# Countering bias against "homegrown" analysis

Leader: Leah Hendey

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Attendance: Laura McKiernan, Mark Abraham, Carlos (BNIA), Shiloh Deitz, Rob (notes)

Laura: What gets me is when you hired someone was hired for $400k. You could hire me for 7 years for that kind of money.

Leah: I’m at HQ and also Urban Greater DC.

Laura: I do stuff for CI:Now in San Antonio.

Mark: ED of Data Haven.

Carlos: Web developer at BNIA.

Shiloh: Community data coordinator with Spokane public library.

Leah: Laura wrote the idea for this session. Can you describe the idea?

Laura: The notion that we discover some out of town firm, maybe in Texas or national, got a contract to do work we could have done. We found out some of our work was repackaged and when the mayor cited it was the national org version not ours.

Leah: We are one of those large National orgs. We collaborated with Mark on a Connecticut housing report. But it happens to me with DC work. In some cases NNIP partners have been suggested to do work! Or out of town consultants to do community engagement. Gallup or Policy Link have been suggested. It’s hard to diagnose the why. Sometimes the funder says they want someone ‘neutral’ but we aren’t out there. I get the equity angle but I don’t think they do as much housing work. It’s flashier, I guess.

Mark: We’ve been doing work around CT, sometimes outside CT. We don’t put out much effort outside of CT since it’s not our mission. Sometimes we are perceived as a biased liberal organization. Curious how to navigate that.

Leah: Are you approaching it from the other angle?

Mark: If someone is doing a project in a small CT town, we are the outsider. Sometimes it’s helpful to partner with a ‘local’ partner.

Shiloh: Our city hired a consultant for anti-bias. Previously a local professor had done it but didn’t give the wanted result. It seems like this outside consultant would use methods to show police are not biased. Local professors didn’t show that result. I don’t know. Is that common?

Mark: Think it’s common.

Leah: People might think a different org will find a different result.

Laura: There are so many different reasons. I think through them every time we lose work. It’s not always getting outcompeted. It’s that we find out someone won something that wasn’t even up for bidding. I can see why they wouldn’t want talented generalist like us. Sometimes it’s legit or not. If they want a POC led org, we’re not that. With funders and local government there is a desire to get a prestigious name. I think there is an issue where people think if it’s more expensive it must be better. We work hard to be affordable so that’s a catch 22 for us.

Leah: My funders don’t think expensive is good.

Laura: Community foundation has a notion that glossy paper and well-known logos were the way to go. I don’t want to say I think we are better than everybody. But how do we change how people think of us as an option. There are probably things that go to us over and over that people wonder about.

Leah: An example to share is a way to proactively partner with national orgs. Urban did it with New Orleans. Allison P wanted Urban to come in even though Kathy thought they already had the expertise. To have an Urban partner with the Data Center helped with credibility.

Laura: I don’t think national players have incentive to do that.

Rob: Big orgs aren’t necessarily monoliths. Individual people behave differently.

Leah: We can’t police our colleagues.

Mark: Similar dynamic with big universities. They could go do it all on their own but we know them so they give us pieces of projects. The way it comes down, you don’t see the RFP. It’s about who has access to the decision makers.

Laura: How do you bring attention to shoddy work without looking like it’s sour grapes. A group announced we don’t have a housing shortage based on a flawed stat. I don’t want to be ‘that guy’ because people point out mistakes, we make but sometimes it’s egregious.

Mark: Or say they didn’t have enough money to do a good job.

Leah: There is a report on gentrification that confuses cities and metro areas.

Laura: Partnerships with other people who might get word of opportunities – that’s a takeaway for me. Strategically pointing out flaws is another. I am growing increasingly in favor of saying ‘why didn’t you ask us’? In that example I gave I just asked the people at the city. They said we don’t know. My guess is that a staffer had a number. And they have higher SEO page authority.

Leah: Sometimes people only see one specific part of Urban. Or know Peter but don’t know other people do other things.

Laura: That’s not true of us. There’s only 4 of us. If they know us then they know us.

Leah: Some people just have their favorites. Or one of their buddies in foundation world recommended.

Laura: I will give props to the NNIP policy that you shouldn’t step into someone else’s turf.

**Link:** <https://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/library/guides/nnip-guidelines-partner-organizations-working-other-nnip-cities>

Carlos: The idea of other orgs getting credit for your work. We receive both the benefits and disadvantages of this. Community statistical areas come from somewhere else – we just picked them up. We are more credited with them than the creator. Alternatively, with Census data some calculations are very simple. Sometimes the mayor or other leader will reference us.

Leah: I know you struggle with Johns Hopkins.

Carlos: The other bit is critiquing work I constantly feel like that.

Laura: I don’t want to criticize publicly. At least without going to them first to give a heads-up. I want to make sure if I’m on the other end that I get a chance to fix it.

Leah: If you’re not a housing person who does housing research it’s not obvious.

Laura: It’s about understanding basic definitions. What I’m trying to say is that’s the advantage of working with someone. If we had to work on air quality, we don’t know those datasets inside out.

Leah: Having those folks on as advisors.

Carlos: Is there anyway, a directory, to know where to go. Rather than have people struggle to figure out where they need to be.

Leah: Like a directory? Those are always hard to maintain.

Carlos: We don’t always know our contact at an org left the org until we try to reach them. Eventually we’ll get better at building supports as tech progresses.

Laura: We run across local orgs work, even state, is just a better fit for someone else. So we can serve as that directory and recommend someone else. I think it helps our credibility to not look like we are project grabbing all the time. I hate when it’s a bandwidth issue. But when it’s someone else is a better fit. We aren’t good to hire for advocacy.

Mark: We have a lot of subcontractors for that reason. Sometimes someone wants an aspect of your work but the expertise they need is sitting elsewhere. If there is a RFP is it a good idea to call competitors? When we did the study with Urban Institute you can form a consortium of organizations for a big project.

Laura: If it’s a state or national RFP. Competing against each other happens but is bad.

Leah: Not sure we have thought about that so much.

Laura: We brought a competitor onto our board. It might have been risky but we did it.

Carlos: Specific human being is what I’m thinking. Org’s have ways of partnering and working together.

Laura: Check out Team of Rivals (book).

**Link**: https://www.amazon.com/Team-Rivals-Political-Abraham-Lincoln/dp/0743270754

Mark: We have passed on a lot of RFPs over the years because they looked too complicated. Maybe tips for responding to those would be helpful.

Laura: Sometimes you have to be an expect in checking the boxes.