

Exactly what is innovative about the word 'innovation'?

Written by The Conversation USA

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was “innovation” – at least, it was this time round. In 2015, the Word was “excellence”. And in the antediluvian era of the 1980s and 1990s, the Word was, variously, “access”, “diversity”, and “Australian”.

The Word may be different but the method of delivery is the same. The government lobs an “operator of policy capture” into the arts sector like a biblical enigma. Cultural organisations then engage in the fine art of scriptural exegesis. What does the Word mean? Is it one that reflects what artists are doing or want to do? Or is a problem, a Word that has to be inched round like a verbal precipice?

Last week Rupert Myer, Chair of the Australia Council, visited Adelaide to play the part of John the Baptist. At a specially organised [CEDA lunch](#), he interpreted the federal government’s [Innovation Agenda](#) for arts and culture:

The arts sector welcomes the spotlight on innovation. We are keen to see the policy unfold to recognise the critical interface between science and the arts, linked as they are by the common threads of creativity and invention.

The Government’s Innovation Agenda aims to “drive smart ideas that create business growth, local jobs and global success” with increasing value placed on the “development of ideas, collaborative thinking, and innovative solutions to complex problems”.

The Australia Council has invested in social entrepreneurs by funding schemes over many decades ... If you want to lead the world in innovation, hire an artist and let them inspire.

In cultural policy, words are never straightforward, though that is no cause for cynicism. They always mean something, even if no one can say exactly what. So a game begins to use the Word in every possible situation as an all-purpose signifier. If that sounds surreal, what’s at stake is very real: funding, favour, and legitimisation; sometimes organisational survival.

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Myer is a good speaker. He has an intelligence, decency and personal warmth not even the government's atrocious treatment of the Council has tarnished. At the lunch he was joined on the podium by cultural bigwigs Vince Ciccarello from the [Adelaide Symphony Orchestra](#) , Rachel Healy of the [Adelaide Festival of the Arts](#) , Douglas Gautier from the [Adelaide Festival Centre](#) and Nick Mitzevitch of the [Art Gallery of South Australia](#) .

Arts warriors one and all, who have done the hard yards, and will continue to do them while braiding the word "innovation" into as many pronouncements as possible. As these people come from different art forms, this will be a bespoke affair, judiciously aimed at the fall out from the federal budget no doubt.

A few years ago, when innovation was a word (and not the Word), I was just starting my research into [how language works in the cultural policy domain](#) . So hyper-focused is our Age of Numbers on quantitative data, that qualitative terms often pass into circulation without even cursory examination.

Innovation, for example, derives from the Latin word *innovationem*. It was first used as a [noun of action](#) – “a new idea, device, or method” – in the 16th century. Until then, “novators” were treated with suspicion. A novator was a heretic, someone with deviant political or religious beliefs undermining the traditional power structure.

The word was turned on its head by the 19th French sociologist, [Gabriel Tarde](#) . Tarde believed that social change required the stimulus of innovative thought. Innovation, leading to invention, would blaze a trail for the rest of society to follow.

Innovation signified an act of disruption creating new opportunities for emerging segments of the population while lessening the influence of established elites. Its association with words such as “rare”, “influential”, and “genius” improved its standing. It was a progressive and positive element within society.

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In the 20th century, innovation became identified with market innovation. It shifted from a quality of thought to an intellectual commodity. Innovation was required for increased economic efficiency. It was something to produce and possess.

This is its aura today – as a mental ingredient sustaining post-industrial countries like Australia in a state of technological and economic advancement. So how does “innovation” apply to the arts?

Like all adjectives that have been repurposed as nouns, the Word doesn't mean anything until used in a context. The first question to ask then is: “innovative *what?*”

At the CEDA lunch, there were mentions (in no particular order) of innovative objects, innovative programs, innovative audience development strategies, and innovative work place employment practices.

The Word does mean something. But its application to the arts is often metaphorical, illuminating some aspects of their operation while eclipsing others. As a standalone term, innovation need be neither applauded nor deplored. It is a place to begin a policy conversation.

The next question becomes “is the government serious about having that conversation, or will the Word be used in an ignorant and/or punitive way?”

This is essentially a query about the government's trustworthiness, and in the absence of precisely stated intentions all we have to go on is its record in the arts thus far.

This isn't good, and I left the event profoundly depressed, wondering, as I always do, what a simpler, more apposite dialogue about the arts might feel like.

The speakers at the CEDA lunch and others arts leaders in attendance, who included Australia Council Board members, deserved better.

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All governments torture language. But the current one does so in a particularly airless way, as if it were talking to itself. Rachel Healy called the arts “a fractured ecosystem” and it’s an insightful turn of phrase.

Meaning and money are the enzymes of successful cultural policy-making. It’s debatable which is the more important. But it’s certainly possible to wreck the way you talk about the arts by vacuous, imperious, or extraneous terms. That’s not innovative, however you define it.

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