Words and Meaning in 2024

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EDITORIAL

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We find ourselves in a curious place at the moment, in which it feels as if society's relationship with words is changing fundamentally. Worldwide we are seeing the rise of right-wing and populist movements, which are in many cases using language in misogynistic, racist, and xenophobic ways that are pushing the boundaries of what was previously thought to be acceptable by public officials. To many of our surprise, the shocking repulsiveness of statements is shrugged off, with explanations that what was said was not what was actually meant. Blatant falsehoods and disinformation spread through the confusing perversion of postmodernist stances that any group may have their own version of 'the truth,' leading to the cynical conclusion that truthfulness doesn't matter. Generally, there is a sense that words are being divorced of meaning.

Unfortunately, I am afraid changes in the relationship between words and meaning are occurring not just in our political atmosphere, but are also being accelerated by new technologies. In the last *Planning Theory & Practice* editorial, Lisa Bates wrote of her concerns with the moral and ethical dimensions of using generative artificial intelligence (Bates 2024). To this I add my concerns, specifically in relation to words and large language models and the culture of what we, as a society, expect the production of words to do.

In 2012, Heather Campbell wrote an editorial for this journal, titled 'Lots of Words… But Do Any of Them Matter? The Challenge of Engaged Scholarship' (Campbell 2012). In that article she asked "How much of what we publish would be missed by citizens, policy-makers, or practitioners? More frightening, how much of what we publish stirs the souls of fellow academics? If we are to be honest, how much of what we publish is actually 'new' or 'original'? How much of what we publish matters?" The editorial focused on the nature of academia: its publish or perish culture, how we academics in trying to be critical and thus relevant, struggle first, not to descend into cynicism, and second, with conforming to notions of academic legitimacy and 'rigor' while also yearning for connection to real world actions.

The pressures and contradictions in academia that Campbell raised are still around, and perhaps have even worsened since 2012. But, recently, I am thinking of writing and publication differently, especially given changes in politics and technology. For this I find it useful to contrast the question of *why we write* (and read), to the emergent trends I mentioned above: the increasing acceptance of separation of words and meaning in public discourse, and communication amidst technological acceleration.

We are faced with a very uncomfortable truth: large language models *are* actually very good at summarizing large amounts of information, and probably already do so better than most people. In my experiments requiring students to use ChatGPT on their assignments and to improve on its output, I found that in spring 2023, ChatGPT was capable of producing writing that was both more precise in terminology use, and better organized than 75% of upper-level undergraduate students' writing. Many students were paralyzed by the fact that they could not write better than an automated process that had been trained on hundreds of billions of words, and most students did not have the confidence in their writing skills or knowledge to even try to substantially improve on its output.

The above example illustrates why we need more than ever to be very clear about what the purpose of writing is. Writing is not merely about producing accurate text; it is about learning the human skill of argumentation and experiencing human connection. While I have seen much commentary evaluating the quality and accuracy of the output of large language models, and many debates about whether or not they might be considered 'intelligent,' I believe we also need to focus on the cognitive and emotional processes of relationship-forming that such tools threaten to replace if we are not clear on what the purpose of writing is. While ChatGPT might have objectively produced 'better' writing than my average undergraduate student, I was bothered by the uniformity of the voice and style, the lack of little details and idiosyncrasies that often appear in students' writing. We had lost an opportunity to connect with each other.

Processes of writing and reading are processes of self-discovery, learning, and connection that require friction, non-immediacy, and *people* to connect with in the process. As educators we know that it is much more likely that students remember a personal connection with their teachers (and through this, hopefully some of the content we hope to impart to them!) than they are to simply learn the material. This is because it is our relationships with our students, often young adults seeking to make sense of their lives, that impart meaning. Writing and reading, if we care about transformation, which I presume we do as planners, is actually relational.

At our last Editorial Board meeting for *Planning Theory & Practice* Eric Heikkila mentioned in passing how the Interface section of the journal reminded him of the first academic journals, in which articles were mailed in to editors as 'letters' or 'transactions.' Research was carried out apart and yet together, building on each other's ideas and findings. There is a sense that in an academic-practice community, there exists something distinct from the words that we read and create, which is the knowledge and wisdom embodied in another person and the value that exists in the personal relationships that we form. It is a sense of the importance of the context that relationships embodied between *particular* people in *particular* places and in *particular* times provide. This past of academic publishing may seem quaint and quite different than what currently happens, especially given the pressures to 'publish or perish' and the proliferation of many more journals to publish in. But, even given these conditions, writing and publishing in our community (at *Planning Theory & Practice*) offers elements of intentions to know each other and our contexts and still somewhat stands in contrast to the increasingly dominant climate of how words are being used, which is even faster/instantaneous, short-form, attention-grabbing, decontextualized, and promoted by algorithm.

While political actors may intentionally render many words meaningless, large language models remove opportunities for meaning-making out of the process of writing and reading. They strip context from the summaries they produce. Their outputs are trained on words found everywhere yet they are written by no one in particular. We have never been in a time when language that reads naturally to us contains no potential to 'know' its author. For planning practitioners, perhaps the words of the plans and professional reports are harder to relate to the often more personal work of academics and literary writers, but the process of creating the story of a *particular* community through knowing *particular* people of that place, is as much about the process of getting to know that place and its people, as it is about producing the text.

Said differently, for both researchers and practitioners, the production of text is about the process of argumentation, the relationships and capacities gained in the process, and the context, not just about the accuracy or the apparent 'intelligence' of the output. Process, relationships, context – how often such themes have probably appeared in the pages of this journal! Might the prospect of cultivating these themes through how we go about writing give additional reason to resist the temptations of efficiency and immediacy offered by large language models and also help us make sense of political powers that are seemingly removing meaning from words?

Proust said that to read is to enter into the wisdom of another, and to read deeply is to make that wisdom one's own (Proust 1972). Many in our field have talked about the importance of

practical or situated judgment and wisdom in the practice of planning. In stark contrast to the logics of 'discovery,' wisdom is not gained through speed and efficiency, but through the metacognitive processes that are triggered through struggling to read difficult things or to put into words a concept that seems always just out of reach.

Campbell's (2012) question of whether or not the words we produce are 'new' seems to take on increased urgency in the context of large language models and political usurpation of words and meaning. And, I think the answer in terms of wisdom, which is probably what matters most in the actions needed for transformation, is probably no – these tenets of wisdom and how to act in society have been written about for as long as humans could write! But, as she alludes to in that editorial, the problem is not that what we do is not new, but that the processes of gaining, imparting, and exercising wisdom are still often considered lesser forms of scholarship. These biases are what contribute to the pressures to use tools like ChatGPT with its logics of speed and efficiency and attitudes that dismiss the meanings of words.

Joining the editorial team of this journal has changed how I view writing, and it is changing the way I read. As a new member of the editorial team, I have been trying to 'catch up' on the wisdom contained in this journal, sometimes reading back issues in their entirety. Maybe this is obvious to others, but this is not the way I have previously read 'the literature.' Previously, I had a research project, and I would conduct a literature review on that topic using the large databases to find sources, occasionally filtering by planning journals to get a sense of what planners were saying about the topic. Reading *all* the pieces in an issue, most of which are outside of my direct area of research is probably not efficient for the purposes of 'identifying a gap' that a 'discovery' I might be working on could fill, but it cultivates wonder that is lost when we get too ingrained in our own habits of thought. So, at a time in which wonder and wisdom both seem lost to cynicism, and words are being used in all kinds of non-generative ways, let's celebrate the challenges and slowness embedded in the processes of reading and writing, as it is often challenge and slowness that help us build connection.

In This Issue…

There are four research articles in this issue. We start off with Harriet Dunn's 'Populism, Planning, and the Politics of Discontent.' Dunn writes on the very timely issue of populist mobilization and its relationship to urban planning in a peri-urban municipality in Sweden. The topic of populist mobilization is particularly salient now as right-wing political groups are gaining support worldwide. Dunn's analysis shows how planners are cast by populist into three archetypal roles: as 'handmaidens' beholden to elites, as eco-moralists pushing anti-automobile environmental agendas, and lastly, in a role preferred by populists: as potential guardians of 'the public's interest.' The article illustrates how populists are reclaiming of language familiar to planners, but for different purposes, reimagine planning to regulate and to restrict, to exclude, and to enforce hegemony rather than pluralism.

Burcu Yigit-Turan and Mia Agren contribute another research article examining the Swedish planning context in 'Green and Socially Sustainable City Discourse, White Spatial Epistemology: The Reproduction of Racial Landscape Injustice and Segregation in Swedish Planning?' The article shows how histories of racialized identities and spaces shape current planning practice in Sweden. Specifically accounting for 'color-blind racism,' which suggests a supposedly 'post-racial' society, they examine planning documents and proposals comparing two areas: a white space and a non-white space. In a society that has been de-vocabularized of race, the authors reveal the meaning that is in embedded in historical racialized treatments of space, if not explicitly stated in plans.

Pauliina Krigsholm then addresses how municipalities enact policies within the context of multilevel policy setting in 'Characterizing the Ultimate Ends of Municipal Land Policy: An Analysis of Land Policy Aim Setting in Finnish Municipalities.' Krigsholm synthesizes six 'rationality criteria' that are used to characterize the quality of policy enactment. In the evaluation of Finnish municipalities'

land policy integration, Krigsholm's framework reveals how higher-level national aims, such as those related to sustainability agendas, may appear in local policies, but how ultimately, locally-embedded motives tend to be operationalized more fully. The study illustrates how vertical incoherence and vaguely expressed policies creates potential paradoxes and conflicts in policy aim setting.

Next, Jasper Lebbing, Edwin Buitelaar, Peter Pelzer, Martijn van den Hurk and Lilian van Karnenbeek have us take another look at the practice of zoning, which is often either conceived to be a process of imposing rules on developers, or that has been framed as a process usurped by private interests to fit their purposes, in their article 'Regulate or Be Regulated: The Institutional Entrepreneurship of Developers.' Using a case from Utrecht, Netherlands, they show how developers engage in 'institutional entrepreneurship,' shaping the complex and mutual relationship between planning decisions and developers' strategies.

After the four research articles, this issue's *Interface* section focuses on an underexamined area of planning: industrial land, edited by Carl Grodach and Tali Hatuka, with contributions by the editors themselves and by Jessica Ferm, Alura Danan Vincent, Elif Merfe Nalcakar, Olgu Caliskan and Robin Chang. The essays in the Interface cover considerations of industrial lands' contribution to global climate change, manufacturing and production processes as mandatory aspects of urban economies, and the need to involve more diverse voices in the planning of these spaces.

Finally we have two pieces in our *Debates & Reflections* section. The first, by Oliver Valdivia-Orrego and Fernando Peña-Cortés 'Mountain Territories: The Need to Approach Territorial Planning and Governance' is a policy & planning brief that shares the motivation of under-considered planning contexts, but for mountainous areas. In this policy brief we learn of the governance challenges in efforts to create policies specific to mountainous regions in Chile. Lastly, Nicolas Paquet reviews Charles Hoch's 2019 book *Pragmatic Spatial Planning: Practical Theory for Professionals*, a book that will find interest both among the planning practitioner and research communities.

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