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Placing Behavior in Context: Political Interpretations of Individual Behavior in Countering Information Warfare in Finland

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Abstract: Malign information influence often targets large segments of the population, with the intent to manipulate individual behavior for the benefit of the actors disseminating this harmful information. However, in a liberal society like Finland, individual behavior is closely tied to personal freedoms and liberties, making the commentary and regulation of individual behavior for the sake of security a complex endeavor. This paper investigates how Finnish politicians and officials perceive individual behavior within the context of information warfare. We examine the emergence of particular discourses that interpret, critique, and potentially seek to influence individual behavior. Our research draws from parliamentary debates and legislative documents, as well as executive branch materials, providing insight into contemporary political thought. By exploring the evolving landscape of political discourse in Finland, our paper contributes to a better understanding of the environment in which countermeasures against information warfare are developed and the roots of national security policy. It underscores the intricate challenges of safeguarding cognitive security while respecting individual freedoms in a modern democratic society.

Keywords: Information Warfare, Individual Freedoms And Liberties, Policy-Maker View, Cognitive Security.

1. Introduction

This paper is interested in the potential impact of information warfare in the peacetime context and the interaction and setting up of norms of a society that tries to understand information warfare as a phenomenon. Any society in which the spreading of malign information is considered a threat to security needs to understand the phenomenon and prepare its response to it as a threat. In those circumstances behavior of individuals towards misinformation, disinformation, or propaganda may become an important theme, as deliberately disseminated malign information poses dangers for democratic institutions (Bennett & Livingston 2018), further highlighted by the argument that personal value orientations may have an impact on the believability of disinformation (Gupta et. al. 2023).

Inspired by the recent brochure by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (2022) aiming to strengthen household preparedness against war or crises and bring individuals and families to the forefront, we will investigate the theme of individual and politics. We are particularly interested in decision-makers from the point of view of politicians and officials who are acting in the context of Western liberal democracy. There, individual freedoms and liberties have an important role in legislation and society, thus influencing the possibilities of politicians and officials to provide public views on individual behavior. Nevertheless, decision-makers are also in a key position to create and implement a national strategy to counter information-related threats to national security. The threat of information warfare and other forms of intentional dissemination of malign information continues to highlight the need to bring more attention to the individual, their behavior, and the response from the rest of society. (See Nistor 2023) Indeed, we identify a three-fold research problem in (i) how political decision-makers see individuals as part of communities, (ii) how decision-makers see their role in maintaining and creating norms for behavior within the community, and in such context, (iii) how decision-makers understand the security-related changes in the surrounding society.

We will narrow our approach to focus on Finland, and our research question is how Finnish political thought surrounding security views individual behavior in the context of countering malign information activities. The period we investigate takes place between 2015 and 2022. This period starts from the aftermath of the Russian annexation of the Crimean, takes place simultaneously with the prolonged conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and includes the period before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the selected period features a potential for a variety of policy papers related to the role of information and information warfare in particular. We utilize political discourse presented in the Finnish context to explore the topic, and as a result, we will discuss the role and potential impact of public politics and decision-making to evaluate and even categorize individual behavior. There are two levels of interpretations this paper is interested in (i) the interpretations of national security policy doctrines and other forms of collectively produced policy-related documents concerning

information warfare and behavior attached to the phenomenon; and (ii) more individual political interpretations that reflect the contemporary societal thinking on the subject.

2. Information Warfare as a (Political) Phenomenon

We define information warfare as an activity in which malign information or disinformation is utilized to shape the thoughts and behavior of individuals in target groups and we understand the term to be closely associated with other forms of concepts that reflect or describe either malign information or attempts to instrumentalize malign information. As a whole, the definition of information warfare is not easy. Often information warfare is broadly linked to data and technology, where technology such as information networks provides the framework for activity, and human cognition or opinion is seen as the core target. No wonder the conceptualization of information warfare has evolved from the 1990s to the present day, especially with associated concepts such as cyber warfare, psychological operations, or cognitive warfare. (Libicki 1995; Waltz 1998, 21–24; Hutchinson & Warren 2001, 2–3; Hutchinson 2021)

The challenges related to defining information warfare partly influence the way individuals and their behavior have been and continue to be seen, and how political decision-making is linked to the phenomenon. For instance, in the US thinking on information operations, an individual has been seen both as a threat and a target for operations that relate to themes such as psychology or information networks (E.g. Headquarters, Department of the Army 1996; Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014), and the information environment has been seen as the “aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information” (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014, I-1). Opinions and thinking of individuals become relevant when individuals form groups and groups gain a shared understanding of a particular issue or start to act according to the group’s dominating thinking. Indeed, individuals help to form the cognitive dimension of the information environment, shaped by factors such as education, beliefs, norms, emotions, experiences, and ideologies. (Joint Chiefs of Staff 2014, I-3) The US concept of information environment provides a conceptual definition that can be utilized in other national contexts as well, helping this paper to connect the general idea of individuals and organizations handling information to a particular organization linked to the information, i.e. the national political decision-makers in the executive or legislative branches. Nevertheless, information warfare poses both an instrument and a threat from a military point of view, which should be reflected on the policy level as well.

As a term of its own, information warfare can include tools of phenomenon described as political warfare. According to Paul Smith (1989), political warfare relates to an aim to compel an opponent to do one's will, “political” refers to the different forms of interaction between the one using the tools of political warfare and the target audience, such as the government of the target state. Historical precedents show that it is often about the use of propaganda, psychological operations, or persuasive rhetoric to gain an impact. Since then, the political spectrum in warfare has gained more attention as a potential target for operations (E.g. Arquilla & Ronfeldt 1993; Paterson & Hanley 2020). However, besides identifying politics as a key spectrum or domain of activity, we should consider the dynamics within politics in the context of information warfare. Here the role of individuals has received some attention in recent years (Bolton 2021), but we acknowledge the existence of a gap in research that needs more case-specific understanding. When it comes to political decision-making in the Finnish context, the behavior of individuals creates a potentially key problematic topic to be involved with and to pave the way for further future analyses. In liberal democratic contexts, individual freedoms and liberties have particular significance and Finland is no exception (Freedom in the World 2023). However, political speaking is connected not only to the issues about legislative processes but also to themes of representation and to discussion and negotiation in general, in which participants are not only the other politicians but also the electorate that observes the activities of elected decision-makers. Such factors influence political speaking also in Finland, for instance in the Finnish Parliament, although the ability to speak in parliament to lead to significant political consequences is often questionable, as various speeches are mostly aimed at the media or the electorate (Pekonen 2011, 92-106). However, when the use of political language takes place, it is bound by the context and forum on which the use of language takes place and is linked to the themes of the debates or policy processes, enabling an opportunity to find ideas and issues such as norms, values, and ideas.

3. Sources and Methods

In this chapter, we will first describe the selected sources and the process of how the sources were selected. In the second part of this chapter, we will describe the methodology we applied in analyzing the sources.

The selection of sources was done to provide a comprehensive view of the discussions, policies, and ideas of the Finnish Government and the Finnish legislature and thus form a representative primary source material for further analysis. As a result, the primary source material consisted of three types of material: firstly, verbatim reports of parliamentary debates (2015-2022, available at <https://parlamenttisampo.fi/>) selected based on keyword searches. The choice of keywords was done according to the existing knowledge of Finnish vocabulary related to information warfare (Flyktman 2017), resulting in the choice of keywords “informaatiovai*” (information influen*)” and “informaatiosodank*” (information warf*). The selection of sources was further narrowed down by the means of close reading of sources and identification of whether the initial hits were related to individuals or groups of people. This produced 108 separate pieces of text related to the theme. Secondly, the Government’s Reports on foreign, security, and defense policy to which similar ideas of keyword searches were applied. This produced five reports between 2015 and 2022 (available at <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/>). These reports are created by the government with the help of parliamentary involvement and outline the commonly accepted stance on key policy principles and means associated with foreign and security policy and defense, thus constituting a key source for policy analysis in the Finnish political context. Thirdly, analyzed sources included parliamentary committee reports related to the Government’s Reports, meaning 27 individual reports from committees in the Finnish legislature such as the Foreign Affairs Committee, Defence Committee, etc (available at <https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/search/Sivut/Vaskiresults.aspx>). These reports have an official role in particular political processes, are based on evidence from experts and officials and discussions within the committee, and can thus feature more viewpoints on thematic issues compared to the crystallized and often more compact view of the Government’s Reports. Keyword searches (“informaatiovai*” and informaatiovai*”) were utilized to explore each Government’s Report or committee report, and all the parliamentary debates, reports, or memorandums were in Finnish. As a whole, 145 separate pieces of text were identified and selected for further analysis.

As a research method, we employed qualitative content analysis, in which we paid attention to notions regarding individuals in the context of disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, and other potential forms of information in societal security. Thus, the role of information acts as a point of reflection to understand the behavior of an individual concerning information warfare. As highlighted by Moilanen (2023) in his non-academic writing on the Finnish conceptualization surrounding information warfare and information influence, the Finnish vocabulary does not perceive information-related threats yet as a form of information warfare, contrary to the context of neighboring country Russia.

The selected and collected pieces of text formed the data that was analyzed qualitatively with the help of qualitative content analysis, source criticism, and contextualization. The approach in this study was linked to political history in which the study of language has been seen as a useful approach to understanding the political thought, contexts, and intentions of contemporaries. (Wiesner et. al. 2017; Skinner 2002, 103-126; see also Pocock 1973)

In relation to qualitative content analysis, ATLAS.ti software (version 23.3.4) was utilized to code the collected data to categories to help in understanding the variety of evidence drawn in the pieces of text to make between the surrounding society and information warfare, and thus to understand how the use of language conveys a thematic view related to the state of surrounding society. Categorization of data also relates to the use of computer-assisted qualitative analysis, or software that enables testing with it (see Lepper 2000; Konopásek 2007) and to the role of grounded theory, in which coding of data enables helps to conceptualize and classify findings and see relations between different concepts or categories of findings, and eventually build a theory based on findings. (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 66-71, 101-121) However, contrary to the idea of grounded theory, in this article the theoretical focus is on understanding the linguistic context for politicians when they are talking about information warfare or other connected phenomena.

In this article, the key coding principles were created based on the understanding of the potential content of the empirical sources, produced by organizations that are bound by practices and rules of the organization in question, and which have major significance for parliamentary speaking. (Ilie 2015) A systematic coding principle, in the spirit of grounded theory, was seen to provide a useful analysis tool to highlight the role of the individual as a particular focus of study. As such, the coding principles were created according to whether the

separate remarks related to information influence or warfare and whether sources talked about individuals or groups. Furthermore, we were interested in what other themes were present, including ideas of what kind of threats were present, ideas of what information or malign information actually could mean, and what kind of behavior might take place. For instance, coding principles included interpretations regarding behavior in which behavior might be positive or negative, and whether the use of language featured hopes regarding the future and seeing the potential for individual or group behavior changing to a positive or negative direction. Quotes were coded, and some codes were applied to the same quotation.

4. Empirical Analysis

Empirical analysis revealed that in the political discourse utilized by the Members of Parliament in the Finnish Parliament or politicians and officials in the Government’s Reports and committee reports, the role of individuals in countering information warfare was limited. The use of discourse focused on group behavior, indicating an interest to approach the theme from a perspective of the macro level instead of trying to raise and discuss rather micro-level phenomena.

Information warfare as a phenomenon was discussed usually outside the context of warfare, and the more typical way of parlance focused on “information influence”. This meant deliberate efforts to utilize information to influence or manipulate group behavior, but rarely the topic was seen to represent a form of warfare. However, based on the content of the analyzed pieces of texts, Finnish politicians and officials were gradually learning what threats dissemination of malign information might constitute for societal security. Of 145 selected pieces of documents, in addition to the role of malign information in general (20 coding hits), key danger in the dissemination of negative information was seen in the increasing danger of polarized society (16 coding hits) and in the increasing erosion of trust (11 coding hits), and malign information was seen as a leading threat (20 coding hits) for individual behavior.

The discussion of the theme was not focused on only one or two parliamentary parties, as parties with more than one Member of Parliament generally discussed the topic at least occasionally and both males and females participated in discussions. The concept of hybrid warfare (43 coding hits) worked as an important concept that either included the outspoken role of malign information or was used together with more specific information-related threats such as information influence and information warfare.

Figure 1: illustrates the use of coding and whether they were grounded to the sources.

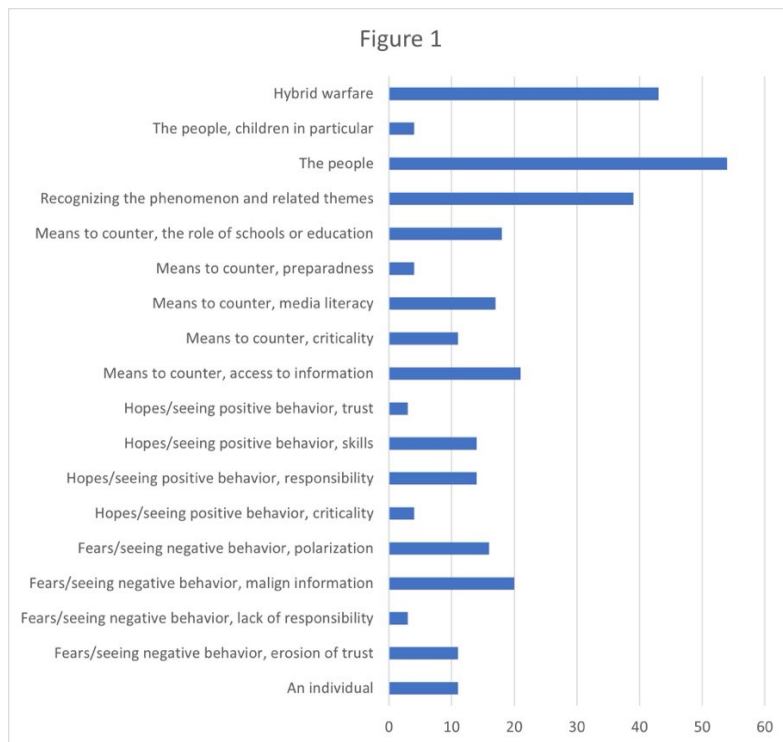


Figure 1: Codes and whether they were grounded to the text.

Information-related threats were consistently raised throughout the explored period, but the attention and depth given to the topic was broader at the end of the period than compared to the earlier period. However, the attention given to annual decrease or increase of attention should not be high. Political decision-making is a context-bound activity, in which the frequency of publication of the Government's Reports was an important framework for documents that referred to the role of information. As a key contextual factor leading to more political consideration related to security, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 not only led to the publication of a new Government's Report but also to considerations on the committee level (Valtioneuvosto 2022; e.g. Ulkoasiainvaliokunta 2022; Hallintovaliokunta 2022) Indeed, in 2020 the concept of "information defense" was utilized for the first time in the analyzed Government's Reports (Valtioneuvosto 2020), and had major prominence in another report published in 2021 about defense policy (Valtioneuvosto 2021). There the concept was linked to both information influence and other forms of information-related operations, indicating a gradual understanding at the doctrinal level.

The sources were extremely sparse concerning whether individual behavior was present. Politicians talked a lot about the Finns as a "people" or even as a nation and utilized discourse in which the Finns were raised as a group, and there also existed other forms of references to groups (58 coding hits), invoking "we" included. None of the sources explicitly mentioned names of individuals and in all 11 separate occasions in which the coding based on individual was possible referred to individuals as abstract notions or to political decision-makers themselves.

To better grasp the way how of talking about information warfare, we will raise a few selected quotations we perceive relevant and feature commentary either on groups or, on rare occasions, on more individual behavior.

Firstly, there was a rare occasion in which an "individual" was directly mentioned, indicating a view on individuals and their behavior. The topic related to critical commenting on individual behavior in social media, although without directly proposing any alternative guidelines on how to behave:

"As individuals many of us are responsible for our actions when it comes to information society and security. (...) we ourselves want to share the information (...) and have it shared and published to all possible people."¹ (Eduskunta 2018, 43)

Secondly, the political discourse focused on means to counter the impact of the dissemination of malign information. The idea to improve common skills provided a logical way to discuss the chances to counter the dissemination of malign information but focused on the Finns as a whole, as represented by the quotation from 2022:

"In its report, the Education and Culture Committee very strongly raised the significance of learning to us all. To a human being, education provides many good traits for life. During this time the important point is also that education gives societal stability and durability against, for example, hoax news and information influence."² (Eduskunta 2022a, 61)

As Figure 1 illustrates, also means to counter malign information was discussed. Here learning to approach information (17 coding hits), having schools teach needed skills (18 coding hits), and enabling the availability of correct information (21 coding hits) were seen as the most essential ways to create resilience against malign information, further underlining the group-bound approach. As an example of the latter from 2021:

"Free, responsible, and equal communication and the freedom of speech are one of the cornerstones of democracy. Media increases the political know-how of citizens and simultaneously makes us as politicians more responsible and more respectful towards the opinions of the voters. (...) Disinformation and other forms of information influence disseminated mostly with the help of social media, weakening the citizens' trust in traditional media and more broadly towards the open and democratic order of society. To secure responsible

¹ Original in Finnish: "Yksilöinä olemme monet myös vastuussa omasta toiminnastamme, mitä tietoyhteiskuntaan ja turvallisuuteen liittyy. (...) itse haluamme jakaa sitä tietoa (...) jakaa ja antaa julkaistavaksi kaikelle mahdolliselle kansalle." Speaker: Markku Pakkanen (Centre of Finland).

² Original in Finnish: "Sivistysvaliokunta tuo mietinnössään hyvin vahvasti esille sivistyksen merkitystä meille kaikille. Koulutus antaa ihmiselle monia hyviä eväitä elämää varten. Tässä ajassa tärkeä huomio on myös se, että koulutus antaa yhteiskuntaan vakautta ja kestävyyttä esimerkiksi erilaisia valeuutisia ja informaatiovaikuttamista vastaan." Speaker: Pekka Aittakumpu (Centre of Finland).

and plural communication we continue to need both the Yleisradio (Finnish public service media company) that takes care of public service and the actors of commercial media.”³ (Eduskunta 2021, 68-69)

Thirdly, as the previous quotation already shows, the role of decision-makers was often present, as the Administration Committee stated in its report in 2016:

“The information influence aims to influence decision-makers and decision-making process and to have the target carry out harmful decisions for itself or beneficial decisions from the perspective of influencer, by using different means on several media forums. Influencing also takes often place indirectly through the so-called general public or it may be focused directly on the decision-makers or the decision-making process.”⁴ (Hallintovaliokunta 2016, 14–15.

This was a typical way of discourse that was present, particularly in committee reports, probably related to the need to have a shared understanding regarding the dissemination of information with potentially malign purposes as a phenomenon. On this occasion, the potential to have both individuals but also the general public as the target for malign information activities was acknowledged and thus the individuals were seen as potential agents of activity. However, deeper consideration of individual roles, behavior, and in particular responsibilities and rights associated with the behavior were not discussed.

Fourthly, on the other hand, political discourse enabled commentary that seemed to have more populist tendencies, highlighting the positive effect of information on the citizens when it comes to the decision-making by the politicians. In this view, not all types of negative “information influence” were products of foreign entities:

“This [different messages received by certain the Members of Parliament] shows that they have been targets of information influence. This shows that also these politicians have indeed trusted that the citizens wouldn’t participate (...).”⁵ (Eduskunta 2021b, 184)

Fifthly, the group behavior was seen to pose potential dangers, and some Members of Parliament called for restraint, patience, and a critical approach to information among the population. (Eduskunta 2022a, 21; Eduskunta 2022b, 95)

Furthermore, in 2022, Russia was directly seen as the actor that wanted to pursue information activities with malign purposes. As the Government’s Report, published in 2022 as a result of the changes in the Finnish security environment stated:

“The significance of information security is highlighted in an information society where every citizen can be both a recipient and processor of information and a producer and distributor of information. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has led to a strong segregation of information environments. Russia aims to influence the formation of opinions both in Russia and abroad, and it creates a narrative to justify its actions.” (The Finnish Government 2022, 31)

5. Discussion

Based on the selection of sources and their analysis, the findings reflect a reality of political decision-making in which the level of individuals is difficult to discuss, especially when it comes to information-related behavior of individuals. However, further research could try to find new forms of sources to understand the politicians’

³ Original in Finnish: “Vapaa, vastuullinen ja yhdenvertainen tiedonvälitys sekä sananvapaus ovat yksi demokratian kulmakivistä. Media lisää kansalaisten poliittista tietoutta ja samalla tekee myös meistä poliitikoista vastuullisempia ja äänestäjien mielipiteitä kunnioittavampia. (...) Pitkälti sosiaalisen median välityksellä leviävä disinformaatio ja muu informaatiovaikuttaminen horjuttavat kansalaisten luottamusta perinteiseen mediaan ja laajemmin koko avoimeen ja demokraattiseen yhteiskuntajärjestelmään. Vastuullista ja moniäänistä tiedonvälitystä turvataksemme tarvitsemme niin julkisen palvelun tehtäviä hoitavaa Yleisradiota kuin kaupallisen median toimijoita myös jatkossa.” Speaker: Suna Kymäläinen (Social Democratic Party of Finland).

⁴ Original in Finnish: “Informaatiovaikuttamisen tavoitteena on vaikuttaa viime kädessä päätöksentekijöihin ja päätöksentekoprosessiin sekä saada sen kohde tekemään itselleen haitallisia tai vaikuttajan kannalta myönteisiä päätöksiä käyttämällä erilaisia toimintatapoja useilla eri median alustoilla. Vaikuttaminen tapahtuu usein myös välillisesti niin sanotun suuren yleisön kautta tai se voi kohdistua suoraan päätöksentekijöihin tai päätöksentekoprosessiin.”

⁵ Original in Finnish: “Tämä kertoo siitä, että heihin on yritetty informaatiovaikuttaa. Tämä kertoo siitä, että nämäkin poliitikot ovat todella luottaneet siihen, että tosiaan kansalaiset eivät osallistuisi”. Speaker: Sebastian Tynkkynen (Finns Party).

thinking towards individuals in general and especially the context of malign information to broaden the contribution of this study. However, the research approach is influenced by some key contextual factors, the most important of them being the role of rights and liberties. In the liberal democratic context, citizens enjoy major rights related to individual freedoms and liberties, also in the context of information. In the Finnish context, such a framework of rights and liberties seemed to form a key contextual framework, probably contributing to the fact that the behavior of individuals was seen through the lenses of a group instead of an individual, creating a way of parlance that also affects the way how information warfare as a topic was approached. This is interesting, taken that in the Finnish society, there have been individuals who have been associated with the dissemination of malign information from the point of view of the Finnish society. (Aro 2020) On the other hand, as the findings indicate, the phenomenon of dissemination of malign information was seen as a macro-level phenomenon in which group behavior was more important than individual behavior.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we asked how Finnish political thought surrounding security perceives individual behavior in the context of countering malign information activities, i.e. themes linked to information warfare. We were particularly interested in two levels of interpretation: (i) the level of doctrines and (ii) the level of more individual political interpretations.

Our results show that in the context of countering malign information activities in Finland, political discourse tends to focus on group behavior instead of individual behavior, and key themes that are present in discourse focus on threats, skills, and needed media literacy, but also on the role and behavior of political decision-makers. The level of doctrine, as presented by the Government's Reports, highlighted malign information as a general phenomenon in crystallized form. The level of more individual political interpretations had more room to discuss on variety of topics. We believe that these results illustrate the current state of political guidance given on countering information warfare.

It will remain to be seen whether some future event emerges that might lead to the broadening of the debate to feature more attention on individual behaviour, but meantime the policies especially in the Finnish context will be dominated by a general approach focusing on groups or even to the entire nation.

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