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COUNTER-FRAMING DESIGN: POLITICS OF THE 'NEW NORMAL'

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we introduce the concept of counter-frames in relation to discourses of sustainability, and elaborate on it in correspondence with participatory design practices. We present our analysis through the lens of the 'new normal' in the wake of the pandemic, to demonstrate and unpack the complex and conflictual nature of emergent frames and counter-frame debates, evident within the field of sustainability. The paper draws on participatory activities and interviews with social movements and grassroots organisations. We present initial reflections on the ways in which design can productively engage with and address counter-frames, as they both fill in and open up spaces for political debate in which new paradigms may be carved out of obsolete discourses and worldviews. A core contribution of paper is a re-articulation of how we understand frames in design and the acknowledgement that any counter-/framing is doing political work.

INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Sir David Attenborough made public his views on the need to 'curb the excesses' of capitalism if we are to meet the interlinked challenges of ecological protection and human flourishing. The pronouncement was perceived as a radical departure from what is acceptable in mainstream British discourse. In fact, it directly challenged governmental guidance issued less than two weeks earlier, advising schools against teaching materials from anti-capitalist groups. More recently, successes by the climate action group Plan B whose climate litigation stopped a proposed Heathrow airport expansion, have been overthrown – attributed to competing priorities between economic and ecological imperatives. Yet, not long after Attenborough's announcement, several UK councils declared a Climate Emergency. These examples represent but a few of the competing actions surrounding the entanglement of framings of ecology and the economy, functioning and emerging at different scales and levels in recent years.

A 2020 New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) report observed that at the outset of the COVID crisis, activism around climate mobilisation all but faltered, whereas campaigns on escalating housing and migration emergencies increased – a window into the ways in which social issues play out and are divided between different social groups. Paying attention to fragmentation and separations and the challenge of cross-cutting antagonisms within movements was at the heart of Mouffe and Laclau's (1985) original post-Marxist thesis. More recently, Mouffe's (2020) call to mobilise against the fraught, fragile and reductive ways in which discourses are developed would mean tackling the ecological crisis through the formation of heterogenous groups for a 'Green Democratic Transformation'. To the extent that the pandemic is understood to have brought converging crises resulting from climate change as a 'threat multiplier' into sharp relief, it consequently too demonstrates the need for intersectional responses (Heglar, 2020). In this paper, we consider some of these complexities, tensions and contradictions manifest within sustainability discourse through the lens of collective action and its use of frame theory, and the implications of such theories for design research and practice.

A frame is a description, a 'take' on a social or political problem or issue, that identifies the originators of the problem and implies solutions, e.g. 'climate change'. Frames present a way of viewing issues that are 'constructed products' (Snow and Benford, 2000), that are linked to the culture of a given context and its

institutions. Yet, frames are made in practice through a social interaction process of *framing*, which involves assigning meaning to experience in a 'dynamic' 'negotiated' and 'contested process (Snow and Benford, 2000; Della Porta and Diani, 2014) of debate and social action. As such, counter-frames are frames developed in a response – a 're-take' – to critique or challenge already existing frames, e.g. 'climate emergency'.

Frames do signifying work by accenting certain elements of what is being discussed. In social movement studies, framing is a generative process that emphasises aspects of an issue which informs how that issue is observed and comprehended by collective action movement/s and their stakeholders (Snow and Benford, 2000). Illustratively, the declaration of a 'climate emergency' counter-frames an inactivist frame of 'climate change', towards an urgent action-based re-articulation of social and environmental issues.

Within a given field, actors can be understood to shape discourse through distinct, dialogic and interactive frames which can inform (and evolve) an actor's position on a given issue. Yet, frames are also critiqued as being 'surface effects' (Jameson, 1976), disavowing the terms upon which debate is built (privilege of actors, reproduction of social structures) which necessitate understanding *alongside* values, ideology, and epistemology (Mignolo, 2009). Understanding frame contradictions and conflicts as rooted in historical phenomena and as contextually-made (Hallgrímsdóttir, 2006), together informs distinct interpretations of a given phenomenon and establishes a given field as a site of contention, where power and culture underwrite dissensus and conflict between dominant and incumbent groups (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

In design research for sustainability, we observe how design engages with distinct and hegemonic sustainability frames – such as an ecomodernist 'technical fix' frames – the understanding of which can open new design knowledge that better interrogates these more fundamental questions and responds to the stagnation in the field of sustainable design (Wilson and Bhamra, 2020). Knowledge on the formation of and relationship between distinct positions and how frames carve out political space is underdeveloped in design, but has the potential to inform more critical design discourses on sustainability.

Our overarching aim is to develop new conceptual opportunities and *working* concepts for design as a critical/political practice. We approach this by using theories of framing and collective action developed in social movement studies, to re-articulate and re-conceptualise understanding of frames in relation to design research and practice. Our early-stage results are based on participatory activities, semi-structured interviews and desk research conducted with social movement actors, grassroots organisations and community and citizen groups. We bring to the fore implications and opportunities for design by engaging with the complexities and contradictions that manifest through frames and counter-frame debates on the 'new normal' – as they mobilise resistance across different scales – in relation to established discourses of sustainability.

Established design theory and practice addresses frames through a process of consent (Schön, 1983; Dorst and Cross, 2001). Indeed, while frames and counter-frames might be erroneously interpreted as dualistic, acknowledging the beliefs and underlying ideologies that correspond to distinct and competing frame positions, as well as the variety of groups mobilising around multiple contentious frames provides an initial orientation on the complexity of positions at work. To this end, a core contribution of this paper is a re-articulation of how we understand frames in design and the acknowledgement that any framing is doing political work.

FRAMES AND COUNTER-FRAMES IN DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

Different theoretical origins of framing exist. From media and communication studies framing is understood as individualistic based on cognitive schema that allow for internal sensemaking (Goffman, 1986). In social movement studies and political theory frames are formed through 'group-based social interactions' (Snow and Benford, 2000), through public debate, political action and dialogic social processes. Framing is a well-established aspect of 'democratic politics and public debate' (Aklin and Urpelainen, 2013 citing Druckman).

By comparison, recent work on framing in design theory departs from the foundational views as established by design scholars (Schön, 1983; Dorst and Cross, 2001). In their conception, within a given specific design brief, the frame of an issue is established and set, then reworked by expert designers through well-established practices of 'reframing the problem'. Recently, critiques re-interpret this work as having limited critical consideration of the worldviews of the individual designers and their capacity for authentic reflexivity (Agid, 2012), and of broader understanding of the politics of frames (Keshavarz and Maze, 2013). Exploring the broader literature on frame theory and its critical interpretations has the potential to engage with such critiques.

In this paper, we take it that frames and counter-frames are made in practice through contextual and historically-contingent socio-material processes and practices. Counter-frames are developed in response to existing established frames and 'oppose earlier effective frames'

(Chong and Druckman, 2011), which arise conflictually between opponents involved in political debates.

Frames and counter-frames in communication studies, informed by developments in cognitive psychology, are considered as positive or negative. For example, environmental movements have long emphasised the 'negative externalities' of inaction on structural unsustainability. Conversely, frames on climate policy may positively link climate policy to enhanced quality of life, job creation, as well as partisan issues like national security, human rights and social justice. In the US, the Trump campaign linked action on climate policy as a threat to labour movements. This means that frames and counter-frames interact and change over time, in accordance with ideological positions of political entities that put out frames and counter-frames. To this end, frames and counter-frames emerge from across the political spectrum. Studies suggest that conservatives become more opposed to climate policy when negative effects such as global warming are emphasised in communication (Hart and Nisbet, 2012).

Importantly for design theory and our intention to problematise the conception of frames in design, the blurred interrelation between frames and ideology has been discussed (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Snow and Benford, 2000). While closely linked to ideology, frames are proposed as distinct from ideology as they work across ideological positions; they are understood as based upon and extensions of established ideologies (Snow and Benford, 2000). Frames are more readily observable than ideology, and on account of this have the capacity to do 'remedial' work in instances of discord – where a person's ideology is confronted by conflicting life experience, and as well as this have the capacity to ameliorate tendencies of 'reification' of ideologies (ibid) – because changes in frames and the process of making and unmaking frames are observable. Lakoff (2010) in a call to revisit how we frame the environment, describes how 'systems of frames' are the basis of ideological understandings.

Crucially, while frames are discrete signifiers identifiable as a descriptive term, they are also linked to deeper social structures by playing out different ideologies. Frame alignment happens when 'values, beliefs...goals and ideology are congruent and complementary' (Snow and Benford, 2000). At the same time, the established understanding that frames can mobilise social groups from across the political spectrum, i.e. from different ideologies presents implications and opportunities for how we understand and apply critical and participatory design practices. Design scholar Le Dantec (2016, p. 24) states, 'frames can be argued to reinforce... entrenched authority structures', setting out how, through the endorsement of a given frame, we license who participates and who has a voice; in doing so endorsement or acceptance of a given frame by effect calls on a particular public.

RESEARCH APPROACH

This research takes a critical perspective to problematise the status quo drawing on concepts from participatory design, theories of collective action and discourses of sustainability. Our interest is in how design can respond to the dissensual nature of democratic politics. Challenging whether consensus within democracy is even feasible or desirable, seeing it instead as a hegemonic practice of new liberalism, Mouffe (2019) has influenced design scholars through concepts of adversarial design and agonistic publics (Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren, 2012; DiSalvo, 2012). We extend and contribute to this earlier work on design theory taking the strategic aspect of Mouffe's conceptualisation, to look at how we deal with emancipation and power relationships in design. To this end, the study draws on a conflictual conceptual approach i.e., counter-frames as manifest in unfolding democratic debate and through collective action for sustainability to support emerging work on design and social movements (Bieling, 2019)

The paper presents the early-stage insights and analysis from the first phase of a major funded project investigating the politics of design with a focus on counter-framing practices and strategic action; 'Counter-Framing Design' funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. Frame construction occurs through processual and dialogic interactions (Della Porta and Diani, 2014) , which implies a temporal and processual approach (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Our research design takes a processual structure (Past, Here&Now, Future) for data-gathering activities while acknowledging that creating the conditions of a decolonised practice requires extended timeframes (Tunstall, 2013). This paper presents initial observations and insights from the first stage, the 'Past: field-mapping' stage of the research based on emergent discourses in the wake of the pandemic. The results are presented discursively.

The scope of the research is defined to focus on the work and activities of UK-based grassroots communities and social movements, engaging with the discourse of the 'new normal', by organising for a 'Green New Deal', to 'Build Back Better', or 'New Economics' through community building, collective action, and building new social and cultural institutions.

The paper includes insights drawn selectively from the early-stage analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews (selected to represent diverse field actors), supported by early participatory engagement with field actors through meetings, events and email exchanges. Desk research and critical discourse analysis also inform the research. A summary of the data and activities is shown in Table 1. This data is analysed to specify the field of action in

detail, whilst identifying frame and counter-frame positions and strategic actions and practices. The analysis allowed us to identify framing practices, issues of conflict and debate within the current context of sustainability and the pandemic, strategic actions of challenger actors, relevant policies, and incumbent actors with stake in the field.

Table 1: Summary of Activities and Data

Activities	Description (Jun '20-Jan '21)
Semi-structured interviews (15)	Collective action groups, community leaders and grassroots/citizen organisations campaigning on issues of: Climate justice; Housing rights; Immigration Rights; Universal Basic Income; Art & Culture; Commons; Digital Rights Activism.
Engagements through community events	Online community organising events on issues such as mutual aid, climate justice, police discrimination, migration, public space.
Desk research and critical discourse analysis	Critical analysis of selective materials (policy and research reports, position papers) linked to the communities of engagement and from which frame positions are extracted.

DESIGNING COUNTER-FRAMING STRUCTURES AND SPACES OF RESISTANCE

Our intention is to conceptualise and understand the ways in which design can productively engage with and render useful the conflictual foundation of counter-frames. Here we share initial reflections on socio-material design concepts we observe from the research undertaken on emergent discourses and associated framing and counter-framing practices – storytelling, navigating and constituting complexity, and organisational design and design tactics.

STORYTELLING

Drawing on research debating the efficacy of data inducing pessimism in the public communication of climate change (Chapman, Lickel and Markowitz, 2017), environmental and social change organisations are increasingly leveraging storytelling as a strategic method in their work.

Storytelling can be harnessed as an intrinsic aspect of framing. For example, in a recent report providing actionable methods for 'how to win the case for a better system', 'Framing the Economy' is equated with telling a 'new story' to replace the dominant, damaging narrative that scapegoats outsiders and resulted in a majority vote for Brexit (NEON, NEF, FrameWorks Institute, 2018). By deploying frames identified as effective in changing thinking and increasing support – e.g. resisting corporate power and fulfilling common

needs – the study demonstrates how it is possible to craft new narratives, regardless of ideological divides. Whilst ensuring inclusivity and accuracy, they assert that narratives should connect problems with solutions. Within organisations with whom we have conducted interviews and other fieldwork, personal storytelling is deployed instrumentally to achieve policy change, through the act of members and affected individuals telling their stories before stakeholders and power brokers as an effective method of producing significant change.

Science writer Sonia Shah emphasises the centrality of storytelling to responses to the pandemic, arguing that the stories we tell determine how we proceed from the crisis (Shah, 2020). For example, by counter-framing the virus from an external, attacking 'other' to a fully predictable pathogen to which humans must respond with agency based on historical experience. This observation can inform how grassroots organisations respond and recover post-pandemic.

The methods of framing within storytelling are important: a report on 'Communicating Climate Change and Migration' claims, 'It matters who gives the message, as much as what is being said,' arguing that in light of widespread mistrust in climate scientists, trustworthy communicators are essential, and placing value on the power of personal testimony (UKCCMC, 2012) – David Attenborough, for example, is a case in point. The authors advocate for campaign materials that 'encourage some kind of interaction or participation beyond signing a petition' as yielding deeper engagement, in particular when mobilised at times when there are clear opportunities to still establish the dominant frame of the debate.

This points towards the performative role of material and participatory engagement beyond linear textual narratives and with respect to time scales. Haraway (2016, p. 12) writes, 'It matters what matters we use to think other matters with. It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with', linking the framing potential for storytelling to the specificity of material realities. A member of one climate activism group interviewed emphasised how storytelling taps into a universal cultural. Rather than merely utilising text or verbal narrative, this group employs visual art, theatre, sound, music and poetry as constitutive of narrative. Through multi-dimensional stories and image, they seek counternarratives to 'terror and apocalypse', to create a sense of collectivity to 'nurture', 'restore', 'stabilise' and 'replenish', through acts of contestation.

Schultz (2018) looks to Indigenous storytelling practices, for using 'design fictions' in participatory contexts. These manifest in 'cultural expression with agency', in which everyone can contribute in order to navigate issues of colonialism, climate change and the 'fusion between people and things'. As such, stories can function as mechanisms for overcoming division and

manifesting intersectionality. As Neuhold-Ravikumar (2020) suggests, stories are currencies of understanding. Thoughtfully applied, multi-layered and carefully constructed storytelling methods offer generative tools for design to respond to conflicting frame positions thereby opening up spaces for political debate.

CONSTITUTING AND NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY

During the interviews, participants conveyed the hurdles and challenges they face when trying to build capacity within new organisational forms and the challenges to engaging with established institutions, their norms, procedures, and practices. Institutionalised frames or 'field frames are frames that dictate the rules of the game, what is appropriate and what is not, through norms and cultural practices of the institutional/field environment (Lounsbury, Ventresca and Hirsch, 2003). This occurs to the extent that procedures of participation developed for public engagement with institutions are institutionalised within such normative cultural practices (Kelty, 2020, p. 251).

Examples of corrupted participatory design processes now circulate within the academic and practitioner design community (c/f Mattern, 2020) – whereby for instance agencies are contracted by local governments to 'co-design' new public services or community regeneration programmes only to find that at the final stages community interests are drowned out by vested and more powerful ones.

In one instance an interviewee reflected on the colossal underspend of a national fund set up to support community housing initiatives, established as an outcome of the campaigning work undertaken by this group and its peers. However, the community organisations the fund was set up to support were unable to avail of the fund due to a lack of consideration of, or sensitivity to, different forms of cultural and institutional practices and underestimating the capabilities of such organisations in engaging with formalised public funding services. Furthermore, the participant conveyed the political skill and language involved in framing practices, when both campaigning, and engaging and negotiating with government funders. For instance, certain terminology perceived as either too socialist or too fiscally liberal could close down discussions. This interviewee perceived certain framings of affordable housing as problematically tapping into ideological differences that only led to inaction. Conversely, treating frames as a workable concept in a situation of debate and negotiation had the capacity to lead to action in the face of ideological difference, resulting in the set-up of the fund.

New social movements are fraught spaces where complex debates around perceived taboos play out between groups. Through the research we identify a range of counter-frames that mobilise social groups around different issues, such as affordable community housing, climate justice, racial justice and migration rights. The lines of separation between issues are sensitive and serious. Groups within the climate movement have been panned for poorly thought-out calls to actively disobey the law, to the disbelief and offense of race movements (Cowen, 2019). Similarly, the intersections between migration and climate action are such that those most affected by the issue of climate-induced migration are of such a vulnerable domesticity that acting out, or being asked to act out, would be highly inappropriate. Furthermore, alarmist and politically co-opted discourses of 'climate migration', deflect attention from the realities of migrants living under the conditions of UK's hostile environment policy. One interview reveals the challenges of an 'intersectional movement': a self-identified feminist engaged with feminist scholarship reported her retreat from any explicit discussion of feminist debates within her climate activist community, for fear of 'tearing the group apart'. These conflicts reveal the dangers of attempts to smooth over such dissension within movements and even individual groups.

Alongside the organising work that emerges out of and through counter-frames and discourses, the sentiment amongst participants, is that tackling siloed policy thinking is essential to address the broad challenges that the pandemic has surfaced. Design is also understood to play a role in engaging with the complexity of layers of interdependent and parallel policy interventions necessary, as organisers voice their struggles with building intersectional movements.

ORGANISATIONAL DESIGN AND DESIGN TACTICS

Concepts of organisational design are used to support emergence of new forms of organisations that mobilise social groups around a given counter-frame. Relatable frames generate interest and engage publics within activities, eventually leading to the formalisation of some of these social groups into organisations that continue mobilising and organising in new and more structured ways. This is a common trajectory of those grassroots entities that we engaged. For example, certain groups utilise systems such as sociocracy or holocracy as democratic decision-making structures.

Some of the inspiration comes from the legacy of the Occupy movement, which protested corruption of allegedly democratic states; other methods are developed according to the needs of a particular group. Alongside the different ways in which social issues are carved up between, amongst and within groups, these organisational forms also impact the degree to which engagement or collaboration may occur between groups organizing around different issues. This can be due to fragmentation within groups and a lack of understanding of who makes decisions, as well as a degree of informality that is sustained even after a group formalises.

While social movements have long used age-old techniques for organising their work, recent integration of creative methods has seen new strategies deployed

that give distinctive attributes to movements. At the same time, COVID protests have been described as 'pre-modern' (Gerbaudo, 2020). Due to the makeup of different social groups, these take different forms and some of the innovation in practices offer more or less of a departure from traditional modes of organising. Designers play a central role in generating movement actions through the integration of 'design groups'. For instance, movement communities conceive recurring motifs that become iconic artefacts or novel and innovative mechanisms of communication of issues representing movements across geographical scales. One interviewee called this 'the magic design challenge', highlighting the influence of design for the group, considering, 'how do you make things that are … iconic and can be replicated' (interviewee).

Paradoxical to the source of some tensions between climate and race group tactics already mentioned, recently Malm (2021) has called into question the practice of 'strategic nonviolence' of climate action groups, which stand in stark contrast to the events of the summer of 2020 in the UK (and across the US) which saw the toppling of the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, in the British city of Bristol. However, this very conflict indicates biases in the perception of violence, depending on the cause being demonstrated for and who comprises the demonstrators. For example, looting during riots for the Black Lives Matter movement and in historical protests against police violence has been vilified as opportunistic, rather than a justifiable action against capitalistic control over the government and justice system (Osterweil, 2020). Meanwhile, activist groups have diverse membership, for example with members who are 'risk averse' and worry about 'getting a bad credit rating' (interviewee), thus demonstrating the makeup of movements and range of positions which need to be considered in organisational and participatory design approaches.

COUNTER-FRAMING THE 'NEW NORMAL'

A key issue around which different frame positions have emerged during the COVID-19 crisis has been the idea of the 'new normal'. The notion of going back to normal, and by extension the establishment of a 'new normal' in the wake of the pandemic emerged as frame debates, against which social groups have mobilised. As the launch of our research coincided with these so-called unprecedented events, responses deployed in dominant discourse have provided a productive area in which to examine counter-frames. In this section we elaborate on three tentative positions.

NEW NORMAL IS PLACATING

COVID has revealed deep structural inequalities, locally and globally. Meanwhile, groups perceive a 'rush to "return to normal", which they seek to counteract (Climate Outreach, 2020) through the development and foregrounding of policy frameworks and ideas in the making over recent years. Meanwhile, groups are cognisant of how the new normal frame is deployed to normalise both the status quo and undemocratic new measures being ushered in. As Asonye (2020) observes: 'By using this language, we reimagine where we were previously relative to where we are now, appropriating our present as the standard.' Maintaining a guise of normality privileges the elite for whom it is serving, whilst overlooking issues of homelessness, poverty, starvation, systemic health disparities, digital exclusion and labour exploitation: 'The "new normal" ignores these lived experiences of migrant displacement and exacerbated structural inequalities, fostering one-size-fits-all strategies based on privilege.'

At the same time, the 'new normal' provides opportunities for the long-term institutionalisation of allegedly temporary measures which ultimately benefit an elite, such as digitisation and increased governmental surveillance and the expansion of big tech's reach (Klein, 2020). As Asonye (2020) notes, 'the "new normal" valorises the promise of virtual engagement'. Such framing seems poised to 'quell any uncertainty ushered in by the coronavirus' (Asonye, 2020).

NEW NORMAL IS TRANSITIONAL

Some groups position the 'new normal' as a transitional state through which a process of learning and formation of new social institutions is unfolding, viewing this uncertainty and the resulting discomfort is exactly what is needed to motivate profound and lasting change. Post-COVID, the 'inequalities and absurdities' of the economic system are 'clearer than ever' (Büchs *et al.*, 2020). The disquietude of the new normal therefore urges acknowledgement of the need to transition to entirely new social systems.

While some problematic practices around digitisation of public services and surveillance are naturalised, transformative acts of public spending and investment demonstrate the possibilities of how public finances could be used for progress on green industrialism, such as through the variety of formations of the Green New Deal. These calls for largescale institutional and systemic transformations are the equivalent of 'a well-functioning immune system against unknowable risks' (Dark Matter Labs, 2020) – that is a direct contrast and move away from the 'small is beautiful environmentalism' of the 1970s, which has come under increasing critique in recent years (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). This demonstrates a significant shift of scale within the sustainability field informed and constituted by conflicting frames and counter-frames.

NEW NORMAL IS CO-OPTING

At the same time, some groups advocate to 'Build Back Better', implicit in which is the imperative to return to a prior state – to 'reset'. The appropriated slogan and

concept to 'build back better' through a business sensibility involves investment in a growth economy that re-establishes things as they were, but improved, by integrating concepts of 'green recovery', 'green industrialism' and 'green investment'. For example, in the 2020 American elections, Joe Biden's campaign slogan 'Build Back Better', brought new meaning to the 'new normal', given the criticisms of his platform largely proceeding with the status quo. In the time since, while committing to massive green investment during his first 100 days of office, assessments range from praise for bold action, to more sobering views of too little too late (Steffen, 2021).

The counter-frame is that through slogans and the details of policy frameworks such as 'Build Back Better' a sense of a return to a previous social order that is problematic and harks of a reformed and potentially strengthened establishment is contentious to those who see the crisis as an opportunity for transformational change. As a Dark Matter Labs (2020) report puts simply, 'Normal was the problem in the first place'.

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY WITHIN THE NEW NORMAL

Nevertheless, in our interviews we discovered concern among some groups that by positioning themselves as not wanting to go back to normal they may alienate people. Relatedly, frames that emerge out of the grassroots are often appropriated and their meanings transformed by institutional actors and their practices. Counter-intuitively, perhaps, this risks representing a privileged position – that of a necessary disruption to society and economy – a luxury not available to many working people, especially those in marginalised groups. This speaks to the sustainability discourse of 'just transition', which foregrounds the necessary acknowledgement that for any societal transition there needs to be an acknowledgement of which livelihoods are lost and who stands to gain or lose. It also relates to broader criticisms of privileged positions prioritised within the sustainability field, including those issued at groups promoting civil disobedience that could lead to arrest, an outcome with widely varying consequences depending on race, class and other factors.

Similarly, rather than isolating the brief ecological benefit of the response to the pandemic, witnessed in reduced road and air traffic and corresponding wildlife activity, but which generated misanthropic rhetoric such as 'humans are the virus', that one group we interviewed associated with eco-fascism, the integration of social and ecological benefits of not returning to normal should be emphasised. Dark Matter Labs (2020) states, in contrast:

> Even a near complete shutdown of the global economy has resulted in only 5.6% CO2 emission reductions relative to the 7.6% required annually to keep within the 1.5°C temperature-rise target. While much has been made of the potential benefits of the pandemic on the environment, COVID-19 has also highlighted the limitations.

The crisis brings to the fore the centrality and entanglement of economics, ecology and society, which form the foundations of discrete positions on what is necessary for any sustainable future. These issues illustrate the making of frames and counter-frames in practice and the tensions and balance between lobbying for transformational social change through mobilisation across race, gender and class lines, in contrast with exclusions through perceived radicalism. It is these delicate lines along which counter-frames can be investigated and fruitfully explored.

COUNTER-FRAMING STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW NORMAL

Increased grassroots activity at different levels, from regional solidarity movements to formal charities to small local neighbourhood support groups, has flourished within the pandemic. Many organisations see the crisis as an opportunity to advance their visions of economies centred on wellbeing and sustainability. Underpinning these visions is the potential for new 'polymorphic' – an entity of diverse forms and dimensions rather than monolithic – social and economic models (Vidal and Peck, 2012), the creation of which can be supported through appropriate counter-frames of hegemonic economic discourses. Meanwhile, response to the coronavirus has demonstrated how rapidly change can take place: A member of Extinction Rebellion states:

> For decades, our government has told us that the systemic changes to our economic system needed to avert climate breakdown simply weren't possible. On the contrary, this crisis has shown us that when an issue … is a life-threatening emergency of global significance, the government is quite capable of responding quickly and rapidly reallocating vast resources. (Quoted in Quigley, 2020)

Despite criticisms of government action, the disruption to the economy forced by COVID sets a precedent for other necessary crises response.

As a report on climate and migration stresses, the right timing is essential to effective framing for social change, to pursue the 'window of opportunity' (UKCCMC, 2012) – the lacuna through which the public can be won over through the right arguments and with the right ideas. This is the point in time before frames become settled and institutionalised and thereby more difficult to disrupt. By the same token, several groups interviewed lamented being 'ten years too late' for necessary action on the climate crisis (interviewee).

Whilst such fatalistic/doomist perspectives are critiqued for breeding inaction (Lamb *et al.*, 2020), such observations also indicate the cruciality of good timing and effective framing. Many of the conflicting frames outlined here, for example between climate and social issues, have imposed obstacles to change, whereas the pandemic and its roots in zoonotic disease, spread due to destructive environmental practices, has demonstrated the necessity of addressing such interlocking frames. The crisis offers an opportunity for 'mainstreaming new social norms' which the group Climate Outreach (2020) establishes as critical to achieving action to address the climate emergency. This group outlines how action can only be achieved through a sense of desire rather than coercion, a distinction which depends on how issues are framed.

The disruption of the pandemic to normal life can foster understanding of those who do not have the privilege of normality, which in turn can be mobilised. Asonye (2020) writes: 'We should revel in the discomfort of the current moment to generate a "new paradigm", not a "new normal".' He suggests that by embracing the destabilisation and lack of so-called normality introduced by the pandemic, people might be urged to empathise with and to help those who are marginalised and excluded regardless of COVID-19, leading to policy dedicated to recognising the diverse realities of stakeholders. These disruptions and their revelations point towards how storytelling and other design tactics can be utilised for counter-framing in ways that go beyond some of the problematic narratives associated with the new normal.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this work we have presented an initial re-conceptualisation of frames and counter-frames in relation to design research and practice and elaborated on this conceptualisation by drawing insights from our empirical findings of working with social movements, grassroots communities, citizen groups and community organisations. Through early-stage analysis and insights based on these activities, we draw out implications and opportunities for design and articulate these through a presentation of the discourse of the 'new normal'. We articulate the constitution of select frame and counter-frame positions within this emergent discourse, and the observed complexities, contradictions and tensions therein. It is essential to emphasise, that each emergent frame and discourse is contested within its own conception. Alongside those contestations that we touch briefly on in this short paper, exist others – between competing discourses, or within sets of frames – that cannot be treated extensively here.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN

Seeking out counter-frames by its very nature is an engagement with complexity and non-linear interpretations of social issues through the identification and acknowledgment of difference and power.

Participatory design scholarship has sought out ways to repoliticise its research and practice (Huybrechts et al., 2020). The concept of counter-frames is here presented as a *working* concept, meaning that it fosters the constitution of dissensus within a given context and thereby engagement with practices of resistance and the creation of publics/counter-publics and practices that are marginalised within the political sphere. It asks designers to engage publics in defining its politics and purpose and builds the spaces and structures into the process.

The aim of working with counter-frames, by seeking frames of contention or competing frames that may exist outside the initial bounds of a given design context furthers the goal of democratic design methods' practices and spaces. If participation's purpose is to reveal 'undemocratic forces and structures…in a design process' (Knutz and Markussen, 2020), by putting counter-frames in dialogue with design we build democratisation processes constitutive of dissensus. Yet, our work opens up new considerations for design in its correspondence with publics. Frames and counter-frames engage different publics differently, which are in dialogue – providing a meso-level of analysis of an evolving field uncommon in design theory. Importantly, endeavouring to find ways of doing design that constitute and/or navigate the tensions and debates between different positions opens possibilities for thinking and doing design critically – in practice.

Furthermore, more explicitly identifying distinctions in frames and counter-frame positions in relation to ideological and political motivations has the potential to enhance our understanding of participation. This is because collective action groups have used frame theory to develop understanding on how to effectively mobilise different social groups, by being responsive to ideologies and value systems. To this end, a core contribution of this paper is a re-articulation of how we understand frames in design and the acknowledgement that any re-/framing is doing political work.

SPACES OF RESISTANCE

The empirical context of the research problematises sustainability discourses through the lens of counter-frames, cutting across varying levels of scale. The character of the scalar concept is varied. For instance, the counter-frames of the 'new normal', provide insights about relationships inside groups such as mutual aid groups and collectives, to how these same groups externalise discourses outside of their actions towards moves for total societal upheaval and global transformation. Yet, investigating these counter-frames requires interrogation of the constitutive relationships between economy and ecology, the human and non-human leading us to more fundamental scalar questions of how frames speak to ideological foundations and

worldviews. How such relationships are understood to be constituted can be challenged through different and new scalar interpretations.

Matters of scale in sustainability have shifted and are contested within different field positions, articulated through frames and counter-frames. We note the shifts in contemporary critical sustainability discourse that stands in stark contrast with a call for downscaling and 'relocalising' of earlier environmental movements. In this paper, the scale of transition is made palpable through the debates of the 'new normal'.

Through their very conflicts, these counter-frames offer spaces in which 'new paradigms' may be carved out of obsolete discourses and divisions, via new methods including some of the strategies we outline, such as storytelling practices and other design tactics. Doing so, counter-frames in their essence both fill in and open up spaces for political debate. Taking this point seriously would also allow for overcoming an instrumental view on the potential of the concept of counter-frames.

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