

## Editorial

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# The Power of Language and Discourse in eGovernment

The written word plays a central role in academia and is one of the main ways of communicating ideas, analysis, theories and the findings from our research. Allied to this is the spoken word where we disseminate our research verbally, in-person or online, and in different settings. The significance of research outputs, such as books, journal publications, conference, seminar and workshop presentations, as well as research grant applications and taught materials, are testament to the importance of language in teaching and research processes. Language is therefore an instrument, it is purposeful, and socialized within academic communities (Duff, 2010). It also plays an influential role in determining the success of individual research projects, personal careers and in building relations within the academy and with policy and practitioner communities. This is the case for all academic communities, including the eGovernment scholarly community which we are part of.

Language and discourse, however, play a unique role in our field of study because of its relationship with new technology. The outcomes and consequences of new technological innovations are, by definition, not known – because they are new. They can be speculated upon, but they won't be fully known until they have been implemented and fully evaluated. Pilots and feasibility studies may provide indicators of potential outcomes, but these are usually very narrow in focus and application. Consequently, there is a period between conception and implementation where the impacts of a new technological application can only be imagined. This is important, because 'how' the technology is imagined makes a difference, and our choice of language when imagining shapes our thinking and expectations. Sometimes, we as researchers develop terms such as the 'information polity' to describe new technological futures and situations. More often, this void is readily filled by commercial companies seeking to sell their wares, and also by politicians and public officials seeking to find technological solutions to public policy problems.

There are multiple examples in our field of study, where the choice of language is designed to shape the direction of travel around a technology. Consider for example, the concept of 'Transformative Government' and the notion that new digital technologies will positively evolve the state apparatus. The term itself, and the way it is used, is embodied with positive connotations – that the power of digital technology can be harnessed for positive good (Braams et al., 2021). As scholars in this area, we are likely to study such phenomena through a critical lens, but by engaging with such concepts we are giving them oxygen and attention. A more discrete example, from the UK, would be the official relabeling, in the late 1990's, of 'speed cameras' to 'road safety cameras', because it was deemed that the policy and subsequent societal discourse should be reframed from one of excessive speed to a focus on safety. This change of labelling was not accompanied by technological change, or its effectiveness, and was primarily designed to change the way we talked about the technology and its purpose (Wells, 2022).

A more extreme interpretation of the way language interacts with technological diffusion is around the notion of 'hype' where language is used purposefully to exaggerate perceived or desired outcomes

without a robust evidence base. Here there is a profound belief in what the technologies will deliver, primarily revolutionary fundamental change, for example in organizational form, in citizen-state relations or economic practices (Meijer et al., 2009). The hype around new technology frames perceptions about what it will do, but at the same time blinds us from perceived negative outcomes, for example in relation to surveillance and privacy, and inhibits us from learning about past mistakes and policy failure. Transformative Government and the Smart Cities agenda are both examples of where the language and discourse around the technology are interwoven with hyperbole to influence and shape technological diffusion. Here, the discourse around a new technology can be seen as a series of competing logics where vested interests interact in an attempt to dominate the discourse landscape (Ball and Webster, 2020). This suggests we identify the vested interests seeking to influence discourse and their choice of language, be they commercial companies, politicians, policy-makers or civil society groups. This can be tracked over time to assess how it evolves in tandem with technological diffusion.

Our main line of argument here, is that language and discourse matters. It matters in terms of how we conceptualise and understand technology, and also how it is framed at a societal level, and interacts with the state apparatus and citizens. As academics working in this space we need to be alert to policy rhetoric and commercial hype, whilst at the same time engaging in new developments, so that we can offer reasoned evidenced analysis of the phenomena in question. This special issue is a case in point, it's focus is 'agile government', a relatively new term/concept/practice transferred from the commercial world into public service contexts. As a term, agile, has positive connotations, about organisational flexibility and about bypassing the negative aspects of bureaucracy. What organisation would not want to be agile, when the alternative is lumbering and inflexible. Agile has existed for quite a while in the commercial sector, especially in the field of IT software development, but its application in public service is relatively new. This special issue challenges and explores the concept and practice of agile management in eGovernment, and does this through theoretical and empirical research. Here, it is evident that whilst the language around the concept is simple, its application is far more complex, as its implementation takes place in a complex public service environment with a range of long-standing values, norms and practices. In this respect, agile management does not happen in a vacuum, and this special issue offers insight into how to understand agile in government.

We would like to thank the special issue guest editors, Caroline Fischer (University of Twente) and Oliver Neumann (University of Lausanne), for bringing this edition of *Information Polity* to fruition. This special issue unpacks the concept of 'agile government' and helps to nuance the language that we use to discuss new flexible forms of governance. As such, it makes an important contribution to our understanding of agile management practices in government.

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