

# Who benefits? Who loses?

## Reflections of an EvalTalk lurker

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**I imagine that many readers have benefited from joining one or more of the plethora of listservs<sup>1</sup> that link practitioners across the ether.** Over the years I have joined (and left) a variety of these electronic communities. Having begun formal academic study in evaluation I decided to join EvalTalk<sup>2</sup> in search of current discourse on theory and practice.

The events in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 prompted an intense three-week exchange. I want to acknowledge the significant impact of this event on the people of the United States of America and that this may, in part, account for some of the more extreme reactions. However, it was the content of the discourse that gave me cause to consider the relationship between values, prejudices and experiences and how an event is interpreted. It seems to me that these are at the very heart of what we do as evaluators and, as such, we have a professional responsibility to explore them in some detail. It is important to note here that I haven't analysed the threads extensively (and have no intention of doing so). The purpose of this article is not to initiate a political debate. What I'd like to share are some thoughts as a 'developing' evaluator from 'observing' the exchange.

I was surprised that rhetoric, polemic and personal attack were used so liberally. This seemed inconsistent with values of a community of practitioners who primarily earn their living by taking opinions, ideas and beliefs into account when considering the value or worth of an intervention. It was obvious that some contributors had not checked their assumptions before forming judgements. For example, expressions of 'non-mainstream' views were interpreted as support of al-Qaeda's actions and, by implication anti-American.

What intrigued me was the reliance on 'tone' as a departure point for criticism. The 'tone' of a posting that raised issues outside the mainstream was considered

offensive. I couldn't 'see' offence in the posting, but then, I tended to agree with the ideas being expressed.

I realise that this is to do with interpreting the written word and is dependent on the context in which the event occurs. But isn't that how we deal with the data on which

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we base our work? I was left wondering whether, for some contributors, the only values worth considering are those that they find palatable and, if so, what effect does this have on their practice?

The possible roles that standards can play were described in the 'First Amendment' debate. The freedom of speech argument raged and when it appeared to be losing some ground, standards, definitions and governance were called on to bolster it.

The 'off-topic rule'<sup>3</sup> was applied liberally but without clear definition it was used

selectively. For example, it didn't appear to apply to postings that offered up prayers, relayed family situations or shared travel arrangements. It was also interesting to note that when attempts to link the discourse back to evaluation practice were made some of non-mainstream voices were the first to comply. I could see that they were trying to contextualise their position within the theory and practice of evaluation. But that wasn't as obvious to others.

At its most extreme, however, the dominant paradigm manifested itself in the sudden moderation of selected contributors. The postings of at least four active members were reviewed by the 'list owner'. It took one contributor logging on through a new account to draw my attention to this situation.

I revisited the conditions under which I joined the list and could see no justification for what I saw as an extreme manipulation of power. Certainly the community itself hadn't been consulted on what or who should be moderated.

It was enough to shake me out the lurkers'<sup>4</sup> lounge. I posted a small argument for the strength of self-regulation, and requested removing the moderation. This wasn't acceptable to at least one contributor.

*Question: Does the AEA really want to sponsor a listserv without some sort of responsibility and accountability beyond that of 'let the subscriber beware' or 'let the most vocal voices win'? The AEA should examine this issue in light of professional ethical guidelines and other organizational governance protocol.*

This caused me some serious reflection. Whose standards were being promoted? Why were they being called on? Was it for clarity or for protection? Was it to ensure that the views of the 'others' could be filtered out? In fact, is it easier if someone else applies the standards for me? Is this a manifestation of governance? Who could gain from this and what could be lost?

Responsibility for posting non-mainstream views appeared to be located with a single contributor who provided lengthy critique. There were several non-mainstream voices but this contributor bore the brunt of highly emotive reactions. I mused on how easy it is to put someone in the 'black hat'; and by demonising the opposition make personal attack acceptable and, by implication, part of the standards.

It appeared to me that the arguments relied more on rhetoric than reflection. There were contributors who questioned the non-mainstream view but in the main these views were refuted by an implied 'common sense' argument. It all seemed to fit into the modernist paradigm of a fixed and finite set of knowledge. The old right and wrong answer and similar dichotomies that deny the rich complexity that is humanity were brought to the fore. Despite

several attempts there was no substantive discussion focused on making meaning of the events within the context of evaluation.

## How did this help me as an evaluator?

This event made me think about the effort I need to challenge my assumptions and how important it is to argue against the theory I am exploring so I can see what doesn't fit. What do I need to do to question the foundation of my own views and their subsequent impact on my interpretation of data? How much attention do I really pay to looking for disconfirming evidence especially when I'm 'comfortable' with the findings? What strategies can I develop to check my steps up the 'ladder of inference'? How much easier is it to generalise than particularise?

Then there's understanding why people respond so strongly to evaluation findings. What imprint has our education left on our capacity to engage with critique beyond the playground level argument of 'Did!' 'Did not!'? Is it because considering views other than your own is very hard to do or that we've not been taught how to do it?

It made me think about the type of support I need to develop my practice. Although the exchange was set in a highly emotional context it had a significant and negative impact on my willingness to post to the list. What if my posting was misinterpreted or assumptions as liberally applied as they were to contributors in this exchange? What are the responsibilities of a community of practice to its members? What are my responsibilities as a member to the professional community?

I discovered some more arguments for particularising over generalising and confirmed the centrality of context to any evaluation. I think I now have a much better understanding of why 'it depends' is a common response from evaluators to complex questions. Most importantly I began a journey of exploring the role values play in evaluation. I wish I could remember who said, 'If liberty means anything, it means people have to hear what they don't want to.'

## Notes

- 1 Software facilitated process of sharing emails across a large number of 'subscribers'; usually established by groups to explore areas of common interest; operates asynchronously (time independent); can be moderated (all emails are reviewed before posting to the group) or unmoderated; either closed (limited to members of specific groups) or open to anyone.
- 2 EvalTalk is an open, unmoderated list for general discussion of evaluation and associated issues sponsored by the American Evaluation Association and hosted by The University of Alabama.
- 3 Comments and opinions posted that are not within the pre-determined focus.
- 4 Subscribers who don't contribute to a discussion.