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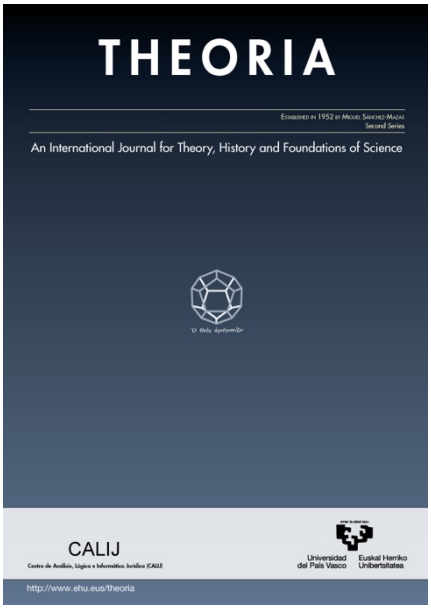

DISCURSIVE DEADLOCK AND THE SOCIAL (MEDIA) LIFE OF FRAMES

(Bloqueo discursivo y la vida social (mediática) de los marcos)

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ABSTRACT: Disputes over complex social and political issues frequently reveal themselves in the use of contrasting frames. A policy on restricting gun ownership may be characterised by one side as "improving public safety" and by the other side as "curtailing individual rights"; one group may frame the construction of new homes on the greenbelt as "increasing the housing supply" while their opponents characterise it as "damaging the environment"; and so on. In recent work, J. L. Bermúdez argues that these kinds of alternative frames put agents in touch with distinct – and potentially conflicting – reasons for judgement and action. He diagnoses many cases of discursive deadlock as clashes of frames and he prescribes to agents a course of epistemic due diligence, whereby they adopt multiple alternative frames. In this paper, I argue that the analysis, while valuable, is importantly incomplete. Frames not only elucidate reasons but signal identities and affiliations—and that calls instead for structural changes to discursive environments.

Keywords: Framing; Frame; Framing effect; Judgement and decision-making; Discursive deadlock; Social media.

RESUMEN: Las disputas sobre cuestiones políticas y sociales complejas suelen manifestarse en el uso de marcos contrapuestos. Una política de limitación de la posesión de armas puede ser caracterizada por una parte como una medida destinada a "mejorar la seguridad pública" y por otra como una "restricción de derechos individuales"; un grupo puede enmarcar la construcción de nuevas viviendas en zonas protegidas como una manera de "incrementar la oferta habitacional", mientras que sus opositores la describen como una acción que "daña el medio ambiente"; y así sucesivamente. En trabajos recientes, J. L. Bermúdez sostiene que este tipo de marcos alternativos pone a los agentes en contacto con razones distintas —y potencialmente conflictivas— para el juicio y la acción. Bermúdez interpreta numerosos casos de bloqueo discursivo como choques entre marcos y prescribe a los agentes una forma de diligencia epistémica consistente en adoptar múltiples marcos alternativos. En este artículo sostengo que, aunque valioso, dicho análisis es significativamente incompleto. Los marcos no solo esclarecen razones, sino que también señalan identidades y afiliaciones; y ello exige, más bien, transformaciones estructurales en los entornos discursivos.

Palabras clave: Marco; Enmarcar; Efecto marco; Juicio y toma de decisiones; Bloqueo discursivo; Redes sociales.

SHORT SUMMARY: Bermúdez diagnoses many cases of discursive deadlock over complex social and political issues as clashes of frames. He prescribes to agents a course of epistemic due diligence, whereby they adopt multiple alternative frames. I argue that his analysis, while valuable, is importantly incomplete. Frames also signal identities and affiliations—and that calls for structural changes to discursive environments.

1. Introduction

Why might someone describe the restriction of gun ownership as "improving public safety" or, alternatively, as "curtailing individual rights"? Is it because they value different things, or value the same things to different extents? Is it because they are focusing just on one facet of the issue, blinkered to considerations on the other side of the argument? Would collective decision-making be improved by discussants incorporating alternative frames into their thought and talk, forcing them to engage with their opponents' perspectives? It is certainly tempting to think so. In this paper, however, I will suggest that things are not quite so simple—especially in the social media age.

To prefigure the argument that follows, I will show how frames not only elucidate facts, reasons, and values, but also signal a speaker's identity and affiliation with others. Hence, incorporating alternative frames into their thought and talk is not merely a question of undertaking epistemic due diligence but of signalling solidarity with an out-group—an individually risky strategy that may also be collectively ineffectual.

I begin by introducing the concepts of *framing* and *frames* (Section 2). I then summarise Bermúdez's proposal that frames elucidate potentially conflicting reasons; and explain how this grounds his diagnosis of, and prescription for, discursive deadlock (Section 3). I critique his analysis by showing how frames can also signal identity and affiliation (Section 4) and explaining how this complicates both the diagnosis of discursive deadlock and the prescription for treating it (Section 5). Finally, I illustrate the acuteness of the problem in social media, due to features like connectivity, publicity, and decontextualization, before sketching out some possible solutions (Section 6). In so doing, I aim to open up new avenues for improving debate and decision-making in the digital age.

2. Framing and frames

Considered in the broadest sense, *framing* and *frames* concern how things are presented—whether privately in individual reflection or publicly in social interactions. Our narrower focus here will be on how entities, individuals, or states of affairs are *articulated in language.*

Here I am cleaving closely to how 'framing' and 'frame' are used by Tversky and Kahneman in their seminal studies of framing effects (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981, 1984, 1986) and by many subsequent psychologists (see, for example, the survey of framing studies by Levin et al (1998)). These researchers typically characterise the frames they are investigating as alternative *descriptions.*[1]

It should be noted that the psychological research focuses on articulations assumed to be logically equivalent (such as 'one quarter full' and 'three-quarters empty', or 'eighty percent die' and 'twenty percent survive'). Following Bermúdez (2020), I will use 'frame' more broadly here, to include articulations that are not logically equivalent but are nevertheless understood to be concern the same thing in the context at hand. For example, I might characterise checking my emails as "my least favourite task" or "the next item on my to-do list". Insofar as these two sequences of words

[1] In order to remain neutral on philosophical debates between description and direct reference, I prefer to talk in terms of alternative *articulations.*

are understood to be characterising one and the same activity, they constitute alternative frames for it.[2]

Taking our cue from the discussion towards the end of Bermúdez's book, we will home in still further on the presentation of *complex social and political issues*, different facets of which are captured by distinct frames (Bermúdez, 2020, Chapters 10-11). To take a few more examples, participating in strike action might be characterised as "protecting workers' rights" or "disrupting people's lives;" building new homes on the greenbelt might be characterised as "damaging the environment" or "increasing the housing supply;" and online content moderation might be characterised as "an attack on free speech" or "a harm reduction measure".

Again, notice that none of these example pairs of frames involve logically equivalence: for instance, "an attack on free speech" and "a harm reduction measure" are not in general co-extensive. Nevertheless, within a specified context, the frames may be used to characterise the same thing (in this case, online content moderation).

Notice too that in each pair of frames considered, one presents the issue positively, while the other presents it negatively. Returning to an earlier example, the prospect of improving public safety lends intuitive appeal to a policy of restricting gun ownership, while the prospect of curtailing individual rights cuts against such a policy. Indeed, we might find that our views on the issue switch as we apply first one frame and then the other—and perhaps this frame-induced oscillation persists, even while we know that one and the same issue remains at stake. As we will see next, Bermúdez (2020, 2022) seeks to explain such frame-dependent preferences by appeal to the different *reasons* made available by each frame.

3. Reasons and reasoning

Bermúdez (2020, 2022) argues that frames can articulate different features or facets of a decision problem, thereby furnishing agents with distinct and potentially conflicting reasons. He asks us to consider, for example, the moral dilemma facing Agamemnon at Aulis:

> Agamemnon is leading the Greek fleet against Troy to avenge the abduction of Helen by Paris. While the fleet is becalmed at Aulis, the prophet Calchas interprets a portent – two eagles swooping down to kill and eat a pregnant hare. As Calchas interprets the portent, it reflects the displeasure of the goddess Artemis at the prospect of innocents being killed at Troy. The lack of wind has the same source. The only solution, says Calchas, is for Agamemnon to sacrifice to the goddess his own daughter Iphigenia. (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 7)

[2] For further discussion of conceptions of 'frame' in academic literatures, see (Bermúdez, 2020, pp. 11-14). Bermúdez himself deliberately eschews a precise definition, instead characterising the core idea as "a schema of interpretation that allows individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label" (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 14). This bears similarities to Elisabeth Camp's conception of frames as expressing *perspectives*—where perspectives are understood as "open-ended dispositions to interpret, and specifically to produce intuitive structures of thought about, or characterizations of, particular subjects" (Camp, 2019, pp. 18-19). Given my interest here in *discursive* deadlocks, I focus narrowly on linguistic devices for talking about some individual, entity, or state of affairs.

As Agamemnon agonises over what to do, Bermúdez glosses him as framing and re-framing the bringing about of Iphigenia's death–first as "murdering his daughter"; then as "following Artemis's will". The first frame furnishes Agamemnon with a reason not to bring about Iphigenia's death, on account of murder being bad (and murder of one's child at that). However, the second frame furnishes him with a reason in favour of doing so, corresponding to the good associated with appeasing the powerful Goddess.[3]

The idea, then, is that thinking about a dilemma through one or other frame can focus an agent on reasons to grasp one or other horn. Similar analyses are given of Macbeth's dilemma in Shakespeare's classic play (Bermúdez, 2020, pp. 108-111), more prosaic everyday battles of self-control (Bermúdez, 2020, Chapter 7), and some classic game-theoretic coordination problems (Bermúdez, 2020, Chapters 8 and 9).

Drawing lessons from the cases of *intra*personal decision-making, Bermúdez (2020, Chapter 10) turns to *inter*personal deliberation—and specifically to 'discursive deadlocks'. He defines discursive deadlocks as "evaluative and prescriptive conflicts between individuals and/or groups" (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 220) where "standard tools for dispute resolution and collective decision-making are ineffective in securing agreement" (Bermúdez, 2020, pp. 220-221). While he doesn't specify what these 'standard tools' are, the basic idea seems to be that disagreement remains, even once all relevant facts are on the table (see also Bermúdez, 2022, p. 11).

Bermúdez is especially concerned about the nature of current debate over hot-button political issues, such as abortion, gun ownership, immigration, and climate change (Bermúdez, 2020, Chapter 10). He observes:

> We are living in times where this type of deadlock is particularly widespread. It has become a platitude for contemporary political and social commentators to observe partisan deadlock and polarization on what are euphemistically called "values issues". (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 221)

Let us consider in a little detail his more specific case of pledging allegiance to the American flag:

> Suppose that I am trying to make my mind up on a complicated and emotive issue, such as whether to support a political candidate whose views are broadly aligned with mine, except on the issue of the pledge of allegiance. He believes, while I do not, that children should have the opportunity to pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States every morning at the start of the school day. [Footnote omitted] Underlying the dispute is our framing the pledge in different ways. For him, it is an expression of patriotism and a reverence for the values that he thinks underpin the American constitution and the American way of life. In contrast, I, like many people who grew up in Europe, have an inherent distrust of flags, which I tend to frame from a historical perspective. Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco all came wrapped up in flags and the dominant image of a flag to

[3] Bermúdez goes on to argue that it may be rational for Agamemnon to prefer following Artemis's will to failing his ships and people, while also preferring failing his ships and people to murdering his daughter, even while knowing that following Artemis's will in this case *is* to murder his daughter. For critical discussion of this further claim, see (Fisher, 2022a, 2022b). For the purposes of the current discussion, I am only concerned with the idea that the frames articulate distinct reasons for action.

> my mind is of hundreds of thousands of people saluting the swastika at the Nuremberg rallies. (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 235)

Rather than giving us a neat pair of contrasting linguistic frames here, Bermúdez merely provides some suggestive associations and images corresponding to the opposing stances on pledging allegiance to the flag.

Still, we can extrapolate from his discussion the terms in which the interlocutors might characterise the issue in debate. The political candidate might characterise the pledge as "reinforcing universal liberal values" (particularly in light of the last five words of the pledge being "liberty and justice for all," as Bermúdez notes on p. 236). Their opponent might frame it as "reinforcing exclusionary nationalism or sectarianism" (indicated by the phrase "one nation, under God," which also appears in the pledge).

While the good associated with reinforcing universal liberal values constitutes a reason to endorse and continue the practice of schoolchildren pledging allegiance to the flag, the bad associated with reinforcing exclusionary nationalism or sectarianism constitutes a reason not to. Hence, in discussing the issue through one or other frame, each agent is put in touch with a reason for or against the policy. Although they may agree on all the relevant facts (the wording of the pledge, the current state of US law and schools' practices, and so on) they fail to converge on a policy solution. Indeed, the interlocutors may seem simply to talk past each other.

Bermúdez argues that the impasse need not be the result of a clash of (potentially incommensurate) values. For instance, in the case of the pledge, it may not be that one party endorses affirmation of universal liberal values while the other does not; nor that one party endorses affirmation of exclusionary nationalism or sectarianism while the other does not. Rather, Bermúdez suggests, the discursive deadlock may be better understood as a *clash of frames*. The adoption of one or other frame is what leads each party in the dispute to attend to distinct reasons.

This diagnosis of discursive deadlock as a clash of frames naturally invites a particular kind of prescription. Bermúdez argues that interlocutors ought to engage in "frame-sensitive" or "non-Archimedean" reasoning (Bermúdez, 2020, Chapter 11). This involves agents first recognising that their opinion is shaped by their frame (a process Bermúdez calls "reflexive decentering" (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 243)) and then adopting their opponent's frame (Bermúdez dubs this "imaginative simulation" (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 244))—but without discarding their original frame (thus they exhibit "perspectival flexibility" (ibid.)).[4]

Only in this way do agents fulfil their "due diligence requirement," according to which "a model frame-sensitive reasoner should make appropriate efforts to understand multiple ways of framing complex decision strategies" (Bermúdez, 2020, p. 271). And only then, with both frames in play, does interpersonal agreement become possible (for example, through convergence on the appropriate weight to be assigned to distinct frame-sensitive reasons). In a nutshell, the proposal is that participants in collective decision-making have epistemic obligations to work with multiple, potentially clashing, frames.

[4] Here the language comes very close to that of Camp (2019). Accordingly, we might think of adopting an opponent's frame as *inhabiting their perspective*, in Camp's sense, with all of the concomitant attentional, emotional, and motivational implications that she describes.

The approach is appealing. However, we might be sceptical that discursive deadlocks will, in fact, be broken, even once the disputants are fully au fait with others' perspectives. Perhaps the process will still bottom out in a clash of values (for example, if views really do differ as to how valuable universal liberal values are, or how detrimental exclusionary nationalism or sectarianism is). Indeed, an interlocutor's very choice to use one or other frame might reflect their already having considered the reasons at stake and come down on one side of the argument. Further due diligence would then seem fruitless.

I wish to pursue a slightly different line of objection—one which challenges the idea that frames (always or only) put agents in touch with *reasons*. In the next section, I will explore another function of frames. Drawing on analyses in the social philosophy of language, I will argue that frames can be powerful signals of identity and affiliation. I will then show how this point complicates both Bermúdez's diagnosis of discursive deadlock and his prescription for treating it.

4. Identity and affiliation

The insight I will be drawing on is that particular linguistic forms can conjure up certain individuals, social groups, or culturally salient characters. Consider, for example, a catchphrase like 'I'll be back,' which calls forth Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator, or a political slogan to make one's country 'great again,' which conjures up Donald Trump and his supporters. This sort of effect is achieved by the speaker seeming to co-opt the words of another, speaking in their voice as it were.

To give a feel for how such uses of language construct and convey speakers' identities and affiliations, I begin by introducing two extant analyses—of slurs and dogwhistles—as a run-up to the idea that framings of complex social and political issues can perform a similar function.[5]

4.1. SLURS

In recent years, many linguists and philosophers of language have grappled with the problem of how exactly to characterise the derogatory nature of slurs, which appear to disparage people based on characteristics such as race, religion, or sexual orientation. There are many distinct approaches, appealing respectively to expressions' truth-conditional semantic contents (e.g. Hom, 2008), presuppositions (e.g. Schlenker, 2007; Bianchi, 2015), attitudes expressed (e.g. Richard, 2008; Jeshion, 2013), pragmatic implicatures (e.g. Bolinger, 2017), or taboos (e.g. Anderson & Lepore, 2013a, 2013b).

Our focus here will be on the account put forward by Nunberg (2018) and broadly endorsed by Pullum (2018). In 'The social life of slurs,' Nunberg argues that the pejorative import of slurs is explained by the fact that they are the terms used by bigots, whereas other members of society

[5] For further philosophical discussion of how alternative linguistic forms carry such "social meaning", see Nowak (2022; forthcoming) and Camp & Nowak (2025). For a book-length discussion of how these sorts of "resonances" might ground the very meanings of linguistic expressions themselves, see (Beaver & Stanley, 2023). I note too that, while my focus here remains on language, other expressive forms could, in principle, have similar effects.

avoid using them. As he writes in relation to racist slurs: "racists don't use slurs because they're derogative; slurs are derogative because they're the words that racists use" (Nunberg, 2018, p. 244).

Nunberg denies that slurs express specifiable prejudiced or discriminatory content about their targets, either as a matter of semantic encoding or pragmatic communication; and nor does he believe they express any specific discriminatory attitude held by the speaker. Yet he maintains that slurs certainly do derogate their targets. According to Nunberg, this derogation is achieved purely through the association between the linguistic forms and with those who use them: slurs are predominantly used by—and therefore strongly associated with—bigots.[6]

In elaborating the view, Nunberg uses the terminology of 'ventriloquism,' 'impersonation,' and 'material obtrusion' to describe how the use of a slur term seems to interpolate the voice of the bigot into the discourse. It is in this way that the bigot's discriminatory ideology enters the scene, somewhat indirectly and amorphously.

Nunberg further emphasises how the use of a slur term *affiliates* the speaker with the bigots it evokes, issuing a "declaration of solidarity with the speakers who own the word" (Nunberg, 2018, p. 286). In this way, a person's lexical choice ends up forging a nefarious alliance.[7]

In sum, Nunberg's analysis shows how a speaker's choice of one linguistic form over another (specifically, a slur term over a neutral term) signals a particular affiliation (in this case, with bigots).

4.2. DOGWHISTLES

Our second case study concerns 'dogwhistles,' i.e. uttered expressions interpreted in systematically different ways by distinct subsets of an audience. To take a few examples, Saul (2018, pp. 362-363) explains how the phrase "wonder-working power" (as used in President George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address) is likely to be heard by Christian fundamentalists as referring to the power of Christ, while most others would take it to be merely "an ordinary piece of fluffy political boilerplate" (Saul, 2018, p. 362). Stanley (2015) gives the example of "inner-city"—an apparently innocuous descriptive term that has become a racist dogwhistle in American political discourse. Khoo (2021) observes how "globalist" and "nationalist" have become white supremacist code words.

Discussing the last pair of terms, Khoo writes:

> Over the course of the last century, these words have taken on racial and religious connotations, with "globalist" becoming associated with Jewish liberal conspiracy theories (many involving Hungarian-American banker George Soros), and "nationalist" associated

[6] Even if one is sceptical about whether this is the *sole* way in which slurs derogate, Nunberg gives us a compelling account of *one* way in which they might do so. My thanks to a reviewer for encouraging me to be clearer about this.

[7] Indeed, the affiliative feature of slurs is supposed to contribute importantly to their uniquely menacing force, since the user of a slur invokes the wider mob with whom they are identifying. As Nunberg puts it, "The word can turn a bigot from a hapless, inconsequential "I" to an intimidating, menacing "we"" (Nunberg, 2018, p. 286). See (Barnes, 2023) for related analysis of how collective authority is constituted online.

> with white Christian conservatives, in particular, the ideology of white nationalism: a loose coalition of commitments encompassing belief in white racial superiority, a fear of waning cultural and demographic dominance of white people in America, and the goal of dividing nations by race and establishing a white America [footnote omitted]. (Khoo, 2021, p. 147)

Importantly for our purposes, Khoo argues that the connotations of "globalist" and "nationalist" have become established purely via patterns of use among the relevant communities of speakers. For instance, he argues that the word "nationalist" is known to be used by members of the white supremacist community to identify themselves and other white supremacists (Khoo, 2021, p. 153). So, someone who endorses a "nationalist" position might thereby signal their affiliation with the white supremacist community.[8]

Two notes of caution are in order. First, Khoo doesn't think coded speech *always* works through this metalinguistic mechanism; sometimes there is a more direct association between the meaning of an expression and what it dogwhistles, as when "inner-city" becomes a racist dogwhistle due to people's beliefs about the racial demographics of inner cities (Khoo, 2017, 2020).

Second, dogwhistles can function somewhat similarly to slurs, with expressions like "globalist" and "nationalist" evoking bigoted individuals or groups and their vicious ideologies. However, they do so much more equivocally. It is still possible in many contexts to use terms like "globalist" and "nationalist" neutrally, as when someone condemns a "nationalist" position on account of its indifference to events in other parts of the world. Likewise, many competent and reasonable audience members may not hear the dogwhistle at all, even when it is intended or interpretable as such. It is far harder to imagine how a slur term could be used without derogation (at least for non-members of the targeted group—a point also made by Nunberg and others).

All of that said, Khoo's analysis suggests that, in some contexts, speakers who endorse "nationalist" positions at least run the risk of appearing to identify with white supremacists. Once again, this is because particular linguistic expressions bring into play particular communities of speakers who use them in particular ways. Use of the expressions can then signal affiliation with those communities.

In discussing slurs and dogwhistles, we have been focusing mainly on ideologies outside of reasonable democratic discourse. However, we can see similar mechanisms at work *within* reasonable democratic discourse. This brings us back to alternative framings of complex social and political issues.

4.3. THE SIGNALLING FUNCTION OF FRAMES

I wish to suggest that alternative framings of complex social and political issues, of the kind Bermúdez discusses, can themselves signal affiliation with distinct communities of speakers.

[8] Henderson & McCready (2024) develop a somewhat similar account of dogwhistling. They draw on recent sociolinguistic research, which recognises that linguistic variation is not merely a function of individuals' membership of social categories like gender, race, and class, but can be involved in constructing fine-grained personas (Eckert, 2012, 2024).

Indeed, as will be discussed, someone's choice of frame in public debate and collective decision-making might ultimately have less to do with the reason elucidated by the frame and more to do with building and maintaining social alliances. By the same token, the adoption of an opponent's frame could function less as an exercise in rational due diligence than as the enactment of an antagonistic social identity, with concomitant risks of alienation and ostracization. As I will show, the prospects for breaking discursive deadlock in that way then seem rather slim, prompting us to pursue other solutions. Let's now take the argument step by step.

First, drawing on the accounts of slurs and dogwhistles surveyed above, linguistic frames that articulate different facets of a complex issue might not *only* or *mainly* do that. For example, framing the restriction of gun use as "improving public safety" or "curtailing individual rights" does not only bring into play distinct features of the policy, and reasons to support or reject it. The first frame additionally evokes US Democrats (who typically endorse gun control in these terms) while the second frame evokes Republicans (who are more likely to characterise the issue that way). In many contexts, then, the choice to use one or other frame in public debate will signal allegiance to these political camps and their ideas (although the signal is defeasible, as when the frame is obviously being used in parody or counter-argument).

To take another example, consider discourse surrounding online content moderation. Someone who characterises it as "an attack on free speech" in the mid-2020s might well evoke right-wing public figures for whom the frame features as a central component of their rhetorical repertoire. In contrast, an opponent who endorses it as "a harm reduction measure" will tend to conjure up a more left-leaning character. By using the frames in discussion, speakers tend to signal their affiliation with different political groupings. Such speech effects are clearly separable from what the frames themselves articulate—and the reasons for judgement and action that they elucidate.[9]

Moving to the next step in the argument, I now show how the signalling function of framing complicates Bermúdez's analysis of deliberative deadlock.[10]

5. Discursive deadlock revisited

Recall that Bermúdez suggests many apparent clashes of value may be better understood as clashes of frame. His idea is that interlocutors' adoption of alternative frames leads to their attending to conflicting reasons, which in turn leads to their taking up opposing stances on contentious issues. Building on the discussion of the previous section, I will argue, first, that interlocutors may often

[9] Similar analyses can be given for other hot button political issues cited by Bermúdez, such as abortion, immigration, and climate change. Indeed, as political views on such issues become 'stacked' in the sense that members of society increasingly divide along the same lines, into the same political groupings, rather than these cutting across one another, an individual's stance across a whole suite of issues may become ever more clearly signalled—see Mason (2018) for related discussion.

[10] While my proposal, like Bermúdez's, has affinities with Camp's (2019), I believe there are at least two important points of difference. First, Camp seems to build into the definition of a frame that it has the function of expressing a perspective. In contrast, I define frames merely as linguistic alternatives, which may or may not express different perspectives. Second, on Camp's view, the perspectives expressed by frames are *sets of dispositions*. In contrast, I am arguing that frames can *evoke individuals, groups, or culturally salient characters*, and thereby *signal affiliation*. See also Camp & Flores (2024)—including for discussion of the relationship between perspectives and personae. Thank you to a reviewer for pressing me on this point.

have taken up opposing stances on contentious issues because of their existing affiliations (and not because of their appreciation of frame-dependent reasons); and, second, that the adoption of alternative frames in such scenarios is unlikely to aid collective decision-making. I take each point in turn in the next two subsections.

5.1. DIAGNOSIS FOR DEADLOCK

In practice, both one's stance on a contentious issue and one's adoption of a particular frame may often be driven by one's prior identification with others.[11] For example, one's pre-existing affinity with the political right might lead one to approach a debate on online content moderation by adopting a frame they use—say, by railing against content moderation as "an attack on free speech". Doing so has the benefit of at least appearing to make a substantive contribution while also, crucially, publicly reinforcing one's social and political positioning. The idea here is that interlocutors are sometimes focusing at least as much on the social signals sent by their linguistic choices as on the informational content of the words themselves.[12]

This changes the diagnosis of discursive deadlock. The reason why we see intransigent exchanges of conflicting frames in interpersonal deliberation could be because people are outwardly reaffirming their distinct affiliations and alliances—not because they have failed to appreciate their opponents' reasons. If this is correct, we should expect deadlock to persist in discourse, even among those who have engaged in epistemic due diligence in their private reflection.

On this analysis, it is upstream socialisation and identity formation which may often turn out to be the real source of discursive deadlock, not frame-sensitive appreciation of only some reasons. Insofar as polarised public debate acts as a barrier to good collective decision-making about contentious issues, we might then expect the problem to persist in the face of further epistemic due diligence.

Of course, the empirical question remains: what proportion of the discursive deadlocks we witness are, in fact, of the clashing identities variety, rather than the clashing frames variety? While I do not have a definitive answer, I proceed on the assumption that the proportion is at least significant enough to require our theorising to accommodate it.

5.2. PRESCRIPTION FOR DEADLOCK

One might hope that even if Bermúdez's diagnosis of discursive deadlock is incomplete, his prescription is still the right one: speakers ought to incorporate their opponents' frames within their thought and talk. After all, based on the preceding analysis, this might not only allow them to appreciate each other's reasons but perhaps also to inhabit, in a richer sense, each other's social identities. For example, if a Democrat were to adopt Republican framing on an issue, perhaps that

[11] For further related discussion on alliance-led formation of political views, see (Pinsof et al., 2023).
[12] Malinowski (1923) refers to the role of speech in social bonding as its "phatic" function. The notion is picked up in recent analysis by McDonald (2021). See also (Keiser, 2023) for an excellent book-length treatment of how linguistic communication often departs from the communicative ideals around which philosophers have often centred their analyses.

would enable them not only to reconsider arguments against policies like gun control, but also to experience *being* a Republican (including, perhaps, how others relate to them in that social position). This points to an even more comprehensive due diligence that is not only epistemic but psychosocial. Perhaps that would grant valuable empathetic insight into opponents' perspectives.

While this is an intriguing proposal, it comes with downsides. One is the potentially destabilising psychological effect of operating with multiple different self-identities (insofar as that is possible at all). Another is that introducing opponents' frames into one's speech is socially risky. Interpolating the voices of particular individuals or groups into a conversation might be wholly unwelcome and resisted by one's interlocutors. For instance, someone who appears to affiliate themselves with Republicans when in conversation with other Democrats, say by characterising the restriction of gun ownership as "curtailing individual rights," may incur disapprobation from their in-group. In this way, practising perspectival flexibility out loud is liable to send signals that harm one's social standing and relationships with others.

One possible response here would be to bemoan the epistemic timidity of those who eschew their opponents' frames merely to avoid creating social friction.[13] Perhaps we should demand that rational agents adopt those frames, regardless of the risks.

While I have some sympathy with this response (and will later suggest ways to foster epistemic virtue more systematically within our discursive environments) I think the point can be overdone. After all, we humans are social creatures whose reputations and relationships shape the course of our lives. While theorists can certainly try to understand and mitigate certain social pressures, simply willing them away is probably neither effective nor desirable. Better to acknowledge the value in social bonding, and recognise that linguistic communication is one means through which we achieve it, with speech therefore serving a mixture of epistemic and social functions.

The considerations above suggest that adopting opponents' frames in public discourse may not always be practical, even if it is desirable from an epistemic or ethical point of view. More importantly, however, doing so may not even be *effective*. Insofar as discursive deadlock is really a matter of upstream group affiliation, not frame-dependent reasoning, it is not clear why encouraging speakers to adopt their opponents' frames would change the underlying dynamics of the debate. Temporarily inhabiting an opponent's perspective could leave one's underlying social identity and affiliations untouched (or lead to some disconcerting flip-flopping between them). The result: debate continues to proceed in as polarised a manner as ever and to result in either paralysed or uncompromising decision-making. In that case, Bermúdez might simply be giving us the wrong normative guidance when he encourages us to adopt our opponents' frames.

In the final part of the discussion, I will illustrate the problem by turning the spotlight on social media, showing how it arises especially acutely there, before proposing an alternative remedy.

6. Social media

We have seen how linguistic frames might reveal divergent identities and alliances, not (only) conflicting reasons for judgement and action. I now show how this comes into sharp focus on

[13] For related discussion of intellectual timidity, see Tanesini (2018).

social media platforms, our public discussion forums *du jour*. I argue that users face incentives to send unambiguous signals about their social positioning, potentially outweighing their incentives to exchange reasons. The discussion addresses three factors in turn—connectivity, publicity, and decontexualisation—that together render the adoption of alternative frames increasingly infeasible and ineffective.

6.1. CONNECTIVITY

Early social media platforms sought to replicate or reconstitute users' real life social networks online. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, sites like Classmates.com (in the US) and Friends Reunited (in the UK) enabled people to reconnect with long-lost friends and acquaintances. Facebook (originally set up in 2004) ultimately became the largest platform connecting users with family, friends, and acquaintances.[14] For over a decade, the stated mission of Meta (which owns Facebook, Instagram, and Threads) has been to bring people together to build community (currently formulated as: "Build the future of human connection and the technology that makes it possible.")[15] Thus, the focus has been very much on the *social* in social media. These platforms are spaces for people to maintain bonds with others. Users achieve this by participating in discourse, posting and reposting content, and replying and reacting to others' content.[16]

Social media is therefore quite unlike traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, where content produced by professional journalists and broadcasters is transmitted to the general public. While traditional media outlets established themselves as forums for reporting and discussion of complex social and political issues, social media platforms were not designed to fulfil that function—at least not primarily or explicitly. That they have nonetheless ended up acquiring it, often displacing, subsuming, or fundamentally reshaping traditional outlets, presents society with various challenges. One of these, I suggest, is that users' speech often continues to prioritise social goals over epistemic ones.

Assuming that the goal of social bonding tends to be furthered by reinforcing shared identities and alliances, it is natural that we would aim to attract approval from in-groups—and that this would be reflected in our linguistic choices. For example, we can expect a left-leaning user to use forms of expression associated with those on the political left, while avoiding those associated with right-wing opponents. This is one way to help signal allegiance to, and bond with, other left-leaning contacts.[17] In a space where bonding with allies is key, there is every reason to use in-group frames and little pressure to use those of out-groups. Other things being equal, then, we can expect frames associated with in-groups to be preferred over those associated with out-groups.

The proposal that in-group framing can support social bonding is complicated somewhat by a feature of social media known as 'context collapse' (Marwick & Boyd, 2010; Frost-Arnold, 2021;

[14] At the time of writing, Facebook is reckoned to have over three billion active monthly users. (https://www.statista.com/topics/751/facebook/, accessed 4th May 2025).
[15] https://www.meta.com/en-gb/about/company-info/ (accessed 4th May 2025).
[16] While social media posts very often include non-linguistic content, such as images and videos, to keep things simple, the focus of the current discussion will remain on the linguistic components.
[17] Frames are not the only – or probably even the best – way of doing so; others include profile information, followerships, and the contents of posts themselves.

McDonald, 2025). This is the pooling within a single audience of contacts from different parts of one's social life, who potentially have quite discordant identities and affiliations. The idea is developed from the work of Goffman (1969). Goffman observes that people present themselves differently across contexts, establishing distinct 'faces' in interactions with family members, friends, work colleagues, strangers on the street, and so on.[18] While Meyerowitz (1986) observes how communication technologies like the telephone, radio, and television already began to disturb the neat separation of social domains, the emergence of social media seems to have all but obliterated any remaining boundaries. On a platform like Facebook, for instance, all of the audiences mentioned above can be present simultaneously.

In collapsed contexts, agents are confronted with the dilemma of which 'face' to present. Speaking in the voice of any given individual, group, or culturally salient character risks alienating some members of one's social network, even while strengthening bonds with others. Thus, we might expect users to behave rather cautiously, in order to avoid offence; and that could take the form of deploying relatively neutral frames, or even refraining from posting on certain issues altogether.

Alongside such strategies of withdrawal, however, we also see strategies of entrenchment. These involve crystallising one identity in the face of competing possibilities (or selecting one 'face' over others). One implication of being able to connect with indefinitely many people all around the world has been to enable users to explore different communities and identities—potentially finding preferred versions of themselves in the process. As a result, an individual might react to context collapse by actively strengthening their identification with certain parts of their network at the expense of others (perhaps also 'culling' legacy contacts who are not well-aligned).[19]

It must be noted that social media platforms have recently begun to move away from a connectivity model towards an entertainment model. Rather than encouraging users to forge and maintain social connections in order to populate their feeds with content, algorithms increasingly serve up whatever—and whoever's—content is expected to be found compelling. TikTok is a clear frontrunner here, with its aim to "inspire creativity and bring joy" through the targeted dissemination of short video content.[20] Other platforms have sought to incorporate similar functionality. On this newer model, the emphasis is on keeping people amused and engaged rather than socially connected. It remains to be seen how this shift might affect the analysis of online framing provided here. In the next two subsections, I consider two other factors driving the signalling function of frames that continue to apply widely across different platforms.

6.2. PUBLICITY

Having considered why users might be inclined to use online speech for social bonding, I turn now to the additional pressure their audiences exert on them in the same direction. There is often no principled limit on who can view a post once it is published (and a post can often be tracked down even after its deletion, for instance through the posting and reposting of screenshots). One

[18] It is perhaps no coincidence that Goffman was also a progenitor of research on *framing*, understood as the organisation of our social experiences (Goffman, 1974).
[19] Hence the emergence of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers online (Nguyen, 2020).
[20] See https://www.tiktok.com/about (accessed 4th May 2025).

upshot of this is that large numbers of people might share or comment on a post—whether in positive or negative ways. This exposes ordinary users to reputational effects, including (in the negative case) public castigation.

On the one hand, it can be relatively easy to foresee the backlash to a post, especially when it comes from political opponents. For instance, expressing allegiance to a particular electoral candidate, party, or policy can be expected to meet with attack from those on the other side of the political divide. Drawing that kind of fire might be 'priced in' to a piece of online speech (or even part of what motivates it, as in cases of 'rage-baiting') and might have limited effects on the user, or their audience.[21]

On the other hand, there can be intense social pain associated with being publicly rebuked by in-group members, with whom one *does* wish to be identified and associated, and among whom one does wish to maintain esteem.

Billingham & Parr (2019) argue that even when in-group norm policing is well-motivated, it can easily end up becoming disproportionate and produce more harm than good. As a case in point, they discuss a user's tweet of: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!"[22] Discussing her case, they explain:

> She meant this as an ironic comment about the attitudes of middle-class white Americans toward AIDS, but many observers considered it racist. [Footnote omitted] [The user] faced a barrage of online criticism, much of it threatening and abusive, and was fired from her job—all while she was on a plane, and so unable to defend herself or explain her tweet. (Billingham & Parr, 2019, p. 372)

This ill-judged tweet was severely punished both through social sanctions (in the form of online public shaming) and material ones (due to the loss of employment).[23]

Of course, the case described above is extreme in various respects. However, lower-key examples, where users face backlash for transgressing (or appearing to transgress) in-group norms, are commonplace in social media. Once users have witnessed or experienced enough such interactions, it is understandable that they would take care over how they frame things.

I suggest, then, that informal social pressure online can serve as an important check on users' linguistic frames. We can expect users to select their framings of contentious social and political issues not only to reinforce their social bonds (as per the previous sub-section) but also more defensively, to avoid social sanctions. For example, a Democrat might wish to avoid framing the restriction of gun ownership in terms of "curtailing individual rights," while a Republican might wish to avoid framing it in terms of "improving public safety". Doing so at least risks raising suspicion among their fellow partisans—and could in some contexts contribute to public chastisement, with unpredictable implications.

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[21] In practice, the vicious nature even of anticipated backlash can itself be grounds for serious distress and withdrawal from debate—see (Brown, 2018) and (Barnes, 2023) for discussion of how hate and abuse is exacerbated online.

[22] The case is drawn from Ronson (2015). See also (Aly & Simpson, 2018) for related discussion.

[23] See also Aly & Simpson (2018) for helpful related discussion.

6.3. DECONTEXTUALIZATION

In addition to their publicity, it is also notable that social media posts are typically short (with many platforms imposing character limits) and presented individually within algorithmically-determined feeds that largely obscure conversational context. This greatly increases the risk of miscommunication and misinterpretation (the risks of which we saw in the previous section).[24]

It is often unclear exactly what an individual post is about or what it is doing, and audiences often lack knowledge about the relevant background discourse or events.[25] Of particular relevance to the current discussion, a user's identity, affiliation, and political views may not be immediately obvious from such a limited snippet of their speech. Disclaimers, clarifications, and corrections are easily lost within longer threads. Given such a scant basis for conveying information, users must rely heavily on how the message is crafted. There is a strong incentive for socially pertinent information to be as clear as possible, avoiding risky ambiguity. This includes sticking to frames that clearly signal in-group affiliation and avoid the risk of signaling out-group affiliation. Again, then, the importance of sending a clear signal through a short decontextualised post adds to social media platforms' encouragement of the use of in-group frames.

I have argued that, in social media environments, what a frame communicates about one's social positioning can loom large relative to any reason it might elucidate. Crucially, such environments inhibit the kind of perspectival flexibility in interpersonal communication that Bermúdez calls for. On the contrary, adopting opponents' frames in one's public posts risks causing social friction and possibly incurring social sanction. This makes the performance of epistemic due diligence especially difficult.

Moreover, it is unclear how adopting opponents' frames in such environments would help resolve discursive deadlock. To the extent that the frame is performing a social signalling function, doing so might simply send a confused signal about the user's identity and affiliations, without helping opposing groups come together in support of reasonable collective decisions.

Of course, the responsible epistemic agent might still make efforts to adopt conflicting frames in their *thought*, even if not in their *talk* (or *posts*). In this way, they might attain a more nuanced understanding of complex issues, had that been lacking beforehand. However, nuanced understanding won't necessarily solve the wider social problem of discursive deadlock in public discourse. In the absence of sufficient incentive to break out of polarising communicative dynamics, we end up with precisely the kind of impasse that motivated Bermúdez's analysis in the first place—with communicative interactions that fail to appreciate the complexity of interlocutors and their ideas; and with visibly bitter contestation of political stances.

If Bermúdez-style due diligence is not the (complete) solution, what is? Insofar as the problem of discursive deadlock lies upstream in people's prior formation of alliances and affiliations, one answer would be to try to loosen the grip of these somehow. However, I will end by remarking

[24] It is true that some platforms' algorithms present posts chronologically, while others seek to optimise for engagement. Either way, though, the speech bears little resemblance to turns in a back-and-forth conversation. See Goldberg (2021) for related discussion.
[25] Davies (2025) discusses how this can result in radically different interpretations.

very briefly on some actions we could take downstream, to restructure our discursive environments.

6.4. DUE DILIGENCE ONLINE

Building on the analysis of the previous section, solutions to discursive deadlock might be found in addressing the dysfunctions associated with connectivity, publicity, and decontextualisation.

Beginning with connectivity, part of the problem was that sites originally designed for establishing and reinforcing social connections have ended up numbering among our most important spaces for debate (both in the sense that more and more of our speech seems to take place there, and that it has a disproportionately large political influence). One possibility, then, would be to (re-)engineer online spaces with explicitly epistemic aims, making social bonding a less prominent goal. Perhaps that could support constructive collective reasoning.

Examples of online spaces that take steps in this direction include Reddit's 'change my view' community[26] and vTaiwan's use of Pol.is to facilitate large-scale conversations and consensus building.[27]

Turning to *publicity*, perhaps posts should not be so readily available for such wide consumption. Enhanced functionality for constraining the audience could make nuanced discussion less reputationally risky. When one incurs disapproval (even when it comes from in-group members) is surely easier to rebuild bonds and regain face in a more private setting than one with indefinitely many onlookers. Just as our private offline social interactions can afford us relatively forgiving 'safe spaces' to work through ideas, it might be possible and desirable to recreate these dynamics online.

Moves already made in this direction include options for users to delete their previously published content, restrict the audience for posts, or switch off comments. Platforms could also experiment further with functionality for re-posting and 'quote-posting' (whereby users repost another's content overlaid with their own commentary), consider options for how rapidly content is permitted to spread across networks, or adopt more nuanced policies on anonymity or pseudonymity for users.

A different sort of approach would target *decontextualization*, to make the wider context of a post easier to access and engage with. The aim here would be to mitigate the risk of misinterpretation, such that users feel a little freer to pursue compromise without appearing to ally themselves with out-groups. This could involve changing the platform interfaces to make interactions more genuinely conversation-like.

The avenues sketched out here will no doubt be littered with obstacles, both of a principled and practical nature—and they are certainly not intended to be exhaustive solutions. The underlying point still stands, though: if we are to address discursive deadlock, it may be misguided simply to call for greater epistemic due diligence. Instead, I we may need to attend more closely to the structures of our discursive environments, including social media platforms. For, as long as frames

[26] https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/, accessed 4th May 2025
[27] https://info.vtaiwan.tw/, accessed 4th May 2025

are used to signal opposing affiliations, discursive deadlocks seem likely to remain and inhibit good collective decision-making. To support constructive communicative behaviours, we should therefore design environments that facilitate, rather than impede, epistemic virtue.

7. Conclusion

I have suggested that the alternative linguistic frames used to characterise complex social and political issues do not only elucidate reasons for judgement and action, as Bermúdez argues, but can also serve as important signals of identity and affiliation. Hence, discursive deadlock might not result from a failure to access the reasons motivating opponents, so much as a disinclination to ally oneself with them (or even appear to be doing so). In that case, adopting alternative frames in one's speech may be altogether counterproductive, failing to address the real barrier to reasonable collective decision-making (while incurring real social costs). We saw why this might be an especially pressing problem in social media, and how structural changes to platform design could potentially help foster more constructive debate. In this way, I believe a suitably enriched analysis of framing could open up new possibilities for improving political discourse in the digital age.

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