

ADVOCACY EVALUATION

Looking Through the Right End of the Telescope



Distributed by
Center for Evaluation Innovation

Jim Coe
and
Rhonda
Schlangen
June 2011

May not be reproduced whole or in part
without written permission from the authors.

Looking Through the Right End of the Telescope

Jim Coe
and
Rhonda
Schlangen

An evolving dialogue has emerged over the past few years between advocates, evaluation professionals, and funders concerned with evaluating advocacy. An earlier focus on questions regarding whether it is possible to evaluate advocacy has given rise more recently to a concern with producing innovations aimed at responding to the real and perceived unique challenges to evaluating advocacy.

The authors argue that the focus on new tools and approaches as part of this ongoing dialogue may be overstated. When considered from a perspective of how advocacy can best be served by evaluation, the authors argue that a disproportionate focus on tools can cause other important issues to be overlooked—in the context that not everything that can be measured matters and not everything that matters can be measured. Vigilance to the risks of overemphasis on tools, and understanding their limits, improves the chances of developing new—and using existing—tools or models in a way that helps support more effective advocacy.

Characteristics of Advocacy

Advocacy takes many shapes and forms across the planet. Boiled down, it can be described as a process whereby a set of influences is brought into play, with the intention of securing (or resisting) social or political change.

Though the distinction between advocacy and other change interventions is perhaps not always clear-cut, advocacy differs from direct service efforts (such as an education intervention or health service provision) in several ways:

- a. Advocacy inherently takes place in a crucible of contested space.* It revolves around disputes as to whether and to what extent the change sought is legitimate; whether the means undertaken to achieve it are appropriate; what the results are, whether they are beneficial, and if so, to whom; etc.
- b. Advocacy inevitably pivots on questions of power.* Questions around the distribution and enactment of power underpin the basic dynamics in any advocacy situation: who sets the agenda; what the

parameters of possibility are; who has the authority and ability to make, implement, and assess decisions; etc.

- c. *Action and reaction are often disconnected.* Advocacy is about influencing change that one cannot directly or individually control. This results in the dynamics of advocacy taking place in multiple stages, often with a time lag between the action of the advocate and actual change.
- d. *Changes can occur in different ways, but invariably are manifested at multiple and interlinked levels—* involving both systemic change and change to individuals with a stake in the system. In other words, to change a policy or the way an institution or a society operates, you have to persuade a policy maker, or more likely a group of people, to think or behave differently.

Change is a process rather than a firm outcome, and as such occurs in an evolving external environment where focusing events, competing priorities, and changes in the political and social landscape result in a constantly shifting context. In sum, advocacy is fundamentally relational, operating in a power-charged and contested context, and involving complex, interlinked, and often fluid and shifting chains of influence. Other social change initiatives can involve some or all of these things; advocacy always does.

Trends in Evaluating Advocacy

Any organization undertaking advocacy will have an interest in understanding what has changed, the significance of the change, and the organization's own contribution to the change, as well as the extent to which the organization's ways of working, the activities undertaken, and strategic approaches followed were optimum in advancing goals. Evaluation is a means to validate this investment and demonstrate accountability to donors and supporters.

But efforts to assess advocacy interventions have in the past operated in the context of a somewhat prevailing view that it's not possible to evaluate advocacy.

Given the characteristics of advocacy outlined above, it seems clear, and is widely recognized, that simply importing accepted evaluation approaches from other disciplines doesn't work. When reviewing or assessing advocacy, for example, we can generally (but not always) say with authority that organization x did a, b, and c. But it's very rare that cause and effect can be asserted with any robustness, and at best this would only ever offer explanation within very limited parameters at a level of detail that would reveal so little of the bigger picture as to be unclear or even distorting.

Given the rarity with which particular changes can be attributed to the intervention of a particular organization or initiative, expecting assessments of advocacy to fulfill requirements of accountability by producing such evidence is highly problematic. For some parties (e.g., funders, boards), this may raise questions about the legitimacy of supporting advocacy projects and programs, given the desire to make funding judgments based on value for money equations or return on investment calculations. Responding to this situation, there have been significant efforts more recently to establish the credibility of advocacy evaluation as a professional discipline. Much of the thinking along these lines has been hugely helpful.

In one ongoing strand, these efforts have emphasized devising and applying a range of mechanisms and tools designed to overcome methodological challenges within advocacy contexts. A key rationale driving this effort is that relying on traditional qualitative input (i.e., interviews and other dialogue-based and qualitative techniques) is not enough and hence that what is needed is a suite of tools that go beyond this.

This is a worthwhile venture but as we explore and argue below, in reaching for such tools there is a risk that complex realities are being ignored or sidestepped, and that in the drive to professionalization, the importance of encouraging diverse perspectives and of practitioners reflecting on their own situation may be downplayed. Although there have been efforts to posit discussion around the use of tools within a wider context, in recognition of the limitations, this more nuanced positioning can easily get lost. In examining the plumage the evaluation community and advocates taking up these tools as evaluation solutions may be forgetting to see the bird.

Advocacy evaluation efforts to date have emphasized devising and applying tools designed to overcome methodological challenges within advocacy contexts. In evaluating the plumage the evaluation community and advocates taking up these tools as evaluation solutions may be forgetting to see the bird.

The New World of Tools and Models: Some Limitations

Reducing any quality to quantity...economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply.—Roland Barthes

It is an attractive idea that there can be an advocacy evaluation toolkit or suite of models that mitigate or even overcome some of the inherent complexities in assessing advocacy interventions. Distilling these complexities would then allow more definitive judgments—about value for money, for example—to be made. The search for this Holy Grail in advocacy evaluation is not without value, particularly as civil society organizations grapple with trying to understand their effectiveness amongst increasingly constrained resources. However, vigilance to the risks improves the chances of developing new—and using existing—tools or models in a way that is helpful to advocacy.

For a start, an interest in what is quantifiable, or a component of advocacy that lends itself to measurement, can lead to a tendency to focus disproportionately on one small piece of a larger puzzle, to the detriment of the bigger picture. The significance of one component within the overall landscape can be artificially magnified, leading to loss of focus on what's actually important. There can be confusion about where the value actually lies, based on a false over-emphasis on something because of its putative tangibility.

Rather than drilling in on a particular detail that can be understood and represented in simple form, it is typically more valuable to step back and try to construct a strategic overview, even if the perspective is less precisely viewed. It's important to be cautious about any driver to make advocacy tangible by shoehorning things into frameworks that don't fit—such as a logic model, which may not be appropriate for an advocacy

campaign in a rapidly changing decision making process—or by magnifying elements that have tangibility but not necessarily strategic importance—such as quantifying media hits or meetings. Not everything that can be measured matters; not everything that matters can be measured.

Even the best-conceived tools, which indubitably have practical use, can have their usefulness overstated. Tools are a second-order resource. The tool, rather than being an instrument in service to the methodology, risks being equated with the methodology. Tools risk becoming the end, rather than the mechanism.

Further, if tools don't actually produce meaningful, useful or accurate results, or are elevated beyond their utility, they potentially undermine the very professionalization they are meant to support. "Poor design, sloppy implementation and inadequate sampling cannot be saved by complex tools available through computer programs or theoretical models generated graphically by these programs."¹

Even the best-conceived tools, which indubitably have practical use, can have their usefulness overstated. Tools are a second-order resource. The tool, rather than being an instrument in service to the methodology, risks being equated with the methodology.

These are perils that are damaging to efforts to establish advocacy evaluation as a discipline; more so because the focus on tools risks demeaning simple techniques that can be highly effective in accessing information in a meaningful way. The new thinking is prone to old skepticism about qualitative information as somehow less valid than quantitative data. Our recent experience in conducting evaluations for international NGOs is that traditional qualitative methods are becoming viewed as somehow a bit old-fashioned, with evidence from interviews deprecated by clients as "anecdotal", and quantitative data conversely over-valued.

Tools are mechanisms that can enhance but not ensure validation. For example, assigning a numerical value to qualitative data does not necessarily (and in fact does rarely) produce data free of subjectivity. Use of such tools gives only the illusion of doing away with a qualitative prism. The data must be analyzed. It is the expertise and experience of the people considering the evidence—evaluators and advocates—that ensures validation, "not the use of a program that can produce models, colors, summaries, sorts and the like."²

In short, data and information, whether numbers or qualitative information, must pass through the brain of a human. As such, evaluators and advocates with subject experience are critical. In this context, the role of analysis—of what, by whom, and when—becomes the focus. Assessments of advocacy interventions always pivot on judgment, and it's in the resolution of those judgments where learning is most fruitful.

¹ Morse, J.M., Swanson, J.M., & Kuzel, A.J. (2001). *The nature of qualitative evidence: Constructing evidence within the qualitative project*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

² Ibid.

The Dynamics of Advocacy Evaluation

More fundamentally, there is a risk of a tools-driven approach to advocacy evaluation diverting from the reality of social change as a complex, multi-faceted, power-laden, sometimes unpredictable process. In this context, some approaches—particularly those based on a reductive assessment of the links between inputs and outcomes—give a false sense of hope that advocacy efforts can be pinned to dollar results in a credible, reliable way.

Many tools carry the enticing idea that they can help uncover and expose objective reality. But Einstein kicked the Newtonian idea that there could be an absolute perspective out of the ballpark a hundred years ago. Einstein's theory carried with it a new understanding of the nature of reality, specifically that objective reality is an illusion. And you don't have to be a post-modernist to apply this notion to social and political settings: evidence from both natural and social science demonstrates clearly that, in complex change contexts, lack of certainty is not a result of a lack of information, but of the intrinsic impossibility of going beyond probability. Interpreting advocacy results essentially and necessarily revolves around the nature of reality and people's understanding and experience of it.

There is a risk of a tools-driven approach to advocacy evaluation diverting from the reality of social change as a complex, multi-faceted, power-laden, sometimes unpredictable process.

Classically and archetypally, advocacy relies on, and is built up from, divergent viewpoints: It's always a question of perspective. In other words, this notion of building a picture from multiple perspectives is not a shortcoming or a stopgap until something better comes along. It's a reflection of the reality of the social and political landscape—that it looks differently to people with different vantage points, and that it looks different to them because it is experientially different (not because they just can't see it right). Beyond that, we need to get creative in understanding relationships between players and the interrelationships between actions and reactions, and—given the operating context that investigations take place in highly-charged environments—with an appreciation of power dynamics to the fore.

This point is illustrated by the modern definition of “Luddites” as naive and irrational technophobes, which belies and demeans their historical role within the labor movement. In the UK in the early nineteenth century, a group of textile workers resisted the introduction of new technologies by smashing machines. The lens of historical evaluation has institutionalized understanding of the so-called Luddite movement as a group who, in their ignorance, sought to resist “progress”. This view of the Luddite movement fits with the perspective of the capital owners of the time (whose goal was increased profits) and is more generally in tune with the “grand narrative” of historical progress—the conceit that history is a forward-moving process toward increasingly more enlightened or better states of being. But from the standpoint of the workers at the time, their actions represented a rational response: their livelihood was threatened in a time of financial crisis, they were denied a democratic voice and freedom of association, and they were reacting to the pervasive repression of the time. The dominant view of the Luddites therefore tells us more about the prevailing ideology than about the movement itself. It's worth noting, too, that there are no extant first

hand accounts from any Luddite,³ this being both a symptom and cause of their lack of even-handed hearing in the court of history.

This is merely an example of a wider truth: that understanding and knowledge is filtered through a prism of individual perspective and experience. The historian sculpts the truth; power plays out in terms of whose voices are heard and listened to. Even truth and meaning are prescribed by what is considered acceptable.

By using accepted and valid “old fashioned” methods, like accumulating incremental evidence, these perspectives can be organized and analyzed so that, while not an absolute perspective, they yield a robust, defensible perspective.

We argue that the idea of the evaluator as a Mosaic truth teller coming down the mountain with his or her tool-tablets to reveal objective truth—implicit in the minds of some who see evaluators as experts who will identify the answers and to whom responsibility for learning from a particular experience is basically delegated—creates [rather than is] a false expectation. Rather, the value that an evaluator ideally brings is in having a credible (but not *the* only credible) understanding of the processes involved, focusing on what’s important, contextualizing, identifying important themes, and processing and interpreting information.

The value that an evaluator ideally brings is in having a credible (but not the only credible) understanding of the processes involved, focusing on what’s important, contextualizing, identifying important themes, and processing and interpreting information.

Placing such emphasis on the interpretive and analytic roles of the evaluators and advocates runs head first into the ideal of evaluation as “value-free”—in other words, a neutral process untouched by the individual’s experiences, influences, and value. While these values do not necessarily interfere with the evaluation, recent discussion amongst US evaluators has stressed the importance of making explicit the “value premises that one logically must have before one can draw evaluative conclusions”.⁴ In the context of this article, values and perspectives are intrinsic to the evaluation. Evaluators have a responsibility to mitigate bias. One way of doing so is to address head-on the myth of one certain or absolute “right” answer, and acknowledge that a useful evaluation will position evaluators to integrate and question various viewpoints.

A good evaluation is one that collates, compares, and contrasts a range of subjective judgments, ensuring that key voices are all heard—and in doing so, ensuring that people’s positions are understood to the extent that their perspectives are intelligently interpreted. Crucially, this includes their perspective on the evaluation itself and its potential usefulness, to them and more generally.

³ This point and contextual information about the Luddites is from Thompson, E.P. (1968). *The making of the English working class*. Pelican Books. (on p.540)

⁴ Scriven, M. (2011, January 9). *American Evaluation Association Thought Leaders Forum*. Edited by American Evaluation Association.

The primary skill that a good advocacy evaluator needs is to understand how change happens—and not just in the political or policy arena, but also at the level of organizations seeking to deliver more effective advocacy.

The Space Between Evaluators and Advocates

Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It requires passion as well as perspective.

—Max Weber

The drive to develop advocacy evaluation as a professional discipline can help cultivate new approaches that have the potential to contribute to the broader evaluation field. At the same time, given that evaluation should be useful and user-driven in service to advocacy, any professionalization must serve to make evaluation more accessible rather than reinforcing divisions.

Evaluation typically has a purpose of some blend of learning and accountability. We argue that requirements of accountability need to be better aligned with reality and resources, and that learning best serves advocacy when there is internal ownership of principles, processes, and practices.

Our experience is that how best to help facilitate learning and embed change within organizations is simultaneously (a) the most difficult thing to get right and (b) the area of least comment in evaluation theory.

One influential theory of the policy process posits two communities—researchers and policy makers—who live in different worlds, speak different languages, and value different outcomes.⁵ This model is being resurrected as evaluators and practitioners increasingly inhabit different spaces. In particular, the dialogue around professional evaluation risks creating an edifice out of the notion of evaluation that makes it alienating to advocacy practitioners.

Jargon and associated paraphernalia puts advocates off, and leaves the evaluators discussing methodology amongst themselves whilst practitioners struggle to make sense of it all. Communication is paramount: Evaluators need to be up to the task when it comes to translating the terms and reference points of evaluation to the end users. For example, it is questionable to what extent some complex models, graphically illustrated with a maze of intersecting lines, arrows and circles, actually clarify an advocacy campaign or serve as a useful road map for advocates.

The focus on advocacy indicators is an example of this wider dynamic: our experience as evaluators is that indicators rarely prove useful in driving, informing, or demonstrating the impact of advocacy. Martin Luther King, Jr., didn't set out a series of indicators before he and his colleagues launched the Montgomery bus boycott. The night Rosa Parks was arrested, they were, according to King's account, discussing how to mobilize the community, what kind of response was most appropriate, and what practical challenges they

⁵ Caplan, N. (1979). The two-communities theory and knowledge utilization. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 22(3), 459-470.

would face—not considering how, precisely, progress would be measured. Luckily for them, they weren't being advised by professional evaluators or applying to funders with a liking for log frames or a desire to make funding decisions on the basis of precise, if potentially spurious, value for money formula.

Indicators pervade thinking about evaluation, though in many advocacy scenarios, such as the one above, they are essentially an artificial construct, because:

- Change doesn't happen that way: It's unpredictable, messy, sometimes hard to see, comes from left field, and may depend on chance intersections of experience from multiple fields;
- People don't naturally think about influencing interventions in that way;
- Once you have indicators, you orient effort towards them—meaning that they typically constrain rather than facilitate;
- Indicators intrinsically encourage people to resort to measuring activities (numbers of people taking action, numbers of meetings, etc.) rather than outcomes

Advocacy is a process that doesn't fit well into static logic models, yield to SMART objectives, or succumb to randomized controlled trials. Instead, experience suggests that you need a plausible influencing strategy derived from, and in support of, a clear sense of what you aspire to achieve, along with an idea of how you will know if you are on target. Detail beyond that risks being a waste of time and effort. The critical role of the evaluator in this case is to facilitate this sort of review, construct accessible and useful frames, question assumptions, and present challenging viewpoints that are supported by evidence.

Importance of Critical Thinking in Advocacy Evaluation

As a counterpoint to the trends that we describe, we recommend:

Tools as Servants, Not Masters

The very best thinking around tools can help enhance conceptual understanding of social change processes and ways to encapsulate something meaningful within these processes. For example, thinking around social network analysis offers models that are particularly useful in planning and evaluation because they are based on a credible (alternative) way of thinking about social change (i.e., in the case of social network analysis, that it is unhelpful for it to be disembodied).⁶

More generally, well-conceived tools can help determine what's important. For example, they can help apply some sort of framework for understanding what you can and can't, or should and should not measure, by distinguishing between short- and long-term results as well as tangible or measurable results and those that are essentially intangible and would require significant resources to credibly measure. For example, comparing the relative impact of different but coordinated advocacy activities, or relative impact of individual coalition members on a collective effort.

⁶ See <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/network-models/>

Opinion surveys (of staff within an advocacy organization or network for example) can be used to efficiently highlight areas that you can then focus on exploring through more qualitative means; they can set the scene for, and offer pointers to, understanding, but they cannot, in isolation, necessarily deliver that understanding.

The value of any data developed through such an approach lies primarily in its comparative content. For example, such a survey used over time and with different networks can help establish a track record of effective network functioning that allows quick assessments of network strengths and weaknesses as well as comparisons over time and across different networks. Stakeholder ranking or mapping allows comparisons to be made between how different audiences see the same thing, their proximity to decision-making and positioning, etc. In isolation, it may lead to certain preliminary conclusions, but these need then to be validated through qualitative means.

In the same way, ranking the positions of policymakers on a particular issue can provide a critical piece of advocacy intelligence. While the ranking data are of limited use on their own, they have the potential to inform advocacy planning and understanding of change, as long as they are analyzed within the broader context of influences on policymakers' positions and decision making (such as election vulnerability, competing policy agendas, relationships). The challenge is to balance the resources involved in using any tool with the advocacy payoff.

Constructing a Viable Picture of Reality

Advocacy evaluation is about constructing an aggregate sense of different realities, the sum total of which should be thoughtfully analyzed—by the evaluator or by advocates themselves—to discern a general (though not absolute) conclusion. A critical part of this is giving due consideration to who is heard, and who is involved in decision making about what findings might mean. It is a dialectical process in which areas of disagreement, if handled productively, are often the most fruitful.

Evaluation outputs should ideally provide a jumping off point for internal exploration, providing an opportunity to understand different vantage points, and space to explore divergent views.

A critical part of this is giving due consideration to who is heard, and who is involved in decision making about what findings might mean. It is a dialectical process in which areas of disagreement, if handled productively, are often the most fruitful.

And advocacy evaluation best starts with the big picture. A seascape painted by Turner, or a view of the Thames by Whistler, or a poppy field by Monet gives you enough to go on; a sketchy, perhaps blurred, picture, but something that expresses and encapsulates the essence of the thing. In advocacy evaluation, something impressionistic but credibly supported by evidence is likely to be a more realistic depiction of what reality actually looks like than an attempt to produce photographic precision. Even if such precision were possible, the result might end up being an accurate shot of a moment in time, but also be less successful in conveying underlying meaning, and less useful as a stimulus of debate. The impressionistic view is in most cases fit for the purpose, especially if you start from the premise that findings and

conclusions in an evaluation have primary value as a stimulus to enhance understanding, and as a support to meaningful dialogue, learning, and change. It's good to be challenged about the effectiveness of advocacy and to keep an eye on cost-effectiveness, but this can easily slide into less conducive territory: The implication underpinning reductive cost-benefit assessment models that precision is possible risks distorting the realities of social change.⁷

This Turner-esque overview can then be populated with detail. As long as it is populated with the *right* detail, and avoids being bogged down in too much (or the wrong) detail, it will help develop understanding of the original picture. One approach the authors have been experimenting with is to hear from a range of different stakeholders what they consider the key outcomes of any intervention to have been, unprompted by a prior identification of intended objectives. Those outcomes that are highlighted in this way are then selected for more detailed interrogation, including where feasible by offering judgment on social and financial benefit.

Organizing such discussions around plausible reconstructions of how change can happen (theories of change) can also be useful in helping advocates map how they expect their actions to trigger a chain of reactions leading to the desired goal. This can be particularly useful when planning advocacy work or setting up an approach to monitor and assess change. Arriving at agreement on the rationale underlying a particular program can unveil differences in assumptions and ideas amongst stakeholders working toward a common goal, or reveal gaps in resources or strategy. Even a simple map of how the project is intended to lead to policy or social change can serve as a useful analytical guide when evaluating the effectiveness of a campaign or advocacy program.

Evaluation as a Driver of Effectiveness

Orienting evaluation in this way also arguably improves the potential for the evaluation work to inform the advocacy work. The starting point of evaluation should be the importance of intelligence (i.e., applied information) as a component and driver of effectiveness. Michael Patton's utilization-focused and developmental evaluation approaches, for example, are based on decades of developing and testing this premise.

For 90 percent of occasions, a streamlined evaluation approach is enough: This is where the real action should be. On the premise that a simple, accessible evaluation approach is more likely to be used by advocates, it is imperative that evaluations be useful and support ongoing advocacy. In severely resource-constrained environments, it seems particularly wrong to see advocacy organizations fund expensive evaluations with little relevance to their actual information needs—either because the evaluation occurred long after decisions had been made or because the evaluation didn't produce information the organizations could use to improve their advocacy effectiveness.

That the evaluation should be in service to the advocacy is a critical point. Too often evaluation (in its conception or implementation) proves to be insufficiently focused on and oriented towards improving

⁷ For example, see the recent launch of the Big Push Forward at <http://bigpushforward.wordpress.com/>

advocacy effectiveness. Resource-constrained organizations can't afford to expend efforts on ineffective advocacy. To the extent good evaluation practice can help organizations plan strategies that are in line with their capacity and resources, it has the potential to mitigate the risk of gambling away limited political capital on misguided advocacy, or sending scant resources in the wrong direction.

In this respect it's not the precision or the purity of the evaluation methodology that is important: It's about having basic simple processes for an organization to gather intelligence and reflect on it. In this reading of things, evaluation is simply something you do on an ongoing basis, because it will aid your capacity to be effective. It's about knowing if you are on track to achieving your goals, having the space to think about it, and building in learning to support strategic decisions about resource deployment.

This kind of approach is inherently supportive of evaluation as capacity building, an area in need of great development. It is a pragmatic approach that prioritizes the importance of internal ownership of evaluation, backed if need be by well-targeted external support.

In this "converged communities" ethos, advocacy evaluation is not positioned as a separate professional discipline, but as an integral element within the professional discipline of advocacy.

Conclusion

Suggesting an alternative view of advocacy evaluation, and the role of evaluation in advocacy, is intended to support the construction of effective practices that advance advocacy and demonstrate the usefulness of evaluation to advocacy purposes. Advocacy as a dynamic, adaptive process requires innovative, creative evaluation solutions. Positioning evaluation as a driver of effectiveness, bridging the two communities of advocates and practitioners, and capitalizing on the critical thinking skills of advocates and evaluators, are key components of this alternative view.

We wish to thank the following people for reviewing and commenting on this piece: Jean Martial Bonis Charanle, Beverley Duckworth, Jessica Mack and Jeremy Smith.

Jim Coe is a UK-based consultant providing evaluation and strategy support to local, national, and international NGOs undertaking campaigning and advocacy. Prior to going freelance in 2001, Jim worked for an international development NGO. jim.coe@lineone.net

Rhonda Schlangen is a U.S.-based evaluation consultant specializing in advocacy and development. She collaborates with international and community-based organizations on practical and rigorous evaluation strategies for their work. Her past experience includes advocacy and policymaking. rschlangen@yahoo.com