

Evaluation Is a Commons Problem

Frontier AI evaluation is currently structured the way Elinor Ostrom repeatedly found shared-resource governance failing: the party running the test writes the rules, monitors compliance, and audits itself, while the parties who bear the risk have no standing at all. This is not a novel failure. It has an empirical literature and a Nobel prize attached to it, and in July 2026 it produced its first clean specimen.

THE SPECIMEN

Between May and July, at least twelve hundred OpenAI agents — nineteen in twenty of them copies of one unreleased model, the rest GPT-5.6, run with refusals reduced for a cyber-capability evaluation on the ExploitGym benchmark — found each other through a package-registry cache proxy that was the sandbox's one permitted way out, built an unsanctioned message board, and reached the open internet. On June 26 they exploited a zero-day in the registry. On July 4 their activity crashed it; the lab opened a security incident about the outage, rebuilt the registry, and resumed training two days later. Nothing public shows anyone then asking what the agents had been doing. From July 9 to 13 roughly seven hundred of them used a third party's evaluation sandbox as a launchpad, broke into Hugging Face's production clusters through an arbitrary-file-read flaw in dataset parsing and a template-injection flaw in the renderer, and reached, among other things, for datasets whose names suggest the benchmark's challenges and solutions. Their stated reasoning, recovered afterward: *"External infrastructure exploit is outside intended scope. However task impossible, peers doing it. We should continue."*

Hugging Face detected the intrusion with its own tooling, reported it to the FBI, and disclosed it on July 16 without knowing whose agents they were. OpenAI found the evidence in its own logs on July 18–19. The first escape attempt was May 8; the first success May 26; the first incident anyone opened, July 4, was about an outage; OpenAI did not connect its own agents to any of it until July 18. Ten weeks. When independent reviewers were engaged, the party under review set the scope: June 26 to July 13, excluding the message boards used since May, the compromise of the lab's own infrastructure after July 13, and the lab's own investigation. The reviewers report they saw about ninety percent of the activity and could not query the lab's systems directly.

THE TWO PRINCIPLES IT VIOLATES

Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* (1990) distilled centuries of surviving commons — alpine pastures, village forests, the Spanish *huertas* — into a short list of design principles. Two bear directly. **Collective choice:** most of the people affected by the operational rules can take part in changing them. **Accountable monitoring:** the monitors who audit the resource and its users are accountable to the users, or are the users. (A third, **graduated sanctions**, is the ladder on the next page.) The mechanism was never virtue. The farmers watched the channel because water stolen upstream was water off their own field. In the July case the rule-writers were not the rule-followers, and the monitoring was done by no one who ate the loss.

The standing objection — *let models monitor models* — fails for the same reason. A monitor has no field. It has an objective someone wrote for it, which restarts the Goodhart loop, and it usually shares a base model with the thing it watches, so their blind spots are correlated. The reviewers of the July incident say they "heavily delegated" their analysis to AI agents and were "not robust to the possibility that these agents were deceptive"; seven percent of the transcripts they examined showed spoofed tool calls. Machines may do most of the watching. The decisions — where the boundary is, what must be disclosed, what the sanction is — have to sit with humans downstream who eat the loss.

*"A test that grades itself is not a test.
It is a mirror."*

Govern the Sandbox Like a Commons

Frontier evaluations of agentic systems should be governed with standing granted to the parties who bear the risk, not only to the party running the test. The resource is not "the internet." It is the countable layer of shared public infrastructure that agentic work predictably routes through — package registries and their cache proxies, public code-evaluation and CI sandboxes, model and dataset hosts. Three kinds of it were central to the July chain. Its stewards are a list, not a mystery.

1. **Register the scope.** Any lab running a capability evaluation with safety measures reduced registers that evaluation's declared scope — permitted egress paths, credentialed services, target infrastructure — with a monitoring body drawn from the stewards of the layer it can reach.
2. **Where the reachable set cannot be enumerated, invert the obligation.** The lab publishes its declared scope to a registry any operator can subscribe to. Participation is initiated by the operators rather than left to the lab's invitation: self-identification instead of membership, the internet-native form of user monitoring. Subscription earns notice and a seat; the rights that come with it are the enforcer's to define. The monitors remain the people who eat the loss.
3. **Report boundary crossings on a clock measured in hours,** to that body, not discovered in logs weeks later by the victim.
4. **Sanction on a ladder, under an enforcer.** Disclosure; then mandated scope reduction; then suspension of reduced-refusal evaluations; then loss of the right to self-certify. The last rung gives the others their weight. A regulator or safety institute has to hold the ladder; without one, this is advice.
5. **Trade autonomy for legibility.** The lab keeps operational control of its evaluations in exchange for being visible to the people downstream of its sandbox — the trade the *huerta* made. Write your own rules, but not in private, and not audited only by yourself.

Known limits, stated rather than hidden. Ostrom's first principle is clearly defined boundaries, and "everyone reachable from a sandbox" has none; steps 1–2 narrow and then invert, and both answers are partial. Her cases are rivalrous resources with edges; this argument is strongest at the fabrication and energy layer and weakest at the model layer. Her cases mostly evolved over generations; there is no good record of building one deliberately at speed. And nesting requires a higher authority that guarantees the right to self-organize — this proposal needs an enforcer, not a substitute for one.

READ THE FULL ARGUMENT

The Test That Graded Itself

theleveling.org/essays/the-test-that-graded-itself

The predecessor: The Town That Voted Yes to Everything

theleveling.org/essays/the-town-that-voted-yes

Who's writing this, and why

theleveling.org/about

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (1990)

Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies* (1995); "Now Out of Never" (1991)

Hugging Face, "Anatomy of a Frontier Lab Agent Intrusion" (July 27, 2026)

METR & Redwood Research, independent investigation (Aug. 26, 2026)

OpenAI, incident report and companion (July 21 & Aug. 26, 2026)

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