

Discussion

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This article, delivered as remarks to the 22nd Memorial Morris Hansen lecture, modestly expands on a few themes from Kenneth Prewitt’s lecture. The article provides some context on the interrelationship between the federal statistical agencies and the contract houses, and offers some preliminary thoughts about what it means to respond to Prewitt’s charge that we cannot rest on our laurels.

1. The Relationship Between Contract Houses, Boundary Organizations, and Think Tanks

To begin the discussion, it is worth briefly reviewing Sheila [Jasanoff’s \(1990\)](#) scholarship on boundary organizations and boundary work. Jasanoff’s main argument is that by creating sharp lines between science and policy, scientific boundary organizations create legitimacy and “cognitive authority” for their scientific work products. As Prewitt noted, this is a key element of the independence that the contract houses will say they have from the government agencies that fund their activities.

With that in mind, it is also important to place the contract houses into the broader context in which they exist. An imperfect but useful term for these contract houses is “think tank.” Two broad definitions of think tanks are as follows:

- A research institute or other organization providing advice and ideas on national or commercial problems ([Oxford English Dictionary 2012](#)).
- An institute, corporation, or group organized for interdisciplinary research such as technological and social problems ([Merriam-Webster 2012](#)).

Although these very general definitions do not fully capture the core elements of the contract houses, most of the research and scholarship on think tanks clearly categorizes the contract houses as clearly categorizes the contract houses as a particular type of think tank. Indeed RAND, the organization for which the term think tank was invented, is one of the contract houses. James [McGann \(2007\)](#), in his work with the University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, describes a broad taxonomy of think tanks. I have simplified the taxonomy here into three main types of think tanks:

- Academic think tanks resemble academic institutions and are staffed by academics. They foster academic culture and organization, and follow established academic

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disciplines. They set their own agendas and determine which questions they wish to study. Research conducted by these think tanks generally has longer time horizons and is published in the form of books, journal articles, and monographs. They do not typically issue reports or policy briefs. Two examples of academic think tanks are the Brookings Institution and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

- Contract think tanks conduct the majority of their research for government agencies using contracts. These organizations have a close working relationship with agencies but are independent and objective, offering data collection and analysis. They are more likely to produce short-term reports and policy briefs. In contract-type think tanks, the researcher's freedom to set research agendas is limited, and usually set by the agency. A few examples of contract think tanks are NORC, RAND, and RTI.
- Advocacy think tanks have a central goal of advancing a cause or ideology. They are usually driven by an issue, philosophy, or constituency and are organized to promote their ideas. They are skeptical of academic, technocratic methods of policy analysis, and cultivate a culture and organizational structure that resembles an advocacy organization. A few examples of advocacy think tanks are the Cato Institute and the Institute for Policy Studies.

In the U.S., the more traditional think tanks are the first two types, but the number of advocacy think tanks has grown in the past few decades.

We will address advocacy think tanks presently, but focusing for now on the first two types, the main point is that for think tanks in the U.S. that focus on objective knowledge generation there are two paths – the federal funding path or the private funding path. Academic think tanks tend to pursue the private funding path, whereas contract think tanks by definition follow the government funding path.

As shown in [Figures 1 and 2](#), there are pros and cons to each path. Academic think tanks might argue that they are more scholarly, have more academic freedom and that they are less subject to bias. Contract think tanks might argue that what they do has the potential for greater impact because they are working directly with the government, that accepting government funds is no more or less biased than accepting private money for research, and

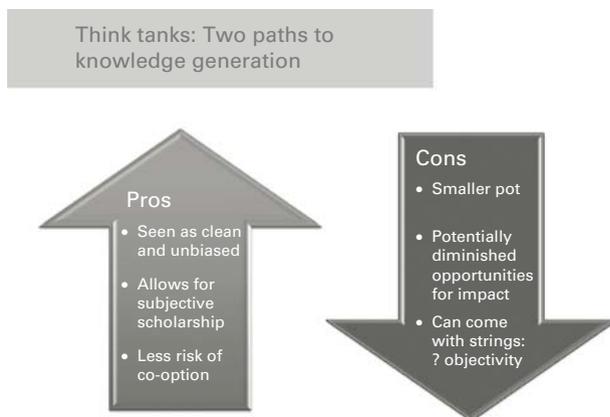


Fig. 1. Path 1 – Focus on Private Funding

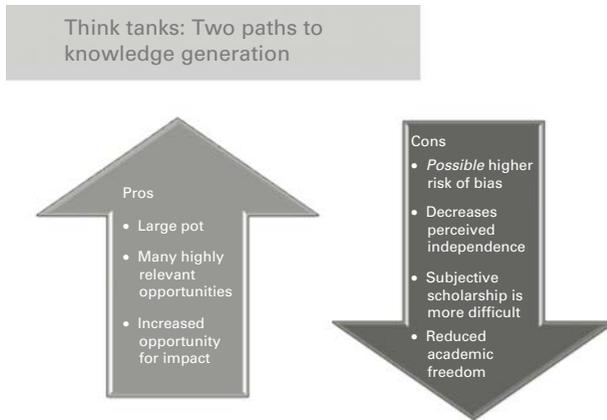


Fig. 2. Path 2 – Focus on Government Funding

that they have a larger playing field. However, when working directly with and for the federal government, contract think tanks need a regime for dealing with the real and perceived risks to their objectivity and independence.

Figure 3 displays a range of approaches by which an organization can mitigate these risks.

Coming full circle, taken as a whole, the approaches in Figure 3 constitute a convincing example of the boundary work that Prewitt references.

2. Enter the Advocacy Think Tank

Despite the successful boundary work by traditional think tanks, an increasing risk to the perceived objectivity of both the academic and contract type think tanks is posed by the extraordinary proliferation of advocacy think tanks that has accompanied increased political polarization in the United States. Andrew Rich (2005), in his book on think tanks, notes that advocacy think tanks are a departure from the commitment to objectivity and independence that is the defining ethos for traditional think tanks. Rich argues that the known ideologies of many, especially newer, think tanks contribute to a situation in which think tanks as a whole, including the more traditional types, are often perceived as promoting points of view and compromising on scientific rigor to do so. As a result, their credibility is undermined and they fail to achieve the substantive impact that they might have. In effect, the scientific boundary work regime is no longer effective because there is *a priori* doubt about the organization promulgating it.

This contributes to the larger milieu of science denial and attacks on the usefulness and credibility of social science and social science data. Examples include the threats faced by the American Community Survey (Groves 2012; Prewitt 2012b; Silver et al. 2012; Webster 2012) and the social sciences arm of the National Science Foundation (Flake 2012a; Flake 2012b). As the line between fact and opinion gets blurred and biased information is promulgated through advocacy think tanks and further disseminated through media outlets with aligned perspectives, the information provided and consumed

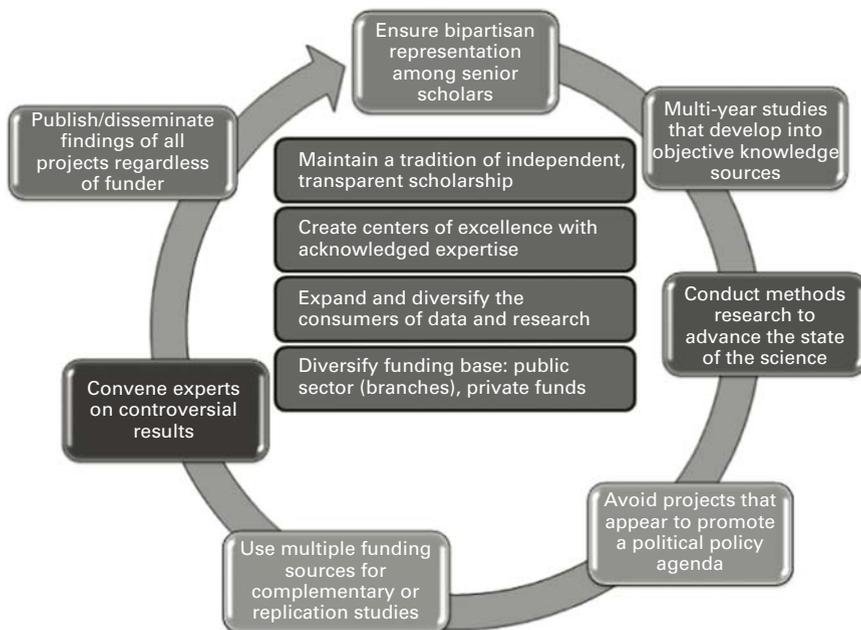


Fig. 3. *Avoiding the Pitfalls of Path 2*

in the public domain is no longer objective or grounded in science. Hence the role of contract houses as collectors of truly objective information and arbiters/presenters of “truth” proves ever more important. Moreover, government has a steadfast need for objective information upon which to base decisions, devise programs, and design or refine policies. Indeed one of the essential pillars on which the contract houses are based is that the government has this fundamental need for independent and objective, scientifically grounded information. As this pillar starts to crumble, the future of the contract houses becomes less certain.

3. Systematic Limitations of the Contract House Model

In addition to these more exogenous challenges, there are endogenous challenges too. While there may not be major failures of the contract organizations, as Prewitt notes, there are some inherent problems with the system.

Prewitt refers to rent-seeking behavior on the part of the contract houses: What is good for the contract house is not necessarily good for the federal government or the taxpayer. The contract houses carefully steward their incumbencies on long-term recurring projects. The competitive nature of our industry and our business models demand it, but it creates the possibility of conflicts. For example, there is the risk that contract houses will not be as quick as we could be to identify efficiencies in what we do. A good contract house continually assesses this risk and takes steps to mitigate it.

Similarly, there can be problems on the government side. Redundancies and regulations that do not allow data sharing create an environment that results in the government not being as efficient as possible, thereby costing the tax payers more. Anyone who has taken

part in the federal budget process has observed the extraordinary effort a federal agency will expend protecting and defending its programs, often despite clear redundancies or substantial overlaps with another agency's programs.

The Office of Management and Budget is a mediator against this *vis-à-vis* government agencies. Other bodies (the National Academy of Sciences, the Committee on National Statistics, etc.) are mediators against it from the contract houses and the agencies, as are the Federal Acquisition Regulations, external review panels, Inspector General's offices, and others. However, there are still weaknesses in the system. A few illustrative examples:

- Problems of focusing on content instead of sample, and vice versa. Despite the use of advisory panels and the dedicated efforts of federal staff, optimizing this tradeoff is a challenging goal in most large data collection efforts.
- Sticking with status quo too long – for example, the overly slow incorporation of cell phone sampling in our surveys (Keeter et al. 2007).
- Successes (but limited successes) with the continuing and recurring efforts at survey integration and data harmonization (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1996).
- Lack of means to make data available and useful and the de-legitimization of those data that then ensues (as a type of “sour grapes” by researchers or justification for the limited access by agencies) (Orszag 2009; United States Congress 2012).
- Significant data gaps: we can all agree that we have important holes in the knowledge base, and in many instances we do not have particularly good ideas for filling them.

These examples above are not meant to suggest that the government/contract house model is fatally flawed, but to acknowledge that in addition to the threats posed by advocacy organizations, the contract house model has some inherent challenges that we should continue to address as we look to the future.

4. The Road Ahead

Prewitt, in his article, warns the contract houses and their federal clients, who are “deeply committed to knowledge for the public good, the question is whether you will be in the game or marginalized.” What does this suggest for us in terms of concrete action? How does the symbiosis between federal agencies and the contract houses need to evolve as the 21st century unfolds?

Prewitt referred to the digital data explosion: big data, social media, and sampling the internet. The common element here is making better use of existing, new and emerging sources of data, to answer pressing questions more completely and more comprehensively, and also at potentially lower cost.

The contract houses, and indeed the entire federal statistical system need to do a better job of showing the cost effectiveness of their efforts, and that includes both elements of that term. Efficiency is, of course, collecting important data in ways that are high quality, but that cost less. Effectiveness goes further – it requires us to address very crucial questions such as: Why are these data needed, and how are they used? What are good examples of ways in which they have informed policy and other important decision making? What would happen if we did not have them?

We must continue to innovate and expand the science base to incorporate new data sources and new methods for dealing with them into the new cost effectiveness regime that is the reality of 21st century federal budgets. Moreover, we need to do a better job of getting the data out to the data users. This is Todd Park's (2011a; 2011b) "data liberacion" theme. Park uses that term to make clear that freeing the data, and getting it into the hands of users who can do useful things with it, is something to which we should pay much more attention.

That is the challenge that lies before us, and it is incumbent on all of us to meet it. Boundary work alone will not do it. We must reinvigorate our efforts to provide a clear rationale for the importance of what we do. That begins with the federal funders, but it continues on to the contract houses, who are their partners in this important enterprise.

What might some of the key components of this joint response look like? Prewitt (2012a) spoke at a conference at Stanford University earlier in 2012, delivering a speech in which he tackled some of this head on. In that speech, he discussed how we need a new science and methods base to help us understand the strengths and weaknesses, reliability and validity – or the fitness for use, as Bob Groves (Groves and Lyberg 2010) refers to it – of the new types of large but not necessarily representative data sets that our increasingly connected world creates. In effect, in the 20th century it was the partnership between government, the contract houses, and academia that created the science base which formed the core of our ability to talk about what high quality survey data is. Now we need similar investment and innovation for newer types of data, even as the possible types of partners broaden.

Defining the new methodological approaches is an important part of the overall challenge. But the larger question remains thus: What should a successful partnership between the contract houses and the federal agencies look like going forward, as we try to be more effective in the 21st century, and as the potential data sources to inform policy, and broader decision making, grow exponentially?

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