pertain to Greta Thunberg, where there is a clear divide between strong criticism and support for her. In general, we find that, like immigration, climate change and the environment is also a more polarised debate, with clear arguments for and against when it comes to measures, and on the question of whether the climate crisis even exists. Wind power is also widely discussed (including words such as "wind turbines" ["vindturbiner"], "windmills" ["vindmøller"] and "nature" ["natur"]), where people have differing opinions both for and against wind power. There is also discussion about whether we are currently in a climate crisis or not.

Immigration is also a major topic where the search term "Islam" figures highly and is often seen in combination with "Muslims" ["muslimer"] and "refugees" ["flyktninger"]. There are clear disagreements in the comments sections related to this topic, with arguments for and against Islam, including warnings about Islam as an ideology featuring terms such as "stealth Islamisation" ["snikislamisering"] and "Islamification" / "Islamisation" ["islamisering"]. This topic is also closely related to discussions for and against immigration. Overall, the language used is relatively moderate, but naturally there are some exceptions, as is common in more polarised debates.

As was the case for VG, there is little use of reinforcing words from our list of keywords (see Annex B). The term that occurs most frequently is "fake news", where all the posts refer to the experiment conducted by the NRK TV programme Folkeopplysningen on the school elections at Lillestrøm upper secondary school. Otherwise, there are occurrences of the terms "domination techniques" ["hersketeknikk"], "lies" ["løgn"], "Islamification" / "Islamisation" ["islamisering"], and "dangerous" ["farlig"], but without further indication of the systematic use of these words.

NRK Ytring

In recent years, NRK removed the comments section from its articles on nrk.no, meaning the scope of data is significantly smaller than from, say, VG. The data material from NRK is from NRK Ytring, which still has a comments section, where we collected some 5,100 posts. Figure 11 shows the thematic search terms with the highest frequency in the NRK dataset. The dominant topics are all part of the "Increase polarisation and level of political conflict" approach and concern immigration, climate change and the environment, wind power, and predators. The content analysis of the comments related to these topics has not revealed any indications of illegitimate attempts at informational influence; rather it indicates that these are ordinary users discussing the

relevant article or the topic in general. Most of the arguments are largely relevant and factual and are written in good Norwegian.

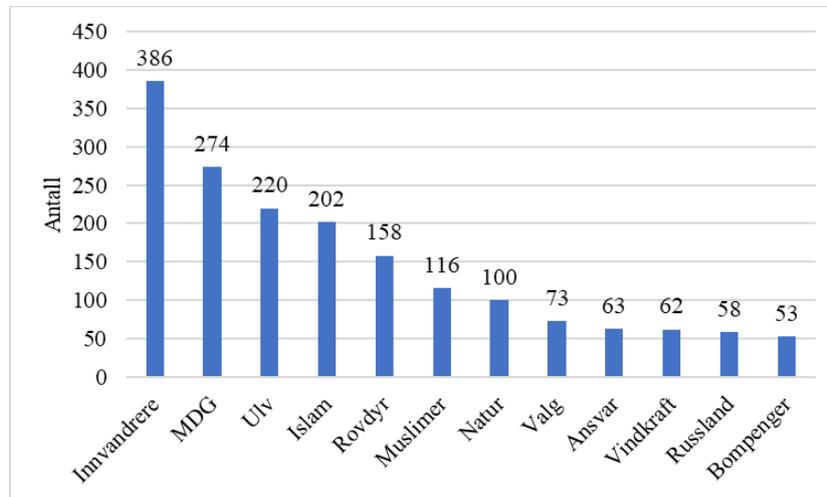


Figure 11: The thematic search terms with the highest number of hits on NRK Ytring

The most talked about topic in the NRK dataset is immigration, with the highest frequencies for the words “immigrants” [“*innvandrere*”], “Islam” and “Muslims” [“*muslimer*”]. Both people who are critical of immigration and Islam and people who are positive participate in the debate. Issues that are discussed include Norwegian language requirements for immigrants, how much immigration costs society, and how profitable it is. Regarding Islam and Muslims, there are many posts that address criticism of Islam in the context of freedom of expression, where it is both emphasised that it must be possible to criticise Islam without being accused of Islamophobia, as well as reactions to what is perceived as hysteria with non-factual stereotyping of Muslims. In this connection, it is also discussed whether the mainstream media address negative aspects of Islam and accusations against Human Rights Service for spreading hatred of Muslims. There is no pronounced ad hominem or malicious rhetoric with attempts to deter others from participating in the debate. Although most of the comments are relevant and factual, strong words are used between users with insults, such as a comment being stupid, that the commenter lacks knowledge, is condescending, a fool or thinks they know it all. Quite often, commenters are asked to document what is perceived as untrue allegations, smoke-screening and strawman argumentation. To the extent that there is an element of exclusion, we found a divide, with the “left” criticised as being manipulative, flock-minded and a chorus of parrots, and the “right” criticised as being stupid, promoting hatred of Muslims, and that right-wing populism is the real enemy. However, there are no indications that this is anything other than a normal exchange of opinions between users and nothing unusual in a polarised debate.

For climate change and the environment, the terms with the greatest number of hits are “the Green Party (MDG)”, “climate crisis” [“*klimakrise*”], “climate hysteria” [“*klimahysteri*”], and links to wind power, nature and wind turbines. On a general level, there is broad discussion about the topic, with people who are sceptical about climate change, and especially whether it is caused by human activity, and people who believe immediate action is required. There is disagreement over whether there is scientific proof for the claim that climate change is caused by human activity and whether there is an ongoing climate crisis. The topic is also linked to Norway’s oil and gas production, with arguments that it is possible to phase out production and that reliable alternatives must be in place first, as well as concerns about jobs. In discussions about wind power, we find both arguments both for and against building more wind turbines. As was the case with *Aftenposten*, there are clear differences of opinions, but the arguments are mostly relevant and factual.

As regards the Green Party (MDG), the discussion is more heated, and both the party itself and its policies are criticised for not having sufficient knowledge about economics, showing contempt for voters, and for being out of touch with reality. At the other extreme, there are also those who support and defend the Green Party (MDG). One issue that many people are concerned about in connection with the Green Party (MDG) is road tolls, where the party is accused of being biased against motorists, promoting unsocial charges, and targeting the worst-off in society. Others point out that the road toll policy is a cross-party political decision and that it cannot be blamed on the Green Party (MDG) alone. Even though there is a good deal of discussion among users, there are no signs of malicious rhetoric. Nor is there any notable degree of ad hominem.

In the posts on predators, like the two other main topics, there is a clear divide between arguments for and against predators. Many people point out that predators, primarily wolves, are not endangered internationally and stress the importance of preserving cultural landscapes and the possibility for farmers to have animals grazing without losing large numbers each year. This is also linked to the economy and how much it costs society to pay compensation. Others argue that it must be possible to combine agriculture with the presence of predators, that several species of predator are endangered in Norway, and the importance of preserving the stocks in Norwegian nature.

In general, the data material provides no indications of foreign informational influence activities or users with abnormally many posts. Most posts are written in good Norwegian with no sign of bots, suggesting they are ordinary users responding to the relevant article or other users' comments. In terms of indications of disinformation, there is little use of multiple exclamation marks, question marks and block capitals. There are also relatively few hits for reinforcing words from the list of keywords. The terms with the highest frequency are "domination techniques" ["*hersketeknikk*"] and "dangerous" ["*farlig*"], but there is no systematic use of these terms and they occur in a variety of comments from different users.

4.3.4 Alternative media

Alternative media are not a new phenomenon, but they are starting to play a more prominent role in the public debate, and some are experiencing rapid growth in readership. They differ from the mainstream media in both form and content. While the established daily press has public or commercial interests, alternative media are often run on a voluntary basis and have clear editorial views. We have studied [document.no](#), [rights.no](#) (Human Rights Service) and [resett.no](#), which are three growing alternative media with stories that reach a large number of readers. According to StoryBoard, these three are often seen among the top 10 most shared on social media.

Overall, we have a larger data basis from Document and Resett than from Human Rights Service (HRS). Approximately 55,000 posts have been collected from Resett with one or more hits in the lists of search terms and keywords, and around 25,000 posts with hits from Document. For HRS, there are significantly fewer with only around 1,100 posts with hits for our thematic search terms and keywords. Overall, this suggests that there are many active users who comment on key topics related to our seven approaches. Based on the thematic search terms with the highest frequency in the comments sections of these media, as shown in Figure 12, we see that there are common features in the dominant topics, but also some differences.

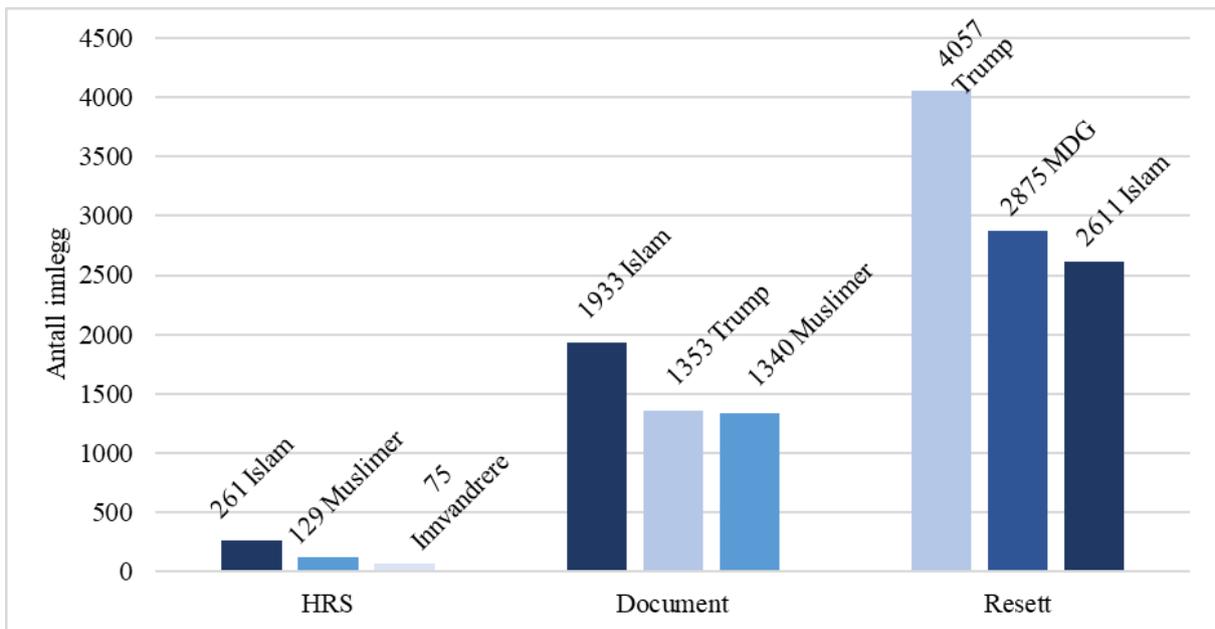


Figure 12: The three most frequently used thematic search terms on HRS, Document and Resett

We also registered a few users who stood out in the discussion threads with over 100 comments on Resett and Document during our period of study. We therefore analysed the comments to find out whether there were any indications of suspicious activity or whether these were simply very active, ordinary users. These profiles were particularly active on the topic of immigration and slightly above-average active in discussions of the EU. Closer analysis revealed that these were different posts and not repeat postings of the same post or comment. The comments also suggest that these were reactions to other users, and they are written in good Norwegian. Since most people have usernames that do not reveal their full name or nationality, it is difficult to find out who is behind the posts. However, the content of the comments and the language does not indicate that these are foreign actors or illegitimate attempts at informational influence.

It is common on alternative media sites for people to use pseudonyms as their username, and there is generally no background information to indicate who is behind a profile. It is therefore difficult to investigate whether fake identities have been used, or whether someone is pretending to be an ordinary user. There are also usernames containing English words and phrases, although this in itself is not necessarily suspicious. The commenters concerned also write relatively well in Norwegian, and our analysis of the posts does not indicate that they have been translated from another language. In addition, the fact that the comments are reactions to the content of the article and other users' posts, with dialogue between the commenters, suggests that these are not bots.

Document

Based on hits for thematic search terms, we identified three dominant topics in Document.no's comments section. The topic with the highest frequency is immigration, with many hits for "Islam", "Muslims" ["muslimer"] and "culture" ["kultur"]. This is followed by "Trump" and "EU", and then climate /environment with the highest number of hits for "the Green Party (MDG)", as well as the use of words such as "windmills" ["vindmøller"], "nature" ["natur"], "wind power" ["vindkraft"] and "Greta Thunberg". Moreover, the word "election" ["valg"] is often used in user posts on Document. There is a fair amount of discussion among users, but overall there is a high degree of consensus among the people who post.

The words Islam, Muslims and culture are part of the operationalisation of the approach “Increase polarisation and level of political conflict”, where the expectation is that one of the strategies that a foreign actor who wants to exert an influence would use is to add fuel to already polarised social debates, for example, by supporting groups on both sides in a conflict. There is a predominantly negative tone in most of the comments with clear views, generally critical of Islam. For example, Islam is considered a threat to the Western world and as undermining Norwegian culture and values. There is also often an exclusionary aspect, with a clear divide between “us” and “them”, where Islam is perceived as incompatible with Norwegian society. To the extent that ad hominem was found, this was related to politicians, primarily Abid Raja and Prime Minister Erna Solberg, but also Jonas Gahr Støre, Knut Arild Hareide and Trine Skei Grande. Moreover, there is strong criticism of politicians and the mainstream media, often abbreviated to “MSM”. In general, politicians are criticised for refusing to take responsibility, and it is highlighted that trust has been weakened because established parties have stopped caring about what people think. The mainstream media are criticised for biased representation, described using strong words such as manipulation, propaganda, lying and activism. Although this is clearly a polarised topic that triggers a lot of anger and frustration, the analysis does not indicate that these are foreign attempts at informational influence.

“Trump” is another leading search term in the data from Document. Among our thematic search terms, Trump has been categorised under the topic of “USA / NATO” as part of the operationalisation of the approach “Influencing topics and supporting candidates and/or parties that are sympathetic to Russian interests”. The analysis shows that Trump is referred to in connection with a number of issues, including the distribution of burdens in NATO, the drone strike in Saudi Arabia, Iran, geopolitics, the trade war with China, and the possible impeachment proceedings against the president. Most people mainly express support for the US president, but there are also some who are critical of the Trump administration’s behaviour and policies. Otherwise, there is no notable degree of ad hominem in the comments.

The majority of the mentions of Trump are positive, using words and phrases such as that he will save the West, and that he is smart, unyielding and capable. There are also a number of comments with a negative tone, criticising, among other things, the opposition in the USA for not accepting the 2016 election result and Norwegian politicians for being naïve and irresponsible in their security policy assessments. The bulk of the criticism is aimed at the mainstream media, which are accused of promoting hatred of Trump, disinformation and manipulative rhetoric. As we saw in connection with the topic of immigration, many people claim that the media’s portrayal is skewed, and they are often accused of lying. It is conceivable that actors who want to exert an influence will seek to sow doubt about the reliability of the mainstream media. Nevertheless, there is no indication of a targeted campaign in this regard, and the criticism seems rather to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the mainstream media. In general, the analysis of the posts about Trump indicates that there are no targeted attempts to exert an influence, but rather that these are ordinary users commenting on various issues that were topical during the investigation period for this project.

Another much-discussed thematic keyword on Document was “EU”, which is part of the “Increase polarisation and level of political conflict” approach. As was the case in the VG dataset, the EU is mainly discussed in connection with issues such as Brexit and the European defence cooperation. There is a consistently negative tone and widespread criticism of the EU as undemocratic, tyrannical and destructive for European culture and European traditions. Not surprisingly, Brexit, Norway’s relationship with the EU, and the EEA Agreement feature strongly. A vast majority of users are critical of Norway’s connections with the EU, with reference to the two referendums on whether Norway should join the EU, arguing that politicians have brought Norway into the EU through the backdoor.

Based on the list of keywords, there are relatively few hits for reinforcing words that may indicate disinformation. The words with the highest number of hits are “violence” [“*vold*”], “murder” [“*drap*”] “dangerous” [“*farlig*”] and “fake news”. The first three are mainly linked to the topic of immigration, where comments refer, among other things, to events in Sweden and where people point to a link between

immigration and increases in violent crime and murder. “Fake news” is used in connection with various issues such as the experiment conducted by the NRK TV programme Folkeopplysningen in Lillestrøm, climate change, Trump, the mainstream media (which are accused of promoting fake news) and criticism of Norway’s fact-checking service, Faktisk.no. The analysis of these comments shows that the comments come from many different users, and there is no indication of targeted messages from individual actors or spread of disinformation.

On a general level, the analysis shows that the posts on Document often have a negative tone and are emotional, but the rhetoric cannot be said to be attempts to mislead, deceive or intimidate others to deter them from participating in the debate. There are also no calls to demonstrations or other forms of activism, attacks on Norwegian institutions or the electoral process.

Resett

Based on the hits for thematic search terms with the highest frequencies, we identify three dominant topics in Resett.no’s comments section. The most talked about topic is Trump, followed by climate change and/or the environment with, among other things, a high number of hits for “the Green Party (MDG)” followed by “windmills” [“vindmøller”], “nature” [“natur”], “wind power” [“vindkraft”], “climate crisis” [“klimakrise”] and “Greta Thunberg”. Immigration is another controversial topic, with large numbers of hits for “Islam”, “Muslims” [“muslimer”], “immigrants” [“innvandrere”], “refugees” [“flyktninger”] and “integration” [“integreering”]. There are also many comments related to road tolls including the search terms “road tolls” [“bompenger”] and “FNB” [People’s Action No to More Road Tolls (FNB)]. In addition, many comments that contain the term “road tolls” [“bompenger”] are about the Progress Party (FrP), and many link this topic to climate change and the Green Party (MDG). There is also a high number of hits for “election” [“valg”], mostly where users are commenting on the election itself in connection with the various issues.

The content analysis of the most frequently mentioned thematic search term, “Trump”, did not find any indication of targeted influence campaigns. The current US president engages many users and is mentioned in connection with a wide range of issues, including possible impeachment, events in the Middle East, the trade war with China, Trump’s offer to buy Greenland, the anniversary of attacks on 11 September 2001, the border wall with Mexico, and the upcoming US election campaign. There is a lot of back and forth among users, not always relevant or to the point, but there is nothing that appears to be attempts to deter others from participating in the debate. Moreover, there is little ad hominem. As regards Trump himself, the comments are largely supportive, but there are also people who are critical in the debate.

Comments mentioning the Democratic Party in the USA have a more negative tone, criticising them for not accepting the result of the 2016 presidential election. The same is also true when comments address US news coverage, which is accused of being an anti-Trump propaganda machine. The consistently negative mention of the news media is also directed at Norwegian mainstream media, primarily the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), but also Aftenposten and the Norwegian News Agency (NTB), for example. In general, there is sharp criticism that they are running an anti-Trump campaign, promote “fake news”, and spread propaganda and bullying. Like the Document material, there are no attacks or criticism of the electoral process or Norwegian institutions, and the criticism appears to be part of an active debate and a general dissatisfaction with the mainstream media.

The other dominant topic in the comments section on Resett in the period of analysis is climate change and the environment. Here the highest number of hits was for “the Green Party (MDG)”, but there were also hits for “Greta Thunberg”, “nature” [“natur”], “climate crisis” [“klimakrise”] and “climate hysteria” [“klimahysteri”]. In general, the comments are a reaction to the associated Resett article and address a number of issues such as the Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER), Erik Solheim’s move to the Green Party (MDG), and road tolls, but differ from the comments about Trump in that many also mention the municipal

elections to a much greater extent. Opinion polls ahead of the elections are discussed at some length, as well as possible coalition constellations between parties in different municipalities after the election. Although opinion polls and the autumn's elections are widely discussed, there are no attempts to sow doubt about the electoral process or the election result – which could have been expected if there were actors in the debate who wanted to exert an illegitimate informational influence.

Although there is some discussion with counterarguments, the comments are mostly negative, criticising the Green Party (MDG), both its politicians and its politics. Strong words are used, such as climate terrorists, extremist, fanatical and crazy. The party is often criticised for having little knowledge of how society and the economy work, and is perceived as not particularly credible. In general, there is also criticism of what is referred to as a climate movement, with its campaign of scaremongering propaganda, and scepticism is expressed towards, among other things, what they call “climate hysteria”. The mainstream media are also often criticised for promoting “fake news” and that they have uncritically helped promote the Green Party (MDG) in the election campaign. It is clear that the environment and climate is a topic that engages many people and triggers strong emotions, but there are nonetheless no indications that this is anything other than a legitimate public exchange of opinions.

Immigration is another much-discussed topic on Resett, primarily with a high frequency of use of the search terms “Islam” and “Muslims” [“*muslimer*”]. The content of the comments related to this topic is predominantly negative. The posts about Islam and Muslims relate to a number of issues that were relevant in the time period for this project, such as Crown Prince Haakon's visit to the Al-Noor Mosque, stealth Islamisation, Abid Raja's accusations against the Progress Party (FrP), FrP politicians who are members of SIAN (Stop Islamisation of Norway), and the attacks by Philip Manshaus. Most of the comments express a clear frustration, with many people critical of Islam and immigration, but there are also countervoices to these posts. There is also an element of exclusion, with a clear divide between “us” and “them”.

The criticism also targets the mainstream media and the major political parties, where in particular the proposal for a national plan of action to combat hatred and racism against Muslims in the wake of the mosque attack is perceived by many as meaning that it is forbidden to be critical of Islam and that the plan will probably instead serve to heighten the level of conflict going forwards. For the comments in general, threats are also referred to in the form of utterances about Islam such as merciless, brutal, dangerous, foreign and destructive, as well as warnings that we are at war and will soon be wiped out. Although threat-based information attracts attention, the analysis does not indicate foreign, illegitimate influence campaigns, but rather a legitimate, active debate about a polarised topic about which people have strong feelings.

As was the case for Document, there are relatively few hits for reinforcing words from the list of keywords. The most commonly used words are “violence” [“*vold*”], “dangerous” [“*farlig*”] “free” [“*gratis*”], “rape” [“*voldtekt*”], “murder” [“*drap*”] and “fake news”. Analysis of the individual comments in context found no indication in the Resett dataset that this is anything other than normal use of ordinary Norwegian words. “Violence” [“*vold*”], “dangerous” [“*farlig*”] “rape” [“*voldtekt*”] and “murder” [“*drap*”] occur most frequently in connection with the topic of immigration, but are also linked to socialism, left-wing extremism, references to Sweden and discussions about freedom of expression and hate speech. “Fake news” is also used in connection with a number of issues, including the experiment by the NRK TV series *Folkeopplysningen* on election manipulation, which is mainly criticised as ridiculous and misleading, as well as the mainstream media in general, which are accused of being a propaganda stream of fake news, biased news and an echo chamber for fake news. The term is also referred to in connection with the topic of climate change and/or the environment with references to Thunberg, reports on Greenland's melting ice sheet, and oxygen production in the Amazon rainforests.

These reinforcing words are used by many different users and in connection with different cases. There are a couple of users who stand out in their use of exclamation marks, question marks and block capitals, but a closer

analysis of the comments indicates that these are simply particularly engaged users who have a penchant for certain stylistic devices, such as writing in uppercase, to express their opinions.

Human Rights Service (HRS)

The dominant topic of discussion in the data material from HRS is immigration. The thematic search terms with the highest numbers of hits are, in descending order, “Islam”, “Muslims” [“*muslimer*”], “immigrants” [“*innvandrere*”] and “culture” [“*kultur*”]. There are also a number of hits for “refugees” [“*flyktninger*”] and “integration” [“*integrering*”]. The election and the climate change and/or the environment are also discussed, but with significantly fewer hits than for immigration. Immigration is part of the operationalisation of the “Increase polarisation and level of political conflict” approach, where actors with the intention of exerting an influence can be expected to try to aggravate polarised debates, for example, by supporting groups on both sides of the conflict.

The comments concerning Islam, Muslims and immigration are marked by a negative tone, where the discussion is mainly critical of Islam and immigration. The content is predominantly emotional and characterised by a clear divide between “us” and “them”. Among other things, there are arguments that Islam poses a threat to Norwegian values and culture, and warnings about the consequences, if Islam becomes more prevalent in the Western world. The comments on HRS differ somewhat from those on Resett and Document in that there is overwhelming consensus among the users. Although there are some instances of counterarguments and/or discussion, these are few and far between. As already mentioned, immigration is a polarised topic in the social debate in Norway. There is no indication of attempts to increase tensions through support for counterarguments; instead, it is more a case of expression of agreement with the views in the article being commented on than debate among the users. Although the language used is often intense with strong feelings expressed in the arguments, we find no indication of targeted attempts to mislead, deceive or deter other users from participating in the debate.

Besides criticism of Islam and all it entails, there is strong criticism of the mainstream media and the policies pursued by the Government and the Storting. However, this is not a case of an attack on institutions or the electoral process itself, but rather users who are dissatisfied with the policies being pursued and what is perceived as biased representation by the mainstream media. Furthermore, there is also no indication of targeted campaigns, calls to demonstrations or other forms of activism. Not unexpectedly, strong language is used to criticise politicians and established political parties, especially, when polarising topics, such as immigration, are being discussed, where people have firmly held opinions for and against.

There are few reinforcing words that may indicate disinformation in the data from HRS. The words with the highest numbers of hits are “frightening” / “scary” [“*skremmende*”] and “violence” [“*vold*”]. These two are common words in the Norwegian language and do not necessarily indicate disinformation. In the data from HRS, “frightening” / “scary” [“*skremmende*”] is often used in the context of radical Islam, about journalists with their own agendas that fact-check people with an opposing opinion, about the scale of immigration to Norway, and about people’s lack of knowledge about Islam. “Violence” [“*vold*”] is also linked to mass immigration and foreign cultures. However, there are no further indications that this is anything other than ordinary use of common Norwegian words.

Some of the typical strategies for fake news and disinformation were found in the material, but a closer review suggests that this is not foreign attempts at informational influence. Instead, it is probably ordinary users who are particularly engaged and emotional regarding a polarising topic.

4.4 Cross-platform analysis in collected data material

4.4.1 Other patterns or correlations

In summary, there are no specific findings linked to the prevalence and distribution of, for example, likes, the use of block capitals and special characters and their correlation with our search terms and keywords that intuitively provide grounds for further follow-up.

The degree of analysis in this respect is limited by the scope of the project, and there is therefore an untapped potential in the form of machine analysis at a more detailed level. The findings discussed in section 4.2.2 are an example of what could potentially be achieved if more detailed machine analysis were carried out.

4.4.2 Qualitative analysis of a small sample based on quantitative filtering

An analysis was carried out in which the hits for search terms and reinforcing words, prioritising the hits with the most likes, were used to reduce the number of comments. These comments were then subject to a qualitative analysis. For three different constellations of search terms, the number of comments was reduced to around 100–300 comments. Seen in isolation, it is risky and pointless to characterise the content of over 5,000 hits on the basis of such a small sample, and to generalise using such an instrumental approach. However, the purpose here is to compare and contrast the findings with the other quantitative analyses, not to apply the results directly.

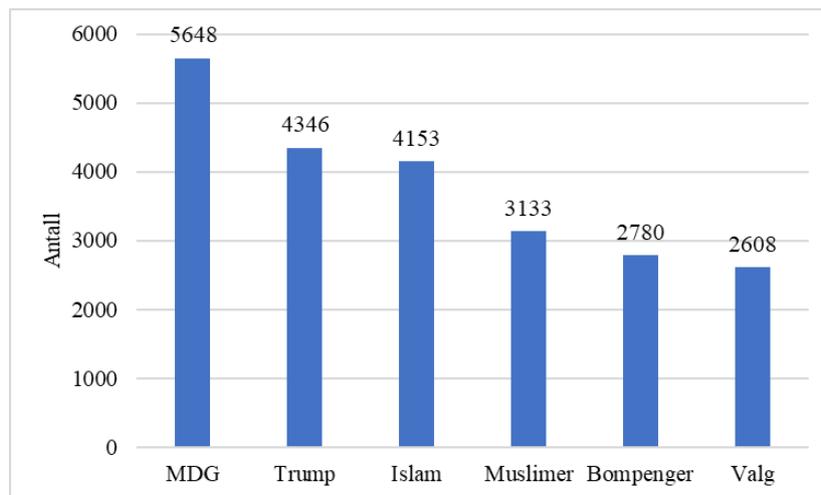


Figure 13: Hits for thematic search terms

The analysis was conducted along three independent lines, based on the thematic search terms that have the highest frequency across the platforms as shown in Figure 13: 1) MDG (the Green party), 2) Trump and 3) Islam+Muslims, and are presented more closely in Annex F.

This analysis indicates to a greater extent than the preceding qualitative analysis a general sense of exclusion, expressed through claims that one's views are not heard or taken into account, and shows less sensitivity to discursive elements on social media, highlighted in the analysis of comments on Facebook. A sense of exclusion is an important part of a general polarised debate landscape, and is often directed at established political parties and the media, which are accused of undermining freedom of expression and allying themselves with forces that want censorship based on special interests such as climate change and religion.

The argumentation reflects the already polarised debate that can be expected to be linked to the chosen topics, and the rhetoric is fairly harsh, but no more so than can be expected. There are few discernible countervoices. In general, there are no particular signs of suspicious actors, informational influence techniques, disinformation, content, language or wording that give grounds for direct suspicion of foreign influence, but in many ways the debate climate is prepolarised, providing an ideal starting point for any actors who want to exert an influence, be they local or foreign.

Through the narrow sample and synthesised narrative extracted from the comments found here, we recognise an “enough is enough” mood that is basically fully polarised against “the others”, yet available for further polarisation for actors who might be interested in doing this, for example, to further increase the excluding distinction between “us” and “them”, or aggravate a polarised topic of debate with emotional rhetoric and frustration.

Some of the most active actors have a remarkable number of comments recorded by Disqus. Many of these have few, if any, followers, and follow almost no-one themselves. Their influence cannot therefore be considered as great, based on an assumption that this reflects the degree of dialogue or exchange with others.

However, these actors become interesting in a different way, when linked to a previous analysis. Actors with high activity, few followers and little following of others resonate with the kind of actors that are possible mediators from more covert, extreme online activities. In other words, we find actors who appear to be Norwegian users, based on our data material, but who also participate in more covert and significantly more extreme forums on other websites. Some of these are part of a network (see section 4.2.2) that systematically transfers content from very extreme websites. These actors deliberately moderate their language when posting on media that reach a broader audience and make efforts to camouflage this type of activity.

Drawn to its utmost conclusion, this could lead to a hypothesis of a connection between the “enough is enough” wing of the participants in the discussion and attempted hidden channels for informational influence. However, we found no concrete evidence to prove that the actors identified through the filtered search have such roles, although one of them has been identified as both participating in discussions in alternative websites with a closed profile and as a possible actor who conveys material of a dubious nature on the alternative websites. At least five others have been identified as participants, but do not have a central role as mediators based on the network graph (see section 4.2.2). None of them shows any signs of being foreign actors. It was therefore not considered relevant to pursue this further.

Moreover, the filtered analysis across the platforms can be interpreted as providing a good indication that the collected data material is consistent and that the search and comparison tools provide a reasonably representative impression across the different approaches. However, it also serves as an important reminder that a quantitative approach to this area must be supplemented by a broad, diverse qualitative approach to give sufficient meaning.

4.4.3 Search terms related to electoral fraud or undermining political trust

With a focus on investigating whether there have been attempts to undermine political trust or systematic attempts to sow doubt about the electoral process, we performed an analysis across the data material. To this end, we conducted searches for thematic search terms categorised under the following approaches:

- Attempts to influence confidence in the electoral process, election results, elected candidates and parties, and the political system and the Norwegian authorities more generally, including unfounded allegations of electoral fraud.
- Attempts to reduce voter turnout. We focused on the following search terms:

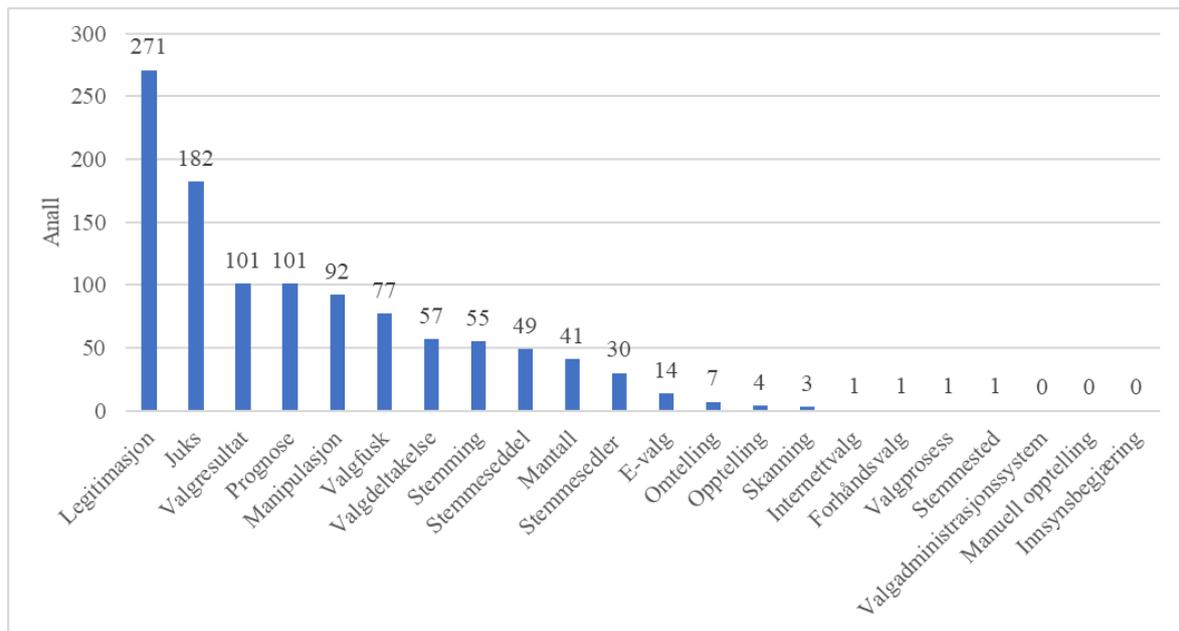


Figure 14: Number of hits for search terms related to electoral fraud or undermining political trust

As illustrated in Figure 14, there are generally few hits in the collected material for the search terms related to the two approaches. An analysis of the posts yielded no indications of organised influence in the form of repeated messages or reports. The most commonly used search terms are “ID”, [“*legitimasjon*”] and “cheating” [“*juks*”] with 271 and 182 hits respectively, which is very small in view of the total volume of data. The words are used in myriad different contexts without any indication of system or underlying organisation. Often, use of these words expresses many different users’ general dissatisfaction and frustration in a number of different areas.

Overall, the analysis of the data material revealed no indications of attempts to undermine political trust, the proliferation of unfounded allegations of electoral fraud or attempts to reduce voter turnout.

4.4.4 RT and Sputniknews’ stories relating to Norway

To assess whether there has been a targeted smear campaign against Norway in the period, we reviewed stories about Norway written by RT.com (formerly known as Russia Today) and Sputniknews.com. These are the largest Russian media in foreign languages and are known channels of influence. RT had very few stories, while Sputniknews had a significant number, but no marked increase was registered in the run-up to the election. The cases are often linked from Norwegian media, and mostly deal with immigration-related matters or issues related to Russia, generally security policy. Details of the findings can be found in Annex E.

We also cross-checked sputniknews.com and RT.com against the collected data material. There were no links to sputniknews.com and the few from RT.com were not about Norway, but about events in Syria and Ukraine. A review of the data material compared with the stories about Norway published by RT.com and Sputniknews gave no hits of interest. Based on these investigations, we found no basis for concluding that there has been a targeted smear campaign of Norway in the period analysed.

4.5 Summary of the analysis

Against the backdrop of the previous analyses, this section returns to the research questions for this project. The main result is that we did not find any clear indications of foreign informational influence campaigns in

the run-up to and during the Norwegian local elections in 2019, including the dissemination of disinformation in Norwegian media from foreign actors.

By contrast, what the analysis has found is a form of organised network activity for the spreading and sharing of controversial content, including known conspiracy theories. Using graph pattern matching to analyse dissemination and sharing from less credible online sources, we identified a handful of users, dubbed “super-users”, who are followed by very many users and who ensure the further spread of similar messages. In the network, we also found users who only follow and are only followed by the super-users. A manual review revealed a number of requests to coordinate information via encrypted channels, use services to avoid being tracked online, and encouraging use of moderate language when commenting on websites that reach wider parts of the general public. Qualitative analysis across our collected data material enabled us to identify some of these users.

Another interesting finding was a trend whereby users spread information about and links to both the Facebook page and the website of the controversial news website Sørlandsnyhetene. A graph pattern analysis of this network revealed another constellation of relationships among the users. They were often organised in one-way relationships where some super-users had very many followers, but only followed one or two users themselves. In addition, the super-users had very many posts and were far more active than an average user. We cannot prove that any of the actors in these networks are foreign or represent foreign influence. Nor has the analysis indicated that the spread of this information was related to the election or was aimed at the electoral process. The actors that it was possible to identify based on their user history and public profile all appear to be Norwegians with a Norwegian IP and residential address.

Although the qualitative analyses have indicated a polarised debate landscape that may invite further polarisation, these analyses also revealed that the democratic debate in both social media and news media is probably better than its reputation, where there is a democratic resilience to attempts at informational influence.

At the same time, these observations are a reminder that the technological possibilities for informational influence are very complex and constantly evolving, and can easily circumvent what we can discover by only studying the content as it appears in the comments sections. One of the few conclusions it is possible to draw is that the distinction between real and fake, legitimate and illegitimate, is becoming ever harder to maintain.

In terms of methods, we have only looked at a sample of digital platforms, and the analysis must be regarded in light of this. This innovative, exploratory analysis also entailed a number of methodological challenges. Compilation of the lists of search terms and keywords posed challenges, because individual words can have several different meanings; in addition, their context must be taken into account, to avoid misinterpretation. An automated quantitative analysis is well suited to indicate potentially problematic words, but at the same time there is a risk of misinterpretation of these words, since the individual context cannot be taken into account. In many cases, it was simply a case of normal words that can be used in many different contexts and by normal users. Another element is that some words have not been the most appropriate, such as the word “free” [“*gratis*”], and that there is a significant potential for improvement in these kinds of lists of search terms and keywords. It was also difficult to run analyses on words like “Islam” and “fake news” on, for example, Twitter, because these words are used globally and not only in Norway. Our lists can be used as a starting point for future analyses, but they will need to be improved and validated. Further work on these kinds of lists in Norwegian should also consider including Nynorsk and Sami.

Our analysis is exploratory and ought to be seen as a starting point for future research in this direction. In our case, however, it has also been demonstrated that qualitative and quantitative analyses can complement each other in a good way, when the results are seen in context.

5 Advice on possible measures to meet the challenges

In its specification for the assignment, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation requested advice on how central authorities can best tackle the challenges, and how the population can be made aware in an appropriate manner. We will start by providing a brief description of election influence. We will then provide an overview of relevant literature, studies and plans to prevent and/or deal with election influence. This will then be summarised in a structured overview of possible measures. Some of the measures are far-reaching and challenging, especially in relation to democracy and freedom of expression; we will therefore then present the main challenges, limitations and criticism of the measures. Finally, an assessment will be made of priority measures that ought to be implemented. However, since we have a very limited overview of the many implications that the measures may have, significant reservations must be made, and we would stress that each measure must be thoroughly assessed before a decision is made.

5.1 Threats and challenges – what is election interference?

Bay and Snore⁶⁸ propose that the purpose of interference in elections may be to influence the election results, undermine confidence in the election, or other intentions, such as undermining democracy and internal solidarity or influencing the perception of a country internationally. They claim this can be done in three ways. Firstly, by influencing elections as an administrative process, by hacking the electoral systems or spreading disinformation that undermines confidence in the election. Secondly, by influencing participation in the election, either by spreading disinformation about where, when and how to vote, or by undermining willingness to participate in the election. Thirdly, by influencing the election as a political process, by means of cyber attacks, trolling and influence on social media, leaks and undermining political candidates.

Brattberg and Maurer⁶⁹ have a slightly different approach, claiming that election interference can focus on influencing voters' preferences, participation in elections, or the electoral process. This can be done in three ways, through information operations (for example, on social media), through cyber operations (for example, hacking computer systems associated with elections), or by means of so-called mixed operations that include both information operations and cyber operations.

There is also a difference between illegitimate informational influence and legitimate communication activities. The first will typically involve deception or forgery, exploit our weaknesses in favour of a foreign state, interfere with constructive debate, or interfere in cases where foreign actors do not have a legitimate role.⁷⁰

5.2 Literature, studies and plans

Extensive research and studies have been done that are relevant for the protection of elections against influence. Firstly, there is literature on influence in general, some of which discusses social media and polarisation in particular, which to date are the most vulnerable areas. Secondly, there is literature on foreign states' influence on Western politics, of which election influence is but one of a range of channels and methods of influence. Thirdly, there is literature on disinformation, which often overlaps with the challenges associated with election influence. Finally, there is literature that focuses specifically on protection of democratic elections against digital informational influence.

In the following, we provide an overview of the most important Norwegian literature in this area, EU plans and measures, and the most relevant international studies on the protection of elections.

⁶⁸ Bay S and Snore G (2019), p. 10–11.

⁶⁹ Brattberg and Maurer (2018), p. 27.

⁷⁰ Pamment J, Nothhaft H, Agardh-Twetman H & Fjallhed A (2018). Countering Information Influence Activities – The State of the Art. Lund University: Lund.

In June 2019, the Norwegian Government launched its plan of action⁷¹ to prevent unwanted influence and hybrid threats in the conduct of the municipal administration and county authority elections. It presents ten measures, including cross-sectoral collaboration on risk analysis, information for candidates, parties and the media, an emergency response system in the event of hacking of central government profiles on social media, security in connection with the implementation of the elections and manual counting of votes, mapping of possible influence, and detection of fake news.

As part of the Government's plan of action to prevent election influence, the Norwegian Media Authority, the fact-checking service Faktisk.no and the National Association of Local Newspapers (LLA) have joined forces on a campaign⁷² to raise awareness about fake news and disinformation. The campaign includes films and advertisements spread via newspapers and social media, plus a quiz and concrete advice on how to recognise fake news. In its surveys⁷³, the Norwegian Media Authority has found that senior citizens are the worst at recognising fake news. The Faktisk.no website describes methods for fact checking.

The consultancy Proactima has delivered the report *Sikkerheten i demokratiske prosesser i Norge [Security in democratic processes in Norway]*⁷⁴ to the Election Act Committee. They propose nine regulatory measures, mainly related to statutory provisions and security requirements, plus 20 other possible measures, and also point out challenges in terms of transparency and freedom of expression.

In a short report⁷⁵, the Norwegian Board of Technology has proposed rules for openness and transparency on micro-targeting and labelling of political advertisements, and also provides an overview of measures to prevent international manipulation. In a report⁷⁶, the Data Protection Authority has examined the use of digital targeting of political messages in general and in Norway in particular, and has formulated six guidelines on prudent use of digital targeting technology. The guidelines focus on the development of common norms and ensuring data protection. In particular, they stress that micro-targeting can make the political system vulnerable to manipulation, foster discrimination and undermine legitimacy and confidence in the democratic process.

In her book *Falske nyheter – løgn, desinformasjon og propaganda i den digitale offentlighet [Fake News – lies, disinformation and propaganda in the digital public sphere]*⁷⁷, Bente Kalsnes has undertaken a thorough review of what fake news and disinformation are, and how they are created and shared, and makes some recommendations on managing the challenges. She reviews relevant literature, describes how fact checks ought to be carried out, and recommends measures in four areas: media, technology and platforms, legislation, and schooling in critical understanding of media and information and a critical approach to sources.

⁷¹ The Office of the Prime Minister (2019). Ti tiltak for å hindre uønsket påvirkning i valg gjennomføringen [Ten measures to prevent unwanted influence in the conduct of elections]. Retrieved from: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/ti-tiltak-for-hindre-uonsket-pavirkning-i-valggjennomforingen/id2661220/>

⁷² The Norwegian Media Authority (2019). Til felles kamp mot falske nyheter [Joining forces to combat fake news]. Retrieved from: <https://medietilsynet.no/om/aktuelt/felles-kamp-mot-falskenyheter/>

⁷³ The Norwegian Media Authority (2019). Eldre er dårligst på å gjenkjenne falske nyheter [Older people are worst at recognising fake news]. Retrieved from: <https://medietilsynet.no/om/aktuelt/eldre-erdarligst-pa-a-gjenkjenne-falske-nyheter/>

⁷⁴ Valdøl A-K, Wiencke H S, Dale C, Tuastad S, Holo T, Røed W & Sandal B (2019). *Sikkerheten i demokratiske prosesser i Norge [Security in democratic processes in Norway]*. Proactima: Stavanger.

⁷⁵ Barland M & Tennøe T (2019). *Valg, teknologi og politisk påvirkning [Elections, technology and political influence]*. The Norwegian Board of Technology: Oslo.

⁷⁶ The Norwegian Data Protection Authority (2019). *På parti med teknologien – Digital målretting av politiske budskap i Norge [Joining forces with technology – Digital targeting of political messages in Norway]*. The Norwegian Data Protection Authority: Oslo.

⁷⁷ Kalsnes B (2019). *Falske nyheter – løgn, desinformasjon og propaganda i den digitale offentlighet [Fake news – lies, disinformation and propaganda in the digital public sphere]*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk: Oslo.

The EU has developed an *Action plan against disinformation*⁷⁸ to strengthen efforts to combat disinformation. The plan includes four pillars: firstly, strengthening the ability to detect, analyse and expose disinformation; secondly, strengthened coordination and common response; thirdly, mobilisation of the private sector against disinformation; and fourthly, strengthened awareness and resilience. The measures are to be followed up with regular reporting.⁷⁹

The EU has also proposed measures in five areas to ensure free, fair elections. The areas are improved cooperation, transparency about political advertising, rules for protection of personal data, data security, and the possibility of fining political parties for violations of data protection rules.⁸⁰ In collaboration with social media firms and the marketing industry, the EU has also created a *Code of practice on disinformation*,⁸¹ where they have provided detailed advice against disinformation in five areas: monitoring advertising, rules for political advertisements, securing the integrity of the platforms to avoid abuse, measures to ensure users' understanding and influence, and measures to strengthen research on disinformation and political advertising. The plan also includes proposals for best practice for the marketing industry.

In *Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicators*⁸², the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) has provided detailed advice on how to handle informational influence. The handbook covers how to handle and counter informational influence in general, and not only in connection with elections. The handbook is divided into three parts: awareness of, identification of, and countering informational influence. In connection with countering informational influence, they attach particular importance to preparations, including awareness-raising, building trust through communication, and thorough risk and vulnerability assessment.

In *Russian election interference – Europe's counter to fake news and cyber attacks*⁸³, Brattberg and Maurer review initiatives and experiences from the Netherlands, France, the UK, Germany and Sweden. They divide countermeasures into five categories: legal, technical, policy-related, operational, and awareness-raising and education, at the same time as they point out the importance of a learning process over time. They make 14 specific proposals for measures, without categorising them, as well as a further 11 measures specifically for the USA. Some of these are included in the subsequent overview of possible measures.

In the study *Protecting elections: A strategic communications approach*⁸⁴, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence looks at measures to protect elections in Sweden, Finland, Estonia and Latvia. Their approach is based on the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's original work, developed by Brattberg and Maurer, and further developed in this study. The study recommends starting with a mapping of the information environment, conducting a threat assessment, and assessing capacities in relation to the risks. The authors behind the study point out that protecting elections with very many actors is demanding, and there is a need for both preventive and damage control measures. Based on the experiences from the four countries,

⁷⁸ European Commission (2018). Action plan against disinformation. Retrieved from: https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

⁷⁹ European Commission (2019). Action plan against disinformation – Report on progress – June 2019. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet_disinfo_elex_140619_final.pdf

⁸⁰ European Commission (2018). State of the union 2018 – Free and fair European elections. Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-factsheet-free-fair-elections_en.pdf

⁸¹ European Commission (2018). Code of practice on disinformation. Retrieved from: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-singlemarket/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>

⁸² The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency – MSB (2019). Countering information influence activities – A handbook for communicators. MSB: Karlstad.

⁸³ Brattberg E & Maurer T (2018). Russian Election Interference – Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Brussels.

⁸⁴ Bay S & Snore G (2019). Protecting Elections: A Strategic Communications Approach. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga.

they summarise a number of measures under six main points: Mapping, coordination, protection and resilience, collaboration and partnerships, detection and monitoring, and education and awareness.

In *Russia-Proofing your election*⁸⁵, Kolga et al. review election interference in Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, France, Germany and Canada, and propose a number of solutions to protect the election in Canada in 2019. These include working with social media companies, data security, regulation of foreign media, deterrent communication aimed at potential adversaries, international cooperation, and amendments to security legislation to enable cyber attacks against any actors who attack the election. Many of the proposals are very detailed, and often significantly more restrictive and far-reaching than those recommended previously.

In *Government responses to malicious use of social media*⁸⁶, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence has reviewed and provided an overview of recommended or implemented measures against social media manipulation in 43 countries. These are grouped into four categories: measures aimed at social media companies, measures aimed at attackers, measures aimed at citizens, civil society and media, and measures to build state capacities to counter manipulation. They also point out that there are no easy solutions to the challenges, that many of the measures are problematic, and they recommend a shift away from monitoring and criminalisation towards a greater focus on data protection and transparency about algorithms and advertising.

In *A report of anti-disinformation initiatives*⁸⁷, the Oxford Technology and Elections Commission provides an overview of a wide range of measures to combat disinformation and manipulation around the world. The report points out that measures to combat disinformation are often controversial or challenging to implement, and that they can be used to gain control of media and prevent free debate and freedom of expression. In another report, *Literature review on elections, political campaigning and democracy*,⁸⁸ OxTec has reviewed the literature on digital illegitimate election influence. The report points out that we still know little about the impact and consequences of this kind of influence and highlights in particular the need to ensure data protection.

The US Senate has published a report on Russian interventions against electoral infrastructure⁸⁹ and another on the use of social media in connection with the 2016 elections⁹⁰. The first recommends a wide range of measures designed specifically for the US system, grouped into four categories: deterrence, sharing information about threats, data security in the electoral systems, and securing voting and ballot counting. The second contains a wide range of measures for social media companies, legislation, awareness-raising and coordination.

⁸⁵ Kolga M, Janda J & Vogel N (2019). *Russia-proofing your election – Global lessons for protecting Canadian democracy against foreign interference*. Macdonald-Laurier Institute: Ottawa.

⁸⁶ Bradshaw S, Neudert L-M & Howard P N (2018). *Government responses to malicious use of social media*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga

⁸⁷ Robinson O, Coleman A & Sardarizadeh S (2019). *A report of anti-disinformation initiatives*. Oxford Technology and Elections Commission: Oxford.

⁸⁸ Thwaite A (2019). *Literature review on elections, political campaigning and democracy*. Oxford Technology and Elections Commission: Oxford.

⁸⁹ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019). *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure*. U.S. Senate: Washington D.C.

⁹⁰ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2019). *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election. Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media*. U.S. Senate: Washington D.C.

A number of others have also made similar recommendations to secure elections, such as the investigation⁹¹ into the 2018 election in Sweden and a comparative analysis of Russian interference in elections.⁹²

5.3 Overview of possible measures

The advice and recommendations span a wide range of challenges and vary enormously in degree of detail. The different sources also have slightly varying approaches and priorities, and it was therefore necessary to restructure and systematise the various measures, in order to obtain a manageable set of data. The suggested measures span from teaching media understanding in schools to security legislation that allows cyber attacks against countries that interfere with elections. Some of the suggestions are adapted to needs, regulations and challenges in specific countries and are thus not relevant to Norway. Others need to be modified slightly to be relevant.

In our work, we did not find any indications of actual election influence and thus do not have a concrete basis for advice based on findings from this election. This overview of measures must be seen as a compilation of possible measures, taken from a comprehensive review of literature on the subject, not advice about what ought to be implemented. Relevant measures ought therefore to be subject to careful further assessment in order to clarify the financial, political, legal, practical, security policy and other implications, as well as compatibility with democracy and freedom of expression. This includes factors that SINTEF does not have the competence to assess in full in this project.

We have chosen to divide the possible measures into six partially overlapping groups: (1) awareness raising, (2) prevention, (3) cooperation and coordination, (4) protective measures, (5) active countermeasures and deterrence, and (6) research, learning and competence building.

5.3.1 Awareness raising

The basic idea is to make authorities, citizens and the media aware of the challenges. Knowledge and information will help reduce both the spread and the impact of disinformation and influence. This can be done by information via media, by discussion of the threat by public authorities, security services, research groups and others who have relevant information, and by encouraging debate on the subject. Relevant topics are identification of the main threats, examples of interference in elections elsewhere, what measures are planned, and what voters can do themselves in relation to information and how they can identify suspicious information. Awareness and discussion may also encourage reporting of attempts at informational influence. These kinds of information measures and communication via editorial articles are inexpensive, can reach many people, and are fairly uncontroversial. However, good documentation explaining the threats must be provided to preserve credibility over time and not blow the threat out of proportion.

Awareness raising among the actors directly involved in elections is another cost-effective, targeted and relatively uncontroversial measure. This may include raising awareness and providing information to the people involved in the implementation of elections, prevention of influence, and campaigns targeting candidates and parties. It has been widely emphasised that the parties need advice on digital issues and security.

⁹¹ Colliver C, Pomerantsev P, Applebaum A and Birdwell J (2018). Smearing Sweden – International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election. ISD: London.

⁹² Lamond J and Dessel T (2019). Democratic Resilience – A Comparative Review of Russian Interference in Democratic Elections and Lessons Learned for Securing Future Elections. Centre for American Progress: Washington D.C.

These measures will also be closely linked to measures to improve cooperation and coordination among the many actors involved in carrying out an election.

A more comprehensive alternative is broad measures aimed at larger audiences. These can be measures, training or campaigns to increase knowledge about democratic processes, awareness of fake news and disinformation, a critical approach to sources and understanding of the media, education in general online security in the broadest sense and campaigns to combat online bullying. Parts of these measures may be relevant for long-term introduction in schools. The Norwegian Media Authority's survey shows that senior citizens are the worst at recognising fake news, and raising awareness among this group is a relevant measure. These measures will be very resource-intensive and time-consuming. They might also be demanding in terms of how far governments can go before their influence is controversial in respect of censorship and freedom of expression.

5.3.2 Prevention

Prevention must naturally always start with mapping and performance of threat assessments and risk and vulnerability assessments. These form the basis for the preparation of contingency plans and communication plans with prepared messages for dealing with various relevant challenges. It is recommended that the plans be regularly reviewed and rehearsed, and that crisis management drills be carried out.

It is recommended that the electoral system and infrastructure be formally classified as sensitive objects pursuant to the National Security Act, i.e. that they are recognised as being of critical importance for basic national functions⁹³. This means that they will be subject to special requirements for testing and protection. In addition, the systems should be "stress-tested" to ensure that they are correctly dimensioned to withstand relevant loads. The project does not have insight into existing threat assessments, plans and measures to protect the electoral system and infrastructure. We cannot therefore make recommendations regarding this, other than that the government ought to consider carrying out a mapping of the challenges and identify cost-effective prevention.

There must be a system and relevant expertise to monitor and analyse various forms of digital informational influence. Reporting mechanisms and notification systems ought to be established, which involve Norwegian authorities, international computer companies, media and civil society so that attempts at influence can be identified and followed up. Furthermore, sufficient capacity ought to be established to be able to analyse attempts at influence and follow them up with countermeasures. These measures will probably require input from a number of ministries, agencies, secret services and research and development environments, and ought to be seen in the context of the next section on cooperation and coordination, as well as the section on research, learning and competence building.

The news media are important actors that ought to be involved and made more aware of the issues at stake. This may contribute to both critical journalism and preparedness against influence. As an example, the media in France collaborated during the presidential elections to make sure they did not publish material based on hacking or disinformation. We recommend paving the way for broad, fact-based, high-quality journalism. Some people stress the need for competence building and better tools so that journalists can more easily check facts. Transparency about journalistic processes is required to ensure trust in the media. Some countries regulate or require registration of foreign media. Measures related to the media are far-reaching and must be assessed carefully in respect of costs, media independence and possibly censorship.

⁹³ National Security Act, sections 6-1 and 7-1.

5.3.3 Cooperation and coordination

Measures in this area are based on those mentioned above under awareness raising. Elections involve a wide range of actors and public authorities at different levels. There should be clear distribution of roles, responsibilities and authority and defined routines for cooperation between all the public bodies involved, nationally and locally. There should also be support mechanisms for local electoral organisations from more specialised expertise on a central level. In addition, cooperation should be institutionalised among all the actors involved in the conduct of elections, including the political parties and the media, as mentioned above.

Furthermore, appropriate forms of cooperation ought to be established with the major international social media companies to handle disinformation, targeted advertising, account theft and other manipulation, as well as routines for reporting problems and exchanging information. The EU has developed a Code of Practice, which could be used as the standard for this cooperation. Some researchers, such as Kolga et al., propose significantly stricter requirements to social media than those suggested by the EU.⁹⁴ Openness about functions and algorithms and access to the application programming interface (API) for digital platforms are also desirable for research on and analysis of influence on social media.

Cooperation should also be established with allied countries on threats, reporting and countermeasures, and with international experts such as the European External Action Service / East StratCom, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, and the European Centre of Excellence on Countering Hybrid Threats (in which Norway participates). This would help improve experience exchange, learning and competence building greatly.

The project does not have sufficient knowledge of the current measures and practices to make more concrete recommendations in this area.

5.3.4 Protective measures

There are very many possible protective measures, which will undoubtedly require prioritisation and careful assessment that go beyond the mandate for this project. However, measures related to data security are mentioned frequently in the literature and ought to be considered in closer detail. Stricter regulatory measures and prohibitions are also discussed, at the same time as there is strong awareness that these kinds of interventions tend to have problematic sides.

Data security is consistently highlighted as very important, and the following measures are mentioned:

- Support parties, candidates and the electoral organisation against cyber attacks
- Establish secure technical solutions, with back-up and independent alternative solutions, especially for the conduct of the election and ballot counting
- Training in data security for everyone involved
- Protect personal data that are relevant for the conduct of the election
- Ensure common interpretation of the GDPR in connection with elections
- Regulate social media companies' use of personal data
- Participation in the EU Network of Cybersecurity Competence Centres

In connection with micro-targeting and advertising, the following measures are mentioned:

⁹⁴ Kolga et al. (2018), p. 27–28.

- Transparency about micro-targeting and target groups
- Labelling and archiving of advertisements
- Transparency about funding of micro-targeting and campaigning in general
- Common standards for micro-targeting and safeguarding of data protection
- Possibility to impose sanctions and fines for violations
- The EU lists a wide range of more detailed measures in its action plan

A wide range of regulatory measures have been proposed. Proactima's report to the Election Act Committee contains a thorough review of the topic.⁹⁵

- Regulation of execution of elections and possibilities for inspections
- Make the conduct of elections subject to the National Security Act
- Clarification of roles between local and central actors
- Mandatory use of the EVA election administration system
- A "stand-by" statutory basis in the election legislation
- Requirements for two independent counts
- Clarify the sanctions available in the event of hacking of the election systems
- • Checks of election workers to avoid insider threats
- Training and awareness raising for election workers
- Rules prohibiting the buying and selling of fake clicks
- Rules prohibiting the spread of false information (this is regarded as particularly problematic)
- Expansion of the definition of illegal material • Prohibition against foreign financing of election campaigns

5.3.5 Active countermeasures and deterrence

Active countermeasures to deter relevant actors are also considered pertinent. The most relevant measure is warnings from the Norwegian authorities that attempts at influence will be detected through monitoring systems and exposed. This entails publicly announcing that data are being analysed and monitored for possible attempts at influence, and warning that any such attempts will be exposed. The measure itself is simple and inexpensive, but requires active involvement from the political leadership to be credible. It will also attract a lot of media interest, and thus has the potential to reach many. In this context, good documentation of any attempts will be essential to maintain credibility. It will also require that there is a reliable surveillance system and political willingness to follow up on any attempts at influence. This kind of public exposure of disinformation and influence may serve as a deterrent and help raise awareness.

At the last election in Sweden, Prime Minister Løfven criticised Russian attempts at influence, stating clearly that they would monitor and relentlessly expose any further attempts.⁹⁶ Similarly, the German security services found that the 2017 Federal Elections were conducted without significant interference precisely because they had broad awareness of the challenges and implemented extensive countermeasures.⁹⁷ The US Attorney

⁹⁵ Valdal A-K, Wiencke H S, Dale C, Tuastad S, Holo T, Røed W and Sandal B (2019). Sikkerheten i demokratiske prosesser i Norge [Security in democratic processes in Norway]. Proactima: Stavanger.

⁹⁶ Brattberg E & Maurer T (2018). Russian Election Interference – Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Brussels, p. 22

⁹⁷ Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) (2018). Verfassungsschutzbericht 2017 (Annual report on the protection of the constitution 2017). BfV: Cologne, p. 270–271, 276.

General, along with a number of heads of agencies, recently cautioned⁹⁸ against attempts at interference in the 2020 election, and the US cyber strategy states that it will use any means to counter foreign interference.⁹⁹

A number of countries and the EU have established special bodies¹⁰⁰ to protect the country's voters from outside influence, and in Sweden they are currently considering establishing a new authority to be responsible for the country's psychological defences.¹⁰¹ It may therefore be appropriate to consider national capacities for protection against foreign influence, organised either as a separate body or through collaboration between existing agencies. Some people also recommend national capacities and legislation that allow the use of cyber attacks against actors that attempt to influence elections. These kinds of measures are potentially quite costly, must be clarified thoroughly in relation to existing capacities, responsibilities and possibly legislation, and may have security policy implications.

5.3.6 Research, learning and competence building

Securing and protecting elections in a digital society like Norway is complex and encompasses many actors, and needs have been demonstrated recently through a number of new technological challenges and threats. Research and development work is regarded as necessary to build sufficient expertise and understanding of the challenges and will also be a prerequisite for and an integral part of all analysis work done to identify, understand and monitor the threats. The challenges related to election influence are new, and there is limited expertise on the subject. This is exacerbated by the fact that very many actors are involved in elections. The most obvious topics at this stage are research on election influence in general, influence via the internet and on social media in particular, and the ongoing changes in the threats, technology and methods. Research and development work will also be able to contribute directly to awareness raising work and thereby prevention. Election influence must be seen as an ongoing process that undergoes continuous development by relevant actors, and research and development ought therefore to be continuous, in order to ensure sufficient understanding. This measure is economically scalable, probably not unduly expensive, and is relatively uncontroversial.

At the same time, it is important to be aware that the research challenges linked to this area are related to, but go far beyond the research objectives and approaches that are currently classified in categories such as information security or cyber security. We would also like to point out that the methods developed through this project are promising, but need more research for calibration and necessary development to keep up with the changes in the threat landscape associated with informational influence.

5.4 Challenges, limitations and criticism

A number of the measures listed above are invasive, restrictive and challenging, especially in respect of democracy, freedom of expression and the risk of censorship or self-censorship. There are very many possible measures, and many have direct and/or indirect consequences. Often, the negative or challenging consequences are obvious, while the positive effects of the measures may be less certain. A good balance must be struck between the threat, measures and consequences, and in that context it is essential to have a sober approach to how serious the threat really is.

⁹⁸ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (2019). Joint statement from DOJ, DHS, DNI, FBI, NSA and CISA on ensuring security of 2020 elections. Retrieved from: <https://www.cisa.gov/cisa/news/2019/11/05/joint-statement-doj-dod-dhs-dni-fbi-nsa-and-cisaensuring-security-2020>

⁹⁹ The White House (2018). National cyber strategy of the United States of America. The White House: Washington D.C., p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ Bradshaw S, Neudert L-M & Howard P N (2018). Government responses to malicious use of social media. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga

¹⁰¹ The Swedish Government Offices (Regeringskansliet) (2018). En ny myndighet för psykologiskt försvar [A new authority for psychological defence]. Retrieved from: <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsligadokument/kommitteredirektiv/2018/08/dir.-201880/>

The European Commission's expert group strongly warns against banning fake news.¹⁰² They are worried that steps to combat fake news and disinformation in countries such as Germany, France, Italy and Ireland will end up restricting freedom of expression and lead to self-censorship. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) has conducted a detailed study¹⁰³ into what constraints the Swedish Freedom of Expression Act sets for measures to combat influence campaigns by foreign powers.

The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS)¹⁰⁴ points out that there is a risk that communication technology is becoming more and more politicised, that this is being addressed with ever more regulatory measures, and that this in turn could lead to a chilling effect on democracy and freedom of expression. They therefore caution against rapid and ill-thought-out regulation, and recommend instead a focus on transparency, responsibility, awareness and greater investment in digital infrastructure.

In *Government responses to malicious use of social media*¹⁰⁵, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence pointed out that there are no easy solutions to the challenges, that many of the measures are problematic, and recommend a shift away from monitoring and criminalisation towards a greater focus on data protection and transparency about algorithms and advertising. A lack of transparency about moderation and blocking may also have a so-called *chilling effect*. They also highlight that measures implemented in democratic countries are copied by authoritarian states and used to legitimise oppression, censorship and undemocratic actions. The European Commission's expert group also cautions against oversimple solutions, saying that all forms of censorship, private or public, must absolutely be avoided.¹⁰⁶

Oxford Technology and Elections Commission has pointed out¹⁰⁷ that measures to combat disinformation are often controversial or challenging to implement, and that they can be used to gain control of media and prevent free debate. In another report, they stressed that we still know little about the impact and consequences of this kind of influence and highlight in particular the need to ensure data protection.¹⁰⁸ The study of the Swedish election¹⁰⁹ pointed out that major media actors ought to report more correctly and wisely on challenges related to immigration and integration, and not sweep the challenges under the carpet. The influence of sensationalist media could thus be reduced. Another Swedish study¹¹⁰ carried out for the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) highlights that freedom of expression is a fundamental right, and that utterances should be met with open, free debate, not prohibition and/or restrictions. They also point out that in the vast majority of cases influence is entirely legal, even when it can be detrimental to others, and that it is very problematic if democratic states start restricting freedom of expression in any way.

¹⁰² Kalsnes (2019), p. 132.

¹⁰³ Winther P (2016). *Yttrandefrihetsgrundlagen och möjligheterna att möta påverkanskampanjer från främmande makt* [Law on freedom of expression and the possibilities for combatting influence campaigns by foreign powers]: Partial report 2 (2016) on commission from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB). The Swedish Defence University: Stockholm.

¹⁰⁴ European Parliamentary Research Service (2019). *Polarisation and the use of technology in political campaigns and communication*. EPRS: Strasbourg.

¹⁰⁵ Bradshaw S, Neudert L-M and Howard P N (2018). *Government responses to malicious use of social media*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence: Riga, p. 6, 12.

¹⁰⁶ European commission (2018), Final report of the High Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

¹⁰⁷ Robinson O, Coleman A and Sardarizadeh S (2019). *A report of anti-disinformation initiatives*. Oxford Technology and Elections Commission: Oxford.

¹⁰⁸ Thwaite A (2019). *Literature review on elections, political campaigning and democracy*. Oxford Technology and Elections Commission: Oxford.

¹⁰⁹ Colliver C, Pomerantsev P, Applebaum A and Birdwell J (2018). *Smearing Sweden – International Influence Campaigns in the 2018 Swedish Election*. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD): London, p. 7, 34–35, 38.

¹¹⁰ Pamment J, Nothhaft H, Agardh-Twetman H and Fjallhed A (2018). *Countering Information Influence Activities – The State of the Art*. Lund University: Lund, p. 112–113.

The same study for the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) also highlights that fact-checking is problematic if this can in any way be regarded as restricting the right to hold alternative opinions and views. Internationally, government-run fact-checking has often faced criticism and accusations of censorship.¹¹¹ When Norway's fact-checking service Faktisk.no was established, fears were expressed that they could become a court in cases where there is no absolute truth¹¹², and their application for state support was referred to as "borderline authoritarian".¹¹³

5.5 Assessment of prioritised measures

Based on the literature review and the overview of possible measures, we will now recommend a number of measures that seem particularly relevant. As mentioned, we must make significant reservations, as we have had limited possibilities to assess all consequences and implications within the scope of this project. That said, we recommend the five groups of measures presented below for further assessment.

Awareness raising helps make authorities, citizens and the media aware of the challenges, and will help reduce both the spread and the impact of disinformation and influence. Two measures stand out. Information about and discussion of the challenges via the media can reach many people, is highly cost effective, and is normally uncontroversial. Furthermore, raising awareness about informational influence among political parties, candidates and actors who are directly involved in the conduct of elections is targeted and cost-effective. A good example of measures of this nature is the information brochure with good general safety advice that the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation sent to all candidates in the 2019 municipal administration and county authority elections.

A comprehensive review of threats, vulnerability and protection measures ought to be considered to close any gaps and identify cost-effective prevention and safeguarding measures. This kind of comprehensive review ought to focus in particular on identifying necessary measures related to data security.

Research and development work is regarded as necessary to build sufficient expertise and understanding of the challenges and will also be an integral part of all analysis work done to identify, understand and monitor the threats. The challenges related to election influence are new, and there is limited expertise on the subject. Research and development work will also be able to contribute directly to awareness raising work and thereby prevention. Election influence must be seen as an ongoing process that undergoes continuous development by relevant actors, and research and development ought therefore to be continuous, in order to ensure sufficient understanding. The measures are economically scalable, probably not especially expensive, and are relatively uncontroversial.

Active countermeasures and deterrence are highlighted by many as particularly relevant, and it has been pointed out that this was a decisive factor in avoiding interference in recent elections in Sweden and Germany. This entails publicly announcing that data are being analysed and monitored for possible attempts at influence, and warning that any such attempts will be exposed. The measure itself is simple and inexpensive, but requires active involvement from the political leadership to be credible. In Sweden, the message was issued by the

¹¹¹ Robinson O, Coleman A and Sardarizadeh S (2019), p. 17.

¹¹² See Kalsnes (2019), p. 92, and ABC News (2017.07.07). Jagland med bredside mot Faktisk.no [Jagland takes out a full page spread against Faktisk.no]. Retrieved from: <https://www.abcnyheter.no/nyheter/politikk/2017/07/07/195315932/jagland-med-bredside-mot-faktisk-no>

¹¹³ Jacobsen T & Eckblad B (2019, 22.10). Sp-politiker Ola Borten Moe angriper Faktisk.no etter søknad om statsstøtte [Centre Party politician Ola Borten Moe attacks Faktisk.no after application for state support]. *Dagens Næringsliv*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dn.no/medier/senterpartiet/ola-borten-moe/vg/sp-politiker-ola-borten-moe-angriper-faktisknoetter-soknad-om-statsstotte/2-1-456355>

Prime Minister. It also requires that there is a reliable surveillance system and political willingness to follow up on any attempts at influence.

6 Summary and reflection

The project did not detect any instances of disinformation or informational influence. However, there were indications that we were not able to investigate in more detail in connection with identified networks that spread information, and patterns were identified in online debates that can be exploited, if someone wanted to exert an influence. Nevertheless, we cannot prove that there has been influence by foreign actors with the intention of aggravating existing polarisations or doing other things that correspond to the approaches for informational influence that we used as the point of departure for our analysis.

At the same time, the data material that we have studied is only a tiny part of the total flow of information that in theory may have affected voters and the election, and there may be methods and mechanisms that we are not aware of or that cannot be captured through data analysis. For example, a larger project could have included local newspapers, as well as image analysis on Instagram and YouTube. We cannot exclude the possibility that infrastructures for influence are being built that we do not know enough about today. An example of this may be the organised networks that we detected that formed a bridge between media that the broad public uses and understands and highly extreme websites with their own format, style and logic.

It can also be queried whether a local election in Norway is sufficiently interesting for an international actor. The counterargument to this kind of scepticism is that the general election due to be held in two years' time may be of greater interest to an international actor and thus be at greater risk of influence attempts, and a possible actor could be interested in practising and testing methods ahead of the general election. The international situation that we used as our starting point also indicates that the level of activity within disinformation and informational influence is high and constantly rising. Effective resilience to threats of this type requires continuous focus and knowledge development. This project has focused on possible foreign influence. The findings indicate that illegitimate, controversial or norm-challenging informational influence can also take place within national frameworks.

It must also be added that our empirical data and analysis have scarcely touched upon the underlying structures we mentioned in the introduction on digital influence of elections, the role of social media, and the digital economy, psychology and power. The overall threat and vulnerability understanding can be complemented through a “Big Other” paradigm¹¹⁴ that provides better parameters for understanding the implications of the daily digital influence we expose ourselves to, and that may result in election influence through digital media not being something we only worry about every two years. Commercial and political influence overlap, and we are subjected to both on a daily basis in our digital lives. Resilience to influence and hybrid threats is also important for ongoing and especially critical decision-making processes that directly affect, for example, civil protection. In this report, our contribution to addressing these kinds of challenges focused on the 2019 election. The method we have developed also constitutes another step forwards in terms of meeting the future in a better way, but the method requires calibration and further refinement.

¹¹⁴ Zuboff S (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Hachette: New York.

Annex A List of search terms: Seven approaches

To operationalise the seven pre-defined approaches for data collection and analysis, a list of thematic search terms was compiled for each approach. To date, there have only been a few content analyses of disinformation on social media, and we did not find any that had been done in Norwegian. While there can never be a static, standardised list of search terms, due to the highly dynamic nature of the phenomena we are investigating, it would have been useful to have some reference lists as a starting point. Lists in English are not necessarily transferable to Norwegian or the Norwegian discourse. We were therefore not able to use any established, validated lists of search terms and reinforcing words that might indicate disinformation (Annex B), and therefore had to compile our own. The compilation of the list of search terms was partly based on an independent assessment of relevant topics. For example, two central terms in the run-up to the election were “road tolls” [“*bompenger*”] and “wind power” [“*vindkraft*”]. These two search terms were chosen as an operationalisation of approach 1 “Increase polarisation and level of political conflict”. Road tolls and wind power are hotly disputed topics in Norway, with opposing sides in the social debate, which an actor with hostile intentions could potentially choose to aggravate in order to increase polarisation in society. By collecting data on these topics, we were able to investigate more closely whether this was the case in the period before and during the election.

The list was updated during the project based on a review of StoryBoard and preliminary analysis findings. Updates of the list of search terms during the project are included in the table (in blue), along with the reason for the update.

Approach	Topic	Search terms
(1) Increase polarisation and level of political conflict	Road tolls (transport)	Bom*penger/stasjon/ring [road toll(s) / station / point], FNB [People’s Action No to More Road Tolls (FNB)], neitilmerbompenger [no to more road tolls], folkeaksjon [people’s action], aksjon [action], samferdsel [transport], bompengeselskap [toll company], gule vester [yellow vests], bilister [motorists], bilhat [car hatred], motstand [resistance], kamp [battle, fight], elite, MDG [the Green party], MDG-Lan
	Immigration	Migrasjon [migration], innvandrere [immigrants], muslimer [Muslims], innvandrerbakgrunn [immigrant background], asyl*søknad/strøm [application for asylum / stream of asylum seekers], Islam, flyktninger [refugees], etnisitet [ethnicity], kultur [culture], terror [terror / terrorism], integrering [integration], arbeidsinnvandring [labour immigration], folkevandring [migration], majoritetsbefolkning [majority population], utskiftning [replacement], konspirasjon [conspiracy], eurabia [Eurabia]
	<i>New words added on 2 Sept. 2019</i>	<div style="display: flex;"> <div style="flex: 1;"> Moské [mosque], rasisme [racism], rasist [racist], nazisme [Nazism], nazist [Nazi], fascisme [fascism], fascist [fascist], Manshaus </div> <div style="flex: 1; padding-left: 20px;"> Explanation Topical story. The mosque shooting in Bærum on 10 August 2019. Naturally enough, the case exploded in the media, and articles were widely shared (cf. StoryBoard) </div> </div>

	båtmigranter [boat immigrants], snikislamisering [stealth Islamisation], håndhilse/håndhilsning [handshake / shake hands]	Topical story in the wake of Sylvi Listhaug's Facebook post and the subsequent reintroduction of the concept of "stealth Islamisation" by Siv Jensen (both matters have received a lot of focus in the media and have been widely shared on social media (cf. StoryBoard))
Climate change and/or the environment	Grønt skifte [green shift], klimagasser [greenhouse gases], fly [fly, aircraft], miljøvennlig [environmentally friendly], moral, drivstoff [fuel], Greta Thunberg, klimakrise [climate crisis], klimahysteri [climate hysteria], klima*bløff/realister/realisme [climate bluff / realists / realism], *skam (e.g. flyskam) [shame, e.g. flight shame]	
Wind power	Vindkraft [wind power], grønn energi [green energy], natur [nature], naturvern [conservation], norsk reiseliv [Norwegian tourism], dyreliv [wildlife], biodiversitet [biodiversity], naturmangfold [natural diversity], arealbruk [land use], skyggekastning [shadow throwing], erosjon [erosion], vindmøller [windmills], vindturbiner [wind turbines], monstermøller [monster windmills], kraftselskap [power company], kabler [cables], EU, kolonialisering [colonialisation], utenlandsk kapital [foreign capital], subsidiering [subsidisation], grønne sertifikater [green certificates], ørn [eagle], fugler [birds], ornitologi* [ornithology], ørnedrap [eagles dying], fugledrap [birds dying], insekt* [insect*], støy [noise], høyfrekvent [high frequency], lavfrekvent [low frequency], infralyd [infrasound], helseskade [harmful to health, health hazard], motstand [resistance], kamp [battle]	

	Other topics <i>New words added on 2 Sept. 2019</i>	Wolves, predators Politi [police], næropoliti [local police] Barnevern [child welfare] .	Explanation The local police reform is an issue that has been debated during the election campaign A possible topic. Generally used with reference to people in, for example, Russia and Poland (about Norway and the child welfare service), but can be a topic here too
(2) Reinforce the centre-periphery conflict	Norway's relations with Russia <i>New words added on 2 Sept. 2019</i>	Nabo [neighbour], store nabo [big neighbour], nabofolk [neighbours], samarbeid [cooperation], broderfolk [brethren], grenseland [borderland], gresnesamarbeid [border cooperation], Murmansk, Kola, Petsjenga [Pechenga], folk til folk [people to people], Nickel, bastionforsvar [bastion defence], stormaktsrettigheter [superpower rights], bakgård [backyard], Krim [Crimea], Ukraina [Ukraine] Øvelse [exercise], russisk [Russian], militær [military], missil [missile], Ocean Shield	Explanation Topical story: In early August, Russia held a major military exercise, just off the Norwegian

		coast, arousing a variety of different reactions
	County mergers	Fylkessammenslåing [county merger], sentralisering [centralisation], regionreform [regional reform], tvangssammenslåing [forced merger], Finnmark, Troms, Viken, Innlandet, Vestland, Agder, Vestfold, Telemark
	Municipal mergers	Kommunesammenslåing [municipal merger], kommunereform [municipal reform], selvstyre [autonomy, self-governance, self-rule], sjølstyre [autonomy, self-governance, self-rule], småkommuner [small municipalities], nærhet [proximity / local], folkestyre [people's rule]
	District policy in general	Avfolking [depopulation], utflytting [emigration], distriktsfiendtlig [anti-regional], sentralisering [centralisation], bruke hele landet [use the whole country], flyplass Helgeland [Helgeland airport]
	The health service, hospital location	Bunadsgerilja [bunad guerrillas], fødestuer [maternity wards], akuttberedskap [emergency preparedness]
(3) Influencing topics and supporting candidates and/or parties that are sympathetic to Russian interests	Sanctions against Russia	Russland [Russia], sanksjoner [sanctions], industri [industry], nordområdene [northern areas], Svalbard, Kirkenes, havn [port], handel [trade], avspenning [relaxation], samarbeid [cooperation]
	Allied military presence	Militære øvelser [military exercises], Trident Juncture, amerikanske soldater [American soldiers], Værnes, Indre Troms, Setermoen, NATO
	Intelligence activities	Globus-radar [Globus radar], Frode Berg, spionasje [espionage], etterretning [intelligence], E-tjenesten [the intelligence service], Marjata, NSA, CIA, overvåkning [surveillance], P-8, Orion, Andøya, GRU, FSB, øvelse [exercise, drill], Nordflåten [the Northern Fleet], marinefartøy [marine vessel], ubåt [submarine], kampfly [fighter plane], bombefly [bomber]
	Missile defence	Missilforsvar [missile defence], Vardø, bombemål [bombing target], amerikanere [Americans], rakett [rocket]
	Norway's relations with USA / NATO	Trump, sikkerhetspolitikk [security policy], forsvaret [the Norwegian Armed Forces], 2 prosent [2 per cent], BNP [GDP], Iran, Gulf*, oljetanker [oil tanker], tankskip [tankers], angrep [attack],
(4) Attempts to influence confidence in the electoral process, election results, candidates, parties, the political system and the Norwegian authorities in general	Electoral fraud	Valgfusk [electoral fraud], ansvar [responsibility], avmakt [powerlessness], ytringsfrihet [freedom of expression], manipulasjon [manipulation], juks [cheating]
	<i>New words added on 1 Nov. 2019</i>	<p>Opptelling [counting], skanning [scanning], stemmesedler [ballots], omtelling [recount], valgadministrasjonssystem [election administration system], EVA, e-valg [e-voting], internettvalg [online elections], protokollering [record keeping], møtebok [election committee minutes], manuell opptelling [manual count], valgresultat [election result], prognose [forecast], innsynsbegjæring [access request]</p> <p>Explanation Suggestions from the client on the topics of political trust and electoral fraud</p>

	Political trust	Alliansen [the Alliance], formue [fortune, wealth], politikerlønn [politician's salary], dekkoperasjon [cover-up], fake news, falske nyheter [fake news], folkevilje [will of the people], lokaldemokrati [local democracy], samfunnsdebatt [social debate], elite, avstand [distance]
	Smear campaigns	Landssvik [treason]
	<i>New words added on 1 Nov. 2019</i>	RT, Sputnik, russisk [Russian] Explanation To investigate whether the stories we found about Norway on these websites appear in our data material.
(5) Attempts to reduce voter turnout	Willingness to participate	Protest
	Dissemination of false information on practicalities linked to participation in the election	Valgprosess [electoral process], valgdeltakelse [voter turnout], stemming [voting], stemmeseddel [ballot paper], valg [election], forhåndsvalg [voting in advance], stemmested [polling station], deltakelse [participation], legitimasjon [ID], manntall [electoral register]
(6) Spreading compromising information that is made up or has been obtained illegitimately		Avlytting [phone tapping], e-mail, e-post [e-mail], telefonsamtale [phone call], svertetekampanje [smear campaign], drittpakke [rubbish deal], kompromat [compromising material], utpressing [extortion, blackmail]
Search terms generally for the election		valg2019 [election 2019], kommunevalget [municipal election], valg [election], kommune [municipality], valget [the election], kommunestyrevalg [municipal administration elections], nrkvalg [NRK elections], regjeringen [the government], frp [the Progress Party (FrP)], høyre [Conservative Party (H)], venstre [the Liberal Party (V)], krf [the Christian Democratic Party (KrF)], sp [Centre Party (Sp)], ap [Labour (Ap)], mdg [Green Party (MDG)], sv [the Socialist Left Party (SV)], rødt [the Red Party]
Other approaches	<i>Add on 2 Sept. 2019</i>	Memes Explanation A typical hallmark of misinformation and fake news is the use of propaganda posters. By adding memes as search terms, we are able to capture any comments on these kinds of images or posters if someone mentions these
	<i>Add on 1 Nov. 2019</i>	“Du er en bot” [“You’re a bot”], “Dette er bare propaganda” [“This is just propaganda”], “Dette er fake news” [“This is fake news”], “Er dette fake news” [“Is this fake news?”], “Dette er falske nyheter” [“This is fake news”], “Er dette falske nyheter” [“Is this fake news?”]

Annex B List of keywords: Factors that make disinformation attractive

Studies of the spread of disinformation highlight factors that make disinformation attractive and memorable, thereby contributing to faster and more widespread diffusion over the internet than true information.¹¹⁵ For example, threat-related information is a central topic in many rumours, where research indicates that this kind of information is forwarded and sought out more often than comparable information that is not threat-related.¹¹⁶ To investigate whether there was any dissemination of disinformation during the investigation period, we reviewed 164 stories from Norway’s fact-checking service Faktisk.no that have been fact-checked as “Completely untrue, actually”.¹¹⁷ These stories were manually encoded into the following categories: threat-related, sex-related, arouse disgust, counterintuitive, unnatural and gossip / celebrities. Based on this coding, we extracted keywords that had been used in the various articles and Facebook posts to enable us to operationalise the factors and perform machine searches in the data material. There were no cases from Faktisk.no that could clearly be categorised as “counterintuitive” or “unnatural”. In addition, stories containing misinformation identified by EU vs. Disinfo, containing the keywords “security threat”, “sexual assault” and “sexual harassment” were reviewed. The following table shows the list of keywords that we have performed searches for in the collected raw data.

Factors	Examples of stories	Terms / concepts
Contains threats	World War III is just around the corner	Advar [warn], advarsel [warning], avsløres [revealed], bedrag [deception, betrayal], blodbad [bloodbath, carnage], destruktiv [destructive], drap [killing, murder], dreper [killer], dødelig [fatal], dødsulykke [fatal accident], epidemi [epidemic, plague], farlig [dangerous], forfølge [persecute], frykt [fear], fryktede [feared], giftig [poisonous, toxic], giftigste [most poisonous, most toxic], grusom [gruesome, terrible], helserisiko [health risk], helvete på jord [hell on earth], hersketechnik [domination techniques], invadert [invaded], islamisering [islamification, islamisation], kaos [chaos], kastes ut [thrown out], kneble debatt [gag debate], konflikter [conflicts], kreft [cancer], krig [war], livsfarlig [deadly], livstruende [life-threatening], løgn [lies, lying], mishandlet [mistreated, abused], mordere [murderers], narkotiske stoffer [drugs], ond [evil, wicked], plantegifter [pesticides], provokasjon [provocation], ran [raid, robbery], ransgjeng [gang of robbers], risiko [risk], sikkerhetstrussel [security threat], skade [damage, harm], skadelig [harmful], skader [damage, harm], skandale [scandal], skandaløst [scandalous], skremmende [frightening / scary], skremmende resultater [frightening results], steril [sterile], svekket [weakened, undermined], svindel [swindle, scam], syk [sick], sykdomsutbrudd [outbreak of disease], terrorister [terrorists], true [threaten], tvangsvaksinering [forced vaccination], umenneskelig lidelse [inhuman suffering], virus, vold [violence], voldsfanatikere [violence fanatics / thugs], voldtaktsmenn [rapists], ytringsfrihet [freedom of speech], ødelegge Norge [ruin Norway, destroy Norway]

¹¹⁵ Acerbi A (2019). Cognitive attraction and online misinformation. *Palgrave Communications*, 5(15), p. 1–7; Vosoughi S, Roy D & Aral S (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), p. 1146–1151.

¹¹⁶ Blaine T & Boyer P (2018). Origins of sinister rumors: A preference for threat-related material in the supply and demand of information. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 39(1), p. 67–75.

¹¹⁷ Faktisk.no (2019). Faktisk helt feil. [Completely untrue, actually] Retrieved from: <https://www.faktisk.no/?rating=5>

Playing on sex	Sweden is going to teach immigrants to have sex with Swedish women	Homoseksualitet [homosexuality], kjønns- [sex, gender], pedofili [paedophilia], seksuell [sexual], seksuell legning [sexual orientation], seksuell trakassering [sexual harassment], sex, voldtatt [raped], voldtekt [rape], voldtektsmenn [rapists]
Arouses disgust	That European countries are going to legalise necrophilia and bestiality	Asyljuks [asylum cheating], avsky [disgust], avskyelig [disgusting], barnemishandlere [child molesters], bedrag [deception], bedrageri [fraud], bestialsk [bestial], diktatur [dictatorship], fake news, juks [cheating], klimaskremmere [climate scaremongers], kriminelt [criminal], lemlesting [dismembering], likvidert [liquidated], løgn [lies], manipulert [manipulated], nekrofil [necrophilia], overgrep [abuse], plyndring [looting], shady, skandale [scandal], skattebetalere [taxpayers], slavebinding [slavery], spekulant [speculator], steining [stoning], tortur [torture], tuklet [tampered]
Counterintuitive	Aliens and satanic rituals caused the fire in Notre-Dame	<i>None of the cases from Faktisk.no fell into this category.</i>
Unnatural	USA sowing genetically modified crops in Ukraine to create hunger	<i>None of the cases from Faktisk.no fell into this category.</i>
Gossip & celebrity news	High-ranking politicians in Baltic countries are implicated in paedophilia Celebrities used in fraud cases	Bitcoin, tjene penger [earn money], investering [investment], belønner [rewards], gratis [free]

Annex C Methodological approach

Selection of digital platforms

Social media

Facebook is the most popular social networking service in Norway and is used by 83 per cent of the population.¹¹⁸ Informational influence, including spreading disinformation, can occur by posting on Facebook pages and using fake accounts and social bots in the comments sections¹¹⁹, but also through the algorithms that control the flow of information to the individual user. From Facebook, we have included public pages from political parties, politicians, and municipal and county authorities, focusing on the comments sections.

Twitter is a central platform in terms of spreading disinformation to a wider audience, including to people who do not use social media. Although Twitter is only used by a minority of the population of Norway (29%),¹²⁰ this platform can have a strong influence on the public discourse, since it is widely used by politicians and journalists.¹²¹ For this reason, disinformation can find its way into the political discourse and media coverage, especially through the use of social bots,¹²² and thus reach broad segments of the population. Due to the project's data capture capacity, a selection was made using the list of thematic search terms (see Annex A) as the search parameter for data capture.

¹¹⁸ Ipsos (ibid).

¹¹⁹ Woolley SC (2016). Social bot interference in global politics. *First Monday*, 21(4).

¹²⁰ Ipsos (ibid).

¹²¹ Ausserhofer J & Maireder A (2013). National politics on Twitter. Structures and topics of a networked public sphere. *Information, Communication & Society* 16, p. 291–314.

¹²² Ferrara E, Varol O, Davis C, Menczer F & Flammini A (2016). The Rise of Social Bots. *Communications of the ACM*, 59(7), p. 96104; Shao C, Ciampaglia GL, Varol O, Yang KC, Flammini A & Menczer F (2018). The spread of low-credibility content by social bots. *Nature Communications*, 9, Article number 4787.

Mainstream media

The mainstream media are still important sources of news in Norway.¹²³ Although journalists quality control what they publish, disinformation can still find its way into stories published via the mainstream media. Disinformation then becomes even more influential, because it reaches large parts of the population beyond users of social media, and because most readers have a high degree of trust in the mainstream media. It can also reduce people's confidence in the media.¹²⁴ In order to investigate whether there was any informational influence in the mainstream media, we included the largest nationwide Norwegian media online and on mobile devices. In 2018, according to Medienorge, this was the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), VG, Dagbladet, Aftenposten, Nettavisen and E24.¹²⁵ Because Dagbladet and Nettavisen no longer have comments sections, they were not included in the sample for this project.

Alternative media

Alternative media differ from the mainstream media in their form, content, and practices regarding use of sources. Alternative media are also often run by people with no journalism experience. While the established daily press has public or commercial interests, alternative media are often run on a voluntary basis and have clear editorial views. Moreover, in many cases, they are driven by campaign journalism with a specific political agenda and usually oppositional views, which are often excluded from the established media.¹²⁶ Many alternative media are very active on social media and target audiences who do not trust the mainstream media.¹²⁷ With the rise of the internet and social media, it is no longer the established media alone that define the news, as alternative media reach new readers and groups that have lost faith in the mainstream media. Where the established media turn to experts for facts, alternative media often turn to other sources.¹²⁸ In a tug of war over the truth in the context of declining trust in the established media, this may be exploited to spread disinformation and other attempts at informational influence. In view of the constraints of the project, we had to limit ourselves to a selected sample here too. We have chosen to investigate growing Norwegian alternative media with stories that reach a large number of readers. To make this selection, we used StoryBoard to identify the three alternative media that are often among the ten most shared on social media. We have examined the following alternative media in Norway: Human Rights Service (HRS), Resett and Document.no. At the same time, the project was open to include other alternative media along the way, if it turned out that other media than those selected proved to be prominent in the debate during the investigation period. Based on data from StoryBoard, no other alternative media than the three mentioned above were widely shared on social media during the project period.

Data capture

The project has harvested relevant news stories, political posts and debates (comments sections) from the selected platforms, and has striven to avoid filtering the data in the capture process. For data capture itself, we used the commercial software OctoParse¹²⁹ to harvest data from Facebook through a link to Facebook's open API. In addition, we have developed a proprietary web scraper in Python based on open-source libraries from the other selected data sources that use Disqus (for example document.no and resett.no) and Schibsted (for

¹²³ Moe H & Sariakassen H (ibid)

¹²⁴ Ireton C & Posetti J (2018). Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training. Paris: UNESCO; Tucker JA, Guess A, Barberá P, Vaccari C, Siegel A, Sanovich S, Stukal D & Nyhan B (2018). Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature. Report. Menlo Park: William & Flora Hewlett Foundation.

¹²⁵ See <http://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/avis/253> for newspapers and

<http://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/tv/219> for television.

¹²⁶ Brandtzæg P B (2018, 28.03). Alternative medier i vekst [Alternative media in growth], debate article in *Dagbladet*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/alternative-medier-i-vekst/69652920>

¹²⁷ Bennett & Livingstone (ibid.)

¹²⁸ Brandtzæg (ibid.)

¹²⁹ See <https://www.octoparse.com/>

example VG and Aftenposten) as solutions for their comments sections. For Twitter, we mostly used real-time analysis of trends and keywords, which were analysed from the perspective that Twitter is used as a channel to spread content originating on other platforms, such as Facebook and general websites.

We separated the website data sources into two types to allow us to analyse them from different starting points: (i) general websites and (ii) political websites. These correspond to *mainstream* and *alternative* media, respectively, as mentioned above. This distinction was made because it reflects the fact that political websites will generally seek attention on social media in a different way than general websites. Political websites have a different approach to how to draw attention to their content (via higher activity in the comments sections and links to other sources on other social media), and they have a far greater degree of user-generated content. At the same time, it is observed that there is a completely different editorial control than is usually seen in general websites in respect of both these points. These factors mean we had to have a different approach to data collection and analysis from political websites than we used for general websites. For political websites, the websites' architecture was used in the data capture through detection of hashtags and possible patterns and/or structures in posts and comments sections. General websites were downloaded ("crawled"/ "scraped") and analysed on the basis of keywords and pattern-based detection of topics and links to other sources.

Structuring of the data capture and analysis

As shown in Figure 15 below, data capture was done in two stages, where the first (vertical) stage was about harvesting data from the selected platforms. The collection process (crawling¹³⁰) addressed only those websites that we had identified in advance. Both scraping¹³¹ and parsing¹³² are complicated processes that need to be adapted for different websites and technology platforms,¹³³ and are thus very resource-intensive. Each of the vertical processes in the first stage culminates in a separate "back-end" database¹³⁴ in a compatible format.

¹³⁰ There is actually very little difference between crawling and scraping. In this report, crawling is used to underline that our positioning for data collection ("scraping") is targeted and limited.

¹³¹ Technical data extractions that include following unstructured links to other platforms, websites, etc. in many stages.

¹³² The syntactical analysis makes it possible to structure and make use of the data content that is "scraped out".

¹³³ From, for example, Disqus and Facebook comments plugin

¹³⁴ These are drawn in red to signal that this corresponds to what is referred to as the "raw data" in the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD)'s approval of the project, and which are subject to special restrictions in terms of access only by computer technical staff.

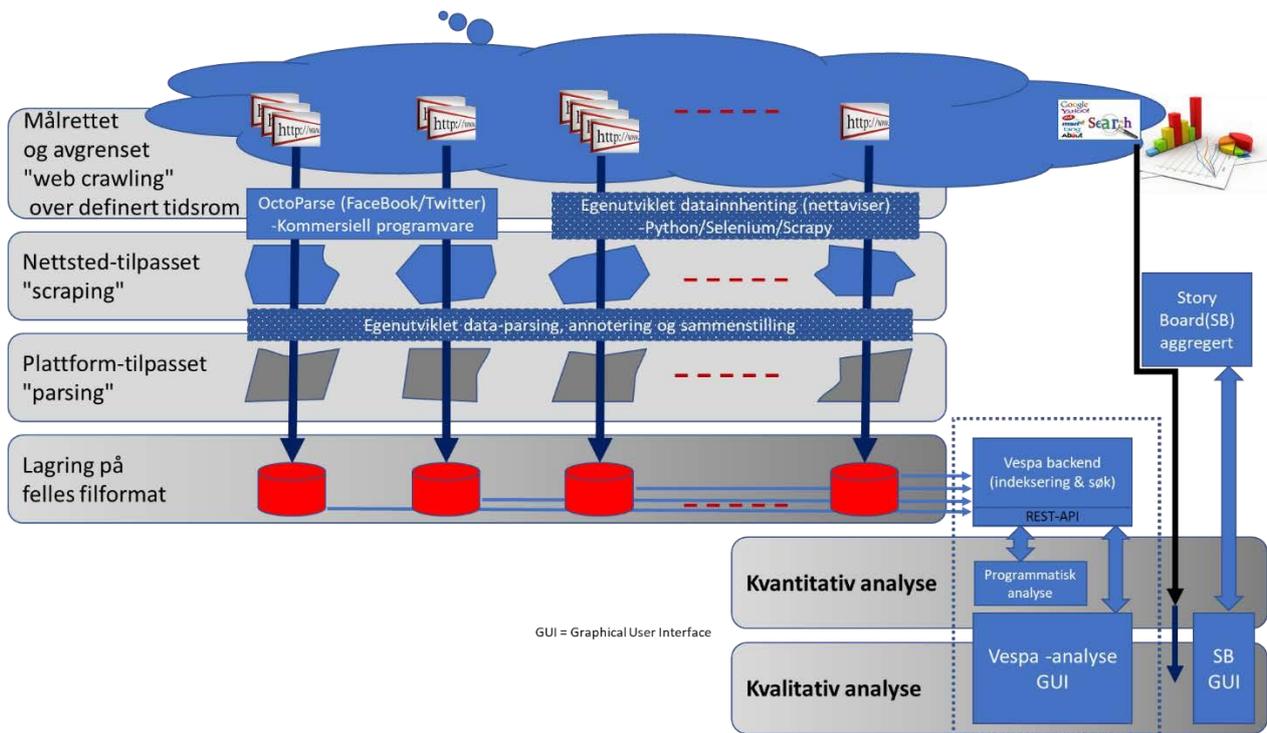


Figure 15: Structured data capture for quantitative and qualitative analysis

In the second stage, Vespa was used to index across the vertically generated databases, enabling both transverse analysis, such as searching for correlations between the different media, and expanded indexing if other keywords appeared to be relevant. At the same time, general information, references,¹³⁵ and searches from the internet were also collected, as well as analyses provided by StoryBoard, which were then aggregated and made available for more advanced searches through a special graphical user interface (GUI).

Vespa is optimised for machine learning and has excellent options for continuous adjustment in respect of findings and trends in the data material, which can be used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Vespa offers several advantages: it is a Norwegian-developed open source code that is fully scalable and supports many formats, and it has flexible search and matching mechanisms that support machine learning. In addition, Vespa can simultaneously index and search in real time. The quantitative analysis at this stage is based on configuration of known functions in Vespa and a search engine connected to a graphical user interface.

From a follow-up perspective, the Vespa-indexed database may have a unique value for future machine learning,¹³⁶ for example, in view of the fact that it represents a set of Norwegian-language data on an electoral process (as opposed to an English-language dataset). For example, it can be used to expand the lists of search terms via word frequencies.

This setup formed the basis for quantitative and qualitative analyses that can each reflect a specific part of the data material, such as the comments sections of the Facebook pages of political parties, or comments on posts on alternate media. In addition, Vespa enables indexation and real-time analysis across the entire data material, adding a new dimension to both the quantitative and the qualitative analysis.

¹³⁵ For example, about known bots or dubious websites.

¹³⁶ However, any such project must have a separate approval process that also involves the Norwegian Data Protection Authority.

Both crawling and indexing were based on the lists of search terms as described in Annex A and Annex B. Vespa indexed this in such a way that it was easy to extract and compile data using queries. In addition, real-time analysis can shed light on trends that evolved rapidly on certain platforms, such as Twitter.

Detection of emojis (which are particularly relevant for Tweets and Facebook) was implemented as a property annotation¹³⁷ in Python for preprocessing of data. The starting point for the quantitative analysis is thus matching words from the list of search terms (Annex A) and reinforcing words (Annex B), and other textual attributes run against the raw data to get an overview of the most talked about matters based on the seven current approaches described in Chapter 3.

The search engine was configured to support the desired search and analysis functionalities, from basic text search to analysis of frequency and linking via hashtags and political keywords. The layout was adapted to support the qualitative analysis as far as was possible within Vespa's functional framework. Data used as the basis for analysis were obtained from Vespa via a well-documented REST API,¹³⁸ so that we can both create graphical user interfaces to search and organise data, and create applications that run automatic analytics tasks enabled either periodically or via real-time analysis of media streams (such as Twitter).¹³⁹

This setup provides far more possibilities than it was possible to make use of within the project's time frame and resource constraints. At the same time, a tool and platform have been developed that it will be relatively easy to use on new datasets.

¹³⁷ Classification and marking that increases the reuse value in subsequent searches.

¹³⁸ See <https://docs.vespa.ai/documentation/api.html>

¹³⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representational_state_transfer

Annex D Websites associated with unserious content

Filter Nyheter considers the following websites to be untrustworthy:¹⁴⁰

- Aftenstidende.com
- Ektenyheter.no
- Alternativ-Media.com
- Dinavis.no
- Norgesavisen.no
- 247avisen.com
- Ordeterminn.com

Additional proposals based on analyses conducted by Brandtzæg:¹⁴¹

- Lykten.no
- politiskukorrekt.org
- Politisk ukorrekt
- Politisk Ukorrekt Nyheder (Danish fake new website)
- Politisk inkorrekt Nyheter (Swedish fake news website)
- Derimot.no
- Riksavisen.no
- <https://sosialnytt.com/>
- <https://eavisa.com/>

Identified fake websites:¹⁴²

- Aftenstidende.com
- 247avisen.com
- News Punch
- Newsner (mostly entertainment)
- DagensBeste
- FrieOrd
- Rapport-X
- Norgesavisen
- Bloggomtoppbloggere.com
- Ymte.no

Norwegian lie factories retrieved from Wikipedia:¹⁴³

- Dagmagasinet.com
- Creepysaker.no
- Nyhetsbildet.com
- Ukensnytt.com
- Viralstarz.com
- Kundeservice
- Toppmag.com
- Rebix
- Renekleveland.blogg.no
- Viralshare
- Norsknaturinformatikk.com

¹⁴⁰ <https://filternyheter.no/dette-er-de-ni-norske-nettstedene-du-bor-vaere-pa-vakt-mot/>

¹⁴¹ Brandtzæg, P.B. (2017, 11.08). Radikaliseres Norges befolkning på Facebook? [Is the population of Norway being radicalised on Facebook?] Debate article published in *Dagbladet*. Retrieved from: <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/radikaliseres-norges-befolkning-pa-facebook/68583360>

¹⁴² <https://hanspetter.info/svartelisten/>, NB: this list is rather old

¹⁴³ <https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%B8gnfabrikk>

Annex E Stories about Norway from RT.com and Sputniknews.com

July 2019

RT ran a story about the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK)'s "Jewish swine" cartoon.

Sputniknews ran the following stories:

- The leader of the Independence Party banned from Facebook
- NRK Satiriks and the "Jewish swine" case
- Muslims in Stavanger who wanted to remove the name plate bearing the name Muhammad Yunus
- The ideology behind Behring Breivik's terror attacks becomes part of the Norwegian school curriculum
- Immigration-critical voices are excluded from the public debate
- Death penalty for the "bloodthirsty monsters" who murdered tourists in Morocco
- Facebook censorship of post about Tommy Robinson
- The Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) shares information with the USA before sharing it with Norwegian authorities
- Norwegian Member of Parliament calls for asylum for Tommy Robinson
- Survey reveals that the Norwegian press has a left-wing slant

August 2019

RT ran two stories about refugee boats in the Mediterranean and two stories about the mosque shooting.

Sputniknews published a story about Muslim women refusing to shake the Crown Prince's hand and five cases about the mosque shooting.

1–10 September 2019

RT published a story that Norway's electric car miracle is a national fraud. Sputniknews had six stories in ten days:

- Voters give the Establishment the finger
- Mysterious disease killing dogs
- Immigrant children are more criminal than their parents
- Eritrean refugees partying with the regime they fled from
- The Prime Minister denies the Islamisation of Norway
- Explosive increase in head lice

11 September – 10 October 2019

RT had a story about Norway halting arms exports to Turkey.

Sputniknews had 13 stories:

- Small risk in bringing home IS widows

- Norway says no to NATO’s missile defence shield
- Norwegian TV channel blocks video after 350 million views from India and Pakistan
- Two stories concerning large withdrawals from the petroleum fund
- Four stories concerning allegations of Russian special forces in Svalbard
- Researcher believes application to the UN Security Council is a bad idea
- Norway ideal as launching pad for US, NATO missiles
- USA urges Norway to increase its defence budget as neighbour to Russia
- Professor publishes book on feminist Islam

Annex F Qualitative analysis of a small sample based on quantitative filtering

The number of posts was reduced to provide a basis for qualitative analysis as follows:

- An initial filtering based on the thematic words with the most hits
- A second filtering based on the keywords with the most hits
- A qualitative assessment of a limited number of comments, identified through the filtering process, further delimited to the media and/or platforms that have the most hits, and prioritisation of the comments that have the most likes in our data material
- Where appropriate, random spot checks were made in the source material in the form of an assessment of the comments on a given article or story from one of the sources to see if this matches point c), and/or
- An assessment of the most prominent actors in the material

This method on its own entails a significant risk with respect to representativeness, among other things. It is used only for the purpose described above, and the findings are compared with other findings from the other quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The thematic search terms with the highest frequency from around 110,000 posts are shown in Figure 16.

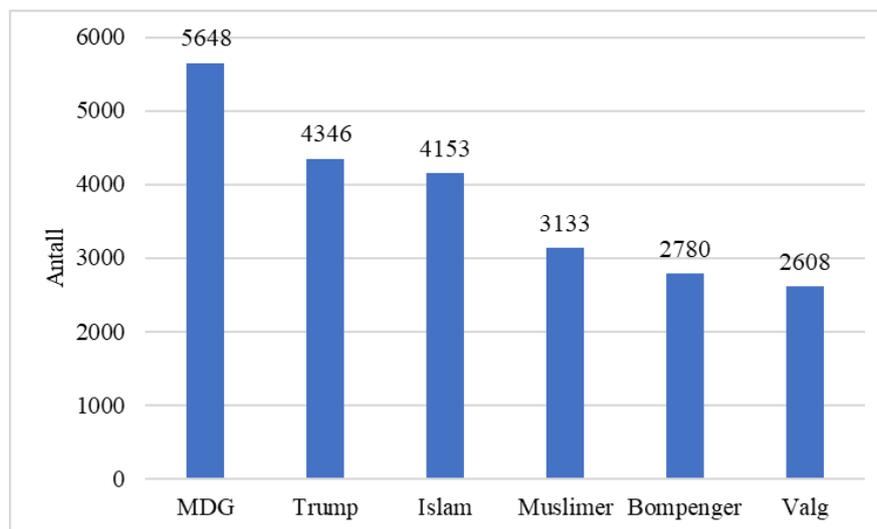


Figure 16 Hits for thematic search terms

The filtered analysis was conducted along three independent lines, based on the following search terms: 1) the Green Party (MDG), 2) Trump and 3) Islam+Muslims.

For the search term the Green Party (MDG), the main keywords were “*gratis*” [free], “*skremmende*” [frightening / scary] and “*farlig*” [dangerous]. This resulted in 99 hits on the domains reset.no (41), document.no (23), vg.no (19) and in comments on the political parties’ Facebook pages (16). The number of likes on these hits ranges between 2 and 822, and all the posts with more than 66 likes are from political groups on Facebook, even though the number of hits for the keywords is dominated by the other domains.

Based on a qualitative assessment of the content of the matches with more than five likes in this sample, the following description can be extracted from across the four domains:

Criticism of the Green Party (MDG) is voiced on the party’s own Facebook pages and concerns allegations of waste, special interests, unfettered use of other people’s money, lack of knowledge about, for example, batteries and emissions, that they do not understand people’s actual transport needs, and that they do not appreciate the important role oil has played for Norway since the 1970s. Moreover, the Green Party (MDG) is characterised using concepts such as immature and “believing in Santa Claus”, extremism, or as a hippie movement that wants to legalise drugs. Representatives of the Green Party (MDG) respond to most of these comments, focusing on the issue, and also receive positive comments and suggestions for, for example, alternative free services.

On other parties’ Facebook pages, however, the Green Party (MDG)’s understanding of finance and economics is referred to as frightening in itself. The realisticness of the proposed solutions in terms of economic sustainability is also queried. It is claimed that the Green Party (MDG) has a frightening or naïve understanding of economics, but also that “it’s all about money”, and not really about the environment. The support for the Green Party (MDG) is characterised as frightening, and the Green Party (MDG) is described as environmental fascists. At the same time, the youth wing of the Progress Party (FpU) says that the only people who have reason to be disappointed about this are the people who believed in the Progress Party (FrP) and voted accordingly; the other parties have got what they want.

There is a rather different tone on the other media. There are attempts to discredit individual actors in the Green Party (MDG) through their family relations to former politicians on the far left, while at the same time discussing the realism of new industries in terms of economic sustainability. The other parties are referred to as dishonest about what they want and what they are, with reference to various old issues concerning the party leaders. The other parties are therefore “spineless”, smooth and dangerous, while the Green Party (MDG) not only sails under a false flag and in reality serves the rich, but also bases all its policies on an uncertain and contentious assertion about climate change. For some people, it is truly terrifying that the other parties even consider collaborating with the Green Party (MDG), simply to get into power. It is claimed that such commitment as the Green Party (MDG) elicits is based on brainwashing that can undermine social development, that the Green Party (MDG) is “crazy” (“The Hitler Jugend movement is a perfect comparison”), and the media’s love affair with the Green Party is due to left-wing journalists. People query who will benefit from this, and “illiterate (Africans) on social security” are more than hinted at as one possibility.

Rhetorically, they play on attraction factors such as disgust, underlying threats and deviations from what is natural. They use sensational claims and harsh rhetoric that follow and reinforce already established predispositions to polarisation in Norwegian society, and are therefore a potential hothouse for attempts to increase the existing polarisation. While on the Facebook pages the opposing parties meet to exchange views to a certain extent, on the other media criticism dominates. However, although the landscape is polarised, there are no specific signs of suspicious actors, informational influence techniques, disinformation, content, language or wording that provide grounds to suspect foreign influence.

By reducing the sample further by expanding the search with the search term “*klima*” [climate], which is potentially polarising, especially in a context focusing on the Green Party (MDG), we get 14 hits, with the number of likes from ranging 0 to 96.

A qualitative assessment of the three hits with 11, 15 and 96 likes resulted in the following description:

The hit that had by far the most likes is a post on Facebook about an MDG politician who suggests keeping the rush hour charges and introducing a free bus service for everyone in a defined geographical area. The countervoices (on document.no) refer to the Green Party (MDG) as climate fanatics and point out that Norway is only a small part of the overall picture. It is described as both comical and frightening that people are seriously considering ruining a small town for something that will have zero impact globally. Once again, we see that it is described as frightening that the traditional parties, as well as the anti-road toll party FNB, are willing to collaborate with the Green Party (MDG) simply “to be in power”. One of the debaters describes themselves in another post as “climate realists who are being silenced”.

Here too the argument underscores the already polarised debate. The rhetoric is slightly extreme, the conditions for influence exist, but there are no specific signs of suspicious actors, informational influence techniques, disinformation, content, language or wording that provide grounds to suspect foreign influence.

By further focusing our search, by adding “*sammenslåing av fylker, kommuner*” [merger of counties, municipalities], we end up with a single post from a user with a foreign-sounding name who delivers a tirade against the destruction of nature, in addition to the topics mentioned above, in fairly poor Norwegian. However, this is a single comment (on reset.no) with one like and is therefore not considered a systematic attempt to aggravate conflict related to centre–periphery issues.

Within this sample, there are no indications of the use of influence approaches other than polarisation and centre–periphery.

In isolation, it is risky and pointless to characterise the content of over 5,000 hits on the basis of such a small sample. In terms of method, however, it is worth noting that the result from the excerpt harmonises well with the results of the qualitative analyses of each individual platform, including with regard to the expressed scepticism of other parties’ collaboration with the Green Party (MDG), and that any dissent is met with name-calling and exclusion. In terms of the objective of identifying influence activity, the filtering has actually led us to one actor with poor Norwegian (without this being part of the filtering process itself) who also meets other conditions for interest; however, we cannot conclude that this actor is an operator of foreign influence.

For the search term “Trump”, the main keywords were “*juks*” [cheating], fake news, “*farlig*” [dangerous] and “*skremmende*” [frightening / scary]. There were 115 hits on the domains reset.no (81), document.no (22), and vg.no (12).

The number of likes they received varied between 2 and 150. Based on a qualitative assessment of the content of the matches with more than five likes in this sample, the following description can be extracted from across the three domains:

The most liked comment is about big politics beyond Norway’s borders, claiming that Trump is standing up against a fascism represented by the merger between governments and large corporations (corporatism). In discussions about USA’s willingness to defend Norway or Finnmark, it is stated that Norway does not understand the implications of changes on the global level between the USA, Europe, Russia and China, that it is frightening that a right-leaning government puts its hatred of Trump ahead of Norway’s national security, that the government prioritises the EU and the UN based on personal preferences, and that this can be compared with the events of 9 April 1940 (when Germany invaded Norway).

The Norwegian News Agency (NTB) is accused of conducting propaganda and indiscriminately disseminating biased information from CNN. It is claimed that the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) and the Broadcasting Council, including comedy programmes, have an agenda. The experiment in Lillestrøm conducted as part of NRK's Folkeopplysningen documentary series is described as a failed attempt to use the Norwegian Centre Party (Sp) as a case to "prove" that the result of the US Election was manipulated, by running the same campaign as Russia is accused of having used in the USA, and thus shaping the pupils' understanding of reality. The conveyed notion of "immigrant" is claimed to be synonymous with "hijab-wearing woman". Globalism is incompatible with Norway's interests.

There are countervoices and debate in this material, but the discussions often revolve around who is most brainwashed and ignorant.

The reinforcing words that may indicate disinformation (Annex B) from the data material are in themselves strongly linked to rhetorical tools such as threats, disgust, and counterintuitive and allegedly unnatural connections. It is therefore not surprising that the comments are characterised by this kind of rhetoric and by hermeneutics of suspicion, in which most things are really about something completely different to what they seem. Although the majority of the comments seem to be mutually confirming, there are also countervoices.

In this material, there are a number of actors who stand out.

One of the most active commenters has a total of 37 hits, regardless of the search term, mostly on document.no, and with a few on resett.no. Examples of recurring themes are the link between personal hatred of Trump and the neglect of Norway's defence capability among Norwegian politicians, the focus on known right-wing radicals, "stealth Islamisation", identity politics, criticism of the political left ("Marxists"), criticism of the Norwegian News Agency (NTB) and "mainstream media journalists", positive mention of Trump, criticism that climate activists use children as shields, and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. This is an anonymous commenter with between 1,000 and 2,000 comments, but no followers; nor do they follow anyone else, according to Disqus.

Another commenter has 13 hits in the entire data material, mostly on resett.no, and with a few on document.no. The kinds of views voiced include criticism of the Norwegian News Agency (NTB), alternative stories of false accusations in connection with current issues, criticism of the climate change movement and climate activists and the media coverage of this, and the use of Norwegian capital abroad.

This is an anonymous commenter with between 1,000 and 2,000 comments, who has one follower and who follows one person, according to Disqus.

A third commenter has over 50 hits, all on resett.no, and is involved in rhetorical duels with people with opposing opinions, at times using quite strong language, supports Trump, promotes criticism of Islam both "at home and abroad", insults named key politicians with derogatory or sexualised comments, and blames the media for the fact that the population in both Norway and the USA are uninformed. This is an anonymous commenter with over 2,000 comments, but no followers; nor do they follow anyone, according to Disqus.

A fourth commenter has over 200 hits, mainly on resett.no, but also on document.no. Of the comments with the most likes, it appears that this commenter is keen to criticise actors on the left and in the centre parties, such as Abid Raja, immigration, government spending, criticism of the Norwegian News Agency (NTB), the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), TV2 and development aid organisations, news stories involving Islam and Muslims, promotion of Norway against international organisations, the shortcomings of the police, the government's inability to prioritise the security of Norwegians, climate change, and the Catholic Church. This is also an anonymous commenter with over 5,000 comments, who has no followers and who follows one person, according to Disqus.

The argumentation reflects the already polarised debate that can be expected to be linked to the topics, and the rhetoric is fairly harsh, but no more than is expected. There is little opposition, and perhaps little to gain by trying to increase the polarisation against people who do not participate. Regardless, there are no specific signs of suspicious actors, informational influence techniques, disinformation, content, language or wording that provide direct grounds to suspect foreign influence. Although the narratives do not necessarily have distinctively Norwegian origins, and some of the most active actors have a notable number of comments recorded by Disqus, they have few if any followers, and generally do not follow anyone themselves. Their influence cannot therefore be regarded as great, based on their assumed degree of involvement with others. Although these kinds of traits are typical of fake profiles, we have no further information to suggest that this is the case.

Within this sample, there are no clear indications of the use of influence techniques other than polarisation.

Here too, it is risky and pointless to characterise the content of over 5,000 hits on the basis of such a small sample. However, here too, the results from the sample harmonise reasonably with the results from section 4.3, albeit with a slightly different tone.

For the search term “Islam + Muslim” the main keywords were “*vold*” [violence], “*farlig*” [dangerous], “*islamisering*” [Islamisation / Islamification] and “*ytringsfrihet*” [freedom of expression]. This yielded a total of 307 hits on the domains reset.no (150), document.no (124), rights.no (14), vg.no (12), the Facebook pages of national politicians (6), and the Facebook pages of political parties (1),

with the number of likes ranging from 191 to 0. In the following, the content of the 110 or so hits that have more than 10 likes is described. Since there are few, if any, countervoices in this material, it is possible to synthesise a hypothetical (but *internally* coherent) narrative that can be presented as described below. We would stress that the purpose of this synthesis is not to dismiss or judge either (part of) the whole or individual views on any normative political basis, but rather to check whether a qualitative description of the filtered excerpt differs from the result of the more open and wider qualitative assessment described in section 4.3.

Islam and Muslims pose a totalitarian and intolerant threat to Norway. Muslims are ascribed basic attitudes that are incompatible with Norwegian values. Fear of Islam is presented not as an ideological choice, but rather as well founded, based on history and religious texts. Politicians, bureaucrats and mainstream media journalists are alleged to be totally deluded in their belief that Islam is only a religion.

Islam as a system is associated with, for example, suppression of women, hatred, violence, rape and murder, and as hatred of Christians. Islam legitimises violence, attacks and child abuse. Halal is defined as animal cruelty, and Muslim customs interfere with people’s everyday lives.

Muslims must therefore tolerate being judged on the basis of generalisations and stereotyping. However, it is not always the case that Muslim values are held to be inferior. It is the very differentness that is the problem.

Freedom of expression is unbalanced: Islam and Muslims are virtually untouchable, while Norwegian citizens are deprived of their freedom of expression. In a free, democratic society, it ought to be possible to express scepticism and criticism of others’ beliefs and values without being intimidated into silence. It is claimed that critics of Islam are either frozen out by left-wing fanatics or are met with violence and threats from the Islamic side.

In order to preserve Norwegian heritage and culture, one must vote for the parties and candidates who are most uncompromising on these kinds of issues, and not allow oneself to be governed by lies and threats. Other political actors are criticised for not seeing what is going on, even though it is glaringly

obvious. It is asserted that the ideal society of some political opponents is precisely what people are trying to defend by fighting Islam. The whole thing therefore resembles an absurd farce.

Opponents are criticised for engaging in active camouflaging and having an agenda against publication of facts about Muslim immigration, for not wanting to safeguard Norwegian values, and for being happy to give Islam a *carte blanche* and full immunity from criticism.

Certain Muslim politicians are accused of being dangerous – they appear secular, but will choose sharia rules without hesitation when the time is right – and of using techniques based on guilt and shaming Norwegians.

Among other things, it is claimed that a socialist power elite uses democratic tools when this works in their favour. However, if the people want something else, they resort to mafia methods, violence, fake news, propaganda and agitation. In the event of an economic downturn and widespread unemployment, there will be civil unrest and a fight for resources. The question is whether the downturn will come quickly enough, before Islam has made the country impossible to save (democratically).

The opponents' motivation is not ascribed any positive characteristics. Quasi-political measures and propaganda lies are the driving force when the local population is to be replaced, in order for the opponents to maintain their position. Indulging Islam tessellates with other controversial issues.

Some political parties are in a grey area: they have betrayed their original views and ideals, they do not understand their own sympathisers, and they are failing with respect to societal values. Sweden is held up as an example of what we want to avoid: Sweden's extreme immigration policy has led to the country already being at war, and it now poses a threat to all of Europe. False narratives lead to the right wing getting fed up and losing faith in the ability to resolve problems using democratic means.

Islam is advancing at great pace and demanding more influence in naïve, defenceless countries like Norway. Figureheads for views and activities that attempt to resist are criminalised, while ordinary people are punished for their sympathies by means of, for example, social sanctions.

Certain groups of immigrants have a higher propensity for violent crime and sexual offences, and society incurs indirect costs through the undermining of trust and willingness to pay tax. Norway is being invaded by Muslims whose sole aim is to tap Norway for as many resources as possible, without any insight into or criticism of their parallel society. When multiculturalism and globalism break down in alliance with Islam, we will face an outright collapse of modern civilisation.

Sometimes, the argument takes a different turn; for example, as sympathy for lapsed Muslims who are not heard or consulted, or that Islam is clearly such a weak ideology that it needs special protection.

It is emphasised that no single commenter, platform or website in our collected material promotes or legitimises this kind of narrative in its entirety. The synthesis has been compiled from the sum of typical comments and views that emerged through our searches, and which can be combined and condensed.

As previously mentioned, the purpose of focusing on this narrative is not to dismiss or judge either (part of) the whole or individual views on any normative political basis. The reason for voicing these kinds of views in comments sections with such strong wording may be, for example, as a reaction to something perceived as a hegemonic or one-sided debate climate over time, real fear based on own or others' experiences, a consequence of a generally fierce debate in this area, or simply that the commenter is of that opinion. Moreover, the central elements of these arguments are well known, and it is not surprising that they appear in a political debate about Muslims and Islam in connection with an election. Nor is it surprising that the discussion largely takes place on platforms where there is more consensus than open discussion, that there are few signs of a conciliatory tone towards the opponents, and that it appears that there is little or nothing to negotiate about.

Through this narrow sample and the synthesised narrative extracted therefrom, we see an even clearer “enough is enough” mood that is basically fully polarised against “the others”, yet available for further polarisation for actors who might be interested in doing this, for example, to encourage the excluding distinction between “us” and “them”, or aggravate a polarised topic of debate with emotional rhetoric and frustration. The prevailing descriptions of Islam and Muslims can be said to play on fear, disgust and unnaturalness in a Norwegian context, the expectations of Muslims are based on group stereotyping rather than respect for the individual, which is sometimes used as a counterargument and ideal, the description of the opponents among one’s own kind smacks of disgust and treachery, and future scenarios are dystopian.

All in all, there are a number of factors in this narrative that an organised actor or foreign power *could* have played on and amplified to increase the polarisation in Norwegian society, but there are no clear signs that this kind of influence has been attempted.

This is also supported by the fact that we have investigated the sources of our material in greater depth in three individual cases commented on in our material. In a debate about support for HRS on resett.no where the main story is that a politician with a Muslim background calls for discontinuation of the press support for HRS due to alleged anti-Muslim propaganda, many of the participants in the debate can be associated with parts of (the synthesised) main narrative presented above, but there are also countervoices that accuse the debaters of islamophobia. The debate over support for HRS specifically is part of a wider debate about press support and support for interest organisations in general.

In a case on Document.no in which a Muslim right-leaning politician criticises the Progress Party (FrP) and Sylvi Listhaug, the association to the synthesised narrative is also evident in the comments: Muslim politicians cannot be trusted, especially if they belong to parties in the “grey zone”. One of the few countervoices argues that Listhaug could have formulated herself in a more elegant way, which is met with defence of Listhaug based on the same narrative, but also by an assertion that Listhaug simply says what she “has to” say, and cannot really be trusted, thereby associating Listhaug with the “wrong” side in the narrative.

In a third case on rights.no, the topic is that the Government’s plan of action against Islamophobia may help stigmatise anyone who criticises Islam, and implies an acceptance that people who criticise Islam can be labelled as racist, Nazi, hate speaker and Islamophobic, which can also be associated with the synthesised narrative described above. Here the comments are mainly that politicians must understand what Islam is before they start pointing fingers, that they are actually really too cowardly to do this, that the politicians are resistant to the facts presented, and are frighteningly naïve and foolish. The original post and the comments thus serve to confirm (the synthesised) narrative, which also implies that it is the politicians who are the real racists, and that politicians and the media are on the wrong side.

Some of the debaters in the three cases clearly stand out in terms of level of activity, number of followers, and (positive) influence, calculated by Disqus. Of course, these actors’ overall activity extends over a longer period of time than the comments we have analysed here. The level of activity probably reflects a certain degree of influence on the relevant media, but we found no direct signs of foreign origin.

For this dataset too, there are concerns about characterising the content of over 5,000 hits on the basis of such a small number of posts as here. However, while the synthesised narrative is rather exaggerated, it is consistent with the other qualitative analyses. Nevertheless, it cannot be interpreted as anything other than a possible tendency integrated within a much greater breadth of opinion in the material that could have been exploited by an actor with hostile intentions. In addition, the filtered analysis helped us identify actors who stand out due to their high level of activity, few followers and little following of others, and who resonate with the actors who appear to be possible mediators between different online communities, as described in section 4.2.2, but without us being able to prove that they actually have this kind of role. One user profile has been identified as participating in discussions in alternative websites with a closed profile and as a possible actor who conveys

material of a dubious nature on the alternative websites. At least five others have been identified as participants, but do not have a central role as mediators.

All in all, the filtered analysis across the platforms can be interpreted as a good indication that the collected data material is consistent and that the search and comparison tools provide a reasonably representative impression across the different approaches; however, it also serves as an important reminder that a quantitative approach to this area must be supplemented by a broad, diverse qualitative approach to give sufficient meaning.

Differences and nuances in the interpretations also reflect an underlying quantitative bias in the data material. The relatively larger volume of data from alternative websites has an impact on the search terms. This is reflected in more people professing that they are being excluded, expressed through allegations that their views are not being heard or taken into account, but less sensitivity to discursive elements on social media that are more evident in section 4.3 of this report. The qualitative analysis can thus be regarded as more robust against errors in selection of search terms, such as attaching too much importance to local topics in a local election that experience shows is nevertheless dominated by national issues.



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