16 September 2026

When the story turns against the evidence: Navigating media scrutiny as evaluators

Australian Evaluation Society Conference 2026

Roundtable discussion

HealthConsult

Facilitators



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Lives on Wurundjeri Country, traditional lands of the Kulin Nations

HealthConsult acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands we meet upon today, the Larrakia people, their ongoing custodianship of these lands and waters, and their elders past and present.

Today's session

The session is designed to unpack challenges for evaluators dealing with media scrutiny, share strategic approaches and equip you with principles and a framework to apply when faced with difficult situations

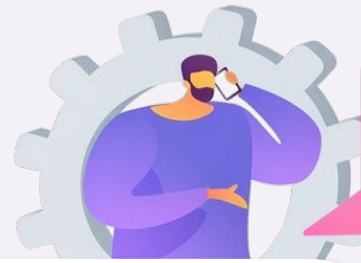
Today we will...

- **Set the scene** with some discussion questions on media challenges for evaluators
- **Undertake a scenario-based group activity on your table** using prompting questions provided through four scenarios
- **Share your ideas** back to the room, then we will synthesise these to identify **emerging ethical, practical and relational principles** for navigating media scrutiny
- **Introduce our framework** for guiding responses to media related challenges



Evaluation doesn't occur in a vacuum





Clients

Whose perspectives do you need to consider when navigating media scrutiny?



Politics





When evaluation comes under scrutiny



16 SEPTEMBER 2026 Edition 1

Promising Program, Disappointing Results

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Program Claims Under the Microscope

EDITORS NOTE

The Numbers Tell a Different Story

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Early Data Paints a Troubling Picture

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The HealthConsult Chronicles 2

16 SEPTEMBER 2026 Edition 1

NEW EVIDENCE Undermines Evaluation Claims

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OPINION PIECE

Independent Evaluation, or Political Spin?

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"Who told the evaluators what to find?"

–CHIEF COMMISSIONER

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REVIEW Did Evaluators Look at the Full Picture?

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The HealthConsult Chronicles 3

Which headline would make your stomach drop the most?

Diagnosing the challenge



When determining your response it can help to pause and consider...

What kind of challenge are you facing?

Ethical

Integrity and independence

Practical

Evidence, methods, communication and timing

Relational

Trust, expectations and relationships

Challenges often overlap!

Activity

Imagine a program you are evaluating.
Devise a strategy for navigating the scenario on your table.

20 minutes



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Instructions

- **Review the scenario description**
- **Discuss in your group how you plan to approach this**
- **Consider the prompting questions provided**
- **Allocate one person to report back to the room**

Scenario overview



1 | Pained public perspectives

How do we uphold integrity and independence when public narratives outpace emerging findings?



2 | Media misinterpretations

How should evaluators respond when public narratives misrepresent the evidence?



3 | Client control, not collaboration

Where is the line between constructive collaboration and undue influence?



4 | Dodgy data

How do you maintain credibility when the evidence cannot support firm conclusions?



1 How do we uphold integrity and independence when public narratives outpace emerging findings?

The scenario

Six months into an evaluation, a program comes under intense media scrutiny.

The client asks you to publicly defend the program, but your findings are still emerging and cannot yet be substantiated.

Meanwhile, communities and stakeholders are demanding immediate answers, confidence in the program is declining, and different groups are shaping competing narratives about what is happening.

Considerations

- How would you assess your data and findings to determine what you can say at this point in time?
- How would you decide who is best placed to communicate publicly?
- How will you communicate uncertainty while maintaining credibility?
- How do you maintain trust in both the program and the evaluation?
- How would you assess what information might be able to be shared without compromising the evaluation if findings evolve?
- How might today's decisions affect trust in the evaluation later?



2 How should evaluators respond when public narratives misrepresent the evidence?

The scenario

An evaluation is nearing completion when media outlets begin reporting that the program failed, based on a selective interpretation of publicly available data that was part of your evaluation.

The headlines omit important context and differ from what the evidence suggested. The client wants the record corrected, but publicly responding could compromise the evaluation's independence and create expectations about findings that have not yet been finalised.

Considerations

- How would you initially respond to the media reports?
- What would you consider in deciding how to respond?
- What risks are there in responding, or staying silent?
- Who is best placed to provide context?
- How could you provide context without pre-empting the findings?
- What approach best protects the credibility of the evaluation?



Evaluation team report drafting

3 Where is the line between constructive collaboration and undue influence?

The scenario

A high-profile, sensitive program is under sustained political and media scrutiny. Concerned about public perception, the client becomes increasingly involved in the evaluation process, requesting changes to the framing, emphasis and language of draft findings to minimise potential criticism.

The client has also asked that the evaluation remain confidential and has indicated it may not be made publicly available. At the same time, you're conscious that draft reports, emails and working papers could later be released through Freedom of Information requests, requiring every interaction and decision to withstand future public scrutiny.

Considerations

- What is legitimate client input?
- When does collaboration become influence?
- When clients request changes, what are the key things you consider when deciding whether to action?
- How should you document your decisions? Would this be different in a high-profile evaluation?
- How does FOI change the way you work?
- What are the key factors in being able to defend your process if challenged?



4 How do you maintain credibility when the evidence cannot support firm conclusions?

The scenario

An evaluation is underway when you discover that the available data is incomplete and of poor quality. The client prefers that the specifics of data quality remain confidential. Qualitative data collection has also been restricted, limiting your ability to explore outcomes.

Your interim report attracts media attention, with commentators criticising the exclusion of particular datasets and stakeholder views. You know these are not appropriate, but the criticism gains traction.

You are increasingly concerned that the evidence base may not support firm conclusions, and misinformed methodological scrutiny risks undermining confidence in the findings and your organisation.

Considerations

- How do you assess what the available evidence can reasonably support?
- How do you provide contexts and caveats around limited data?
- How should evaluators communicate the limits of what the evidence can support - both to clients and in reports?
- How do you best explain methodological decisions to a non-technical audience?
- How do you ensure transparency about limitations without undermining confidence?
- How do you protect your credibility when firm conclusions aren't possible?

Reporting back

It’s time to share your table’s top strategic actions or decisions

Please outline why they are important.



A framework for navigating media scrutiny

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1 Understand
What is happening?

- What evidence do we have?
- What might be driving this narrative?
- What type of challenge is this? (e.g. ethical, practical, relational)

2 Assess
What are the implications?

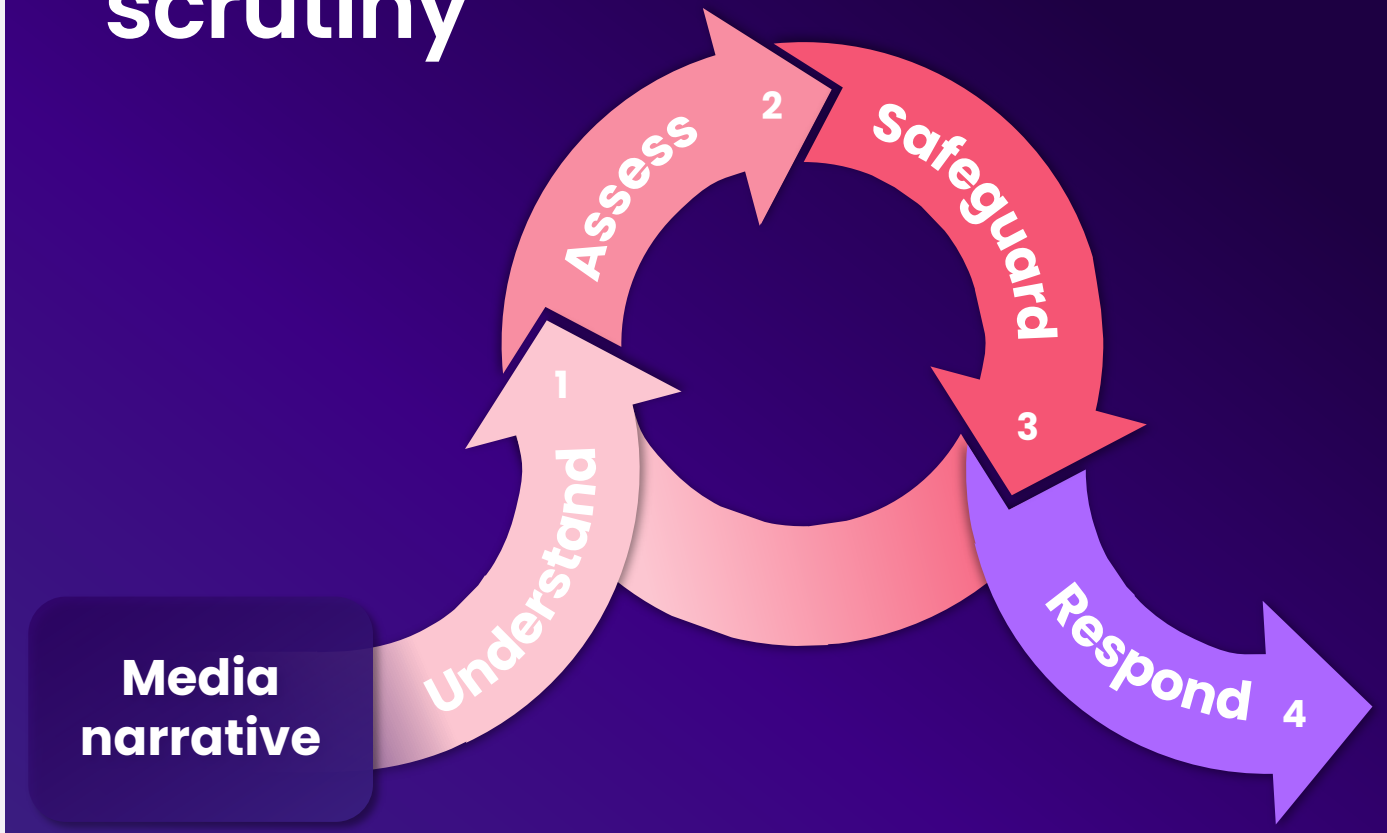
- What are the risks?
- Who is affected?
- Respond or stay silent?
- Who should respond?
- What does credibility require?

3 Safeguard
Protect the integrity of the evaluation

- Independence
- Documentation
- Future credibility

4 Respond
Choose the most appropriate response

- Communication
- Stakeholder engagement
- Methodological adaptation



Emerging principles

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Ethical

Independence

Practical

Transparency

Relational

Neutrality

Provide us with your details, and we will distribute the principles developed from today's session.

Thank you

Get in touch

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