Editorial: That depends, please define design

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Academic design journals are about *writing* about design, i.e., about design and language. One might expect academics to be particularly precise with their language, but reflecting on manuscripts submitted to *Journal of Design Research*, or other design journals, contributions made by design school faculty to popular media (e.g., TED talks), and the occasional Twitter rant, make one wonder.

Speaking of concepts such as co-design, service design, design thinking or circular design, one sees multiple interpretations of what is actually meant by these terms. See also the book review on *Designing for the Circular Economy* elsewhere in this issue. Terms that sound good quickly get abused by others. As a case in point, products that were redesigned in the 1990s to be, at least in theory, recyclable under a design-for-environment or ecodesign scheme, were frequently relabelled as being sustainable a decade later, and may now, without any further innovation, be presented as circular.

Misuse and abuse of the term co-design triggered Cameron Tonkinwise (@camerontw, November 2, 2018) to ask on Twitter: "given that 'CoDesign' has become the meaningless term of Big-4-Consultancy-monopolising-large-government-contracts or Any-and-All-Digital-Transformations, what other term are people using for genuinely broad-engagement-based designing-with?"

In a similar vein, Adam St. John Lawrence (@adamstjohn), argued a couple of days later: "Stop photographing walls of sticky notes, start photographing field research, field prototyping and – most of all – implemented #servicedesign solutions. And if you are not doing those things, please stop calling it service design" which just exposes that any successful concept is sadly subject to rapid devaluation.

When talking about design thinking, there are several parallel concepts that may be referred to, from well-grounded and self-critical academic work to rather empty consultancy rhetoric. In design thinking practice and education, dancing with ambiguity (as Larry Leifer from Stanford University puts it) is advocated, but in writing about it, it should be dealt with more carefully.

On occasion, critiques are published of such concepts, where the author takes one of the rather empty practices, and argues or demonstrates that the emperor has no clothes. Such dismissals are then projected on all users of said concept, basically constituting a strawman fallacy.

In the end, the basic question of what is, and is not, design can already be debated indefinitely.

For academic research this reflection on precise language is relevant, as it also applies to the manuscripts submitted to *JDR*. When using a term in a literature search, not all resulting publications will have the same mental construct in mind when using that term. When posing a question in a questionnaire, the same applies to the respondents, they may well answer with a different understanding of a term than intended by the researcher. When research was conducted in a different language than English, translation of terms for the publication risks additional shifts in understanding.

These aspects, and how they were managed during the research, could frequently do with more reflection from authors, as well as more explicit discussion in submitted manuscripts.