

Evaluation in the Post-Truth World

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Conclusions

Some suggestions for evaluators' daily work in a post-truth world

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The evaluation aims to improve public interventions (policies and programs) and ultimately contribute to social betterment and justice (Chelimsky, 2006; Henry & Mark, 2003). Daily practice typically involves evaluators assisting policy-makers and policy-takers in finding a better match between policy problems and available policy solutions. Previous volumes of *The Comparative Policy Evaluation* series have comprehensively discussed the challenges associated with the evaluation mission and its practices (see, for instance: Leeuw et al., 1994; Rieper et al., 2012; Palenberg & Paulson, 2020). However, post-truth, which in short denies evidence and facts, provides a new context in which evaluators work, making the evaluation mission even more challenging.

In our concluding remarks, we offer two things. First, we distill the novel characteristics and ramifications of this contemporary post-truth milieu for the work of evaluators, as elaborated upon in various chapters of this volume. Second, we propose a framework that builds on the insights presented in the book's individual chapters and brings together various evaluative strategies offered by the contributors to this volume. Our aspiration is that this consolidated effort will help the evaluation community navigate the complexities of the post-truth landscape and conduct productive and impactful work.

Summary of key characteristics of contemporary evaluation

Five key issues emerged as new characteristics of contemporary evaluation in post-truth era. First, the introduction and the chapters across this book show that post-truth is a complex, multilayered problem, deeply rooted in our human cognitive mechanisms and bounded rationality but substantially exacerbated by latest changes in information infrastructure, modes of social communication, and social dynamics of hyper-polarization.

Second, evaluators become involved in a much broader spectrum of decisions (also called: action situations) than we used to be in traditional program evaluation. These conversations now focus on framing the policy problems and co-designing pilot interventions. The examples are discussed in the first three chapters of this book: Chapter 1 by Marra, Chapter 2 by Guerrero, and Chapter 3 by Boyle and Redmond.

Third, the extended spectrum of decision situations involves different types of actors that use different types of heuristics and evidence hierarchies and are exposed to different biases. This issue is analyzed in detail by Krawiec and Śliwowski in Chapter 5. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 7 by Bundi and Pattyn, policy-takers' attitude toward evidence and expertise also differs in specific national contexts.

Fourth, there is a substantial difference in the degree of (ir)rationality among decision situations, and the exposure to post-truth challenges. The chapters in this book illustrate the broad spectrum of decision situations. On the one hand, Jacob and Milot-Poulin in the Chapter 4 discuss political dynamics with many shades of truth and lie, and even degrees of deception. On the other hand, book reports on the continuous efforts for development of evidence-driven practices. In particular, Chapter 8 by Hart and Newcomer presents institutional development of architecture for evidence-informed system at national level, while Chapter 3 by Boyle and Redmond and Chapter 9 by Park bring insights on the smaller in scale but also pragmatic content of co-design processes.

Fifth, a clear practice emerges across chapters of this book to involve various stakeholders in the evaluation process, especially to co-produce and co-create with citizens and final users of policies (so-called policy takers). Turning evaluation practice into "multilogue," that is, the dialog of various actors would bring new perspectives, a more in-depth understanding of policy issues, and potential better buy-in for solutions.¹ However, this participation could make the evaluation process more challenging since new groups will bring to the table not only their ideas but also their biases. The conceptual details and practical examples of these co-creation efforts are discussed in numerous chapters in this book. The specific insights are brought by Chapter 1 by Marra, Chapter 3 by Boyle and Redmond, Chapter 9 by Park, and Chapter 10 by Nielsen and Lemire.

Framework for evaluators' work in the post-truth era

The diverse and dynamics circumstances of post-truth milieu requires from evaluation practitioners to recognize the differences in contextual situations and adapt our roles and tactics to specific contexts and degrees of challenges. The idea of such an agile approach emerged in two chapters of this book—Chapter 6 (Olejniczak and Jacoby) and Chapter 10 (Nielsen and Lemire). In our Conclusions, we follow this idea and propose a framework to flexibly organize evaluators' actions, roles, and choices.

We recognize that addressing the challenge of post-truth in democratic societies is an effort much bigger than the evaluation practice and requires systemic responses and adaptations at the level of our institutions, rules, and processes. Selected chapters in this book touch upon this issue and provide the big picture suggestions: Jacob and Milot-Poulin, in Chapter 4, present mechanisms to restore trust in democracy and political process; Bundi and Pattyn, in Chapter

7, point out the importance of engaging the general public, while Hart and Newcomer in Chapter 8 focus on a regulatory framework for evidence-informed policymaking.

Most of the professional evaluation practice, however, takes place in the context of projects and programs, with limited influence on changing the grand institutional and regulatory settings of whole public policy systems. Therefore, in our Conclusions, we propose a bottom-up approach, focusing our attention on improvements that evaluators could implement in their daily work with policy-makers and policy-takers, becoming change agents on a small scale. The choice of this human-centered approach is also justified by the fact that the underlying mechanisms of post-truth are rooted in human reasoning and biases.

We propose considering various decision/action situations in which evaluators engage during the policy process. Each type of situation has its specific function from the policy decision-making perspective, specific actors/participants, dynamics, and degree of (ir)rationality. Depending on the situation, evaluators would play specific roles, working with different stakeholders and using different strategies to minimize the risk of policy failure.

The decision/action situation perspective is well recognized in social-science literature on collective decision-making (Ostrom, 2005). Also, specific adaptations have been proposed to characterize government decision-making (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Hallsworth et al., 2018).

Introduction to the framework

Our framework is built on the Theory of Disproportionate Information-Processing (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005). This theory explains how the government processes information in producing public policies. The whole policy process is portrayed as a collective problem-solving effort. Attention allocation and biases in decision-making are crucial factors explaining the outcomes of this process. We have adopted this perspective to evaluation needs.

Building on the earlier literature (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Dörner, 1990; Hallsworth et al., 2018), we have identified four main types of action situations that evaluators can encounter in public policy. These are: (1) noticing policy issue, (2) defining policy problem, (3) choosing a solution, and (4) executing policy solution.

The following paragraphs discuss the four types of action situations in detail. Each situation is described in terms of its function in collective problem-solving, the spectrum of actors it engages in, and potential post-truth limitations it brings to the participants. For each situation, we propose roles that evaluators could take and assistance that evaluators could provide to the participants of the decision situation. Those concise descriptions are linked back to the detailed discussions in the specific chapters of this book.

Noticing policy issue

This action situation is concerned with making public and policymakers' aware of a particular policy issue. The main participants involved in these decision situations are politicians, various sectoral stakeholders, interest groups, and general public opinion, usually through mass media discourse. Actors noticing policy issues usually could face several biases and challenges. Two major are attention deficit and salience effect, when the most salient issues draw attention regardless of whether they are the most urgent or important, while slow-developing problems often go unnoticed. Another potential bias is availability heuristics, a tendency to rely on immediate examples, more recent information, salient anecdotes, and previous events that are easy to recall. Framing could also kick in at this stage. In this situation, it means that the presentation of an issue determines whether it is noticed and how it is interpreted, and at the same time, policy actors often passively accept the formulation of problems as given. Other challenges at this stage could include confirmation bias (seeking and interpreting evidence that aligns with one's pre-existing views and beliefs) and simple information noise.

We are convinced that in this type of action situation, evaluators could assist participants by monitoring trends and situations and scanning the horizon for emerging policy issues. Also, evaluators can help notice the problem by changing the main narrative or providing new theory lenses to see policy issues from a different perspective. Finally, evaluators could, supported with data, prioritize the attention of the policymakers and public opinion. The specific solutions available for evaluators were discussed in Chapter 2 by Guerrero, Chapter 8 by Hart and Newcomer (systemic settings and institutional perspective), and Chapter 6 by Olejniczak and Jacoby (individual, evaluator-decision-maker perspective).

Defining policy problem

The second type of action situation focuses the energy of policy actors on making sense of the policy problem. That means framing the policy issues in specific terms (for example, economic, societal, ecological, or technological problems), understanding the system's structure affected by the problem, and tracing the roots of malfunctioning.

Defining policy problems engages a slightly different group of actors than in previous action situation. These are high-level decision-makers, stakeholders of the specific policy issues in question, policy designers responsible for developing concrete programs and projects as a response to a policy problem, and citizens—however, not a broad public but rather specific groups that are directly affected by policy issue and its solutions (so-called policy-takers or policy users).

As in the previous stage, those actors can face challenges of availability heuristics (explaining problem using already familiar facts or previous situations), salience effect (focusing on first most visible or media-present aspect of the

problem), and confirmation bias. Additionally, they can experience an illusion of similarity, assuming that others have similar views, determination, and understanding of the policy issue. Other challenges at this stage include insufficient goal elaboration (Dörner, 1990 calls it the “repair-shop principle” when an initially diagnosed problem is quickly matched with a solution already available in the system) and falling into myopia by neglecting the side effects and long-term implications of specific policy problems (Smith, 1995).

At this stage, evaluators could support policy actors in articulating the main assumptions on how the system works and the causes of the problem. The basics of evaluators work starts here with simple fact-checking. Evaluators can also bring new voices to the conversation, including varied voices and perspectives of different stakeholders group, especially those excluded or marginalized. Critical questioning of the mainstream frames and theories used in problem analysis can also be a valuable contribution from an evaluation practice. Evaluators can also find ways to communicate and engage citizens with evidence—create a laymen-friendly (non-expert) merit discourse on the roots and perspectives of the policy problem. Specific chapters in our book (Chapter 2 by Guerrero, Chapter 3 by Boyle and Redmond, and Chapter 7 by Bundi and Pattyn) show how all those efforts can help deepen the understanding of the policy problem and see new aspects of the discussed policy issue.

Choosing a solution

The third type of action situation covers several specific activities leading to the final choice of policy intervention. That includes formulating options for policy solutions, generating policy alternatives, debating options, and finally, making collective choices.

Participants involved in those decisions include senior decision-makers in public institutions, stakeholders, policy designers, and representatives of target groups. At this stage, policy options are focused on technical aspects (e.g., choice between a set of programs or regulations) but the political dynamics can often turn that conversation into a broad discussion on the logic of intervention (or non-intervention) and the role of the state. That in turn, can draw the attention and involvement of the broad public and high-level politicians.

Biases that can emerge among those participants during this decision situation include status quo bias (sticking to the current state of affairs and perceiving any change from the baseline as less advantageous) and loss aversion (weighing possible losses larger than possible gains). When discussion on policy options returns to the broader public arena, it often triggers the Dunning-Kruger effect—the less policy actors know, the more confident they are about simplistic solutions (Motta et al., 2018). Also, the myopia of neglecting the side and long-term effects can kick in when choosing a solution. An illusion of similarity can also emerge, but it plays slightly differently—the more policy actors favor a policy,

the more they assume that others have similar views (Straßheim, 2020). Usual time pressure at this stage can also exacerbate confirmation bias—with too much information and too little time, policy actors can focus on the information supporting their preferred proposals.

Finally, during the choice of solution, several challenges can emerge related to group dynamics, such as the bandwagon effect (a tendency to adopt the positions or solutions because decision-maker perceives that everyone else is doing it, e.g., other public agencies or countries), group reinforcement (self-censoring and conforming to the group-majority view, not challenging arguments and views within a group) often combined with inter-group opposition (rejecting arguments of other groups, even if they are good ones).

Chapters in this book and core evaluation literature indicate that evaluators are well-prepared to help articulate and choose priority criteria for assessing policy options (effectiveness, efficiency, utility, equity, etc.). That is because the logic of assessment and the aspects of valuing has a long tradition in evaluation practice. The unique added value of evaluators is in helping policy designers articulate alternative theories of change—that is, a set of assumptions about what policy tools could trigger what type of change and why. Thus, evaluators are well prepared to assist participants in clarifying policy options, providing inspiration on similar problem-policy solutions, and animating merit-based discussion on options among various, often conflicting groups of stakeholders. Numerous chapters in this book provide practical insights and examples on evaluators' activities related to facilitating policy choices (see: Chapter 6: Olejniczak and Jacoby, Chapter 9 by Park, and Chapter 10 by Nielsen and Lemire).

Executing policy solution

The final action situation focuses on establishing the implementation details, delivering the solution, and tweaking the cogs and wheels of change mechanisms that drive policy intervention.

This situation is the primary interest of policy designers, street-level bureaucrats, specific stakeholders, and policy takers/users of the specific policy intervention. Here the logic of policy dominates, but if a major implementation failure occurs, the dynamic could be turned into political accountability.

The participants engaged in these decisions usually overestimate the quality of their plans, the abilities of the institutions to implement policy options, the likelihood of successful policy delivery (optimism bias and overconfidence), and their ability to control outcomes, often downplaying uncertainties and challenges (the illusion of control). The latter bias is related to linear thinking (that is, ignoring mechanisms and complex system dynamics). As Hallsworth et al. point out (2018) policy often deals with complex systems where the link between cause and effect is not direct. Addressing a problem in one area can create unintended consequences in another part of the system and push policy actors to

keep trying to intervene with new actions without realizing that the system is not responding as they intend. Finally, in our complex world of organizations and implementation systems, policy actors can face such challenges as competing solutions implemented simultaneously, and measure fixation (focus on reporting performance indicators of progress rather than the success of underlying objective).

The action situation of executing policy solution is a traditional realm of program evaluation activities. Thus, the evaluators have extensive possibilities in assisting policy participants. We want to point out four things in particular. First, evaluators can help unpack the black box of mechanisms, articulating theories of change and underlying assumptions that drive specific policy interventions. Second, evaluation practitioners can keep bringing the user perspective to the table, showing actual user experiences as specific programs unfold. Third, evaluators can help coordinate different policy measures, seeing synergies or conflicts among them (in public policy literature, this is discussed under the term of policy mixes (Howlett, 2023)). Last but not least, evaluation can help balance operational vs. strategic perspective and indicators since the daily implementation routines often create measure fixation on short-term products at the expense of long-term, more difficult-to-measure effects. The dynamics of this decision type are discussed in particular by Chapters 1 (Marra), 3 (Boyle and Redmond), and 10 (Nielsen and Lemire).

The above-discussed perspective of thinking in terms of policy actors, decisions they face, and biases they experience has recently emerged in public policy literature (Dudley & Xie, 2019; Gofen et al., 2021; Hallsworth et al., 2018). Our approach follows these developments but focuses on evaluation. We recognize that, in reality, the evaluation practices can and should be present in all identified action situations, and we indicate possible roles that evaluators could undertake.

Looking more broadly, as has often been said, the only constant in this world is change, and indeed the world has changed and will continue to change in the future. Theocracies have been replaced by the divine right of kings, which was replaced by feudalism, which evolved into democracy, and some democracies have failed, devolving into autocratic regimes and even, in some cases, to a resurgence of pseudo theocracy. The chapters of this book have examined various ways in which our world has been molded politically, socially, and intellectually by the “Post-Truth” phenomenon, but it is worth noting that there is nothing new about this phenomenon—it just seems that way, because we happen to be here now. Evaluation can help us understand our situation, and help guide change, if we let it. Evaluation offers the opportunity to develop shared intelligence, involve more stakeholders, take account of opposing views to co-produce democratically solutions to complex problems. Of course, excessive information can turn public attention off; and the need is for evaluation to separate the grain from the chaff. This is part of the permanent tension between the public good and private ambition, and that is why evaluation matters.

Note

- 1 We borrow the term “multilogue” from Richard Duke—a classic author of serious gaming literature and practice, who promoted games as collective sensemaking, that improves communication among competing stakeholders (Duke, 2011).

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