



Ep 7: Enabling impact through cultural research

Sunil Iyengar in conversation with Adrian Ellis

[00:00:00]
[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:06]

Adrian Ellis: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy, and sometimes congested intersections of cultural urban life.

The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

I am Adrian Ellis, the chair of GCDN. And today, I get to talk to Sunil Iyengar. Sunil is the Director of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment of the Arts in Washington, DC. He has been in that post for 15 years. And as you will hear, has a fantastic overview of the development of research relevant to our field, and some suggestions on where it may be and should be going. After my conversation with Sunil, I'll be joined by Criena Gehrke for our usual key takeaways segment. So, stay tuned.

[00:01:14]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:01:21]

Adrian Ellis: Sunil, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me. I've been really looking forward to the opportunity to talk to you and to get you on the podcast. So, thank you so much for coming.

[00:01:30]

Sunil Iyengar: Thank you for having me, Adrian. It's great to be here.

[00:01:32]

Adrian Ellis: You are the, the Research and Analysis Director, I believe that's your formal title at the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, DC. And you have been there for how long?

[00:01:45]

Sunil Iyengar: Well, it turns out that about a month ago I passed my 15 year mark at the agency. So quite a while. (laughs)

[00:01:52]

Adrian Ellis: And has, that has always been in research?



[00:01:55]

Sunil Iyengar: It wasn't in fact, in this very position for about 15 years, that was my entry level into the U.S. government, as it turns out. You know, people have asked me why I have you know, 15 years that's a long time or whatever. I think that uh, for me, it's been, it continues to be an intellectual adventure and that's probably what, uh, has made this really a place that I've enjoyed. You know, I've enjoyed haunting. It's been a steep learning curve and a tremendous opportunity to work with some of the finest minds in research around the arts, cultural research uh, and policy, and of course, to work with great practitioners and consultants such as yourself who know the stuff uh, through and through. And so I've had a lot of, there's been a lot of peer learning along the way I should have to say. And so, yeah, it's been about 15 years in the role of director.

[00:02:42]

Adrian Ellis: So you said a steep learning curve and that implies, I think, that your background is not in the cultural sector, is that right?

[00:02:51]

Sunil Iyengar: Yeah, but, you know, in a way I would say that the learning curve aspect to me applies even more so to knowledge about statistics, methodology uh, some of the technical aspects of research and evaluation. Um, my background prior to that, I had worked about 10 years as a journalist reporting and the managing editor of series publications in the biotech and uh, medical research and pharmaceutical industry. And so that role, you know, kind of, it was a very different kind of milieu, but, as it comes in terms of arts and cultural knowledge, you're absolutely right there as well. I had certainly never given really much thought before, to the cultural policy framework, if there is one in America and uh, what, what the funding and resources and infrastructure is for cultural policy in the U.S. or abroad.

[00:03:41]

Adrian Ellis: We're going to come to that one, but, I'm always interested in pivots in people's careers and so far, almost every interviewee has identified a pivot in their career in which they found a groove that they wouldn't necessarily have expected and blossomed in it. So it sounds as if, the, joining the NEA in this capacity was a pivot for you, is that right? And sort of, what were you thinking?

[00:04:05]

Sunil Iyengar: Yes, yes. Big time. It was quite a pivot for me. So I, you know, as I said, I'd been working in, in the field, you know, journalism, a very specialised kind of journalism for about 10 years. So we would do Capitol Hill reporting and Washington reporting, stock analyst meetings about, you know, innovations to medical devices that may affect the markets for those, you know, products.

A lot of very technical in their own way, very technical kinds of reporting. Uh, but we also had to do a lot of interviewing, you know, I basically coached teams of reporters. Uh, you know, a lot of editing um, and all those skills and writing of course. And, and I have to say that prior to all this, and even now I would consider maybe one of my core I guess assets or strengths I would like to think is in writing.

And that's really where a lot of my passion is. So coming into, you know, at the end of this 10 year period or so working as a journalist, realising that I would like to apply this sort of the same kind of analytical abilities and the writing that I've been doing to another kind of field.



[00:05:05]

Sunil Iyengar: And specifically, I was always passionate about the arts as I think most probably of the people you interview are – and I, you know, I felt strongly that, you know, there was a role in a cultural agency, like the NEA for the kind of research and strategic thinking about uh, research questions that could maybe be found in other sectors. So I had actually, this happened around 2007, 2006, maybe.

Um, I had gotten to know the then chairman of the NEA, Dana Gioia, who himself is a poet of high renown now and of course, you know, was leading the NEA at the time. And, you know, we had, we had met in kind of other circumstances, you know, through literature, you know, literary meetings and that sort of thing.

And I, you know, I kind of put it out there that I was looking to make a career transition and I have to really credit him wholeheartedly for alerting me that there was an opportunity within the NEA at that time for a research director. And I'll tell you when I learned about this – although it seemed very attractive in many ways, my immediate you know, the sort of the sceptical side of myself started kicking in, like, Okay, so what experience do I have in arts management and cultural policy?

You know, what, what about, you know, some of the statistical or sociological you know, research skills that are presumably needed for this position? And what Dana, and in fact, a lot of the NEA leadership at the time assured me, is that what they needed at that point in time especially, was somebody to help translate and interpret a lot of the research and then also ask the right questions and to guide a research agenda.

And so, I was very heartened by that. In fact, one of the first things I was able to do coming to the NEA was to work on a guide to funding, or rather, guide to arts funding throughout the U.S that explained all the various ways in which our country really, you know, is different from many other countries in how it, you know, this, this is the nature of arts philanthropy in our country.

And also the way that, you know, it's a fragmented kind of ecology in terms of people receiving funding for arts projects. So it really kind of was a great learning initiation experience to learn by writing this guide how other federal agencies and local agencies and state arts agencies contribute to the arts, total arts infrastructure in the U.S and of course, how individual donors and businesses also do.

And so that was my kind of learning experience on the job, to work with an amazing team of statisticians and economists to develop that guide. That's one of the first things I ended up doing for the NEA.

[00:07:42]

Adrian Ellis: So I think you're describing a role, which is a sort of arbitrage role in a sense, which is to look out at either existing or potential research and identify areas that are of potential use to practitioners in the field, whether they are individuals, whether those are organisations. Is that broadly the essence of it?

[00:08:03]

Sunil Iyengar: Well that, that's one way of looking at it. And, and the reason I'm altering your formulations slightly is because I think there's also a recognition and this was born on me very early in my job there that there's also a demand. Maybe – I don't know that this is unique to the U.S., it certainly seems to be swelling in other countries too.



[00:08:22]

Sunil Iyengar: This kind of demand for information that will substantiate or validate the arts to other communities of practice or to the broad other sectors and to the total economy and to policymakers. And so there's this element of, yes, we want to understand what kind of information will help arts practitioners do their work better.

But for many years, especially I think after about five years into the job, we shifted in our strategic planning for the NEA. We included language about the NEA supporting knowledge production, about the value and impact of the arts. That's a pretty tall remit, I mean, tall order, right. Because that implies a different line of research in some ways, from the kind of descriptive statistics and the kind of qualitative research that we might've done before to understand practice.

This was more about studies about causal inference, you know, how do the arts actually help add value to the economy or to health and human development? And we can talk a little bit about that, but the point is that was a big part of what I think has happened in the last several years.

[00:09:24]

Adrian Ellis: Let's, let's stay on that. It's come up early in the conversation. So, tell me about your views on the state of that area of research. Because there was a time, I don't know, probably 10, 15 years ago when uh, academics were quite dismissive of the quality of research that was used in the context of advocacy. Economic impact studies were sort of discredited because their choice of multipliers, because they failed to take into account displacement effects, et cetera. Social impact was, was in its infancy. And cultural impact was a sort of, you know, a locked box in a sense. And there were periodically coruscating articles by academics quite dismissive of, of the field of enterprise.

My impression, tell me whether this is right, is that uh, the field has come a long way, that there is a reasonably robust body of knowledge that you can sort of put your foot on and it doesn't collapse – with respect to both social and to some extent economic impact. And, and therefore the work that is generated and for which, people like yourself are responsible both for commissioning and shepherding and articulating, has got a sort of more backbone than it had when you set out on this endeavour 10, 15 years ago. Is that reasonable?

[00:10:42]

Sunil Iyengar: I think that's fair, and I would like to think that's the case. I also, and I think there's some proofs of that as well. Um, let me, before we get to the proofs briefly, I just wanted to also acknowledge that, you know, I just described the period of my life prior to this, when I was in the trenches in reporting about health policy and you would constantly see – you know, obviously the arts cannot be equated to a pill or, you know, a medical device or something, but you would see several studies and some of them involve behavioural interventions too, not just medicine uh, sorry, not just, you know, medications, but, you know, studies that were, you know, these randomised controlled trials uh, to try to shepherd, to use your word, an intervention along, you know, to get FDA approval, you know, sorry, FDA approval in the U.S. or to, you know, make its way to the markets. There was, there were those kinds of studies that were very crucial, you know, very important to, for people, to the community of practitioners and health, for example, to feel that they could use those interventions with competence.



[00:11:42]

Sunil Iyengar: And so some of that mindset may have, by osmosis, may have permeated me. And so when I arrived at the NEA, I was looking around and like, Okay, you know, we know all this great stuff about arts education, but where is like, where are there multicentre trials or studies where you can compare kids who have the benefit of a particular programme against kids who have similar characteristics, but who do not have that programme.

And can we follow that longitudinally? So I was kind of thinking from that angle almost from day one when I joined the NEA, but I had a real opportunity, I think, maybe as I said, about five years into the NEA, when um, you know, when we did elevate within our strategic plan, the role of that kind of research.

Because I then had um, sort of the green light to do such things as I started research grants programme at the agency. And we had never given grants for research, dedicated to research before, but then also to incentivise through our grant making uh, some of these experimental and quasi experimental studies that can get at causal inference and can maybe arrive at generalisations about the arts that then, or go beyond correlate, correlational studies.

I'm not saying, you know, therefore we ended up with that platonic study that I've mentioned, you know, this large scale study that once and for all defines the value of a particular aspect of arts education. But what we have ended up with, thankfully, are several small scale studies and even medium-sized studies around the country, many of them ongoing, but many of which we've funded over years that have, are trying to investigate the causal relationship between the arts and a particular outcome: social, economic or health-related.

And so when I talk about the proofs of what we've achieved, not only do we have these, this output numerically – we have these X number of studies out there doing this kind of stuff, but we also now have seen larger federal agencies step in. NIH, the National Institute of Health, which is the world's largest biomedical and behavioural research funder has started looking at music very seriously.

And I like to think we played a role in that. And a lot of our investigators, people we're funding to do these kinds of studies have ended up getting grants from NIH. Um, so we have a role, even though we don't have a lot of money compared to some of these larger agencies, we can provide seed money for proof of concept studies and for researchers then to move on and do larger scale studies.

Then you mentioned economics. In that realm, we have, we've sort of stayed away generally from economic impact studies. What we've done there instead is work straight with um, the, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), the Department of Commerce. And they have worked with us to create something called an Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account, which many countries also have.

And that, that instrument is being used to tell us on a yearly basis, what is the value added to GDP for various arts industries? How much arts do we export compared to import you know, how many arts workers are there? You know, a lot of great information that yes, has been used for advocacy and will probably continue to be used for advocacy, but at least I feel that we don't then need to be doing, you know, so many economic impact studies all over the place.



[00:14:49]

Sunil Iyengar: Um, and we can allow some of the state funders and local arts funders to uh, do their own targeted studies on their regions. And we can kind of capture this information at the national level.

[00:14:59]

Adrian Ellis: So you're, you're saying that um, uh, the field has, has moved in this area from correlations to being able to demonstrate causal reasoning – the underlying basis of all sorts of, all policy models and that in turn, those arguments have also had an impact in terms of uh, influencing resource allocation.

Sunil Iyengar: Yeah.

Adrian Ellis: In other words, they have, they have proved persuasive, but they are more than simply persuasive. They are robust and persuasive. I think you're coming to the end of a five-year research agenda? Where is impact as you look forward, and what's the next piece of terrain specifically with respect to impact that you're looking at, or considering?

[00:15:40]

Sunil Iyengar: Well, I think, you know, it can – the way I described it can certainly make it seem more kind of like a one size fits all model that somehow we've cracked some big puzzle by doing all these studies. What I'm trying to indicate though, is that in doing these studies, you know, there are obviously limitations, all kinds of limitations.

Like I just described that many of them are small scale. Uh, therefore many of them are not quite as diverse as we'd like, right. So we can't say that a particular study, even if it shows a very positive result, not a correlation, but a result of the arts you know, introduction to a particular context, whether it's community development or economic or health.

We can't say that that applies to all the people of a certain background, right? We can't, we can't necessarily extrapolate you know, it's not quite as one size fits all. Um, and the reason that's the case is because again, a lot of these studies are small scale, but also many times, you know, there's a, there's a thirst to kind of talk about impact without necessarily understanding the mechanism, without understanding why something happens. You know, we all love the numbers, right? So we'll say, hey, reading rates went up X percent and people who did this arts programme.

Okay, but what, what caused that to go up? You say it's the arts, but what element of the arts? Or was it a particular, you know, we talk about dosage, you know, how much of the arts? And, and was that dosage applied to all kinds of students, or were some students may be more susceptible to that intervention to begin with?

And so those are complicated questions, but there's the next level of inquiry needed to get to a true policy formulation, right? And to, to really proliferate these programmes in a way that it can benefit everyone. So especially now, with a great high intensive focus now on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, certainly at the administration level within the government, in the U.S. uh, there's an opportunity for us to embed those questions more into these impact studies.



[00:17:36]

Sunil Iyengar: So to make them not only about, do the arts help you know, palliate this illness, or, you know, cause this outcome, but for which populations, and how, and why. So, is it neurological? Is it uh, is the mechanism of action, something that has to do with an emotional state? Um, and there's, there's, there are measurement tools.

Some of them are kind of blunt, but there are measurement tools, whether it's psychology studies or, you know, economic, econometrics tools that can get us a little bit of that explanation of why, but a lot of it has to be qualitative research. So we have to do much more research I believe, that's going to involve communities, communities themselves in the research, as partners.

So, this is, there's a field within public health – it's grown quite a bit, and it's being used in other sectors of research called community-based participatory research um, where um, it's not just a, you know, a researcher or consultant swooping in and saying, Hey, we want to study your population. And you know, you're the arts organisation, you'd be our partner. It's more like, we need to work with the people who are, you know, being studied and who this work is presumably going to benefit.

We need to understand what – get their help in formulating the research questions, we need to get their help and perhaps ultimately in um, you know, in validating what we collect. And I have to say here, not to jump topics, but this is, I think particularly an acute need within uh, community planning and community development, as you've probably seen with districts, right. It's, you know, it's not just, you can come in and impose these metrics about, you know, cause a lot of that can lead to, you know, adverse events in terms of gentrification, but also getting buy-in from the local community as to the mechanism of action and getting them to understand what's happening and get their own words for it.

So I think we are now learning and hopefully being a little wiser and saying, Okay, we're going to continue impact studies, but we're also going to incentivise qualitative research. We're going to incentivise community-based participatory research, so we can understand more about the how and why. And then also understand how we can uh, achieve greater equity as well as impact.

[00:19:40]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:19:47]

Adrian Ellis: So this takes organisational stamina as well as a broader range of skills, because to set up those sorts of projects and then get longitudinal data with a time series long enough to tell you a story, takes a level of organisational commitment – is often quite difficult for small teams. Is the NEA able to, to address that?

[00:20:09]

Sunil Iyengar: I think we will over time. And I think that's a great question. You know, we, we have to always remember and not, you know, not to let hubris get the better of us. You know, like, even though we're in this privileged positions of being able to steer a research agenda for the country, on arts and culture, we try to be as responsive as possible and attentive to the needs of the people we are serving.



[00:20:33]

Sunil Iyengar: I know this sounds really almost like a platitude, but you know, the general public, we really do care what the public cares about and how do we, how do we use that input to model better studies? So, um, we're actually at the pivotal, to use that phrase again, the pivotal planning phase right now.

Our office is developing with, with other members of the agency, a new strategic plan for the NEA, and we will be posting it for public comment, I think, in about a month or so. We'll also be developing and have been developing a research, a new research agenda, as you mentioned. This is very much about planning and budgeting and figuring out what's the right proportion of funds to spend for these activities. So we're trying to work out these things right now, but what you mentioned about longitudinal sort of staying power, right now, the mechanism I can see for doing that is something we call NEA Research Labs.

Basically, NEA Research Labs is another programme that we were able to get off the ground a few years ago, that is in parallel with our regular grants programme for research, but instead involves collaborations between what we consider centres of excellence in the country who study arts and culture, or some aspect of arts and culture and work with arts organisations to commit to a multi-year research agenda of their own over time. So currently we have, I think, close to 20 research labs out there. And what they try to do is they often have a keystone study or two that they're conducting over years.

And so that funding mechanism gives us a way in to also now, I think, support not only impact studies, but also some of that qualitative, necessary qualitative research, community-based research. So I'm hopeful that the NEA Research Labs model will be a way for us to do multi-year funding on a shared research agenda for arts practitioners and researchers.

[00:22:21]

Adrian Ellis: I think we'll come back to some aspects of the substantive research agenda, but just to follow that story to the end as it were. What's your take on dissemination? What do you think of as your responsibilities for dissemination, and what are the goals of dissemination?

Are they advocacy goals? Are they policy goals? Are they about the strategies of individual organisations and how they might be informed by research? How do you think about that sort of knowledge transfer?

[00:22:51]

Sunil Iyengar: Well, I think in recent years, we've moved more into that second category of, you described, of trying to keep up with the research in the field and share it out with the field again, you know. Some of our most recent NEA research reports have been, I would say more practitioner oriented than in the past. So for example um, oh, just last month I believe, we released um, a report we'd done in partnership with the Ford Foundation and the Knight Foundation. It's called Tech as Art and it's um, basically about tech technology centred artists, you know, which is a whole different field of artistic practice than I think many of us are accustomed to.



[00:23:29]

Sunil Iyengar: And this report goes into what's that, what does that ecology look like? And what are the funding needs there, and actually ends up with some recommendations for the field and for other funders.

And that's very different from the casual reports we used to put out where here's a great study we did with uh, with a big survey or the census about how people perceive the arts. And we're going to stop short of telling you how to use the findings, right. So I think we are trying to move in a direction of uh, not presuming that we know, ever know as much as people in the trenches who are doing arts programming or who are artists themselves, but that we can somehow push them a little toward what the evidence is telling them.

About smart ways of doing their work and working, you know, how people can work together more effectively. So I know that sounds vague, but I think where that's leading us to is maybe more reports of the type I just mentioned, where there are some practice recommendations, policy recommendations. But, you know, we do try to lift up interesting findings. I mean, yes, I do a blog and also a little podcast, which is really a very short affair, but essentially try to on a monthly basis, lift up some of the research that we're aware of, that we think people may want to know about. And they maybe may want to know about it for advocacy purposes.

They may want to know about it, to learn something about how they, you know, how their arts organisation can work. And that is a little bit whimsical. I mean, it's not terribly systematic. It's, it's very much things that we come across that we think are interesting. Um, but I don't think you can escape that element of self-selection, you know, I mean, you can't, I don't think there's a really great scientific or taxonomical way of presenting this stuff because it is very haphazard at the stage in the evolution of arts research. I mean, I would argue there's no single journal you can go to or necessarily should there be and feel like, you know, you're on top of everything that's going on in the field, right. I mean, there's grey matter, there's reports that are not peer reviewed journals. There's, you know, reports, government reports, there's all kinds of analyses out there. And we try to just track it. If not, even if we can't be comprehensive, we try to stay on top of it.

[00:25:32]

Adrian Ellis: And is your sort of uh, synoptic capacity national or international? How, how important is research outside of the, the specifics of the United States?

[00:25:41]

Sunil Iyengar: I hope it can be more synoptical internationally. I mean, right now we are very U.S. focused, but I think we do bring in occasionally some UK studies or some Canadian studies. You know, I think it really depends and it's going to sound really parochial, but on our ability to read beyond English, I mean, we can, if it's in English, we can usually work it in, New Zealand, you know, Australia.

Some of those studies are very apropos to what we care about in the U.S.. Now I think what we miss, and it's a huge lacunae is um, you know, all the scraped works going on in Latin America or, you know, in Asia and Africa, we're quite not, not always up to speed on that. And some of that is because there are different ways of knowing, and that's another theme I would say that has emerged as we've been doing fact-finding for what, what does the new research agenda look like?



[00:26:30]

Sunil Iyengar: Is the theme being that you know, the arts themselves are celebrated by many people as a way of knowing, right? You know, you have organisations now that look at the arts themselves as a mode of research.

And that's not quite where we are as an agency. I think we're still talking about social science, behavioural research, maybe health research, economics research where the arts are the subject of the study, right. But there are people who view the arts themselves and storytelling and, you know, digital storytelling, for example, or other means of learning as coming from the arts and, and that, well, the reason I bring that up in this context where I'm talking about non-Western kind of methods is, thinking about, you know, maybe even if you don't find, you know, in a country in Africa, there may not be a RCT or study that's going to tell us something about the cause and effect relationship of an arts programme, but maybe there are other more important art questions in that area uh, that pertain to the arts.

And we need to be attentive to those, if we're going to understand what's going on globally. Um, and this has to do, a lot of it has to do as you know, Adrian, with the way people view what are called cultural bearers or people who may not view themselves as artists in that sense we have in English language, but may view themselves as, you know, a spiritual leader or a traditional leader of a tradition in arts and culture.

And so they understand – what we need to do in the U.S. I think is understand the sort of the Venn diagram. What does that kind of field of practice tell us that could be useful for those who maybe more intentionally view themselves as arts practitioners. And how does that influence our practice and engaging with more audiences, bringing more people to the arts and allowing more people to express themselves.

[00:28:06]

Adrian Ellis: So it feels to me as if we're at a sort of pivotal point in understanding what cultural policy and cultural agendas should embrace. And they are broadening rapidly and healthily, but it makes the policy task even more complex. Is that, fair?

[00:28:24]

Sunil Iyengar: Yeah, I think that's right. And, you know, I think, I think within the NEA, for example um, there's some really outstanding, you know, visions that have been put forward but as we think about that, I think we have to just be realistic about what can we actually accomplish in the U.S. at this point in time.

And as you say, you know, be sensitive and attuned to other perspectives, but we can't really please all masters. I think, you know, we have to think about you know, what, what is going to serve the American public the most effectively and more, most authentically, but at the same time, try to uh, you know, plan for doing so in a way that doesn't exclude other voices.

And so, you know, I'm learning, that's another part of the steep learning curve for me, right. And I've realised that you know, the best thing I feel we can do at this point in time is to support arts organisations and researchers and artists to, to ask these questions themselves and to really develop these insights in ways that are going to help their own work. And what that means is you know, we, we still anticipate producing reports about research at the high level, you know, the national level uh, based on say national data sets that only we have access to, or, federal studies, you know.



[00:29:35]

Sunil Iyengar: But I think it's important to con- you know, to really push on them our research grants side of the house, and really crowdsource great ideas rather than dictate here are the top five things that we are going to require you to do as part of a research grant, you know? And so we're trying to build some flexibility into our mechanisms as we do this, so that you know, it's again, a bit of a democratic process while there's still quality control in terms of what ideas get funded.

You know, that we hope that if people feel differently about a particular pedagogy, you know, way of approaching a question, they will come up with an innovative way of answering it.

[00:30:10]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:30:17]

Adrian Ellis: So you're coming to the end of a period of um, internal reflection, strategic planning, and you're about to put out for consultation that paper probably, or that document, probably about the same time that this podcast will hit the streets happily. So, I don't want to particularly press you on it. But I'd love to press you a bit on the thinking about the operational environment in which cultural sector finds itself and therefore as you look forward to the next five years, the sort of context you're thinking about. All of the things being equal, the next five or 10 years probably won't look like the last five or 10 years. That doesn't really help you in seeing what it does look like or will look like.

But it does sort of mean that you need uh, a sort of degree of agency that you didn't necessarily have before, or didn't necessarily need as much as before. So I'm just, I'm curious to know whether and how that is being taken into account, both in the general planning processes, and specifically as you look at your research priorities.

[00:31:19]

Sunil Iyengar: Yeah. Well, let me just give you an example of some of this. You know, we have the responsibility of allocating funds that were appropriated to us from the American Rescue Plan, in the U.S. ARP, and that law, you know, that that's, that gives us extra funds to, for the specifically, for the purpose of recovery from COVID right, for arts organisations.

And so, the way that's being laid out is something I think I haven't seen in my time here, which is very deliberate about how are they going to allocate these funds. What are the criteria for awarding these grants, that kind of stuff that was pretty normal, but then going beyond that and saying, okay, what are some metrics of success?

How do we know the programme has succeeded and then taking it a step further and saying, and what lessons can we learn from the administration of this new one-time programme that can then feed into our understanding of how our regular grants are awarded, NEA grants. So that kind of learning you know, I think what I'm trying to say here is, I think the NEA – and I see this all the time with the great colleagues we work with, the programme officers, you know, in the various discipline arts disciplines, there, there is much more uh, attention to continuous learning opportunities and to truly trying to continue, you know, reform or revitalise the way business is done.



[00:32:37]

Sunil Iyengar: And so I think that we're at a time when I think people are hungry for, it's, it's a cliché again, but uh, data-driven kinds of policies. And, and I think, you know, of course this is also the view I think of leadership without presuming to speak to that, speak for them. I think there's a lot of interest in using data and research and metrics to guide policy rather than as an afterthought.

So I think that culture is very promising right now and suggests that the NEA can stay on top of uh, challenges to the system that may not be um, anticipated. And, and still ride out some of the turmoil we still might be within, you know, economically and socially and et cetera.

So I think, I think there's a lot of attention to how to use data better, but I think what this comes down to me is, as a research director, is again, moving away from a model where we say here's a prescribed list of research questions, we have go at it and solve them as part of the research agenda. It's more like trusting the field more in our grant opportunities and allowing space for them to propose their own research questions that make the most sense for them at the time, but that conform to maybe three or four broad areas.

So for example, I think one of the things that's very much on my mind, the way you described it is, the quote 'changing arts ecology', you know, what is this? What are some implications not only of COVID, you know, the, the fallout from racial violence and uh, you know, some of the other issues that the country has faced. And within the arts specifically, what are some uh, research questions that are going to speak to the ways in which the arts are changing in this country, whether it has to do with sort of hybrid or digital, and in-person ways of participating the arts to the capacity of organisations to provide those experiences, to, you know, best practices in those areas.

I mean, moving along those lines and allowing people to propose research questions, and then give them the funds to answer those questions, I think is where I'd like to see us go. So a much more open-ended, I would anticipate, research agenda than we may have had in the past. When you go to our website right now and see our old research, current research agenda, which is why I nicked down.

I'm very proud of it. And it did arise from stakeholder consultations as well. But it is very um, almost to the, every single study is clearly laid out – here's what we're going to do, here's the methodology, here's the data source we're going to use. It's very um, It's not boxed in, but I think in this, going forward, doing something like that could box us in. So I feel, um, given the seismic changes that have occurred uh, we wanted to be much more nimble ourselves in getting more white space in our research agenda for others to populate.

[00:35:14]

Adrian Ellis: How interesting, but that in turn puts a greater burden on your shoulders in terms of aggregating, establishing the, robustness of methodologies and in turn, making sure that research is ultimately cumulative.

Sunil Iyengar: Yes.

Adrian Ellis: And that there is a body or bodies of knowledge that are accreting one to the other over time, which is how uh, how a paradigm is built.



[00:35:35]

Sunil Iyengar: So, so I think you're absolutely right. And I think what the, the sort of guard rail here is, I mentioned the NEA Research Labs Programme. And so having multi-year research agendas that are cohesive and that aligned with some of these broader questions can help us. But I think that's not the only kind of research we want to support.

I mean, I think we do want to support one-off studies that may not have a shelf life beyond, you know, a particular use, you know, for a few years or for a particular purpose. We want to, we want to support studies that ideally speak beyond a particular organisation or particular field of practice, but to a broader public, but not all studies do that.

Some studies are evaluations of a particular programme, and if they get the evaluation right, then it'll tell something not only about that programme, but something that could be maybe used to guide developing programmes of that type. Um, so the way I'm describing it, there's almost like a continuum of, of arts funding opportunities for research. So we can imagine that the high end, these so-called NEA Research Labs which we support, which are multi-year research agendas to study one or two research questions over time.

And that uh, you know, involve a group of stakeholders, collaborative projects um, that may involve the communities as well. Um, but then there're also oftentimes opportunities for one-off studies, which may be evaluations or uh, studies that may have to do with a particular research question that may not have a large resonance to others outside that community of practice. And that's okay.

I think we want to support both kinds of studies. And so what we envision is ultimately a research portfolio that kind of balances that out and how some studies that are in it for the long-term, and that will yield generalisable knowledge, but then also other studies that are maybe more um, opportunistic in the sense that they're trying to go after a particular research question to demonstrate the value and impact of something or to you know, understand how to improve a programme. But we want to make sure that we put out guidelines for these grants, that it's very clear that we, we have a few key priority areas and we're going to be spelling those out in our research agenda.

[00:37:42]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you. I have one last question. Which is probably a trick question. It's not really meant to be a trick question, but it's an obvious one, which is, does the United States have a cultural policy?

[00:37:55]

Sunil Iyengar: At this point in time um, it is a very fragmented cultural policy um, because of the various agencies that are considered cultural agencies, not all of which are in a position to exert the kind of influence the policy typically does. Um, you know, we have funders who can incentivise certain types of approaches toward the arts and arts administration for example.

Uh, we have state arts agencies, we have local arts agencies. We've talked about, a little bit about, you know, the, the enormous role of the individual donor in the, in the U.S. and private philanthropy. But because of that, I think the nature of that ecosystem, I would argue that it's, that there's no signal authority in the U.S. for cultural policy.



[00:38:38]

Sunil Iyengar: And maybe that's a good thing. Um, and that might be a little heretical, because I know you often hear about clamouring for the need for a point person in the U.S. but I think there's, there's a fragmented ecosystem when we talk about cultural policy and the best we can do at this point in time, I think is often make sure that the parts work together and that there's no unnecessary friction in the sense of not unpleasantness, but friction in the sense of efficiency that we, inefficiency that, that these organisations and stakeholders understand and can read off the same score sheet when it comes to understanding how to move to make progress in areas, for example, having to do with equity, inclusion, et cetera, but also in areas having to do with the innovation, innovations within a particular artistic discipline.

Um, and, and this is actually – I'm glad you asked this question, I know we're going along here, Adrian, but I think one of the things I left out and I feel is very, maybe apropos to this, is vocabulary. I feel like we need to understand more about terms and definitions even across these different segments.

And what I mean by that is, you know, even in the arts and health, there's been a lot uh, dissonance I think at times, among people who are in arts therapy or arts work, arts organisations working on some kind of health project and people in the health field. And I think, you know, just imagining where we could all at least agree to certain things in the arts as terms of terminology.

Like we agree that, okay, these are the kinds of art forms we're talking about when we talk about the arts, these are the types of you know, methods we're talking about for arts delivery or distribution. Now, I don't think we can get to that point and I'm not necessarily saying we, we try to strive for that.

But I think lacking that, I think it's incumbent on every, anybody doing research in this area to clearly define their terms. And I think that can also help practitioners understand the limitations and the strengths of particular findings about an arts programme that come through research.

[00:40:35]

Adrian Ellis: I think it would be a fascinating exercise and incredibly valuable to try and develop a sort of communities-source lexicography of terms that we use glibly as we describe our work –

Sunil Iyengar: Absolutely.

Adrian Ellis: Not knowing with any confidence that what we're thinking about when we use that term has any resemblance at all, to what the person listening to us is thinking about when we use that term. Um, Sunil that was fascinating and really helpful.

[00:41:04]

Sunil Iyengar: No, Adrian, this has been a pleasure. And I just wanted to note that I've very much valued being in touch with you throughout the years about research. It's always great to talk to someone who maybe gets around and sees the work of these organisations, the amazing work they do, and also kind of has their finger on the pulse of a lot of the changes that are going on, because I know that we compare notes from time to time. And I try to do that with a lot of folks in the field. I always enjoy it when we get a chance to do so.



[00:41:30]

Adrian Ellis: Well, I feel the same way. It's a, I think one of the wonderful things about working in this field is, is the sense of uh, a large community of people engaged in good faith on interesting questions, trying to figure them out together. And I have always put you right in that camp. So thank you. Thank you for this, and thank you more generally.

[00:41:50]

Sunil Iyengar: Thank you very much.

[00:41:51]

Adrian Ellis: Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Sunil's work. But first, just stick around for a conversation between myself and Criena, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:42:09]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:42:19]

Adrian Ellis: Hi Criena, how are you? How is the Gold Coast?

[00:42:23]

Criena Gehrke: The Gold Coast is magnificent as always. Thank you, Adrian.

[00:42:27]

Adrian Ellis: So, I thought that the interview with Sunil was really interesting and I was deeply impressed by how thoughtful and measured he is. How, if you've sat in that seat as he has, as director of research and analysis for the NEA for 15 years, you can really chart the evolution of research and the context of research.

Uh, there were a lot of judgment calls in there, not just about topics, but about how to approach them, what the needs of the field were, what they are, where those needs are going. And I thought that the sort of deliberate humble, but very uh, directive agenda, I thought was remarkable.

[00:43:09]

Criena Gehrke: I think he's an incredibly thoughtful, but visionary human actually. And what I enjoyed right from the get-go in the conversation was his background, you know, so the unlikely director of this particular team with that journalism background and the interest in science and medicine. And, it is almost like he embodies his passion for quality longitudinally research, you know, to be in that role for 15 years, you can see the journey. I would say that the NEA has taken in this space and the fact that it's that formula, yet again, which is to name it, set a vision for it, invest in it and then have really great strategic leadership behind it.

And I think he really embodied that. And I know for me with this, you know, key takeaway, I'm a bit like mic drop, he said it all, he was magnificent. Do that, do what that man told us to do.



[00:44:12]

Adrian Ellis: (laughs) Yeah, the new strategy, the new NEA strategy and the research strategy, I think is about to be announced. And that too will be very interesting. He seemed to be saying that the evolution of the next chapter is a broadening of the agenda in response to the times and the issues.

More qualitative research, more on the why as well as what the impact or the effect of particular dosages, if you like, of arts expenditure or government intervention or, uh, foundation intervention and why they have the impact that they have. Uh, community-based participative research, difficult, expensive, but really important in community-based projects in place-making, et cetera. Continued longitudinal data collection on basics, participation, employment size, sector size, and overall sort of receptivity to the need for greater pluralism of approach.

[00:45:09]

Criena Gehrke: I found that fascinating. And for me, it actually was like a light bulb went off because I know we've all been involved, many of us in research projects, or we crave that research in exactly the way you have, you had that conversation so that it can inform decisions, influence government policies.

But that question of why, really resonated with me because it takes the arts and cultural research and evaluation to the next stage, I think, which is to really be able to talk about not just what the role of arts and culture is and all that rich data and then this happened in this community, but why did it happen and the fact that he did talk about, was it, the psychology? Was it the education? Was it the physiology? And for a brief moment – and you know that I'm passionate about this, Adrian, it was like I was having a Renaissance moment, that collision of art, critical thinking, science.

And I think that we do need to look to those other research agendas and frameworks to support us.

[00:46:18]

Adrian Ellis: Absolutely. And I also think he's very realistic about the ends of research and the importance of research informing advocacy, but informing it in a robust way, the importance of research to inform strategies for audience development strategies for engagement and strategies for supporting artists.

[00:46:37]

Criena Gehrke: Absolutely. What he clearly articulated was that research needs to be meaningful and it needs to be meaningful to the sector, the community and the citizens, but also it needs to be legible – like his whole thing about his strength being good writing.

[00:46:52]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, I liked his plea for better defined terms. Especially when researchers in the cultural sector working with researchers from adjacent fields, like health, where dialogue requires precision.

Criena Gehrke: And a shared vocabulary.

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, a shared vocabulary.



[00:47:07]

Adrian Ellis: And so the research agenda is clearly a, you know, a practical one with a strong, practical bent, but he's also appropriately fastidious about methodology. And I think that the um, the initiative of the NEA Research Labs, which is to have a, a set of long-term relationships with centres of excellence in research, uh, as a sort of methodological conscience is also a uh, a great move.

[00:47:29]

Criena Gehrke: Well, it brings rigor to those organisations or that community-based approach which means that you're tailoring that research with expert guidance and collaboration to get great outcomes, I think. You know, how often I know in my career, have I floundered in this space? And I'm deeply committed to research, evaluation, evidence, knowing more about my community, but you need the expertise and the methodology to make it real and meaningful and stand up, when you're talking to those that can actually support the vision through funding or progressing the cause.

[00:48:13]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah. And he was honest about the gaps too, you know, like over-reliance or reliance on English speaking sources for research, the um, challenges in making generalisable results from small samples and a lot of the uh, the studies are relatively modest in scale. And um, and one thing that really struck me, which is we have in the sector, been pretty hard on ourselves about correlation versus causation.

And when you look at other sectors like the biotech field, um, that he's from, you see similar challenges: sample size, generalisability, et cetera. So we shouldn't beat ourselves up as, as hard as we sometimes do.

[00:48:52]

Criena Gehrke: Well, it's the constant prove it, which then I think relates to how about we have more of a quest for the why, rather than the proof, which tends to look like a data set that says, this many visitors or this many people engaged, you know, but what does that actually mean and why?

I was thoughtful also during that part of the conversation of, actually the last convening that we had in Singapore. Remember those days, Adrian?

Adrian Ellis: Oh yeah.

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, they were good old days, weren't they? B.C. And, and when we were even talking about evaluation and audience responses, and I remember, I think it was Claire, from the Arts Centre Melbourne actually stood up and said, how many of us in this room are asking our audiences how it makes them feel? And there was sort of that cone of resounding tumbleweed or something. And it's such a good question because for me, that links to the why as well. So yeah, it's just fascinating. It was such good conversation.

[00:50:02]

Adrian Ellis: So, Sunil, I think you have two fans here and many more I suspect, around the world for your agenda and for the care with which you have shepherded it through. I would have to say – and we didn't talk about this, some pretty wild political switchbacks from, um, Obama to Trump, to, um, Biden, and their respective, heads of the NEA.



[00:50:22]

Adrian Ellis: But, um, we look forward to the next chapter in the evolution of the strategy, as do I know all our listeners. So thank you for a really fascinating account and thank you Criena, for our usual key takeaways segment.

[00:50:35]

Criena Gehrke: Adrian, it's always such an absolute joy having these conversations across the ocean during this time. Keep well.

[00:50:42]

Adrian Ellis: And you, Criena. Talk to you soon. The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcasts and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform.

My name is Adrian Ellis. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

[00:51:10]

THEME MUSIC

