CHAPTER 6

Context Moulding and the Production of Uncertainty: Exploring Future Signals in Geopolitical (Dis)Information Spaces

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6.1 Introduction

The mantra of our current times asserts that 'uncertainty is on the rise in our operational environment'. To a certain degree, this is definitely a valid assertion. During the last 10 or 20 years, We have encountered events and trajectories that have pushed this assertion through with increased strength: we only need to think about the drastic events of the pandemic or the war in Ukraine, but also the potential impacts of creeping transitions, such as climate change or the decline of biodiversity. However, we could also take another view towards this assertation on uncertainty and rethink to what extent, why and how uncertainty has been on the rise. We could ask, for example, the following questions: On what basis do we assert that uncertainty is on the rise? Is it because the operational environment has become more change-prone, more labile? Or could it be that, in the last 30 years or so, we have become adjusted to a certain mode of perceiving and thinking about the operational environment?

In other words, it might be possible that we have become conditioned to interpreting the operational environment through specific lenses, reflecting such ideas as liberalism, democracy, market-orientation, regulation and operations based on common rules and decisions. Thus, one source of the feeling of the rise of uncertainty might be that our lens has been resting on a very particular type of foundation, that of a market-oriented perspective and its manifestation through Western liberal democracy that was quite hastily declared as the triumphant future mode after the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1992). The developments during the decade have shaken this foundation to the core. This discontinuation of the common Western narrative has constructed a feeling of unclarity and inexplicability that has resulted in the realisation that uncertainty is on the rise. Therefore, it could be argued that we have always been in a complex and uncertain environment, but lately we have just interpreted this

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environment with too narrow a lens that focuses on particular kinds of activities and features of the operational environment.

Therefore, perhaps both explanations are valid. In this article, we aim to build on both of these explanations and argue that a defining feature of the current condition is that not only has uncertainty been rising and that our lens should be widened but also that a generic atmosphere of uncertainty is, at least partially, purposefully produced via the creation of specific information and disinformation spaces in which various actors manufacture signals with the intent of catalysing different kinds of impacts and increasing the fog of uncertainty. We further suggest that this production is not just bounded to signals but includes the moulding of societal contexts in a way that certain repercussions and causalities become blurred and foggy. This form of activity in the geopolitical sphere is, first, partly directly catalysed by technological interventions, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and various kinds of algorithms, but it is also emerging due to the constant moulding process of audience responses via technological interactions on social media platforms. Second, the activities result from the complex combinations of factors that make drastic solutions to the problematics of the democratic system seem attractive. These processes, such as 'revenge of the regions' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), have made populist parties victorious and created a serious challenge to the more moderate parties in the political system. Third, the problematics of Western liberal democracies, and the reactive attractions of populism, have also catalysed a slippery slope type of governance process of some Western democratic countries, sliding towards a more authoritarian political atmosphere and regimes.

In this article, we build a theoretical framework for engaging with three types of components and practices related to the interpretation of the signals and their contexts. First, we argue that the production of weak and 'foggy' signals activates new kinds of geopolitical fields that we call (dis)information spaces. Fallis (2015, 422) has usefully defined 'disinformation' as '*misleading information that has the function of misleading*'. Second, we analyse a related practice that we call context moulding. Third, we construct an interpretation of a future signal, building especially on the notion of weak signal from the futures literature. In futures studies, weak signal commonly refers to an event, issue or piece of information that is interpreted as a rudimentary sign of change. As the theory continues, by combining various weak signals, the interpreter could speculate, for example, whether a more significant process of change is under construction or whether a cluster of signals could be turning into a trend. In a sentence: our aim in this article is to scrutinise how the processes of context moulding are activated via (dis)information spaces by using various weak signals.

In the following section, we discuss the notion of (dis)information space, and the production of disinformation, in the context of geopolitical analysis. Then, we discuss the relationality of futures knowledge and weak signals. After that, we examine the theoretical baselines of context moulding and future signals. We then move on to present a theoretical framework of context moulding.

This is followed by stylised empirical examples that demonstrate the practical use of the framework. In the final section, we offer some concluding remarks.

6.2 Geopolitics and (Dis)Information Spaces

Scholars in the field of geopolitics, particularly critical geopolitics, have reminded us that there are always multiple parallel and possible ways to construct, imagine and reimagine a political space (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1999). The tradition of critical geopolitics was interested in how political spaces were constructed out of the plurality of social processes. Scholars of critical geopolitics were interested in three types of geopolitics: the 'practical geopolitics' of state leaders and bureaucrats, the 'formal geopolitics' of official strategic and security communities and the 'popular geopolitics' present in the international media (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1999). Ó Tuathail further adds a fourth type to the list, 'structural geopolitics', which refers to the scrutiny of the current geopolitical condition by studying wider social processes and their contradictions, such as information society or risk society (Ó Tuathail, 1999). This distinction is a useful starting point also for our endeavour, since the current practices related to information, disinformation and contexts operate at all four interrelated levels. Furthermore, geopolitical scholarship has emphasised the roles of specific political rationalities, linking both political and economic aspects in order to analyse geopolitical changes (Cowen and Smith, 2009; Moisio and Paasi, 2013). There have also been explorations in the future-oriented analysis of geopolitical processes and structures, emphasising emerging, possible and potential governmentalities (Ahlqvist, 2013).

However, during the last 25 years we have seen developments that affect the classic divisions of critical geopolitics. One distinctive change trajectory has emerged through technology, that of social media platforms and related algorithms. This trajectory is currently intensifying through AI. Chesney and Citron (2019) argue that we are entering an era of 'post-truth geopolitics' and a 'disinformation war' via AIs acting through deepfakes. As they assert, there are now multiple technological solutions for producing high-quality deepfakes, even with free software, and social media platforms provide effective pathways for spreading these.

The topic of information and disinformation is not that new in geopolitical analysis. For example, the classic Mackinderian distinction of sea, land, air and space powers was based on the need to understand the varieties of geopolitical contexts and concomitant information (e.g., Lonsdale, 1999). Lonsdale (1999) has argued that these classic forms of powers should be implemented with the novel 'information power' as the fifth sphere of power. Lonsdale (1999, 139) argues that '*information power*' is activated in an '*infosphere*', which he defines to be an '*ethereal*' and '*polymorphous*' environment in which '*information exists and flows*'. He argues that through information power the infosphere could be strategically controlled in order to further one's own strategic

purposes and block the enemy from doing so. This practice could be amended with classic military power. Obviously, Lonsdale's assertions date back over 25 years, so there are various unforeseen developments, but the notions of 'information power' and 'infosphere' are still valid, especially if we think that information power includes a more heterogeneous set of actors than just those in the realm of formal geopolitics. In the relevant set of actors, we should add actors in practical and popular geopolitics, and lately also various kinds of posthuman-technological actors. The sources of information power are not easy to delineate. The same argument applies to the notion of information itself and, thus, disinformation should be a critical domain of information power.

Indeed, in recent geopolitical and political studies, the notion of disinformation has surfaced as a key topic. Also, the study of disinformation and related practices has emerged as an important topic in business studies (e.g., Petratos, 2021) and in digital media studies (e.g., Diaz Ruiz, 2025). For example, Lanoszka (2019) analyses how state disinformation campaigns impact international politics. Lanoszka evaluates that these campaigns have little effect on the international power balance. Lanoszka (2019, 228) sees three reasons for this. The first is '*the international anarchy*' that hampers the interpretation of signals coming from abroad and increases scepticism. The second is related to the '*pre-existing ideological commitments and mindsets*' of politicians and citizens that could create barriers for disinformation. The third are the state's countermeasures towards disinformation. Lanoszka's argument has boundaries. His insight is apt if one assumes, first, that the political actors are classically rational agents and act accordingly. We would argue, contrary to Lanoszka's view, that the impacts of parallel (dis)information practices could result in new kinds of political rationalities, such as the collective feeling of being 'left behind' widely discussed in the recent scholarly literature on human geography and regional studies (Pike et al., 2024). Second, Lanoszka's perspective applies only to disinformation campaigns that can be clearly identified as disinformation campaigns. Again, our argument here asserts that the settings and instruments for the production of disinformation, and the related geopolitical processes, are currently more complex than what Lanoszka proposes: there are a myriad of simultaneous disinformation-producing processes, operations and practices that operate via the plethora of technological instruments and channels, continuously causing fuzz and uncertainty. In other words, the world is flooded by disinformation flows that are not explicit. Most of the flows are not emerging through controllable official channels; rather, they are increasingly observed in 'out-of-radar implicit' forms, traversing a multitude of channels that are not easy to moderate.

The post-truth geopolitical space has exploded in the last 5 years or so, as it has become increasingly easier to produce convincing material via novel AI solutions. It is possible even to fully automate the production of artificial signals and feed them automatically into online social networks and social media platforms. Through these channels, it is relatively easy to spread fake news and, in the longer term, construct ideological fortresses, that is, embedded vantage

positions from which to read the environment via the lens of 'benevolent information' versus 'hostile disinformation'. These kinds of 'definite divisions' are somewhat unproblematic just as topics of rabbit hole dialogues, but if and when these kinds of 'fake certainties' enter a public sphere, then they could become problematic.

Gentile (2023) discusses the notion of 'spaces of disinformation' in the context of the war in Ukraine and in what he calls 'geopolitical fault-line cities', such as Kharkiv and Dnipro. He suggests that multiple spatial aspects, such as national cultural contexts and even features of urban residential contexts, are affecting how the specific kinds of disinformation, such as conspiracy theories or various rumours, impact political communication and general interaction. For example, Gentile (2023, 1685) argues that in Ukraine, the '*decades of Soviet disinformation and propaganda*', combined with '*a general distrust in authorities coupled with swelling feelings of nostalgia*', has had the impact of creating fertile ground for various kinds of disinformation practices. Therefore, there are national varieties and specificities in how information and disinformation stick, and how they connect with various kinds of local or national topics. This variegation could also be quite significant in transnational settings, such as the Baltic Sea region. However, in recent years, the world has seen a number of geopolitical information and disinformation spaces also outside of active war zones. In these spaces, the main product is uncertainty, fuzz and fog. These spaces are based on an interplay of information and disinformation, blurring divisive perspectives and blocking categorical analysis.

Therefore, we argue that (dis)information spaces are sites of geopolitical activities playing on the boundary of information and disinformation. The actors producing signals in these spaces aim for direct intervention with the public sphere: the signals are to be located by various environment scanning actors, such as state organisations, political institutions and the media. Furthermore, these signals constantly operate in the boundary of information and disinformation: when interpreting these public interventions, the interpreters constantly face difficulties in understanding the ambivalent nature of signals. Signals are difficult for public interpretation because the actors producing them, the way the signals are produced and how the repercussions are mapped are difficult for public organisations to communicate.

6.3 Weak Signals and the Relationality of Futures Knowledge

A critical starting point for our argument and framework is the theory of weak signals, and how it could be utilised in deciphering various geopolitical change signals and events. As such, the notion of weak signals is a widely discussed topic in futures studies (Ansoff, 1984; Mendonça et al., 2003; Ilmola and Kuusi, 2006). Here, we base our argument on the relational theory of futures knowledge (Ahlqvist and Uotila, 2020). The core idea of relational theory is

that the weak signal emerges through relational interaction that entwines various components, such as observer, perspective and the context of observation. Thus, the construction of futures knowledge is relational: it is conditioned by and dependent on relations and their actualisation.

Futures studies commonly builds on visual metaphors and verbs, such as visioning, monitoring, scoping, horizon scanning, assessing trend landscape and so on. Through these visual metaphors, specific ontological and epistemological prioritisations are made and remade. The position is similar to Neugarten's (2006, 895) proposition: '*…rather than "seeing is believing", it appears that "believing is seeing"—we see what we expect. The act of classifying inevitably focuses on and privileges certain issues, marginalizing others.*' A prime example of this kind of 'visual trope' is weak signal that in its classic theoretical form refers to an emerging issue that is perceived in its rudimentary form. There are three basic assumptions in classic weak signal theory: (1) weak signals are emerging issues; (2) emergence is linear, that is, moving linearly from a rudimentary stage towards a more advanced or progressed stage and (3) issues have a universal feature that makes them identifiable as weak signals. Complementing the classic theory, there is also a constructivist theory of weak signals that begins with actors who are embedded in a context when using and producing futures knowledge. Thus, weak signal is not approached as 'objective observation' but as a perceived construct, an outcome related to the observer's frame and capabilities. The development of a weak signal is not perceived as linearly as in the classic theory: changes and evolution are approached as hypotheses connected with other signals and patterns of change, and assessed from multiple viewpoints (Rossel, 2012).

Here we build on a weak signal theory that is based on a relational theory of futures knowledge (Ahlqvist and Uotila, 2020). The basic premise of the relational theory is to take seriously the positionality that conditions the act of observation. Relationality refers to the actual practice of weak signal observation in the event or object that is observed and to the social setting of observation. We suggest that there are five critical components in the relational theory of weak signals (Ibid.). The first component is the observer, that is, an actor who identifies a weak signal. The observer could be an individual agent, team or collective, an organisation or firm. The second component is the object, which refers to the signal grasped by the observer and defined in relation to the observer. The object can be in multiple forms, such as material, information, symbol, noise, linguistic, visual, symbolic or practice related. The third component is perspective. This refers to the orientation and an information-scouting practice fundamentally connected to the sense-making capabilities of the observer. Perspective affects signal interpretation and recording. The fourth component is context. The context defines the boundaries of what is it possible to know from a certain position. The context can refer to the spatiotemporal context, that is, the observer's spatial and temporal frame, or trajectory context, that is, the conditioning effects of history and past lineage. The fifth component is local knowledge, that is, the setting in which the observer is

embedded, in a knowledge setting that is particular, selective, limited or interpreted from a certain perspective. Local knowledge is connected to bounded rationality and social power.

As can be perceived from above, the relational approach to futures knowledge builds on the interaction between actors, objects and contexts. There are multiple combinations of objects and contexts that can be imagined and/or empirically verified. We demonstrate this with a brief theoretical example of a hybrid object, that is, a complex object constructed of several partially overlapping objects. If this object is observed only from one vantage point, the observers will only perceive one part of the object. Depending on their contexts, every observer perceives only partial objects and thus have to draw conclusions on a very selective basis. The entire hybrid object can only be unravelled by observers who are located in different positions and by combining the positional perspectives.

We briefly discuss theoretical examples of how context affects the interpretation of weak signals. The basic idea is that not all signals labelled as weak signals are emergent issues in a rudimentary evolutionary form, but some signals are outcomes of contextual changes or contextual transitions. Therefore, the classic case of a weak signal is a transforming object where the object evolves in a context through different phases until it breaks the recognition threshold and becomes identified. However, there could be multiple ways in which contexts play roles in the identification of weak signal. There could be, for example, connected contexts, such as loosely related industrial settings, that enable the observer to scout a new object, a signal, in a neighbouring context, thus locating a signal that is novel in the home context, but not in the context from where they were selected. One could also use various information brokers for connecting more distant contexts, such as in the case of companies entering new foreign markets and seeking help from consultants with local knowledge. Also, a classic case of boundary object (Star and Griesemer, 1989) could be highly useful, referring to an object that combines, or can be interpreted from, two or several contexts when bridging far-away contexts and linking weak signal types of objects and constructs. Further examples could be evolution processes that happen in different contexts. For example, an object evolves by passing through different contexts and is interpreted and used alternatively in different contexts. This could be the case, for example, when transferring research knowledge from one context to another. In one context, the same piece of knowledge might be viewed as a result of basic research without any foreseeable direct applications, but in another context, it could enable the setting up of a successful business endeavour or public solution.

6.4 Context Moulding: Theoretical Baselines

Context moulding refers to a practice in which the purposeful production of weak signals, and stronger signals, is aimed at moulding a specific context,

be it inside the state, in specific industries or in the international sphere, by causing confusion, blur and a generic feeling of impreciseness that builds up an ambiance of inexplicability and inaccuracy. In this article, we are especially focused on the geopolitical contexts of the Baltic Sea region. When the moulding process advances in multiple contexts simultaneously and is catalysed by concomitant (dis)information spaces, a more generic atmosphere of geopolitical transition is under construction.

We want to emphasise that what we discuss here is not meant as a new explanation of generic social change or a new theory of social transformation. Our argument is focused on how the contexts are shifted through a process of environmental signal production, that is, signals of events and non-events, information and disinformation, signals that are taken up in various state contexts, by media, by citizens and so on. Therefore, our framework has significance in understanding how the boundary play on information and disinformation enables particular 'potentials' for social change, but not necessarily social change per se.

6.4.1 Structuration Theory and Future Signals

The first baseline for our framework is the classic structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984), and particularly its applications in the field of futures studies. Structuration refers to a constant process of social realisation that happens in the interplay of agency and structure. Giddens (1984, 376) defines structuration as '*the structuring of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of structure*'. In the context of futures studies, MacKay and Tambeau (2013) suggest that future potentials are constructed and realised through structuration, that is, through the duality of agency and structure. Thus, they argue that '*scenario methods can better make sense of the unpredictable twists and turns that arise from the reflexive relationship between human activity and structural properties within continuously evolving social systems*' (Ibid., 673).

MacKay and Tambeau (2013) apply structuration for scenario planning and interpret future changes through the interplay of the two realms, that is, the realm of structure and the realm of action. In their application, the scenarios oscillate between these two realms in the following way: the model starts with actors who interpret and enact social norms (the realm of structure), then, in the scenario narrative, some event or interaction of scenario drivers causes a contextual change in the social norms (the realm of action), after which there are sets of rules and resources that either enable or resist change (the realm of structure). After this oscillation, a new round begins: again, actors enact on the changed social norms, a new change event appears and so on.

This oscillating logic of change is a critical starting point also in the framework we suggest here. The interpretation of a signal is invariably a contextual act by actors in a setting, and the interpretation of signals reflects internalised and enacted values in a context. The signal, be it explicit or implicit, can then be viewed as a change event that bounces back to the actors who then

interpret it. Depending on the nature of the signal, and its resonance with the set rules and resources in the context, it is either identified as a potentially effectual change element, neglected for the time being or completely ignored. Then a new round of contextual acts begins, and, again, a new signal enters the context. Then, depending on the interpretations on the previous rounds, the signal is either interpreted and acted upon, or not. The process of context moulding is a continuous process that oscillates between various rounds of interpretation of change events by contextual actors.

6.4.2 Varieties of Explicit and Implicit Knowledge

The second baseline for our model can be called varieties of explicit and implicit knowledge. This refers to multiple theories discussing various dimensions of knowledge. These theories are too numerous to be covered fully in this article, but here we refer especially to organisational and future-oriented knowledge theories, such as tacit and personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1962; 1966), and various future-oriented knowledge theories (e.g., Dufva and Ahlqvist, 2015). In order to bridge this introduction in the setting of this article, it can be asserted that there are always various parallel forms of knowledge resources in a context, and these resources condition how particular events are interpreted and signified. It also varies, according to a situation, actors and capabilities, what knowledge resources are initially activated by certain event.

Here we briefly summarise the useful knowledge resources that are relevant for this article. The first knowledge form can be called explicit-codified. This form of knowledge is expressed as words or numbers. This type of knowledge can be transferred from one context to another basically in an unchanged form (see Uotila and Melkas, 2007). The second type of knowledge form is implicit-tacit. This knowledge is expressed as experience-based insights, intuitions and hunches. The knowledge could be related to person and it could be embedded in organisational routines. This kind of knowledge is difficult to formalise. There is also a third type of knowledge that could be called knowledge of future potentials. There are several variations that could be referred to here. One variation is self-transcending knowledge, defined by Scharmer (2001) as the ability to perceive the potential in something before it is constructed. Another is out-of-radar knowledge, defined by Dufva and Ahlqvist (2015, 254) as knowledge that '*seems irrelevant in the context*' and '*is ignored or outside the scope*', that is, '*not directly accessible in the initial context*' and '*requires challenging [of] mental models*'. Usually, out-of-radar knowledge is discussed in foresight exercises through such concepts as weak signals, wild cards and different kinds of disruptions. The capability of identifying various kinds of concomitant 'foreknowledge' is usually perceived as a strategic advantage to the actors mastering it.

There are also process models that build on the varieties of knowledge, such as classic SECI model (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). SECI is an abbreviation of the following words: socialisation, externalisation,

combination and internalisation. The model is usually depicted in a circular form where socialisation represents tacit forms of knowledge, externalisation represents movement from tacit to explicit, combination represents merely explicit knowledge, and internalisation represents movement from explicit to tacit knowledge. Thus, knowledge in a context goes through various conversions from tacit to explicit and vice versa. Later on, the model has been modified, for example, by including Scharmer's concept of self-transcending knowledge into the traditional SECI model and adding two new phases to the model: potentialisation (from tacit to self-transcending knowledge) and visualisation (from self-transcending to tacit knowledge) to the original four phases (Uotila et al., 2005).

These varieties of explicit and implicit knowledge, and their conversions, are critical for our framework because the interpretation of future signals, and embedding them into a context, depends on the already existing contextual knowledge resources that can be activated. This already existing knowledge then conditions how various future signals are signified and how they attach to the 'perception system' in a context.

6.4.3 Causal Layered Analysis

The third theoretical baseline is causal layered analysis (CLA), a classic poststructuralist futures method introduced by Inayatullah (1998). Since Inayatullah's original article, CLA has arguably become the most utilised poststructuralist futures method: for example, Wahab (2024) has done bibliometric analysis of 292 peer-reviewed articles and conference articles using CLA between 2000–2022. Indeed, CLA has proved to be a widely adaptive framework that fits various kinds of method combinations and empirical settings. Therefore, our article here is no exception to this rule.

The principle of CLA is to deepen the framing of a topic under scrutiny and unravel the various parallel layers and textures to the topic that provide depth to the analysis. The basic format of CLA is built via four levels of analysis that any sociocultural topic shares (Inayatullah, 1998; 2002). The first level is called 'litany', which focuses on surface aspects of things, such as basic quantitative aspects of the topic. Litany level perception approaches events as discontinuous, point-like instances. Litany is commonly the main analytical level of daily news media. The second level of CLA is 'system'. The system level focuses on societal factors, such as economic, political, and cultural trajectories that provide a historical frame to the litany-type reading of, for example, statistics and quantitative data. At this level, a more in-depth, systemic framing is given to the topics under scrutiny. The third level again goes deeper, focusing on the discourse and worldview behind the systemic framing. At this level, the analysis focuses on, for example, questions of legitimation and power that are enacted behind the litany and systemic frame. Inayatullah (1998, 820) emphasises that, at the level of the worldview, the aim is to grasp '*deeper social, linguistic, cultural structures that are actor-invariant (not dependent on who are the actors)*'.

The key issue is to understand how different societal discourses, such as economic or cultural, condition and constitute the framings of the topic. The fourth level travels even deeper into the questions of cultural metaphors and myths, such as 'deep stories', 'collective archetypes', 'unconscious dimensions' and 'paradox'. The main idea is to go beyond the common scientific analytical perspective and explore the baseline issues of human socio-cultural existence.

CLA is crucial for our framework for several reasons. First, Inayatullah's (2002) approach starts with identifying the critical role of the context in every human endeavour, including futures exercises. A similar perspective cuts right through our framework. Second, the layered approach of CLA has inspired our framework in the sense that context moulding could be viewed as a sort of 'CLA of futures signals', that is, our framework is to a significant extent an adaptation of CLA, embedded in a focused setting of futures signals and their contexts. Third, our framework, like CLA, is committed to a relational epistemology that builds on the idea that every fragment of human knowledge is contextual, positional and bounded. However, our framework is not 'poststructuralist' in the traditional sense. The baseline for our framework is that all information and knowledge, including future signals, are outcomes of human imagination and practices, tightly linked with the societal and material settings, that is, the contexts, of their production. Nonetheless, in a similar way to Inayatullah, we maintain that unravelling the various parallel features and linkages of signal elements, including their layered structures, could open novel perspectives for understanding their deeper impacts.

6.5 Context Moulding: A Framework

In this section, we outline a framework for scrutinising how signals in the operational environment are linked with contexts and contextual changes, and how the signals interact and shift the contexts by increasing the atmosphere of uncertainty. The rationale and structure of the framework is inspired by its baseline theories: visual format is inspired by CLA, the notion of parallel dimensions of signals is inspired by the variety of knowledge types and the idea of a constantly fluctuating interaction between realm of action and realm of structural change is inspired by the duality of structure in the theory of structuration.

The framework has five layers (Fig. 6.1 and Table 6.1). If we start from the top, the first three layers are grouped in the realm of action and the two lower layers denote the realm of structural change. The first layer is called 'out-of-radar implicit'. When scrutinising a context, be it a local community, nation-state or transnational region, there are continuous surges of signals, either banal everyday activities, news-type of events or more fuzzy events, that could be located in this category. Out-of-radar implicit refers to observations that are novel and somewhat difficult to categorise. Signals seem to emerge from the white noise of lifeforms. The causalities of these signals are arduous to track. Some signals in this category could first seem like mere noise, but,

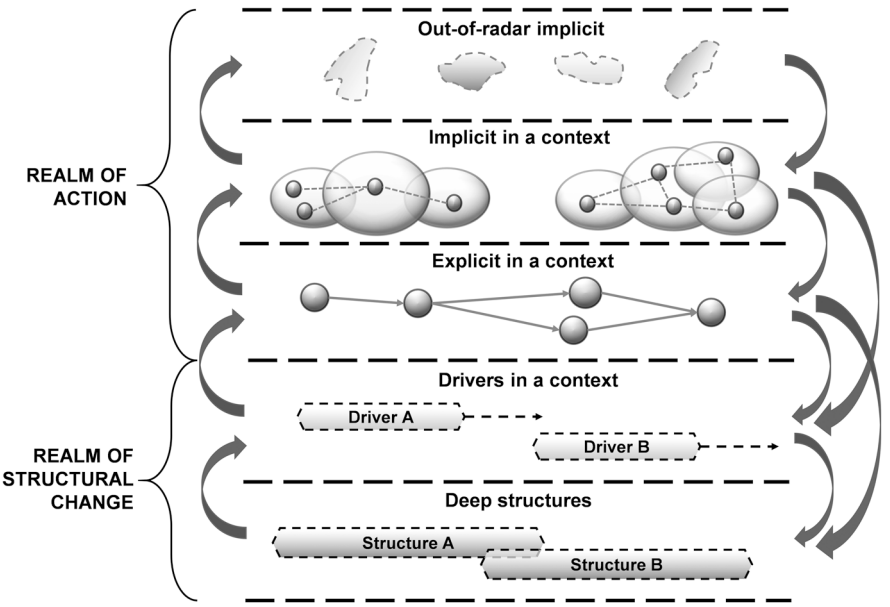

Fig. 6.1 Context moulding framework: the realm of action and the realm of structural change. Source: The Authors.

Table 6.1 Examples of events in the realm of action and the realm of structural change

	Event	*Actors*	*Target*	*Causality*	*Setting*
Realm of action					
Out-of-radar implicit	Can be identified, novel and problematic	Unclear or speculative	Unclear or speculative	Unclear	Speculative; explorative
Implicit in a context	Can be identified; motives speculative	Unclear	Relatively clear	Somewhat identifiable	Unclear; indirectly through other settings
Explicit in a context	Explicit triggering event	Well-known; identifiable	Well-known; identifiable	Identifiable	Known setting
Realm of structural change					
Drivers in a context	Geopolitical drivers in a context Examples: energy geopolitics; transnational, national and regional coalitions (such as NATO); regional events and conflicts; technologies; built environment; natural environment				
Deep structures	Deep and relatively stable societal structures Examples: state governance structures (e.g., welfare state); rule-based world system; structure and restructuration of geopolitical blocs; (return of the) imperialist world order; deglobalisation of industries				

Source: The Authors.

if and when the emergence is verified from several sources, it could break the recognition threshold. Out-of-radar implicit signals include classic weak signals and signals that are somehow out of joint, unordinary. Furthermore, the category includes signals that, when taking a closer look, are revealed to be anything but significant. If we view this layer via the lens of critical geopolitics, it could be asserted that these events usually happen in the domain of popular geopolitics; however, in the current turbulent state of the world, we could also argue the domain of practical geopolitics has increasingly become an arena of out-of-radar implicit signals.

The second layer in the framework is 'implicit in a context'. This layer gathers signals that could be unfamiliar or fuzzy in a specific context, but could nevertheless be scrutinised by benchmarking other contexts. Here, an event can be more or less clearly delineated, but its connections to a context seem thin or wavering (see Table 6.1). The target of the signal can be identified relatively clearly, and the causalities can be more or less identified. The setting of the signal is ambiguous, but it can be analysed by analysing other contexts and making parallels. This layer is populated by signals that are key resources for popular geopolitics, practical geopolitics and even formal geopolitics. Some of the signals in the layer could build up towards explicit and even structure-changing elements.

The third layer is 'explicit in a context'. This layer contains signals that can be explicitly identified in a context. These signals resonate in familiar registers. The functions of the signals can be mapped, for example, by locating a signal as a triggering event or event that is targeted at clearly conceivable causal outcomes. The actors producing the signals are known, targets and causalities distinct, and target setting and even the context changing motive can be recognised.

The fourth layer is in the realm of structural change and it is called 'drivers in a context'. This layer contains various structural change potentials, as well as the impacts of signals on wider geopolitical drivers. This is a kind of synthesising layer that combines various potential joint effects of the signals and scrutinises their context-shifting properties. Geopolitical drivers can be impacted by many types of signals and processes, but usually it requires a constantly strengthening flow and clustering of signals in order to catalyse major changes in the drivers. The geopolitical drivers are usually found in four geopolitical domains: practical, popular, formal and structural.

The fifth layer is called 'deep structures'. This is a layer of relatively slowly changing structures, such as national identity, culture, language or historical common understanding of a geopolitical position of a state. Deep structures can change—there can even be drastic transformations due to major events and trajectories—but usually the structures go through more stable and evolutionary transitions that may, from time to time, burst into significant events. The common rule could be that out-of-radar and other kinds of implicit signals do not usually have the momentum for changing deep structures. The same could be said for singular explicit signals. It usually takes a considerably

forceful cluster of signals to impact the deep structures, but sometimes grand transformations could happen due to rapid and drastic singular events, as in the case of war. In the following section, we provide a set of stylised empirical examples from the Baltic Sea region context to demonstrate the utilisation of the framework.

6.6 Stylised Examples Demonstrating the Framework

In this section, we elaborate the context moulding framework with some recent stylised examples and signals identified from the present popular geopolitical conjuncture. We fully acknowledge that the picture we paint is partial and selective. Moreover, many of the examples we present are strongly interconnected. Nonetheless, we see that this 'empirical exercise' is worthwhile for the sake of demonstration.

6.6.1 Out-of-Radar Implicit Signals

The first signal category is out-of-radar-implicit signals, where the event can be identified, actors and targets are fuzzy or speculative, causality is unclear and the setting speculative or explorative. These signals are highly dependent on the lens of the observation: the signals that are detected from the environment might not communicate at all if a specific context and concomitant lens is not activated.

Here, we briefly discuss the real estate purchases by Russian citizens in Finland as an example of a context-dependent, out-of-radar-implicit signal. The starting point for the emergence of this signal is the following circumstance: since 1999 it has been possible for Russian citizens to buy real estate in Finland. After a relatively slow start, the number of real estate purchases began to rise steeply in 2007. However, at that time, there were only a few Finnish authorities and Finnish voices who were able to perceive and grasp the security issues related to these real estate purchases. When the European security situation started to change in 2014 due to Russian military activities, and finally peaking in 2022 due to Russian open aggression against Ukraine, which resulted in Finland joining NATO in 2023, these concerned voices grew stronger. The change of context from 'non-NATO impartial state' to a 'full NATO state' enabled a change in the official geopolitical perspective, it constructed a new context and a new lens for Finnish actors.

Finnish authorities had noticed already for quite some time that some of these real estate purchases were located near, for example, critical infrastructure, power-plants, airfields and deep-water channels (Yle, 2024d). These purchases were, however, not publicly discussed because of the Finnish impartial state context. However, since 2025, new legislation has been passed concerning foreign (non-EU and EEA) real estate purchases in Finland. The purpose of the new legislation is to '*prevent hostile broad-spectrum influencing by means of property owned in Finland as foreign real estate ownership can be exploited to*

prepare hostile action against the Finnish society' (Ministry of Defence, 2025). Consequently, real estate purchases are now more openly identified as threats to national security.

This example shows that the change in the interpretative context—in this case the European security situation related to Russian aggression and Finland entering NATO—changed the context and the lens, and the interpretation of an out-of-radar-implicit signal.

6.6.2 Implicit-in-a-Context Signals

The next category in our classification is the implicit-in-a-context signals. In this category, the actual event can be identified in the context, but the motives behind the event are speculative, the actors are unclear, although the target is at least relatively clear. The causality of the signal is somewhat identifiable and the setting unclear.

As stylised examples, we present four recent events in the Baltic Sea region in which Finnish and transnational critical infrastructure were damaged due to a rather peculiar set of circumstances. The first example relates to the damage to underwater sea cables (Yle, 2024e). These kinds of sea cable-related incidents have occurred several times in the Baltic Sea region during recent years. The second example deals with the cutting down of a communication mast in Janakkala, Southern Finland (Yle, 2024c). The third example is a series of acts of vandalism against water supply infrastructure during the summer of 2024 in Southern Finland (Yle, 2024b). The fourth example is generic GPS interference that has caused difficulties for civil aviation in Eastern Finland (Yle, 2024a). All of these examples portray events that can be clearly demarcated, but are caused by a fuzzy set of actors with speculative motives.

6.6.3 Explicit-in-a-Context Signals

The third category of signals is labelled as explicit-in-a-context signals. Here, the actual event is explicit, the actor is identifiable, the targets and causalities of a signal are recognisable, and the setting of a signal is known. These signals are distinct and therefore they are commonly reported in the media. There is, obviously, an abundance of such signals. Thus, we only discuss one example here, with particular relevance for this article.

A stylised example in this category is the case when Vice President J.D. Vance and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio explicitly commented on upcoming parliamentary elections in Germany in the spring of 2025. The comments were a purposeful speech act that provided favourable arguments for the right-wing AfD party in Germany (Yle, 2025a). The clear aim of this act was to affect the German parliamentary elections. This kind of direct and explicit electoral interference is quite exceptional, and thus it can be classified in this category. It is more common that attempts to affect elections, such as the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016 or the first round of presidential elections in Romania

in the late spring of 2025 (Yle, 2025b; 2025c) are likely be categorised as implicit-in-context type of signals.

6.6.4 Drivers in a Context

The fourth category is drivers in a context. This category contains tendencies that drive wider structural change potentials that could provide momentum for a variety of shifts. Depending on the context, this category could cover multiple topics, such as regional events and conflicts, technological developments, topics connected to the built environment and the natural environment. However, since the context of this article has been new spaces of producing disinformation, we will discuss examples in this setting.

When scrutinising novel spaces of (dis)information, a crucial baseline is constructed by the infrastructure that enables these spaces, that is, technological platforms. A key driver for these spaces is information and communication technology, especially various kinds of social media platforms and online social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok. The various practices building on disinformation are quite common knowledge already. For example, as Aïmeur et al. (2023) argue, online social networks are a 'double-edged sword' in the sense that, while they provide simultaneous access to worthwhile news and information for millions of users, they simultaneously enable, via novel algorithms and AI, an unforeseen platform for spreading disinformation, misinformation, fake news and deepfakes. The novel AI solutions enable the ultrafast production of targeted disinformation and social media platforms enable their just-in-time delivery. A particularly intriguing question in this setting, and perhaps one that is not that much discussed, is the question of how early visions of the 'internet as information superhighway' (e.g., Gates 1995)—imaginary of the internet as an open and transparent channel enabling the free flow of knowledge for the benefit of democracy—quite univocally emphasised the liberating aspects of technologies and not the messier social repercussions that we are witnessing in the current conjuncture. Some earlier analyses (e.g., Ahlqvist et al., 2008) identified the potential ethical and societal problematics and dilemmas of social media, but nearly 20 years ago it was hard to assess the current magnitude of disinformation practices.

Another driver example is located by an intriguing research stream in human geography and regional studies analysing 'left behind places' (e.g., Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Pike et al., 2024), and especially the affective atmosphere of these places. As this research shows, these places are characterised by a spatially attuned collective feeling of being 'left behind' that has a high potency of articulating into a 'revenge of places that do not matter' through electoral behaviour (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Usually, the affective atmosphere springs from a vicious and possibly decades-long cycle of decline that integrates multiple downward spiralling elements, such as a declining number of inhabitants, an ageing population, a shortage of resources and services, the loss of jobs and economic innovation, industrial decline and a

lack of national political will to do anything about these issues. This localised collective emotion explains with surprising clarity the recent successes of populist politics and populist parties in Europe and the USA. Also, this collective emotion could catalyse populist reactions, for example, towards the political inefficiency of the current system or towards the lack of services and poor infrastructures.

6.6.5 Deep Structures

The fifth category emphasises relatively slowly changing structures that are commonly not prone to fast changes, but are, instead, constructed out of the oscillation of more stable periods and evolutionary transitions. Deep structures are usually societal narratives, with a long and complex history that many people adhere to either explicitly or implicitly.

Human societies are held together by long-term historical narratives and imaginaries considering, for example, nation states (e.g., Anderson, 1983). These narratives seem to be, more or less, cast in 'temporal concrete', changing only slowly and through messy and complex processes. However, this is not always the case: histories are constructed by social practices and history, specifically through changing interpretations, is prone to change as any human endeavour (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021; Geroulanos, 2024). For example, multiple recent instances show that there are constant political practices to 'change history', or, at least, depict it through a particular lens. Authoritarian states and authoritarian leaders build their communities with highly selective historical narratives that are prone to continuous change. Western liberal democratic states are not immune to these tendencies either, as, for example, is shown by Trump's recent attempts to affect the presentation of American history in museums governed by the Smithsonian Institution (The White House, 2025).

Further examples of deep structures are the widely shared beliefs and belief systems that many people adhere to. An obvious, yet surprisingly little discussed example, particularly in geopolitical and strategic foresight analyses, is religion and the various ways in which religious practices continuously affect societies (e.g., Luckmann, 1963). There are some studies that contemplate the geopolitical aspects of religion and related institutions (e.g., Agnew, 2010): however, considering the wide-ranging impacts of religion, even in current societies, the topic is rather under-problematised in scholarly settings. We could also widen the perspective of belief systems, for example, towards the economic systems that are used to manage societies and economic transactions. For example, Tanner (2010) proposes that capitalism, that is, the market-based economic system, could be analytically understood as a belief system, even by using a quite traditional 'religious metric'. Furthermore, capitalism and markets could be perceived as its own civilizational category, as argued by Gill (1995). Thus, both religion in the traditional sense and the modern economic system could be harnessed to various kinds of disciplinary and managerial uses by transnational organisations, states and different intra-state institutions and organisations.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have discussed how novel (dis)information spaces are constructed through a process we called context moulding. We delivered a theoretical setting for context moulding by discussing the notion of (dis)information in the context of geopolitics. To analyse this process, we presented a context moulding framework. The framework is based on a combination of selected tenets of futures studies, critical geopolitics and social theory. From the perspective of futures studies, the framework is grounded in the relational theory of futures knowledge and the notion of weak signals. From the perspective of geopolitics, the framework leans on the notions of information and disinformation, and especially geopolitical practices utilising information and disinformation to build strategic spaces for political action and influence. The framework also builds on three distinctive social theoretical frameworks: structuration theory, organisational knowledge theories and CLA.

The framework as such leans on two dimensions: the realm of action and the realm of structural change. The realm of action contains three signal categories: out-of-radar-implicit signals, implicit-in-a-context signals and explicit-in-a-context signals. The realm of structural changes contains two categories: drivers in a context and deep structures. All five categories of the framework are considered from the theoretical perspective. We also give stylised examples of five categories for further demonstration of the framework.

In conclusion, we emphasise that in an article as brief as this, it is not possible to cover fully all the theoretical avenues and repercussions of the framework. In order to develop the framework, it is necessary to provide empirical analyses utilising the framework. These would further pinpoint the more fluently operating components in the framework, as well as the components that might require some adjustment.

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