

Beyond Disinformation, Fanaticism and Interference: The Deep Story that Amplified the Campaign Against Sweden's Care of Young Person's Act (LVU)

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Abstract *In this article, I use Arlie Hochschild's concept of the "deep story" to explain the resonance of Sweden's viral LVU-campaign among segments of the country's Muslim population. Drawing on interviews with Muslim public-facing actors—including teachers, lawyers, civil servants, and community organisers—I argue that the campaign's plausibility derives from its alignment with a broader affective narrative about life in Sweden. Participants describe Sweden as a society characterised by surveillance, opaque institutions, a conditional commitment to human rights, and persistent experiences of unbelonging. These experiences provide a framework through which allegations about social services become plausible on an emotional level, regardless of their facticity. This means that efforts by The National Board of Health and Welfare to counter LVU-related narratives are unlikely to succeed if they focus only on correcting false information. Trust-building interventions must also address the affective and political conditions that make such narratives resonate.*

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2025, I conducted a 3-month pilot research project on the "LVU campaign"¹ – an in-person and online campaign that included a viral wave of social media posts claiming that social services in Sweden kidnap Muslim children from their families and, in the most extreme examples, force them to eat pork and drink alcohol. The momentum behind this campaign, which began in 2021 and involved actors from within and outside Sweden, was so strong that the government formally tasked The National Board of Health and Welfare [Socialstyrelsen], together with the Psychological Defence Agency [Myndigheten för psykologiskt försvar], with developing a counter-disinformation strategy.² The strategy they devised used the same social media platforms on which the campaign appeared to provide accurate counter-information. I have written elsewhere about the shortcomings of such a strategy,³ but in this article I wish to highlight one of the central findings of this pilot project: that the power behind the LVU campaign does not lie in the content of individual

posts, but in their resonance with a "deep story" that is held by a significant proportion of immigrants in Sweden, a story which diverges from authorised narratives about Swedish society. Rather than parroting typical causal explanations for the effectiveness of the campaign, such as foreign interference, religious fanaticism, or a generalised mistrust of government authorities, in this article I propose that the resonance of such narratives emerges from normative Swedish politics.

The data for this article are transcripts of 7 interviews I conducted with Muslim "public facing actors", comprising lawyers, civil servants, community organisers, and teachers.⁴ Due to the time constraints of the project, my original plan—of interviewing people who had left or were considering leaving Sweden because of the LVU campaign—failed,⁵ and I decided to interview the 'gatekeepers' whom I was originally relying on to help me gain access to the other research group. As public-facing actors and Muslims themselves, these participants were able to offer a valuable contribution to understanding the dynamics underlying this phenomenon, drawing on multiple first- and second-hand accounts of experiences with Swedish social services which they encountered by virtue of their professional activities.

THE DEEP STORY

The theoretical lens for this article—the deep story—was developed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. The deep story is "a feels-as-if story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols".⁶ The deep story represents one's common-sense understanding of the world. The

deep story resonates with the person who holds it because it affirms their feelings about how the world works and helps them to make sense of events in society.

One of the tacit assumptions underpinning The National Board of Health and Welfare's work is that the problem underwriting the LVU campaign is false information—that people are provided with false information and that this results in false beliefs, which, in turn, lead to a tangible reduction of trust in state institutions. This is logical if we assume that people are primarily “thinking things” who think their way through the world. But what if human beings are “feeling things” who feel their way through the world?

The problem, as Hochschild sees it, is that our knowledge of our political “other” is primarily based on a view from the outside. We see what people do—how they vote, or what they react to—but we do not understand why they react to it. We usually have no understanding of the deep story which underpins these observable opinions and behaviours. Engaging with the deep story of another person allows us to engage not only with points of view that we find troublesome, but to understand what makes those points of view seem reasonable to the person who holds them. We can ask: what underpins the plausibility of these ideas? Deep stories have an emotional pull on some people that they do not have on others. Forms of precarity play into the draw which a deep story exerts on a person. In this article, I seek to reconstruct the deep story of the public-facing actors that I interviewed for this study in order to get a better sense of the beliefs which underpin the low levels of trust in public institutions.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a fully developed alternative to the interventions made by The National Board of Health and Welfare, I conclude it by signposting one way forward in this discussion. Until recently, narratives surrounding the lack of consensus in Sweden's public sphere have been dominated by the concept of “parallel societies”. Such parallel societies are thought to disrupt the unity of society because they operate

outside of the mainstream. While I do not seek to claim that all aspects of this discussion are false, I believe this negative portrayal of non-mainstream segments of society forecloses the possibility of imagining a public sphere with a capacity to include an array of disparate voices.

In the following sections I describe certain recurring themes in the depictions of the participants in this study of life in Sweden. According to their stories, life in Sweden is characterised by a high degree of surveillance, a strong pull toward worldview consensus, and where there are certain social rules which are never clearly spelled out, which newcomers are always at risk of breaking. Additionally, Sweden is portrayed as a country in which much weight is placed on a formal affirmation of human rights and rights language, but in which this commitment is significantly limited, especially in relation to Muslim populations in and outside of Sweden.

THE SURVEILLANCE STATE

The participants and their foreign-born friends experience Sweden as a place in which they are subjected to a high degree of surveillance. This takes place during their interactions with healthcare providers and school staff but also spills out into other informal moments when they are outside of the home. For example, they feel watched by neighbours, or strangers in public parks. Whether rooted in fact or affect, this belief causes the participants to feel that they should be cautious when outside of the home. They feel that, especially in their interactions with their children, they should be aware that there may be invisible lines which they cross, or are perceived to have crossed, which could lead to someone filing a notification of concern [*orosanmälan*] with the social services. The threat of a notification of concern, and the fact that anyone in Sweden can file one, transforms relationships that would otherwise be characterised by trust—such as with neighbours or other acquaintances—into a potential threat. Ahmed, a civil servant from Syria, described it this way:

"I feel that there are... sometimes there are kind of... restrictions on how I should raise my children. I have to be very careful about everything I say because there might be something that may raise some questions [from the social services]."

The caution Ahmed expresses relates to an experience that his brother had in relation to the LVU law. A notification of concern was filed by a teacher who observed that his two sons, who liked to wrestle with each other, came to school with scratches on their faces. Ahmed continued:

"[T]hey scrutinised everything and they didn't find anything [...] and the case was closed without any action. But those days between when the teacher made a notification of concern and until the case was closed it was a nightmare for my brother [...] it took, four or five weeks [...] he is still like ten times more careful when it comes to everything related to how the boys are looking when they go to school. I mean he makes sure now like if one of the nails of one of the children is long he becomes kind of stressed like he wants to cut their nails so they don't fight and they don't leave marks."

Ahmed's brother has become extremely cautious about how his children appear when they go to school. He is aware that the consequence of failing to meet the expected standards can have extreme results. While Ahmed, who has three children, has not experienced this directly, it is easy for him to picture himself in his brother's shoes:

"My children fight sometimes [...] I mean, once, twice every day [...] But that's, in my world, that is very normal. And it's very hard to control that. I mean, I tell them that there are consequences if you act aggressively against your brother."

For teacher Basima, it is being with her children outside of the house that gives her cause for concern:

"I don't feel comfortable sometimes playing outside with my kids because of some Swedish old people who just stare at us. These kinds of things make me feel scared because I don't know what kind of thing will lead them to call or like to report me."

Basima is aware that anyone could submit a notification of concern about her children and she is worried that the old people who she sees in the park are looking for missteps in her parenting. She is worried that there is a standard that she is being held to that she does not fully understand: "What kind of behaviour should I avoid and not to be careful? This is my fear, actually."

Community organiser Fatima believes lack of understanding of how the system works leads to people feeling like they are being surveilled:

"[S]o many people say, 'oh look, she is really bad, my case officer' and when I say, 'why is she bad?' she says 'because she says you have to report to me if you buy a car, or if you buy something'."

Rather than understanding this monitoring as a precaution to make sure that money goes only to those who are most in need, they are interpreted as a means of manipulation or control.

The combination of pre-existing suspicion toward authorities and the sense that, as immigrants to Sweden, they are continuously monitored, makes it difficult for the participants to trust in social institutions.

AN ELUSIVE BUT POWERFUL STATE

Following from the previous theme, the state is portrayed as both powerful and elusive. Maryam believes that one of the barriers to trust among Middle Eastern women in Sweden is the mode of communication favoured by the authorities: "When we meet Swedish society, they are used to writing everything via email, [hiding] behind a screen." She finds it problematic that all school communication is done via a smartphone app, explaining that the parents she meets, "need to meet [...] eye to eye [...]"

they value meeting and speaking in a physical meeting.”

The same problem was raised by Fatima, who expressed exasperation at receiving emails from her city council that are signed ‘city council name’ rather than with a person’s name:

“I email them sometimes and say, ‘please put a person’s name in the signature’. Because it feels so robotic! And I’m not talking to [the city council]. I’m talking to a person. It’s stuff like this that can make a huge difference.”

For Fatima, being able to conceptualise the city council as a network, as “a chain of people” makes it more difficult to view it as an anonymous, malevolent entity. Both of these women speak from experience: Maryam as a cultural translator in a school, and Fatima as a community organiser. Both remarked on the tendency for misunderstandings to shape the perspective of one party toward the other. Maryam described one occasion working with a young person who had been placed in a program for kids who are disruptive in class. The father of this child interpreted the placement as an act of malice toward his son, whereas the head teacher believed it to be in the best interest of the child. Through face-to-face mediation, Maryam helped them to understand the other’s point of view.

“[W]e come from a country”, Maryam reflected, “where we have never trusted the government. We could never trust the authorities. Everyone tried to mislead us over many years.” The sense of the ‘hiddenness’ of the state that the participants experience lends itself to misunderstanding. Herz and Lalander⁷ have remarked on the way in which otherwise invisible representatives of the social services can swoop into the lives of young people and make decisions with far reaching consequences. Their problematising of the social worker role captures well the experience of the participants in this study.

EVERY CHILD IS (NOT) OF EQUAL VALUE

Another way in which this deep story reveals itself is in the way that the participants question certain dogmas of Swedish society. The song, “*Alla barn har lika mycket värde*” [Every child is of equal value], which is taught to preschool children in Sweden, takes its lyrics from article 2 of the Children’s Convention. In Sweden, the Children’s convention is the central instrument used for structuring children’s education, from preschool upwards. The participants in this study were sceptical of the depth to which Swedish society embodies its proclaimed values. For example, Laila told me, “Swedes like to say ‘*alla är lika värde*’. I say that in Sweden not everyone is of equal value”. She described what she sees as a discrepancy between what is said, and what is done. In particular, she believes that it is white, ethnically Swedish children who are prioritised in the endowment of rights, whereas ethnic minorities and non-Swedes abroad are tacitly understood to be of lesser value. In expressing this, Laila tells me that although it is something that people say, “you don’t really feel it”—it is not a reality for her on an affective level.

Although the LVU campaign predates the invasion of Gaza, for the participants, the Swedish government’s apparent disregard for the genocide in Gaza was indicative of this double standard. Fatima expressed it this way:

*“Since the Gaza thing started, I started to feel that it’s been like extremely difficult to be working with kids and seeing like even [...] as you’re saying “*alla barn har lika mycket värde*” and you want to believe it and you want to give the same option to all kids and sitting and planning the whole workshop based on the kids perspective and the needs while knowing that there are kids who are losing limbs, who are getting operated without medicine, and getting starved to death and you know it’s been like driving me mad—like really crazy—I feel like I’m losing my mind every time I’m interacting with kids here.”*

As a community organiser and art teacher, Fatima has been trained to put the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the perspective of the child at the centre of her pedagogical approach. However, the tension between the rhetoric she has been taught to promote and the disinterest of Sweden's government toward Gaza has troubled her. She does not believe that Sweden is doing anything to prevent the deaths of children outside of Sweden.

It is clear to these participants that there is a connection between the national and the international, an expectation that believing in rights means enacting them on both a domestic and international level. This is something that they feel has been breached or inconsistently applied, and that generates a good deal of mistrust and disappointment. Basima expressed it this way:

"The human rights things that I believed I will have here in Sweden is nonsense. It's a lie. There is no human rights [...] This is a problem. Because we talk always about these kind of things, but we don't do them."

As immigrants in Sweden, the participants have a strong transnational sensibility, a strong sense of connection beyond national borders. This means that they assess the Swedish state according to how rights are perceived to be upheld both domestically and in foreign policy.

WE WILL NEVER BELONG

The early optimism that the participants describe having toward the state early in their time in Sweden had waned by the time I spoke to them, even though most of them continue to exhibit a proactive attitude to life in the country. Fatima, for example, describes the sense of unwelcome that some of her Arab friends experience, "I know so many Arabs who [...] have lived here for 15, 20, 25 years who don't have a single Swedish friend. It is crazy because they feel like they don't belong and they feel that they are not welcome." Fatima addresses this concern as something of an outsider

to the problem herself. She has Swedish friends who she met early in her time in Sweden and whom she considers among her closest friends. However, she is concerned that there are not more opportunities for immigrants to become friends with ethnic Swedes and that this leads to feelings of resentment. This stems not only from the political environment, but from feeling that they do not conform bodily to the norms of Swedish culture. This includes how they use their bodies and voices in the public spaces. Basima describes it like this:

"[T]he way we use our hands... it doesn't mean that we are aggressive towards our kids. But we have a way of using our bodies and that is different than the Swedish culture because the Swedish culture is so silent [...] this is just the way I am. I cannot be assimilated to this culture because I came here 15 years back and I am not Swedish and I don't know how Swedish moms behave. I respect this culture but it doesn't mean I can do it or practice it."

Basima believes that changing the way that she uses her body, particularly when she communicates with others, would be disingenuous. She has not grown up in Sweden and so, although she can observe the Swedish habitus, she cannot make it her own. There is an ambivalence to how she describes Swedish culture, as something she respects, but to which she will never belong. Basima believes that she is under observation when in public spaces with her children (see above) and that, under the gaze of an imagined Swedish observer, she will always be considered too loud, or too expressive.

Echoing Fatima's earlier comment, Laila told me:

"Some of my friends who have lived here 19 or 12 years tell me 'if we have lived here 20 or 30 years, we will still not be Swedish.' That's the feeling, but I don't know why it's this way [...] I have a passport, but I feel like an outsider."

While none of the participants offered a simple explanation for this feeling of unbelonging, they did point to social factors that underpin their sense of disillusionment. As well as LVU-related narratives and the government's silence on the genocide in Gaza, these included the rise of the anti-immigration Sweden Democrat party, and a spate of public Qur'an burnings which took place in 2023.⁸ In the case of the Qur'an burnings, the police initially failed to take action to prevent the burnings. This was perceived by many Muslims in Sweden to be the state taking the side of the anti-Muslim activists.

Returning to the case of Gaza, Laila told me that, although she is a Swedish citizen, she does not feel that she has any political agency in Sweden. She said, "These past two years have taught me a lot. Has there been any change [as a result of the] demonstrations that take place every Sunday on the streets of Sweden? We couldn't change anything." As far as she could tell, the demonstrations that she had participated in had been entirely ignored by the political establishment.

CONCLUSION

I have described the deep story that the participants in my study tell about their experience of life in Sweden. They see Sweden as a place of heavy surveillance where they are expected to hide or give up on deeply held values, and where there are secret rules which exist which threaten to trip them up at every turn. This deep story is one explanation for how a collection of negative experiences of the Swedish social services could be woven together as evidence of a coherent conspiracy theory which has been taken seriously by a significant portion of Sweden's Muslim population. It accounts for instances where information becomes plausible regardless of its facticity because of its ability to resonate with existing experiences of normative politics in Sweden.

So far, counter-disinformation interventions by The National Board of Health and Welfare on behalf of the Swedish government have focussed on presenting correct information. However, since the

beliefs they are targeting are based on information which *feels* right, regardless of its facticity, it is important that any strategies for trust-building or improving the reputation of the social services (or indeed the state of Sweden) take account of the affective dimension in which such beliefs are founded. In addition, there is a problem of "sender legitimacy",⁹ in which the sender of the 'correct' information—The National Board of Health and Welfare—is not trusted by the recipients of their message.

Whether or not this description resonates with Muslims in Sweden who were not part of my interview sample remains to be seen and should be the subject of further research. If it is found that this deep story is widely held, there are very specific factors which should be considered by any kind of trust-building intervention. Rather than simply correcting false information, agencies like The National Board of Health and Welfare would be given the more far-reaching mandate of cultivating belonging beyond a univocal conception of the public sphere. This could involve following the work of philosophers like Nancy Fraser,¹⁰ and re-conceiving a multiplicity of publics not as a threat to democracy (as so-called 'parallel societies') but as a necessary part of a coherent plural society.

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¹ LVU refers to Swedish law (1990:52), Lag med särskilda bestämmelser om Vård av Unga (The Care of Young Persons Act.), which regulates the care of children and young people in Sweden.

² Socialdepartementet (2022). *Uppdrag att motverka ryktesspridning och desinformation om socialtjänsten (S2022/03244)*. Stockholm: Regeringskansliet.

³ Morgan, J. J., & Goldman, A. J. (forthcoming). Beyond the facts of the matter: Addressing Socialstyrelsen's efforts to counter the LVU-kampanjen conspiracy theory. In E. Drazkiewicz and D. Gorbach (Eds.). *Contesting Conspiracies: Unpacking Conflicts over Disinformation*. Routledge.

⁴ Interviews were conducted in Swedish and English. Where quotes are taken directly from English interviews, grammatical errors are preserved.

⁵ Members of this group are particularly vulnerable and nervous about discussing social services. Building trust with them would have demanded a longer stretch of fieldwork than a 3-month project allowed.

⁶ Hochschild, A. R. (2016). *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. The New Press, p. 135.

⁷ Herz, M., & Lalander, P. (2019). An abstract and nameless, but powerful, bystander – 'unaccompanied children' talking about their social workers in Sweden. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 9(1), 18–28.

⁸ Hajjaji, D. (2023, January 21). *Turkey condemns burning of Qur'an during far-right protest in Sweden*. The Guardian; Ritter, K., & Olsen, J. M. (2023, July 5). *Quran burnings have Sweden torn between free speech and respecting minorities*. AP News.

⁹ Backholm, K., & Nordberg, C. (2023). Efficient authority communication in times of crisis: Examining how vulnerable language minorities experienced Covid-19 communication strategies in Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In B. Johansson, Ø. Ihlen, J. Lindholm and M. Blach-Ørsten (Eds.). *Communicating a Pandemic: Crisis Management and Covid-19 in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 325–346). Nordicom: University of Gothenburg.

¹⁰ Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the 'postsocialist' condition*. Routledge.