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Point of View

Sound and Fury

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GREAT PROSE IS NO GUARANTOR OF GREAT IDEAS, much less of great social action, grantmaking, or public policy. This is a painful thing for a public affairs writer to admit. Yet the opposite may well be true: A certain kind of awful writing really can be a hallmark, even an underlying cause, of sloppy thinking.

There are a handful of toxic words and phrases that have a way of polluting any stream of consciousness, muddying the concepts and making it impossible to see what facts and arguments (if any) lie below the surface. The nonprofit and public sectors have more than their share of these kinds of expressions, which may be one reason that some areas of public debate seem to drag on forever without making much progress.

For instance, when people argue for greater "access" to healthcare, you often have no way of knowing whether they want improvements in insurance, public subsidies, transportation, health services, HMO rules, fluency in patients' languages, treatment of people from various cultures, or something else. Worse, you might not think to ask what they meant, because "access" is such a fixture of the health policy debate that you probably assume you're the only person who can't precisely define it. What you won't do is question the speakers' assertions or try to debate them, because you don't actually know what their assertions are.

Similarly, when an interest group calls for "empowerment," you may have no idea whether the group is seeking legal authority, electoral representation, funding, organizations to represent its interests, or merely a chance to express its views. The word "empowerment" sounds like it means something, even if you can't actually say what that something might be.

Tell someone that the workforce "infrastructure" in your town is weak, and you never have to say whether the problem is with workforce organizations, policies, coordination among agencies, communication between trainers and employers, or half a dozen other possibilities. The soothing authority of "infrastructure," with its aura of precision engineering, gives a reassuring impression that some formidable idea has been expressed. Yet it's quite possible that no two people would agree on what that idea was.

Using words like these repeatedly, without clear definitions and concrete examples, is one good way to fog up the public discourse and prevent real disagreement and debate. These expressions aren't necessarily "jargon" – technical words whose meanings only an expert would understand. In many cases, these expressions have no precise meanings even among experts.

The problem is that these words don't express thoughts. They are placeholders for thoughts. Like an empty suit of armor, they present an intimidating authority that gives no hint of the void inside.

Any one of them, and maybe a dozen others, warrants an essay-length indictment as enemies of civic discourse. For my money, though, the greatest offender – and the easiest to indict – is "capacity." It serves as a good example of its species.

Fully Incapacitated

One sure sign that "capacity" has too many meanings to be useful is that it appears everywhere. In the most recent report on the work of the United Nations from former Secretary-General Kofi Annan,[1] the word "capacity" or "capacities" appears 271 times – an average of once every single-spaced typewritten page. Besides featuring the ever-popular "capacity building," the report also discusses "organizational capacities," "institutional capacities," "human capacity," "management capacity," "capacity planning," "capacity utilization," and "decision-making capacity."

Several nonprofit and philanthropic groups likewise devote whole sections of their Web sites and publications to "capacity building" of one kind or another. A Google search for the phrase "capacity building" turns up more than 20 million links, in fields from international development to prenatal health. Their sweeping definitions of the term – for example, "the country's human, scientific, technological, organizational, institutional, and resource capabilities" – are none too helpful.

In the world of organizational development, "capacity" can mean the size of an outfit's staff or budget, the number of peo-

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ple it can serve, the quality of its financial or personnel management, the talents of its various officers and employees, or the reach of its fundraising network. Most often it means several, but not all, of the above.

In international development, for example, "capacity" can refer to networks of institutions, or to government ministries, or to whole industries or economic sectors, or even to the hearts and minds of all citizens (as it does in the "human capacity development" literature). The capacity of schools can relate to their classrooms or teacher qualifications or equipment or budgets. Public health systems have capacity that may be measured by their facilities or professionals or payment systems or outreach networks. Capacity in a housing program may have to do with borrowing power or numbers of available project managers. In transportation it may have to do with planners or vehicles or political alliances.

The problem with "capacity" is not just that its definitions are different from field to field, or even that they vary widely within any given field. The problem is that the idea of "capacity" is so fluid, so boundless and malleable, that even scholars who deliberately set out to define it come up with conflicting or hopelessly vague definitions, sometimes contradicting themselves before they're halfway through.

Words of Distinction

"Ability to perform or produce" is one admirably succinct definition of the word "capacity," from a Web site sponsored by Princeton University.[2] But the crispness of this definition is deceptive. It actually describes an immense, almost limitless domain: any ability to do just about anything. The quality of a definition depends most of all on the contrast it creates. A word has meaning only to the extent that it distinguishes something from everything else. To know what "capacity" means, we also have to know what it does not mean.

Yet in the realm of social change and public affairs, what isn't connected with the "ability to perform or produce"? Several development organizations and foundations have reasonable answers to that question. But as you must have guessed by now, their answers are at odds with one another. Some fund staff; others won't. ("That's not capacity," one person told me. "That's horsepower." Ah, all right then.) Some invest in projects ("You build their ability to produce by building their experience producing"); others consider that out of bounds. Some aim at technical expertise; others focus on general management skills.

A team of international development experts from Ottawa tried to distinguish capacity from actual performance by defining the former as "an organization's … ability to successfully apply its skills and resources to accomplish its goals and satisfy its stakeholders' expectations."[3] So it would seem that the "skills and resources" are not inherent in the meaning of "capacity," but the ability to use them is. OK, but the experts then go on to define "performance" as "the ability of an organization to meet its goals and achieve its overall mission."[4]

Wait. Wasn't that pretty much what the definition of "capacity" entailed? I'm sure I missed some of the elegance of the distinction they were drawing (I'm no expert). But it's clear from the many contrary uses of "capacity" in circulation that whatever the distinction is, a lot of other people are missing it, too.

One can't think, or plan, or argue this way. To the extent that people who work on "capacity" are genuinely doing important things – and I don't dispute that for a minute – they are no doubt actually thinking in concrete words that have real definitions. If we could somehow probe their intimate workday thoughts, I suspect we'd find a universe of "staff skills," "financial planning," "software," "management consulting," "training," and the like. Hard concepts that have real definitions. Ideas that are obviously different from other ideas.

My hunch is that effective people don't *think* in miasmic terms like "capacity." They think in the verbal equivalent of nuts and bolts, and then – inexplicably, regrettably, self-destructively – they translate those firm concepts into what must strike them as a loftier or more fashionable vocabulary. In the process, they leave any actual meaning behind, and they drastically lower the odds that someone else might be able to weigh, debate, or critique what they have said.

Perhaps that's the point. Maybe "capacity" and its ilk are simply self-protective camouflage: words that blend into the surroundings so effectively that they draw little notice, much less critique.

That may be good marketing. But as a way of grappling with problems, advocating solutions, and promoting innovation, it's a dead end. It would be ridiculously simplistic to say that the problem with public affairs debates in America is that they suffer from poor vocabulary. But it would be just as silly to say that the vocabulary is a strength of our national dialogue. It is one weakness among many, but it's a weakness that thoughtful people can correct, anytime they choose. □

1 *Programme Performance of the United Nations for the Biennium 2004-2005: Report of the Secretary-General* (New York: U.N. unpublished draft, April 2006).
2 From WordNet, a lexical database for the English language, Cognitive Science Laboratory, Princeton University, at http://www.wordnet-online.com/capacity.shtml.
3 From Douglas Horton et al., *Evaluating Capacity Development: Experiences From Research and Development Organizations Around the World* (Ottawa: The International Development Research Centre, 2003), chapter 2, quoted from http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-43616-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.
4 Ibid.