Briefing Note on Risks of AI Generated Content in Community Engagement

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Introduction:

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a hot topic in the news lately following the emergence of OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot late in 2022. AI software or 'bots' like ChatGPT can quickly generate text, images and videos virtually indistinguishable from those generated by humans. Bots can also mimic human behaviour, converse or answer questions based on information it learns from the internet and perform basic activities on social media, such as sharing or posting content, and sending friend requests. Digital engagement channels such as e-mail, web-forms and social media offer planners opportunities to engage with a wider variety of citizens across a broader spatial area, at a low cost compared to traditional public consultation methods. However, low cost and high potential engagement comes with risk, particularly in the context of increasingly sophisticated and human-like AI generated content and 'bots'. This briefing note explores the impact of AI generated content in formal consultation processes and how it may shape community sentiments on social media. Further to this the note identifies key benefits and risks associated with such AI, and proposes ways to reduce the negative impacts of AI on planning processes.

Overview of AI Generated Content:

AI has become more prevalent and sophisticated in recent years, and is now capable of generating original pieces of text, images and videos. AI software is programmed by humans, but is capable of learning and evolving based on the information that it is given. As such, the intentions and capacity of AI are dependent on the person programming it initially, but can vary substantially in quality if its exposure to information is limited or biased. While some bots are transparent regarding their non-human nature (e.g. ChatGPT or Emoji Weather USA - a weather sharing bot on Twitter), others are deliberately misleading and seek to represent themselves as human users. This means that AI is increasingly difficult to identify and distinguish from human users due to their growing sophistication and computer learning making it difficult for human users to discern trustworthy sources of information from unreliable sources.

Benefits:

Although this briefing note focuses on the risks to community consultation, it is important to note the many benefits and opportunities offered by AI. AI will allow

planners to streamline work processes and reduce administrative burdens through automation, opening up more time for more creative and future-focused planning work. Planners may also find AI such as ChatGPT helpful to translate technical information and jargon into language that a variety of groups in the community can more easily understand. Bots may also provide a more intuitive way for citizens to find relevant planning information and navigate planning processes. These examples offer just some of the potential uses for AI in planning, and practice is expected to mature rapidly now such powerful AI tools as ChatGPT have become accessible to everyday planners. PIA will continue to seek out advice and provide training to its members regarding how to successfully integrate AI and other technologies into planning practice.

Risks to Formal Consultation Processes:

The release of ChatGPT has dramatically lowered the barrier to the production of AI-generated content. This has the potential to overwhelm public submission processes as pro-forma submissions are replaced by uniquely crafted responses. While currently considered a lower-priority risk, planners should also be aware of the potential for other types of AI-generated media to disrupt formal planning processes, such as the use of 'deep fake' video feed in online conferences and calls. Because widespread access to these systems is relatively new, it's as yet unclear how common AI-generated content will be in formal planning processes and this risk should be monitored in the months and years to come.

Risks on Social Media:

There are a number of more established risks associated with AI-powered social media use specifically in planning processes. While individuals on social media may distort information around planning processes, our studies have found strong evidence that AI bots are the primary source of manipulation and misrepresentation of information on social media, rather than individual users. The level of anonymity on social media and the use of fake identities on social media systems can limit the capacity of other individuals and planners to know who exactly they are interacting with online. This means that the content released by bots might develop into group ideas on social media platforms and influence other real human users' thoughts and responses to planning issues. AI bots programmed with malicious intent use a variety of strategies to mislead social media users, these are summarised in Figure 1. These strategies are rarely used independently and can be combined to more effectively spread rumours, false information, and reinforce specific perspectives. Such strategies when used simultaneously can overwhelm online public engagement processes or substantially sway public opinions on planning issues.

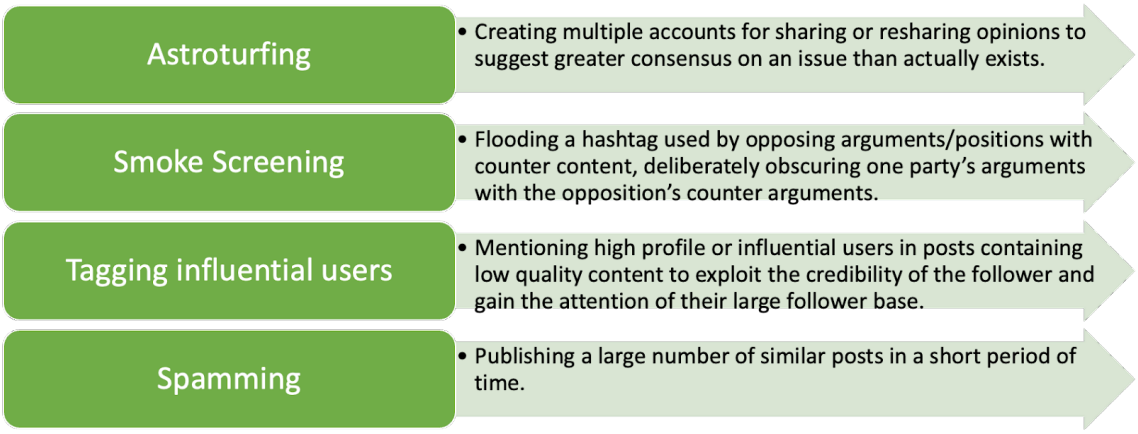

Figure 1: Common strategies used by AI bots online

Mitigation measures:

A number of strategies can be used to reduce the risk of AI bots to planning processes:

1. Use a diverse array of methods to meaningfully engage with the public.Focus efforts on collaborative engagement activities and actively seeking input from a diverse range of people, rather than relying solely on passive submission processes.
2. Avoid relying on social media as a sole source of public sentiment and mechanism for public engagement.
3. Dedicate resources to proactively publishing factual information about planning processes and the reasons for planning decisions. Ensure language and content is accessible to the general public.
4. Use social media to share factual information and information about opportunities to participate in formal participation events (online or in-person).
5. Have a staff member monitoring and moderating comments to ensure misinformation is being identified and corrected, and antagonistic posts are being removed.
6. Include identity verification (via provision of an email account or phone number and name) as part of the 'sign up' requirements for online channels. Include bot-detection measures such as CAPTCHA verification on submission portals.
7. Use software that is capable of identifying bots to determine the legitimacy of participants on social media platforms.

The Planning Institute of Australia is interested in collecting reports on the use of AI generated content by Australian Planners including where:

- AI generated content and/or misinformation has disrupted public engagement processes for urban planning in Australia.
- AI technologies have been successfully implemented in planning organisations to achieve better planning processes and outcomes.

This will help us determine the prevalence of adverse incidents, help us evaluate the need for a more concerted policy response. This information will also help us develop training materials and events as we endeavour to share expertise and uplift AI capabilities across the profession. Please contact PIA's PlanTech project coordinator at claire.daniel@planning.org.au.

The information contained in this briefing document is based on research completed by Ruth Potts (Cardiff University), Justin Hollander (Tufts University) and Maxwell Hartt (Queen's University) for the Land Economics Foundation 2020-2023. For more information see our recent publications:

- Hollander, J. B., Potts, R., Hartt, M., Situ, M., & Seto, A. (2023). The role of bots in US real estate development online communication. *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, *99*, 101918.
- Hollander, J. B., Potts, R., Hartt, M., & Situ, M. (2020). The role of artificial intelligence in community planning. *International Journal of Community Well-Being*, *3*(4), 507-521.

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