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Policy Analysis in an Age of Technological and Social Transition

Four Futures and an Agenda for the Field

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About This Paper

This paper argues that the field of policy analysis is at a watershed moment, as AI-driven change, eroding trust in expertise, and evolving configurations of political authority shift the institutional arrangements that once anchored policy analysis in public life. Drawing on a RAND scenario exercise, we develop plausible futures for policy analysis. The field must revisit first principles and use those principles to modernize, guiding renewed institutional design, policy analysis training, and research governance. This paper should be of interest to those that conduct, manage, sponsor, or consume analysis, from researchers to funders and policy makers.

Frederick S. Pardee Center for Longer Range Global Policy and the Future Human Condition

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Summary

Policy analysis has long been central to how decisionmakers in democratic societies understand problems, develop and consider policy options, and justify collective choices. The field now confronts a watershed moment, as AI-driven socio-technical change, decreasing trust in expertise, and shifting configurations of political authority undermine the institutional arrangements that once anchored policy analysis in public life. Drawing on a scenario exercise conducted at RAND, we develop four plausible futures for policy analysis and use these futures to identify common stresses on analysts, organizations, and the broader epistemic systems that support democratic decisionmaking. We contend that incremental adaptation of tools and methods will be insufficient without clarity about the north star toward which policy analysis should evolve, and without concurrent institutional and practitioner-level cultural shifts. Renewal and reimagination can begin by returning to first principles of the field – its commitments to problem definition, development and comparative assessment of alternative options for decisionmakers, and transparent reasoning under conditions of deep uncertainty – and use these to guide an agenda of renewed institutional design, policy analysis training, and research governance for the AI era. These must be accompanied by a renewed set of expectations surrounding methodological rigor and how findings are translated for use by decisionmakers and other end users.

Policy Analysis in an Age of Technological and Social Transition: Four Futures and an Agenda for the Field

Introduction

The world needs policy analysis. Not as a professional convenience or academic specialty, but as part of the sense-making infrastructure of democratic life.[1,2] Open societies depend on shared systems for gathering information, evaluating evidence, adjudicating disagreement, and translating knowledge into collective action.[3] Strengthening policy analysis is not only a professional concern but a democratic one.[4] Effective policy analysis can improve the responsiveness of government to peoples' lives, and demonstrate that democratic societies can meet complex social and environmental challenges.[5,6]

Policy analysis is as an applied field that draws on theories and methods from economics, political science, sociology, law, and other disciplines to help people, acting individually or with or through institutions or governments, make better-informed decisions about public problems.[7] It is organized around practical questions of how to define problems, assemble and interpret evidence, compare alternative courses of action, inform the design or development of additional options when needed, and confront tradeoffs among different goals or concerns about efficiency, equity, and other public values.[8] At the same time, the field lives with productive tensions, such as between interdisciplinary breadth and maintaining a coherent identity, and between the aspiration to neutral analysis and the reality that policy work is unavoidably entangled with politics, values, and advocacy.

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[1] Roger Levien, "RAND, IIASA, and the Conduct of Systems Analysis," *Proceedings of the Dibner Institute Symposium on the Systems Approach*, October 1997.

[2] Warren E. Walker, "Policy Analysis: A Systematic Approach to Supporting Policymaking in the Public Sector," *Journal of Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis* 9, nos. 1–3 (2000): 11–27, https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-1360(200001/05)9:1/3%3C11::AID-MCDA264%3E3.0.CO;2-3.

[3] Sophie Juliane Veigl, "More Than Just Principles: Revisiting Epistemic Systems," *Synthese* 204, no. 2 (2024): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-024-04708-7.

[4] Alain C. Enthoven, *Ten Practical Principles for Policy and Program Analysis* (2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3956-1.html.

[5] Amy Garrett, "Helping Europe Help Itself: The Marshall Plan," *The Foreign Service Journal*, January-February 2019, https://afsa.org/helping-europe-help-itself-marshall-plan.

[6] Tim McDonald et al., "The Rise and Fall of Seguro Popular: Mexico's Health Care Odyssey," Think Global Health, n.d., accessed July 8, 2026, https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/rise-and-fall-seguro-popular-mexicos-health-care-odyssey.

[7] David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*, 5th ed. (Pearson, 2010).

[8] Eugene Bardach and Eric M. Patashnik, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, 5th ed. (CQ Press, 2015).

We are experiencing a transition to a new socio-technical age that is reshaping how policy analysts can do their work.[9] Artificial intelligence (AI) is only one of several profound shifts in how people work, communicate, organize, find meaning, and exercise power. These transitions, which also include social, environmental, and additional technical drivers, are reshaping the conditions under which democratic governments must make decisions, respond to demands, and maintain legitimacy.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing how knowledge is produced and used. At the same time, authority has dispersed across levels of government, markets, and civil society, and trust in credentialed expertise has eroded. Policy debates are increasingly driven by competing visions of what type of society we want to become, rather than by disagreements over the best means to widely shared ends. Together, these shifts contribute to undermining support in specialized research institutions, universities, and government agencies devoted to informing public decisions. That world is being remade. The question is whether policy analytic institutions will reinvent analysis and analysts fast enough to meet it.

This paper draws on a scenario exercise conducted at RAND in Spring 2026, still early in the onset of widely available advanced artificial intelligence tools. The exercise explored the prompt *"How must the field and practice of policy analysis evolve in the coming years to stay credible, viable, and valuable?"* as part of the knowledge-generating and decision-relevant systems of a democratic society. When conditions are fast-changing and the future is deeply uncertain, scenarios can inform the decisions of individuals and organizations, helping them to identify and stress test near-term actions that ensure success over a wide range of futures. In addition, scenarios can help us perceive more viscerally that the not-too-distant future may be very different than our current lived experience.

The scenario exercise involved a multistep, mixed-methods process. An initial small online meeting with five RAND researchers generated a dozen candidate drivers of change for policy analysis in 2035, which the team then narrowed, using deliberation amongst the team plus AI-assisted synthesis (via RAND's RFI-ARC tool and RANDChat) – into two key uncertainty axes: trust in expertise and the extent to which analysis remains human-centered versus AI-driven. These axes produced four core scenarios (Evidence Commons, Algorithmic Authority, All About Attention, Fragmented Frontiers), each further paired with two of four governance archetypes (Private, Federal, State/Local, and "Do It Yourself Democracy") to create eight scenario variants. At the in-person, day-long workshop in RAND's Washington office, participants including RAND staff and RAND Board members worked in scenario-based breakout groups across two phases – first assessing near-term threats and opportunities for the current practice of policy

[9] Robert A. Manning and Mathew Burrows, "Welcome to the Age of Chaos: The Top Global Risks of 2026 Show an Ever More Unstable World," *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/02/top-10-risks-2026-ukraine-trump/?tpcc=recirc_trending062921.

analysis in their assigned scenario and governance pairings, then "lifting their gaze" to envision how policy analysis might evolve to thrive as best as possible in each scenario.

Crisp insights emerged from this scenario exercise. Responding to this moment requires coordinated institutional action including rethinking the foundations of policy analysis, redesigning training pipelines, reshaping organizational capabilities, and revisiting the social compact that grants analytical organizations their legitimacy.

Built for Another World

An historical view can also re-enforce understanding that familiar institutions and circumstances can change significantly in a relatively short period of time. The policy analysis enterprise we know today was a creature of its historical moment. It emerged over a few short decades, launched by the applied science mobilization of World War II, when systems analysis, statistical modeling, and what was called operational (later operations) research demonstrated their value in military planning and resource allocation.[10] RAND's founding in 1948, and the subsequent expansion of analogous units within universities, government, and independent research organizations, exemplified the belief that rigorous, evidence-based analysis by diverse experts would produce better public decisions than intuition or interest-group bargaining alone.[11]

That belief rested on the postwar world's particular configuration of power and knowledge. Decision-making authority was concentrated in a relatively small set of public actors. Information was scarce and costly to assemble, professional expertise was relatively uncontested with a presumption of quality, and the "Great Acceleration" created genuine demand for new analytical tools and organizations able to deploy them at scale.[12] Graduate programs, analytical organizations, and public and philanthropic sponsors professionalized and diversified the field, reinforcing this compact between expertise and authority.[13]

Even in that period, however, the relationship between analysis and action was more relational than linear. Carol Weiss's classic work showed that research rarely translated directly into specific policy choices; instead, it "crept" into decisions by shaping concepts and frames,

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[10] Robert Healy, "Notes on the History of Policy Analysis," *Academia Letters*, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/56060215/Notes_on_the_History_of_Policy_Analysis.

[11] Levien, Roger E. "RAND, IIASA, and the Conduct of Systems Analysis." In *Systems, Experts, and Computers: The Systems Approach in Management and Engineering, World War II and After*, edited by Agatha C. Hughes and Thomas P. Hughes, pp. 433–461. The MIT Press, 2000. (https://academic.oup.com/mit-press-scholarship-online/book/17579/chapter-abstract/175206325?redirectedFrom=fulltext)

[12] Robert J. Lempert, *Decision Making under Deep* Uncertainty *and the Great Acceleration: The Role of Experts and Policy Analysis in a World in Transition* (RAND Corporation, 2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA3789-1.html.

[13] John W. Ellwood and Eugene Smolensky, "Public Policy Schools," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Elsevier, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.75047-1.

undermining the simple information-deficit model of influence.[14] David Guston's notion of "boundary organizations" describes analytical organizations sitting between knowledge production and political action, accountable to both, translating evidence into forms that are credible and usable for decisionmakers.[15] Policy entrepreneurs – actors who invest time, energy, and reputation to couple problems, solutions, and political opportunities – have been central in developing and advancing agendas across both public and private arenas.[16]

This history complicates the field's self-image of neutrality. Many consequential policy changes were and are driven by analysts who combine methodological rigor with strong normative commitments, and the growth of advocacy think tanks and interest groups has expanded this "influence industry." Industry or sector-specific research agendas and political policy platforms routinely draw on rigorous, well-developed analysis that is then deployed within an explicitly political process, demonstrating that even highly credible analytic work operates inside, rather than above, contests over power, values, and specific interests. The relevant lines are not just between analysis and advocacy, but also between conviction grounded in logic and evidence and agenda-driven distortion – a boundary that analysts must navigate in contested information environments where claims of fact and truth are routinely deployed without shared standards of evidence or accountability.

Why the Old Compact No Longer Holds

The configuration of power, information, and expertise that supported the postwar compact no longer exists. We are not simply updating tools within an existing industrial-era policy apparatus but are at the leading edge of a new technological and social age, where AI-driven transformation plays a role analogous to – but distinct from – the postwar reconstruction and institution-building that originally gave rise to modern policy analysis. Authority has dispersed across levels of government, markets, and civil society; information has become abundant and cheap to assemble; attention has become the scarcest resource in public life; and polarization turns tradeoffs into perceptions of existential risk. In an unpublished 2026 paper analyzing the impact of emerging technologies on knowledge organizations, researchers Jack Skeels and Melissa Rowe argued AI is accelerating each of these trends by lowering the cost of producing information and disinformation, enabling new forms of automation, and reshaping how knowledge is produced and circulated.

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[14] Carol H. Weiss, "Knowledge Creep and Decision Accretion," *Knowledge* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381–404, https://doi.org/10.1177/107554708000100303.

[15] David H. Guston, "Boundary Organizations in Environmental Policy and Science: An Introduction," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 26, no. 4 (2001).

[16] John Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives,* and *Public Policies, Update Edition, with an Epilogue on Health Care*, 2nd edition (Pearson, 2010).

AI and the democratization of data are transforming how information is gathered and synthesized; power has dispersed from federal agencies toward states, cities, corporations, platforms, and transnational actors; and the attention economy compresses deliberation, fragments shared information environments, and rewards emotional resonance over analytical rigor. Policy problems like geopolitical conflict, climate change, economic instability, and technology governance are increasingly interconnected and prone to slow-then-sudden shifts, making tools built for bounded problems inadequate.[17] This calls for deep-uncertainty methods that stress-test strategies across multiple futures rather than relying on single forecasts.[18,19] At the same time, trust in credentialed expertise has declined, funding patterns have shifted, and standards for what counts as rigorous or useful analysis are increasingly contested.[20]

These pressures operate at multiple levels simultaneously. At the macro level, they stress the broader epistemic systems – journalism, universities, research infrastructures – on which democratic governance depends. At the meso level, they reshape organizational practice, such as how policy analysis organizations build capabilities, sustain business models, and define their roles in *polycrisis* conditions where social, technical, and environmental forces interact in complex ways.[21,22] At the micro level, they affect how individual analysts work, learn, and construct their professional identities in environments where AI can handle many technical tasks but cannot replace judgment, framing, and relationship-building. Systems leadership research shows that progress in complex environments comes from ongoing work that balances short-term fixes with long-term strategic changes.[23]

Four Futures

With this recognition, we convened a scenario exercise with RAND researchers and external experts to explore plausible futures for the field by 2035.

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[17] Brian Mandell and Tim McDonald, *Effective Negotiation Preparation for an Uncertain World* (Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, 2025), https://www.pon.harvard.edu/freemium/effective-negotiation-preparation-for-an-uncertain-world/.

[18] Robert J. Lempert et al., *Making* Good *Decisions Without Predictions: Robust Decision Making for Planning Under Deep Uncertainty* (RAND Corporation, 2013), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9701.html.

[19] Robert J. Lempert, "Robust Decision Making (RDM)," in *Decision* Making *under Deep Uncertainty: From Theory to Practice*, ed. Vincent A. W. J. Marchau et al. (Springer International Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05252-2_2.

[20] McDonald et al., "The Rise and Fall of Seguro Popular."

[21] Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *The American Economic Review* 100, no. 3 (2010): 641–72, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27871226.

[22] Aku Kwamie et al., "Prepared for the Polycrisis? The Need for Complexity Science and Systems Thinking to Address Global and National Evidence Gaps," *BMJ Global Health* 9, no. 9 (2024): e014887, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2023-014887.

[23] Tim McDonald, *Beginning with System Transformation in Mind:* Toward *a Theory of Policy Leadership for Systemic Challenges* (RAND Corporation, 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/rgs_dissertations/RGSDA3001-1.html.

Using expert input and an AI scenario development tool, we crafted four scenarios based on two axes: (1) the degree of trust in expertise and (2) the extent to which humans remain central relative to AI in producing and interpreting analysis. To capture how analysis relates to public decision-making systems, we also examined how these futures might interact with four stylized contexts: federal governance, state and local governance, private governance, and what we called do-it-yourself (DIY) democracy.

These scenarios highlight how different sponsors, accountability structures, and public expectations shape the roles and business models of analytical organizations. The goal was not to predict a single trajectory, but to understand how analysts, organizations, and broader epistemic systems would be stressed across a diverse ensemble of plausible futures and to identify institutional strategies that could remain robust across them.

Policy analysis in each of these scenarios might evolve as follows:

- **Evidence Commons: Shared Evidence, Human Judgment**. Trusted institutions steward shared data, models, and methodological standards, while analysts focus on framing problems and helping diverse decisionmakers use common evidence under uncertainty. The role of analytic organizations lies less in privileged information and more in judgment, synthesis, and co-production with clients, requiring investments in evidence stewardship and training analysts as integrative, boundary-spanning collaborators.
- **Algorithmic Authority: Auditing and Interpreting AI**. Artificial intelligence systems dominate the production of policy-relevant analysis, making it faster and more accessible but blurring the line between rigorous outputs and plausible, low-quality, or agenda-driven products. Organizations need human-AI capability for validation and interpretability, with analysts working in "centaur teams" and funders supporting functions that cannot be sustained through project-by-project contracts alone.
- **All About Attention: Translating Rigor into Influence**. The binding constraint is not evidence but attention, as analysis competes with advocacy, entertainment, and algorithmically curated content. Impact depends heavily on timing and narrative clarity. Communication, translation, and relationship-building become core capabilities for analysts, and organizations must design products that embed analysis in ongoing decision cycles and trusted networks rather than relying on stand-alone reports.
- **Fragmented Frontiers: Localized, Community-Embedded Analysis**. Analysis is decentralized and embedded in places and communities, with analysts acting more as conveners and community-grounded problem-solvers than distant technical experts. Large national organizations face pressure to decentralize and partner locally, while universities and associations help connect place-based work into learning networks.

Across all four scenarios, policy analysis also varies with who holds power and makes decisions, characterized by four governance archetypes. *Federal governance* (FG) favors centralized analysis with national standards; *private governance* (PG) amplifies the influence of platforms, corporations, and philanthropy; *state and local governance* (SLG) rewards organizations that adapt evidence to diverse implementation realities by geographic context; and

DIY democracy (DIYD) elevates the individual and groups, grounded in the themes of accessibility, transparency, and participatory sensemaking.

Figure 1 presents the four scenarios, and the eight scenario-governance combinations used in the workshop are listed below it. These combinations were selected as illustrative pairings and to ensure breakout-group coverage across the full scenario space, not because the other pairings are implausible. In principle, any of the four governance archetypes could inflect any of the four scenarios.

Figure 1. Scenarios and Governance Configurations

	Human-Centered, Deliberative Analysis	AI-Driven, Rapid "Good Enough" Analysis
High Trust & Acceptance	**Evidence Commons:** A trusted, curated, widely accessible data commons exist to support policy analysis.	**Algorithmic Authority:** Validated "GovAI" models dominate decision processes. Rigor is defined by algorithmic transparency rather than peer review.
Low Trust & Anti-Elitism	**Fragmented Frontiers:** Local enclaves form their own truths. Evidence is judged by community identity, not universality.	**All About Attention:** AI bots flood the infosphere with biased "insight feeds." Policy analysis becomes entertainment and advocacy.

SOURCE: Findings from the RAND scenario exercise (2026) described in this paper.

What Changes at the Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels

Across the four futures and governance variants, common stresses were identified at three levels: the role of the analyst, the capabilities of organizations, and the broader social compact that underpins trust in analytical institutions. These are questions that demand joint agenda-setting, shared standards, and sustained investment by research organizations, universities, professional associations, and funders.

Micro: The Policy Analyst

AI drives the cost of assembling information toward zero, shifting the distinctive value of analysts from production to interpretation and judgment.[24] When AI can generate rigorous-looking syntheses at scale, the question becomes: what makes analysis genuinely credible? The answer lies in specifying what human judgment must supply, such as framing the right questions, identifying missing perspectives and blind spots, making values-laden design choices explicit, and recognizing when apparently precise answers rest on fragile assumptions. This is the logic

[24] Skeels and Rowe, "Internal Conversations."

behind human-AI centaur teams, which use AI's computational power to extend human judgment rather than replace it, enabling faster analysis without abandoning critical scrutiny.

Across the All About Attention and Fragmented Frontiers scenarios, claims of "evidence-based" policy proliferate in contested information environments. As mentioned above, the relevant distinctions are not between analysis and advocacy alone but between logical, evidence-grounded conviction and agenda-driven distortion. Analysts will find themselves navigating roles that involve both co-production with affected communities and translation for sponsors with explicit agendas, making it critical to articulate norms for independence and to treat "boundary-spanning ethics" – how policy analysts can maintain their independence while engaging with advocacy – as a teachable skill.

Meso: The Organization

Organizational advantage will depend less on owning information and more on combining capabilities such as AI-enabled validation and interpretation, methods for grappling with multiple, simultaneous, and interacting crises (i.e., *polycrisis*); disagreements over goals and the values that underlay them; and working closely with decision-makers to inform their decisions in a manner that is attuned to their needs. Institutions should build dedicated functions for AI validation, integrate methods for DMDU into curricula and project design, develop explicit models for co-production, and treat narrative framing and engagement strategy as part of analytical design rather than peripheral communication work. Systems leadership research suggests the need for a two-track approach: a more responsive quick-turn "problem solving and adapting" track that involves decision-makers in the analytic process through quicker communication of incremental results adapts current projects, curricula, and governance to AI, deep uncertainty (thereby maintaining the viability of organizations and legitimacy of leadership), and a "system-redesign" track that experiments with more fundamental changes in institutional roles, funding models, and training pathways.[25,26,27]

These capabilities suggest that policy schools and research organizations need to rethink hiring, promotion, and training pipelines. Methodological strength remains necessary, but the future field will reward analysts and leaders who can work at the intersection of AI, deep uncertainty, and working closely with decision-makers in a form of "co-production" of both analysis and decisions.[28]

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[25] McDonald, Beginning *with System Transformation in Mind*.

[26] Ted Kolderie, *The Split Screen Strategy: How to Turn Education* into *a Self-Improving System*, 1st ed. (Beaver's Pond Press, Inc, 2015).

[27] Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New* Technologies *Cause Great Firms to Fail*, 1st ed. (Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

[28] Paul K. Davis et al., "Reforming the Teaching and Conducting of Policy Studies to Deal Better with Complex Systems," *Journal on Policy and Complex Systems* 7 (September 2021): 119–39, https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP68721.html.

Macro: The Social Compact

At the macro level, the field's legitimacy will depend less on its internal standards and more on its demonstrable contribution to outcomes that publics recognize as improvements. In contexts of low trust, citizens and decisionmakers rely heavily on perceived governance quality – competence and integrity – when deciding whether to accept analytical guidance. For policy analysis, this implies that institutions must make their epistemic practices visible, link analytical work more explicitly to implementation and performance.

These macro issues cut across all the scenarios. In Evidence Commons, trust is sustained by shared standards and open evidence infrastructures. In Algorithmic Authority, it hinges on visible, independent oversight of AI. In All About Attention, it depends on consistent integrity in the face of incentives to oversimplify or polarize. In Fragmented Frontiers, it emerges from repeated, positive interactions between analysts and communities. The micro and meso changes outlined above are necessary not only for organizational survival, but also for rebuilding the social compact that grants policy analysis its role in democratic epistemic systems.

An Agenda for Institutional Leadership

Policy analysis is at a watershed moment and now is the time to use first principles not to return to status quo and bury heads in the sand but to actively renew the field. The scale of change presented by AI, and the demands of societal problems, call for more than reactive adaptation by individual organizations but a deliberate process of resetting the policy analysis playbook.[29] While individual institutions must respond, the foundational question of how analysis informs public decisions in an AI-driven, low-trust, multi-level governance environment is not one any single actor can answer. It requires the field to act with the kind of collective intentionality that characterized the postwar founding of policy analysis institutions but directed now toward the challenges of technological and social transition. It also requires an examination of how AI and other impacts influence the use of evidence and the evidence typology (see Table 1 as an example for further consideration).

[29] Tim McDonald, "Policy Analysis for Improving the Performance of Large Social Systems," *Decision Analysis Today* 40, no. 2 (2021): 17–20.

Table 1. Evidence Standards and the Role of AI

Evidence Mode	Description	AI-Era Implications
Evidence-based	• Policy choices are directly dictated by research • Research to action links rooted in measurable change	• Move from gold standard methods to real-time validation • Employ continuous feedback loop designs
Evidence-informed	• Policy choices are informed by the best available reason and evidence; practical implementation is considered as well, such as political will and financial constraints • Recognition that data does not exist in isolation	• Use AI to act as the synthesis engine and enable connections of evidence with logic and theoretical leaps beyond typical human capacity • Leverage an information intake process that is more comprehensive across views and contexts
Evidence-inspired	• Policy choices are guided by *general scientific principles* and/or big ideas from research, but this is used to spark new policy directions, without a direct, proven blueprint • High level of innovation is utilized particularly when data on the issue is not readily present	• Shift towards digital twins and predictive modeling • Increase use of "artificial creativity"

SOURCE: Table reflects author analyses.

Advancing this work includes roles for four sets of institutions: the schools that train analysts, the organizations that produce analysis, the associations that set norms, and the funders who pay for the work. We describe them further here.

- **Universities and schools of public policy** need to do more than train individual analysts; they also should be intentional in shaping how the field itself evolves. Public policy programs can treat advancing the craft and science of policy analysis as central to their mission and are well placed to articulate what the next generation of analysis should look like. Working with students attuned to societal trends and oriented toward long-term policy careers puts these schools in a strong position to provide intellectual leadership for the field. They should redesign training pipelines so that analysis and decision-support under conditions of deep uncertainty, and how to build credible and interactive AI-human teams are treated as core competencies. Training should be well-connected to decisionmakers and end users such that new, iterative and AI-enabled research processes are designed to be both rigorous and actionable, including how to elevate issues and cut through noise in an attention-based economy.
- **Independent research organizations** need to demonstrate through their own practice what independent, co-productive analysis looks like across the futures described here. They should invest in AI audit and validation capacity, normalize the use of deep uncertainty tools in major projects, and embed narrative strategy into analytical design to ensure findings are understood and contextually relevant rather than treating it as an afterthought of dissemination. They also must be transparent about the structural pressures shaping their business models and experiment with funding arrangements that

protect independence while enabling place-based and participatory work. There is a need for standards for how evidence is used, what constitutes rigorous analytic design, and how new data and insights are incorporated in rapid iteration. This includes defining what policy analysis looks like after the traditional phases of research design (e.g., literature review and data collection) have been largely automated and going stepwise through research methods (e.g., benefit-cost analysis, experimental design) to identify the right combination of human value-added elements to AI enablement for each approach. This also means strengthening the tools and methods best suited for complex problems including pressure-testing multi-response options across sectors and approaches that most effectively combine human judgment with evidence.

- **Professional associations**, general and field-specific, are positioned to convene the field and set shared norms. We need effective platforms for sharing practices, stress-testing proposed standards against real-world constraints, and building a common narrative about what "rigor" means in this new era.
- **Financial supporters of policy research** such as public agencies, philanthropies, and other sponsors, have a direct interest in a healthy analytical ecosystem that works for modern needs and should invest explicitly in field-building that meets the moment, including supporting training infrastructure, refreshed norms development, and novel boundary-spanning work that cannot be financed solely through project-based contracts.

The agenda outlined here calls for collective action that returns to the foundational principles of the field and yet reimagines the institutions, roles, and practices of analysis for an age of social and technological transition. These can drive toward rigorous, well-informed decisions that enable democratic governments to respond effectively to public needs and to govern credibly in a transforming world.

The Task Ahead

The four futures described in this paper differ with respect to who is trusted and who does the work of policy analysis. In the Evidence Commons scenario, trust rests on shared data and standards. In Algorithmic Authority, it rests on visible oversight of machines. In All About Attention, it rests on integrity under pressure to oversimplify. In Fragmented Frontiers, it rests on repeated, local trust between analysts and communities. These futures do not differ in what the work is for. Policy analysis still must define problems, develop and compare alternatives, and reason transparently under deep uncertainty. These comprise the north star this paper has argued for, and it should organize the choices that follow as the field enters a time of innovation and renewal.

The postwar compact that once carried the work of policy analysis will not return on its own, or in its previous form. It developed in response to a world of concentrated authority, scarce information, and largely uncontested expertise. The assumptions underlying all those conditions have given way, and incremental adaptation of tools and methods, without institutional and cultural change, will not be enough to meet a world that has already moved. The field needs reimagination across all its key institutions – universities redesigning training and scholarship,

organizations rebuilding professional practices and supports, associations reinterpreting and reimagining norms, and funders backing broad-based innovation in how analysis is conducted and informs public decisions.

Waiting or expecting conditions to return to normal is itself a choice, and a high-risk one. AI, dispersed authority, and eroding trust are already rewriting the conditions under which democratic societies generate and apply knowledge to informing public decisions. The question motivating this paper, which remains the priority focus, is whether practitioners and institutions of policy analysis will reinvent the field fast enough to stay credible, viable, and valuable to the societies that depend upon it.

Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
DIY	Do-It-Yourself
DIYD	Do-It-Yourself Democracy
DMDU	Decision Making under Deep Uncertainty
FG	Federal Governance
GovAI	Government AI
PG	Private Governance
SLG	State and Local Governance

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