On Think Tanks

Public Engagement

Annual Review 2018

This has been a good year for On Think Tanks (OTT) and the think tank sector. In June, we celebrated our 8th birthday with a series of events and communication activities to acknowledge the people who have supported us throughout this journey. In November, we joined the Think Tank Initiative's Global Exchange as it bid farewell after almost a decade of work supporting think tanks across the developing world. It has been a great honour to be part of this global community.

This year also provided the opportunity to expand our network of associates and the projects that we are involved in. This, in turn, has helped to expand the OTT family, bringing us closer to think tanks, foundations, and policymakers interested in promoting evidence-informed policy in their societies. Our ongoing collaboration with **Southern Voice** is particularly important. And so are new opportunities to study the role of think tanks in supporting social movements with the **Open Society Foundations**, the consolidation of our **Working Paper Series** with **University of Bath** and **Universidad del Pacífico**, and our strong partnership with ***foraus***, our WinterSchool for Thinktankers co-host in Geneva. As always, **Soapbox** remains one of our strongest supporters and we hope to do their excellent design work justice in how we use and the branding and tools they have developed for us.

Significantly, in 2018 we led the organisation of the 3rd ***Semana de la Evidencia Latinoamericana*** (Latin American Evidence Week). This is a decentralised festival of events focused on promoting the generation, communication and use of evidence in policy. With support from the Think Tank Initiative, the British Embassy in Peru and more than 80 other organisations, the *Semana de la Evidencia* 2018 brought together over 3,000 people in 95 events involving 16 countries.

The *Semana de la Evidencia*'s success illustrates the great appetite there is for such spaces. We are encouraged by the emergence of similar initiatives in other regions. This appetite is further confirmed by the demand for the **WinterSchool for Thinktankers**, held in Geneva in partnership with *foraus*. Young think tank leaders and leading think tankers signed up to learn and share their experiences. The high interest in joining the **On Think Tanks Conference 2019** further confirms the hunger and need for open and safe spaces to learn with peers.

Other highlights from the year include the formal launch of the **Open Think Tank Directory** that is now constantly updated by individual think tanks. In 2018, we also launched the **OTT-TTI Fellowship Programme** in partnership with the Think Tank Initiative. This programme, like the WinterSchool for Thinktankers, represents our commitment to investing in future generations of think tankers. The one-year Fellowship offers 10 young think tank leaders the opportunity to explore new ideas, learn new skills and to put them into practice while they develop professionally and personally.

Finally, in 2018 we held a record number of free webinars, we participated in global, regional and national think tank meetings, and we published hundreds of new articles, resources, working papers and best practice documents.

The **Hewlett Foundation**'s support to OTT has been instrumental in everything we have been able to do. Its support extends beyond funding to encouragement, critical advice and guidance.

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The public is now thirsty for explanations of what is going on – and what happened. They are ready to act and play a greater role in shaping the future.

Enrique Mendizabal
Founder and Director, On Think Tanks

There are many histories of think tanks – but I like this origin story of the modern think tank. Sometime in the late 1800s, business leaders, policymakers, experts and the interested public came together in civic associations in US cities to solve pressing problems such as crime and waste collection. Money, policy, expertise and the people worked together.

In time, money moved into increasingly professional foundations, policymaking acquired formal processes and developed into highly specialised bodies, and expertise came together in universities, think tanks and consultancies. Only the public remained in the community.

Throughout the 20th century, think tanks have honed their policy influencing skills. They have developed new channels and means of communication. They have adapted their research teams and agendas to address policy questions – often in tune with the political cycle. Their communication function has developed exponentially. Many have adopted state of the art marketing and PR strategies with great success. Their main audiences have consistently been other think tanks, funders and policymakers.

The public has remained relatively underserved.

However, ever so often societies undergo sudden and unexpected upheavals. The First and Second World Wars. The Great Depression. The breakdown of democracy in Chile. The fall of the Berlin Wall. The 2008 financial crisis. Endemic corporate corruption in Latin America. The recent rise of populism in Europe and the US. Brexit. These present a new challenge for think tanks. Either their usual audiences are no longer interested in what they have to say or they are no longer relevant.

These are moments when institutions crumble. Their credibility is called into question. And so is the credibility of others associated with them. It wasn't just the politicians who could not prevent the 2008 financial crisis who suffered – economic policy experts took a beating too. Brexit brushed aside political institutions and think tanks alike. The rise of new populism in the US and Europe has

shaken the foundations of many established think tanks that have been questioned on everything from the source of their funding to their associations with political operators. Think tanks who have offered services to Odebrecht and other companies found to be corrupt in Latin America have been affected, by association.

Suddenly, attention has had to turn towards the general public. The public is now thirsty for explanations of what is going on – and what happened. They are ready to act and play a greater role in shaping the future. They are more attuned to nuances than the elites who are busy trying to save a sinking ship.

The public demands captivating narratives, guidance rather than instructions, nuanced yet simply communicated arguments and opportunities to engage as equals. In exchange, they will offer think tanks the support they need to regain the centre stage in evidence-informed policy debates, they will help communicate their ideas across society, and they will award them a new dose of credibility.

Our attention has to turn to the public too. It is more informed. It is more aware of the corrosive role of money in politics – and in think tanks. It is more interested in finding out who is informing and influencing their elected (and appointed) representatives. The public is actively participating in public debates and not simply consuming the opinion of a small intellectual elite.

However, think tanks are rarely equipped to engage with the general public. They prefer to use technical language, communicate using channels and tools designed to influence decision-makers and tend to enjoy (and crave) the company of the elites.

The public demands captivating narratives, guidance rather than instructions, nuanced yet simply communicated arguments and opportunities to engage as equals. In exchange, they will offer think tanks the support they need to regain the centre stage in evidence-informed policy debates, they will help communicate their ideas across society, and they will award them a new dose of credibility.

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REFLECTIONS ON A DECADE OF THE THINK TANK INITIATIVE

By Andrew Hurst
Think Tank Initiative Programme Lead, IDRC

At the Think Tank Initiative (TTI), we just received the draft of our final evaluation report for Phase 2. Final evaluations are always exciting, if a little nerve wracking, as the team's efforts are put under the microscope.[1] I am not going to go into detail on the evaluation findings now (the final report will be publicly available for all soon) but I will draw upon it and other reflections from over the past year, including those generated at the **TTI Exchange in Bangkok** in November, to make a few observations on TTI's past, what the future may hold for think tanks, and how this might relate to public engagement.

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THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS STABILITY

It seems obvious to say, but looking back over the decade since TTI was first conceived, there have been massive changes in the national and global contexts that TTI and its partner think tanks work in. On the donor side, the aid effectiveness agenda and the Global Partnership for Development days seem a long time ago. Within many national contexts, the space for civil society has shrunk and politics has become more polarised. Wars, civil strife and desperate economic prospects have led to significant increases in many types of migration. Of course, the last ten years was not all doom and gloom. Internationally, there was modest progress on climate change via the Paris Agreement and a new universal agenda via the SDG framework. Arguably there were also promising national political, social or economic developments in places as diverse as Ethiopia, Ghana, Peru and Bangladesh. However, overall, the contexts for the work that think tanks do and the issues they work on have become decidedly more complex. These changes created profound operational challenges for many think tanks, and demonstrated one value (among many) of the core support that TTI provided: a buffer against uncertainty.

Such turbulence is unlikely to cease. This will require think tanks to explore ever more creative approaches to maintaining independence and resilience. The organisational model of the past may not necessarily be the one that works in the future, especially where in some countries the space think tanks occupy is getting crowded with all manner of organisations working in public policy processes and systems. In this

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1. There will be no surprises because the TTI's second phase has used an accompaniment evaluation model. With an **inception report and two interim reports** along the way, and another **helpful evaluation at the end of Phase 1**, the Phase 2 evaluation process has been invaluable for us to learn in real time and make modifications to program implementation in response to interim insights.

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THINK TANKS CANNOT THRIVE WITHOUT AN ORGANISATIONAL VISION AND GOOD LEADERSHIP

When I look at the organisations I feel have made the best use of TTI support, and have done the most interesting things with it, I see that they have a strong mission and vision, and understand that they need to connect this vision with their business model and everything they do. All decisions – such as why to expand into a new research area, why to invest scarce resources and hire young PhDs, or why to expand communications and outreach capacity – were intentional. And these decisions fit within a deliberate and intentional process of organisational transformation. The intentionality of the effort, and the force to drive such a change process forward, benefited from strong leadership teams, both at the level of the board and senior management. Of course, certain national contexts made this kind of deliberate change process difficult for some organisations. But even in such circumstances, good leaders were able to articulate what value their organisations could offer, and were able to help their organisations survive.

Good leadership will continue to be important in the decade to come – perhaps even more so given increasing competition and disruption in the sector. No longer can it be assumed that being a good researcher means that you will be a good manager or leader. Those organisations that hope to do well will need to invest in transformational leadership, the kind that sees value in and possesses the ability to continually reflect on and ensure a match between the organisation's vision and the way it operates. To paraphrase Anthony Boateng – who has helped many think tanks in Africa work through such a process – **resilience organisations will have to stand for something in order to thrive**.

In part, this will require an ability to tell your organisational story convincingly. We know change is complicated and non-linear (see for example **reflections during Phase 1**) and that a single research project won't generate impact without all the organisation's prior efforts to position itself, demonstrate credibility, cultivate networks and frame narratives. Taking a 'leap of faith' is no longer a convincing way to ask for money. There must be a convincing story that places your organisation at the centre, explains what the challenges you are working on are, what your organisation hopes to do about them and why, and how flexible support can help you get there. You also need to be able to explain what your organisation was able to do successfully in the past, why and how, capturing honestly all the messiness and complexity in the process.

Such storytelling should be considered part and parcel of public engagement more generally. Funders, especially bilateral ones, are sensitive to public perception, and through their governments and political masters are highly sensitive to notions of public accountability. They are also

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often involved in various forms of public engagement themselves. If think tanks can tell their story effectively, funders will be able to as well, which will make it easier to justify the investment to their political masters, boards or senior decision-makers investing in your organisation. Good organisational storytelling can thus be a critical dimension of organisational resilience.

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COLLABORATION CAN YIELD BENEFITS

TTI was set up to support national organisations working to improve policymaking at the national level. Yet, over the last decade, we saw amazing efforts amongst many think tanks to collaborate on many levels – from single projects, via regional or global meetings, and even through networks in the case of **ILAIPP** and **Southern Voice**. The rationale for these collaborations varied, as did the intensity of effort. In some cases, it was seen as a great way to learn from peers. In others, it was a way to contribute to sustainability and amplify policy influence: what could not be accomplished alone might be accomplished as a group. Some of these efforts have been successful in what they set out to do; others may have been too ambitious. All demonstrated that collaboration can generate value for the organisations involved.

This experience suggests that collaboration will continue to be a feature of future think tank work. The challenge of finding ways to cover the costs associated with collaboration will remain. Collaborations should likely be approached with caution, and any decision to collaborate undertaken with clear objectives identified and a solid analysis of whether the circumstances warrant it. A particularly interesting space to watch will be potential collaborations between think tanks and other kinds of civil society organisations. As **citizens demand more and better ways** of having their voices heard in policy processes, I wager that, in the decade to come, these kinds of public engagement will increasingly reflect notions of research excellence (in IDRC, this thinking has coalesced around our **Research Quality Plus** framework) and serve as important loci for driving development processes.

These are just a few of the many reflections I have coming out of TTI. Be sure to check our website regularly as we continue to roll out pieces over the coming months reflecting on insights and lessons from the past decade. It has been quite the journey for sure. But just because TTI is ending, does not mean the journey does too. There is still much work to do, and the world needs, now more than ever, the kinds of things good think tanks can provide if we are to achieve all that we collectively aspire to.

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Andrew Hurst
Author, *Reflections on a decade of the Think Tank Initiative*

POLICY KITCHEN: EMPOWERING THE PUBLIC AS EXPERTS AND AUTHORS IN RESEARCH

By Lukas Hupfer
Director, *foraus*

Public engagement commonly focuses on consultation and awareness activities. By explaining and discussing findings, researchers seek to enhance the application, benefits and relevance of their work. However, increased visibility and significance do not necessarily lead to better research quality and greater impact. In order to achieve full transparency, accountability, responsiveness and innovation, the public needs to be involved at all stages of research.

At first sight, a broad paradigm of public engagement might seem inadequate and difficult to implement: engaging 'non-specialists' in the design of my research questions? Collecting evidence and formulating

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policy recommendations together with members of the public? Risking time, quality and reliability of my work due to others with no active knowledge on my topic? As a consequence of these perceived risks, many researchers default to a concept of public engagement as dissemination. But collective approaches are often underestimated: they will not only provide you with fresh and needs-based insights, but also with more comprehensive and innovative results. The main question is thus not why, but *how* to engage the public in research design and conduct.

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GOING BEYOND DISSEMINATION

There are various ways in which the public can be involved in the framing, conducting and dissemination of research. **_foraus_** – the Swiss think tank on foreign policy – has been experimenting and working for almost ten years with different models of comprehensive public engagement. Based on our vision, experience and resources, we have developed a crowdsourcing methodology and tool called **Policy Kitchen**. Policy Kitchen enables a diverse network of global thinkers to generate high-quality recommendations on foreign policy issues for decision-makers and the public. The methodology is built on an online platform, a series of workshops in different geographic locations, and a support process bringing the best ideas to policy impact.

How does this work?

Policy Kitchen generates 'policy recipes' in six steps:

1. **Framing (preparation):** Our engaged voluntary network of graduates and young professionals identifies pressing foreign policy issues. Together with representatives of various sectors (science, government, international organisations, non-profit organisations and businesses), the issues are turned into concrete research questions, so-called challenges.

2. **Brainstorming (chopping):** Possible solutions to these challenges are then collected through in-person workshops and online engagement, by a mixed crowd of researchers, experts from our Open Think Tank Network and interested members of the wider public.

3. **Refinement (mixing):** Over several weeks, new inputs are incorporated and author teams are consolidated.

4. **Selection (frying):** In the next phase, the most qualified and promising ideas are selected. The online-participants make a pre-selection, followed by a high-level jury comprising scientists, national politicians and practitioners.

5. **Development (simmering):** The authors of the winning ideas are coached and supported over several months by our research community to develop their ideas into research papers with policy recommendations, so-called 'policy recipes.'

6. **Impact (serving):** Once reviewed by two external and two internal academics, the policy recipes are served together with the authors to decision-makers and the public.

Policy Kitchen's goal is to engage the public throughout the whole research cycle. In doing so, the role of the public is not limited to commenting on research findings. On the contrary, members of the public are empowered as experts and authors in their own right. Any person, irrespective of background or location, can contribute with ideas, data, questions and knowledge. In return, *foraus*' research projects gain innovation, trust, relevance, legitimacy and dissemination all at once.

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INCREASING STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Policy Kitchen was successfully launched in September 2018. The first results are encouraging: our methodology has caught the attention of academia and foreign policy professionals. A mixed crowd of experts and the broader public are participating in finding solutions for different challenges relating to biodiversity, artificial intelligence and China. Last but not least, our set of tailor-made instruments with monitoring mechanisms, trainings, panels of experts and rigorous reviews has ensured high quality engagement at all time.

In times of unprecedented global challenges, collaborating across borders and disciplines has become a necessity. And cooperative and inclusive approaches are key for problem-solving. Going beyond dissemination in public engagement is inevitable, and thanks to open source software such as Policy Kitchen, it is now possible in a scientific and trustworthy manner.

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Lukas Hupfer
Author, *The Policy Kitchen: empowering the*
public as experts and authors in research

IN CONVERSATION WITH 'THE INTERESTED PUBLIC AT LARGE'

By John Schwartz
Founder, Soapbox

Joe Miller
Washington DC Director, Soapbox

At Soapbox, we receive a lot of invitations to tender for think tank campaigns and websites. The following is a direct quote, but they nearly always say something similar:

OUR PRIMARY TARGET AUDIENCES ARE:

1. Policymakers
2. Academics
3. Civil society organisations
4. The interested public at large

The first three audiences need some unpacking. Do you mean local, national or multilateral policymakers? Do you mean university academics or other think tank researchers? Can we talk to, or survey, some of your target audiences?

By asking the right questions we can start to understand these users better, maybe create personas for them and map the places and contexts in which they come into contact with think tank communications. We can design great content targeted at the right channels to reach them.

If we were just interested in the top three target audiences in the list, well, that would bring a lot of clarity to our work.

But that fourth category – the interested public at large – now that's different matter…

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WHY TALK TO THE PUBLIC?

Not every think tank necessarily needs to talk to the wider public. If you can pick up the phone and get a meeting with a minister or a committee chair, you might be able to accomplish your goals without a broader outreach campaign. After all, those outreach campaigns are often a means to an end – a way of mobilising or shifting public opinion to increase pressure on policymakers. If you can't get a meeting with a minister, a public campaign may be your best chance to make that happen.

But public engagement isn't solely of instrumental value. For us, public engagement is also about intrinsic values. This position is well set out by Robin Niblett, Director of Chatham House, in his recent speech on the **future of think tanks**. In short, the route to social progress runs through the participation of an informed population. Peace, prosperity, democracy and sustainability require civic debate around ideas and evidence.

The route to social progress runs through the participation of an informed population. Peace, prosperity, democracy and sustainability require a civic debate around ideas and evidence.

Think tanks have a strong role to play in providing the intellectual foundation for those ideas, originating and analysing the evidence and kickstarting the debates. Equally important is that these debates are **framed** using values and metaphors that resonate with the public and promote progress. Think tanks have an underestimated role to play here as well.

At Soapbox, we believe that communicating and engaging with 'the interested public at large' is an intrinsic part of our mission – and our clients agree. They are sincere in their desire to talk to the public and, crucially, they have often made that strategic decision to prioritise public engagement.

But many think tanks are behind the times and most lack the resources to do it well.

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HOW TO TALK TO THE PUBLIC

The idea that think tanks should communicate widely is not a new one. When we worked at the UK's Institute for Public Policy Research in the early 2000s, we talked to the public through newspapers, television and radio. Thanks to media managers like **Richard Darlington**, we were pretty good at it.

We informed the public by going where they were already accustomed to getting their daily fix of information. And traditional media provided a convenient shorthand for segmenting the wider population into more useful chunks. Want to reach Daily Mail readers? Well the answer is obvious…

But, as we all know, mass media has declined in importance as a source of news and information – so we'll need to go to where the 'the interested public at large' are now. And that means social media and Google.

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HOW DO WE DO THAT?

First, we need to create content that's tailored to digital channels. Think tanks have made a lot of progress on this in recent years. Informative, well-designed and well-produced think tank content that is easy to find and share is becoming more and more prevalent. But there's much more to be done – especially on making content **more modular and**

efficient; on discipline around framing individual issues; on the personalisation or localisation of content; and on how we strategically plan and coordinate campaigns over long periods of time.

Second, we need to get more comfortable using digital channels to their fullest capacity. That includes using paid online advertising and the wealth of data available to digital platforms to break 'the interested public at large' down into more useful segments based on interests, location and other demographics. Progressives may balk at paid advertising. But the truth is that think tanks have always paid for content distribution – be that in printing and postal charges or in the wages of staff to write press releases and cultivate relationships with journalists. The shift to digital advertising requires serious internal conversations about budgeting and about the transparency and ethics of targeting particular groups with policy-based content.

Our third point is that the current debate around online privacy provides a window of opportunity for think tanks to engage positively with tech giants like Facebook and Google on creating a framework for presenting and prioritising evidence-based content and public policy ideas online. That's an opportunity in which we are **pretty well positioned** to help.

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NOW WHAT?

Once we have the attention of the public what do we want to do with it?

Businesses, charities, and political campaigns spend small fortunes understanding user journeys and tweaking their digital offers accordingly. They want to funnel users towards an action (buy something, sign a petition, donate, vote) and from there, to become an advocate for that brand, cause or candidate.

It's a tricky model for think tanks to emulate. We want to encourage advocates for our policies, but there is no single action, no final click, no point of purchase that we are looking for.

News organisations and content publishers provide another model. They create compelling content which drives repeat visits and encourages users to read more each time. They turn these added page views into advertising revenue and **brand loyalty**.

But again, the model doesn't quite fit. We want to build our brands, but we don't want think tanks to be slaves to the news agenda or our researchers to churn out content for its own sake.

> *To understand why and how think tank communications should engage with the public, we'll need to get to grips with a more fundamental purpose of our work – what Ruth Levine has characterised as the moral dimension in evidence-based policymaking.*

Think tanks create public content for the public good. Certainly we want to shift mass opinion as a way to influence policymakers, but I believe that to understand why and how think tank communications should engage with the public, we'll need to get to grips with a more fundamental purpose of our work – what Ruth Levine has characterised as the moral dimension in evidence-based policymaking.

What do we want from public engagement in think tank communications? Here are four ideas:

1. **To frame the public debate:** helping the public to understand issues in ways that will reinforce values and metaphors to promote social progress. This means discipline around messages and simple impactful communications products. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's **work on poverty** shows this approach in action.

2. **To inform the public:** because, once we have framed the debate, empirical knowledge will be an essential element in making progress towards a just society. This means content that seeks to inform, not obfuscate, and it means transparency around data and methodologies for those who want to dig deeper. The Institute for Fiscal Studies' **work on tax and spending** over many years is a good example.

3. **To encourage public participation in policymaking:** because this will create more enduring, more widely supported and more innovative solutions. This means widening the ways that the public can participate in research, increasing the reach of our content and increasing capacity to moderate and engage with this participation. The **Chatham House Commission on Democracy and Technology** will be an example of this kind of deliberative research.

4. **To measure success in public engagement:** investing capacity and studying public attitudes and levels of knowledge around issues. These kinds of impacts are hard to measure, so we need to commit to both qualitative and quantitative surveys over long periods of time as well as ambitious goals for public engagement with our own digital content. Support for longitudinal surveys like NatCen's **British Social Attitudes** survey will help here as will purpose-built tools like the **On Think Tanks monitoring and evaluation dashboard**.

Think tanks need to make the explicit choice to engage with the public and to stand up for basic values. It is a choice that will have a profound effect on communications priorities.

These four dimensions provide the framework we use at **Soapbox** to help leading think tanks deepen their public engagement. We would love you to join us on the journey.

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John Schwartz & Joe Miller
Authors, *In conversation with 'the interested public at large'*

FOR THINK TANKS, VIDEO HAS BECOME A KEY TOOL TO ACHIEVE OUR CENTRAL PURPOSE

By Michael Kleiman

Founder & Executive Director, MediaTank Productions

When you want to learn something new, where do you turn? According to **recent research put out by Google**, for millennials the answer is increasingly video. In fact, millennials are 2.7 times more likely to watch a video on YouTube when seeking to learn new information or skills than a book or any other resource. And it's not just bored college kids thumbing through their phones during class; **86%** of millennial fathers say they turn to YouTube for child rearing advice. In the commercial space, brands are quickly learning this lesson and investing heavily in video marketing. As Facebook's Irene Chen advised a group of marketers last year, '**Video is not a nice-to-have, it is a must have**.'

However, for some reason, think tanks often prefer to lag behind proven audience engagement trends in the commercial space. What begins with for-profit companies spills down to non-profits and advocacy organisations, eventually drifting down into the think tank and government toolkit.

But think tanks looking to engage the public in important policy research would do well to take a lesson from their business sector counterparts. According to a **survey** of 1,051 US adults done by Animoto (a leading online marketing

> *As online video becomes an increasingly dominant component of our media diets, we're becoming more sophisticated consumers. Today, the most successful online videos are those that follow narratives about individuals.*

firm), two thirds of millennials prefer to consume information via video than text. And **research** from Pew suggests that **20%** of YouTube users see the site as 'very important for helping them understand events that are happening in the world.' In other words, video is a place where a rapidly growing segment of the population is turning for the type of information that think tanks provide.

So what does that mean? Do serious researchers need to adapt their scholarly findings into videos of cats on treadmills to engage a YouTube audience? Fortunately, the answer is no (though you're welcome to do so if it scratches a particular itch). As online video becomes an increasingly dominant component of our media diets, we're becoming more sophisticated consumers. Today, the most successful online videos are those that follow narratives about individuals.

This is great news for think tankers. As I've long argued, by telling character-based stories, think tanks can help their audience more concretely understand how policy problems (and solutions) directly impact human lives. Doing so makes real pressing policy research that, to the general public, can often feel abstract or distant. And, in a stubbornly polarised world in which citing facts and statistics can often drive people to dig deeper into an entrenched position, research shows that stories have the ability to **actually change our beliefs.** Stories also make it easier for us to **remember complex information and ideas, and influence our future beliefs on related issues**.

In other words, a well-told story can effectively accomplish three key goals that thinktankers seek to deliver through their research:

- helping people understand and recall complex information and ideas;
- shifting beliefs with new information;
- influencing future views.

None of this is to say that the written report is dead. Among specific, policymaker audiences, written reports are often a more efficient way of providing important information – especially information that is heavy on statistics and technical details.

But even policymakers are drawn to online videos that shed light on relevant issues. A survey I did among US policymakers and staffers showed that 80% watched at least one online video about a policy issue every single day.

And as think tanks wisely look beyond the limited policymaker audience and seek to influence the public at large, it's time for us to take a page from our counterparts in the private sector's book. Video, they've proven, is no longer a luxurious gimmick for us to throw spare resources at as the fiscal year winds down. It is a key tool in achieving the goals of providing new information, influencing public debate, and shifting beliefs that are central to our core purpose.

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Michael Kleiman
Author, *For think tanks, video has become a key tool to achieve our central purpose*

INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT'S APPROACH TO POLICY ENGAGEMENT

By Lauren Phillips

Senior Advisor to the Associate Vice President (Programme Management), International Fund for Agricultural Development

Policies affect every dimension of the economic environment in which people pursue their livelihoods. And enabling policies are essential for providing the conditions for inclusive and sustainable development. Because the policy framework can have such a dramatic impact on the opportunities open to people and on their livelihoods, many organisations working in development explicitly seek to engage in, and advocate for, country-level policies that are expected to reduce poverty and inequality and improve sector outcomes. Such approaches tend to focus on the national government, discussing and strategising with an array of policymakers and development actors about the evidence in favour of particular policy approaches or tools. In some cases, this approach of evidence-based policy advocacy is coupled with a strong emphasis on engaging with the poor, and the organisations that represent them.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) promotes country-level policy engagement in order to support the goal of inclusive and sustainable rural transformation and the reduction of rural poverty. It pursues three outcomes when engaging in country-level policies. The first is to stimulate the production and use of evidence for policy processes, drawing heavily on its large portfolio of sovereign loans and grants as a key source for evidence on what works in diverse contexts. The production of evidence to inform policy processes is an important dimension of IFAD's comparative advantage in policy engagement, with much of that evidence drawn from on-the-ground experience gained through project implementation.

The second is to enhance the policy capacity of governments. For example, by working with government actors and institutions either at the local- or national-level on strengthening capacity to monitor and evaluate policies and projects, or to undertake policy planning and implementation in the rural and agricultural sector. IFAD focuses a great deal of attention on strengthening the capacity of local governments or local implementation agencies, in order to ensure that projects are sustainable and have maximum impact on the ground.

Third, and most centrally, IFAD works to enhance the participation of smallholder farmers, the rural poor and the organisations they belong to in policy processes. This focus on bottom-up policy

> *In order to enhance the participation of the rural poor and their organisations in policy processes, IFAD creates space for policy dialogue and/or enhances stakeholders' capacity to participate in policy processes.*

participation represents one of IFAD's most frequently used tools for policy engagement, and is strongly linked to public engagement. In order to enhance the participation of the rural poor and their organisations in policy processes, IFAD creates space for policy dialogue and/or enhances stakeholders' capacity to participate in policy processes.

In the first instance, IFAD uses its investment projects to create space or a platform for policy dialogue between national stakeholders – particularly rural producer organisations and other organisations representing smallholder farmers and the government. In the second case, an investment or grant-financed project can be used to enhance the capacity of rural people's organisations, providing them with the skills and analysis they need to ensure that their leaders are able to participate effectively in national policy processes.

In Benin, for example, IFAD worked with the Federated Union of Producers of Benin (FUPRO), the National Platform of Farmers Organizations and Agricultural Producers (PNOPPA) and the National Agricultural Chamber of Benin (CAN) to organise and document public interviews with all candidates for the March 2016 presidential elections about their ideas for developing the agricultural sector. The activity aimed to improve the policy environment for the agroforestry and pastoral sectors in Benin, for family farmers and their organisations, and to position agroforestry and pastoral development at the centre of the presidential debate, given agriculture's large contribution to GDP and national employment in Benin.

A participatory approach was used in the methodology design, involving farmer representatives from across the country, promoting strong ownership of the process. Additionally, the farmers' groups worked to demonstrate political neutrality by imposing a strict agenda for the interviews (offering all candidates the same time to present their programme and answer questions), clearly defining rules of conduct and banning the use of campaign material by candidates at the site where the interviews were held. The events were covered by television and radio journalists.

Such approaches allow IFAD to engage in all parts of the policy cycle: supporting the rural poor in the formulation, approval and implementation of rural development and agricultural policies. Participation in monitoring policy implementation through the provision of feedback from the ground about what works and what does not, is an essential part of ensuring policies continue to improve their impact.

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This article is derived from two previous publications:

- **IFAD's approach to policy engagement**, April 2017

- And **IFAD Policy Case Studies – Benin: Farmers' organizations interview presidential candidates on agricultural development**, November 2016

INFLUENCING BREXIT?

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By Jill Rutter
Programme Director, Institute for Government

I had invited Institute for Government colleagues round for a barbecue on the evening of 23 June 2016. We had planned to have fun on the roof terrace, watch the UK membership to the European Union referendum ('Brexit') results come in and take the next day off to recover while the Government returned to business as usual.

Instead, we watched all night, riveted, as the leave votes piled up (and the pound sterling dropped through the floor). Dawn broke and we were still watching. At 8 am the Prime Minister resigned. A colleague received a message to say that everybody was needed at work to plan the Institute for Government's response to Brexit.

The Institute for Government is a non-partisan London-based think tank, established in 2008. Our mission is to make the UK Government more effective. We look at the 'how' not the 'what' of government policymaking – covering areas such as accountability, the way government uses digital, information management, and the quality of policymaking. One thing we had steered clear of over our first eight years was Europe – our focus had been on the government departments in Whitehall and polarised debates about the UK's membership to the European Union (EU) seemed like tricky territory. But in the run-up to the referendum we had established a small team and started developing our capacity on Europe. That formed the nucleus of our post-referendum efforts.

We were clear from the start that we would never say that Brexit was the right or wrong choice – our focus would be that the Government's Brexit policy had to be delivered well. Our lack of a track record on Europe before the referendum proved to be a big bonus, particularly with broadcasters wedded to 'balance.'

In the early post-referendum months we focused on applying what we knew: how the Government needed to organise for the most daunting challenge the country had faced since the Second World War. We published our first report, **_Brexit: Organising Whitehall_** to deliver, within a month of the referendum and days before Theresa May became Prime Minister. Her first act as Prime Minister was to ignore our key recommendation: she set up the dedicated Brexit department that we had counselled against. A year later she had to make changes that validated our initial warnings.

Our team's main focus early on was getting up to speed on the technicalities: how would the exit process work? How did the EU trade with third countries? What would be the process for approving a deal? We then got more specific: what are the common

fisheries and common agricultural policies? Why did the EU think the UK owed a divorce bill? We developed a series of '**Brexplainers**', neutral explanations of the issues at stake (often with great graphics) to share the knowledge we gained. ***The EU divorce bill*** explainer and our ***Trade after Brexit*** report have been our most read publications. We offered briefings to major news organisations, helping to establish ourselves as helpful, informed commentators.

We have divided our focus between the three big processes: negotiating, legislating and implementing Brexit (which the UK Government has had to undertake simultaneously rather than sequentially) as well as considering what the options were for life 'after Brexit.'

The Government has, for most of the period since the referendum, been incredibly unforthcoming about its plans for and assessment of the likely impact of Brexit. As a result, we have found that our team has been increasingly in demand to speak to a wide range of audiences, as people try to figure out what is going on and how it is going to affect them. In the past few months, we have spoken at: a conference organised by Prospect, the civil service union for frontline staff; at regional Brexit roadshows of the Engineering Employers Federation and other trade associations; and even at the Bradford Literary Festival!

> *The Government has, for most of the period since the referendum, been incredibly unforthcoming about its plans for and assessment of the likely impact of Brexit. As a result, we have found that our team has been increasingly in demand to speak to a wide range of audiences, as people try to figure out what is going on and how it is going to affect them.*

We know that we have regular readers in EU capitals and in Brussels – and sometimes have to make clear that we are not being used by the UK Government to test the waters for their own proposals. We put on events in our building, bringing different voices in to close contact with Whitehall decision-makers. And we give evidence to parliamentary select committees, who regularly cite our reports.

That makes for a lot of activity. But does it make for a lot of influence? We do not pretend that we will shape the final decisions on Brexit – those will be hammered out in the Prime Minister's office, Brussels and in the UK Parliament. But we do think that we have helped improve the scrutiny of Government decisions – and made the debate in the UK better informed on the process and practical implications of Brexit. We make sure that what we say is always based on the best evidence we can find. In a debate dominated by shrill opinions and assertions, we need to be vigilant that we do not deviate from that principle.

INVESTING IN A ROBUST PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS PLAN FOR INDIA'S PUBLIC AFFAIRS INDEX 2018

Varsha Pillai
Programme Manager, Policy Engagement and Communication
Public Affairs Centre

Dr Annapoorna Ravichander
Head, Policy Engagement and Communication
Public Affairs Centre

The **Public Affairs Index 2018** uses data to rank Indian states on governance. 2018 was the Index's third year; it was bigger, more comprehensive and more rigorous, including 10 broad policy themes, 30 subjects and 100 indicators.

The Index is an important data-driven social accountability tool to assess the quality and adequacy of public services. We, the Public Affairs Centre's Policy Engagement and Communication (PEC) team, could see the Index's potential and carefully planned a robust communication and dissemination strategy for it – what's more, we were involved in the design and production of the product from the outset.

We have seen that a planned and focused intervention can lead to effective policy engagement outcomes. As the Index has evolved each year, it has occupied a position of eminence among national level studies of comparative governance in Indian states. It has attracted the attention of political leaders, policymakers, developmental economists and concerned citizens. We also tripled media interest from 2017.

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We had had two main communications goals: visibility and creating space for effective policy advocacy. Here's what we did:

- **Audience mapping**. Early on, the team came together to identify who would be interested in the index, and why and how they would access the information.

- **Feasible communications plan**. We set clear objectives and devised a plan, well in advance, to produce timely and targeted outputs and dissemination, including a launch event and media release in English and regional languages.

- **Clear timelines and responsibilities**. We developed a timeline for all the key activities and made sure people knew who had ownership of each task. For example, the relevant researcher was tasked with the technical review, while the PEC team did the editorial review.

- **Researcher – communications collaboration**. Internal communication between the researchers and the policy engagement and communications team was open and transparent.

- **Launch event**. At the launch, we identified well-known and knowledgeable speakers to attract our target audiences, including government, private-sector, academics, NGOs and donors.

- **Press release, policy briefs, op-eds, blogs, podcasts and presentations**. Post launch we produced a package of outputs to leverage the product with different stakeholders.

Taking time to meet with stakeholders has proved to be important. It has ensured that today PAC works with diverse stakeholders to foster data-driven decision making across government units, through similar frameworks. We are currently developing a national human rights index for the National Human Rights Commission and have developed a district-level good governance index for the state Government of Himachal Pradesh. We are also partnering with the state Government of Kerala to develop a district industry-friendliness index.

We are proud to have created the Public Affairs index as part of the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) supported by the IDRC, which has now become the standard to assess the quality of public governance in India.

IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCES AND SIMULATIONS ARE HELPING THINK TANKS ADAPT TO THE CHANGING POLICY LANDSCAPE

By Keith Burnet

Director of Communications and Publishing, Chatham House

For many decades, think tanks have been able to carve out a neat place for themselves within the policymaking process, without having to seriously consider changing the way they undertake research or the way they fundamentally work.

That has now irrevocably changed. Policymakers and politicians are less and less likely to consider ideas unless those ideas can carry resonance with the wider audiences that they increasingly feel beholden to. They have even less time than they used to for thinking beyond the current election cycle. And they have less time to fully understand practical solutions, especially if those solutions don't carry an emotional argument.

> *Policymakers and politicians are less and less likely to consider ideas unless those ideas can carry resonance with the wider audiences that they increasingly feel beholden to.*

All of which means that think tanks no longer need to just rethink how they are communicating their ideas, but also how the research itself is conducted and how it can create more resonance with their audiences.

Increasingly Chatham House is using simulations and immersive scenario planning exercises to help us improve our research processes, stimulate dialogue and generate new ideas. Analysing, understanding and discussing problems is still vital but, alone, is not enough. Study groups, workshops and other meeting formats are now complemented by this 'next step' in events that engages people in different types of dialogue and where they are obliged to explore and tackle the process of making decisions in the face of rapidly changing and unexpected situations.

Our cyber simulations, for example, are designed to allow participants from the financial sector to be prepared and practiced in their responses to a major incident or crisis caused by a cyberattack. These simulations involve a series of crises and situations that evolve over the course of an afternoon or day, during which we stress-test responses and explore which courses of action are most valuable and which mitigating factors have the most impact.

Our researchers work with practitioners from the sector as well as policymakers, journalists and others to generate better ideas on cyber-related issues and thereby help

us produce better analysis on the subject. Individuals often participate in role-playing or attend 'as themselves' representing their own organisations or fictional ones with given criteria for the exercise.

Technology underpins the situations, creating task-specific content such as social media accounts, emails and news reports to guide each scenario. These activities and processes are a long way from the first Chatham House report on cybersecurity, which was produced nearly fifteen years ago and came out of desk and other traditional methods of research.

In addition to cybersecurity, risk management preparedness is just one of the themes that can be explored in these exercises. Simulations on geopolitical or global strategic crises can explore state negotiations, stress-testing roles, responsibilities and outcomes. The common thread is an integrated high-tech space that can cater for a range of research, education and risk-management purposes.

Participants at the first scenario exercise held at Chatham House in 2017 explored how to respond to a humanitarian emergency that required landmine clearance. The initiative drew on the landmine eradication work of Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex who participated in the event.

The facilities, including a media studio, are also used for media training, multimedia content creation and scenario planning exercises, as well as more traditional roundtable discussions. For the communications department, the facilities have allowed us to create communications crises and job interview simulations. They have added a new dimension and energy to Chatham House's programme of work and improved engagement with stakeholders.

Simulations and their related exercises are helping Chatham House and others make research and analysis more relevant to practitioners and policymakers. In turn, the outcomes should have more 'real life' implications for wider audiences – an important consideration today for every think tank.

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Think tanks no longer need to just rethink how they are communicating their ideas, but also how the research itself is conducted and how it can create more resonance with their audiences.

Keith Burnet
Author, *Immersive experiences and simulations are helping think tanks adapt to the changing policy landscape*

SIX LESSONS FROM THINK TANKS INFLUENCING AND INFORMING ELECTIONS

Louise Ball
Communications Consultant

Leandro Echt
Research Associate
On Think Tanks

Attempts to set up a presidential candidate debate during Argentina's 2011 elections failed, with those candidates leading the polls refusing to join.

But, in 2015 there was a different political climate: President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner would not be permitted another re-election. A handover of power was certain and there was no clear front winner. The political campaigns were highly polarised, creating an appetite for public debate.

A coalition, led by Argentine think tank CIPPEC, set out to achieve the country's first presidential debate. In doing so, it hoped to lay the foundations to institutionalise the event and promote a culture of open dialogue in Argentina.

CIPPEC had led the 2011 debate efforts, and so this time it was equipped with lessons learned, stronger alliances and political presence, and a favourable political environment.

The campaign united individuals and institutions in support of public debate. Together, they managed to instil the understanding that the debate was important for Argentina's democracy. And once the public began to demand the debate, the political costs of not taking part rose.

On 4 October 2015, the first presidential debate in the history of the country was broadcast live on Argentinian television with all presidential candidates present.

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This story from Argentina, illustrates just one of the ways that think tanks can – and do – support evidence-informed elections.

> *Democratic elections facilitate the exchange of ideas in a country and are an important moment for public engagement in political processes.*

There are many examples of think tank initiatives around the world seeking to influence and inform elections. They range in ambition and scale, engaging at different levels and stages of the election process to promote public debate, inform the public and increase

public engagement, and bring evidence into the political debate.

Democratic elections facilitate the exchange of ideas in a country and are an important moment for public engagement in political processes. This means that elections are an important moment for think tanks. Elections are a think tank's chance to influence and inform – to step forward as the link between policy, evidence and the public.

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OTT and GrupoFARO developed a series of good practice case studies and practical tools on think tanks working to inform and influence elections processes in their countries.

Here are six big-picture lessons to come out of all the stories we've collected:

1. **You can't do it alone**

   With very few exceptions, strong partnerships play a big role in successful think tank election initiatives. Including partnerships between civil society organisations, government, private sector, academic and media organisations.

   Each of these players can contribute different skills and influence. For example, universities introduce an element of neutrality; media partnerships can help reach large numbers of people and increase public scrutiny; and state partnerships can help increase project legitimacy.

2. **Invest in smart communications**

   In all the stories we heard, either investing in communications was a success factor, or the need to invest more was a lesson learned. Whether you're targeting political parties, the public or journalists, spending time and money to make your messages and products relevant and accessible is a must. Quality infographics, videos and media-broadcast are all good ways to cut through the noise. Some organisations brought on board third-party communications or social media experts to build successful campaigns. Digital tools and applications have also become increasingly popular – and effective – in communicating with voters.

3. **Build political incentives and costs**

   Politicians will not join in public debates or speak openly and honestly about their plans and what is feasible unless there are political incentives to do so, and political costs for not doing so. Fact-checking can be a powerful tool to hold politicians to account for what they say. Partnering with the media has proved to be a successful strategy to reach the public and increase political incentives for open and honest dialogue.

4. **Political timing is everything**

   It's important to plan your project according to the election timeline. The year before the election is the best time to start engaging political parties. By election year, campaigns are already locked into agendas and manifestos, leaving little room for dialogue.

   When engaging the public, wait until the election year – any earlier and there's

little interest. In the days leading up to the election, voters are looking for information. One think tank in Ecuador capitalised on this, via a partnership with Facebook, to reach 9.5 million accounts.

5. **Pay attention to the external environment**

External factors will also play a big role in how the project unfolds. For example, in the Argentina debate story, attempts to set up the first presidential debate failed in one election, with the two leading candidates pulling out, but succeeded in the next, in part because of a different political context.

6. **Failure is a stepping stone to success**

Again, the story from Argentina is a good example of this. While the project failed to achieve the debate in 2011, it learned important lessons, built stronger political presence and relationships and strengthened its institutional partnerships. These elements helped the project to succeed the following election. In fact, some of the most interesting stories, and most valuable lessons, come from the organisations and initiatives that have been working on elections for many years.

This article was adapted from the full collection of stories and practical advice in **Think tanks: why and how to support elections,** edited by Leandro Echt and Louise Ball.

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Elections are a think tank's chance to influence and inform – to step forward as the link between policy, evidence and the public.

Louise Ball and Leandro Echt
Authors, *Six lessons from think tanks influencing and informing elections*

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TELEVISION IN REVIEW

By Maryam Shabbir Abbasi

Digital Media Officer, Sustainable Development Policy Institute

To whom should we disseminate our research? Audiences can be policymakers, a particular community, academia and/or the private sector. Engaging each stakeholder group requires a different strategy. For example, to engage a policymaker, the think tank needs to be credible and support its recommendations with robust evidence. Policymakers need non-technical one-pagers. Academia on the other hand, may best be engaged through a detailed report or research paper. But how can think tanks engage the public at large? The conventional way to engage the public is through articles, research papers, policy briefs and working papers. However, technological advancements have introduced many more effective and efficient tools, especially social media and mainstream digital media.

> *The conventional way to engage the public is through articles, research papers, policy briefs and working papers. However, technological advancements have introduced many more effective and efficient tools, especially social media and mainstream digital media.*

The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) has a unique way of engaging the public with its web-based Sustainable Development Television (SDTV). Engaging people in the online world, where there is a lot of information and people barely have time to open and read, is not an easy task. However, the trick is to create a niche. SDTV's niche is short clips and videos on sustainable development. When we say short, we are talking less than five minutes to get across our message without losing the research's credibility. Once people are engaged, they can opt to explore further. That is where longer videos and documentaries come in handy.

SDTV provides production services, which include short video packages, documentaries and talk shows, to its valued viewers. Through its seasoned staff, SDTV is busy providing quality services from pre-production (i.e. finalising the story board to scripting and field work) to post production (i.e. final editing). SDTV reflects SDPI's drive to operate as a dynamic organisation. Through its web-TV, SDPI reaches out to wider groups, including public and private sector, legislators, policymakers, experts, researchers, students and academia, civil society, media and professionals.

Through its innovative and forward-looking approach, SDTV also provides live streaming and broadcasting services to its valued customers for greater outreach and advocacy and public engagement. Those who couldn't join us physically at our events can watch

them live on SDTV. Our stakeholders not only include students but also researchers, policymakers and academia. SDPI's annual sustainable development conference (December 2018) had 2,942 viewers from 26 countries including Afghanistan, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Nepal, Netherlands, Oman, Pakistan, Poland, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Switzerland, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, UK and US!

The research video packages focus on energy, trade, environment, climate change, the China-Pakistan economic corridor, bilateral relations, gender, health, education, economy and other issues of sustainable development. Videos are uploaded to the website, YouTube, and social media including Facebook and Twitter. Hence, the final product is disseminated to a wider audience.

OTT Consulting
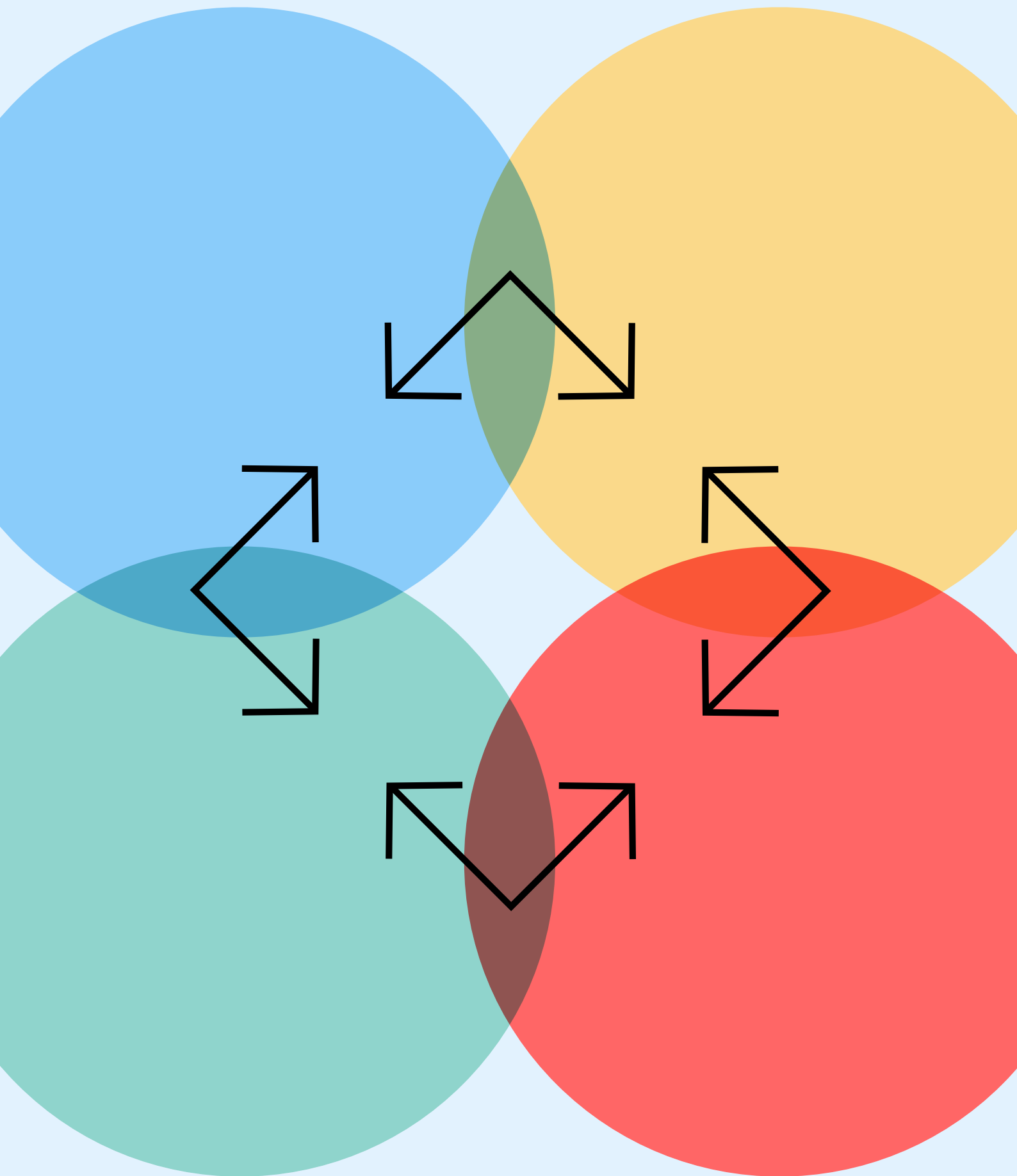
OTT CONSULTING

OTT Consulting provides a vehicle to work more closely with our multiple audiences, and over the longer term.

We draw from the expertise of the OTT network to design and deliver solutions for our clients. This means that we can respond to demands from Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia with locally based experts.

Our approach emphasises the importance of understanding, respecting and behaving according to the contexts, the people and the institutions that we work with. We recognise that every intervention is an opportunity to lean and adapt our strategy. We aim to reflect on these lessons and share them widely through OTT's many channels of engagement.

Our consulting work is also an important vehicle to support OTT: it contributes financially and in-kind to many of our initiative's core functions.

HELPING EMERGING THINK TANK MANAGERS TO IMPROVE THEIR PRACTICE WITH THE OTT-TTI FELLOWSHIP

By Ajoy Datta
Research Associate, On Think Tanks

Together with colleagues at OTT, I'm coordinating the 2018/19 Fellowship. This year it's being run in partnership with the Think Tank Initiative. The Fellowship is for emerging think tank managers and young leaders. Just Google 'leadership course' and you'll find a plethora of programmes that promise to turn ordinary managers into charismatic leaders. These courses assume leaders can, to a large degree, predict the future, control what others do and over time with the aid of of certain tools bring about transformative change. However, the links between what leaders do and organisational performance are **weak**. During the Fellowship, we propose to do something less ambitious and altogether more feasible: to support managers who join the course to improve their own working practices (in research, communication or administration). Doing so will put them in a better position to influence the practices of those they work with, if that's their intention.

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WHAT ISSUES DO FELLOWS WANT TO EXPLORE?

How do you attract resources for non-research activities? How do you do research where there is limited data? What role can open data play in facilitating policy change? How do you communicate research in a polarised political environment? How do you manage differences within and between teams in a think tank? How can you help young people to flourish in a think tank? And how can you retain staff? These are just some of the questions that Fellows aim to explore during the nine-month long programme.

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HOW WILL FELLOWS IMPROVE THEIR PRACTICE?

To answer these questions, Fellows may need to challenge and change how they think about what they do. They'll need to act and think independently – questioning taken-for-granted views about the merits of certain rules and norms. For instance,

they may need to revisit what they believe to be a 'good' manager. They'll need to develop a capacity to know themselves better – promoting deliberate change can be an uncomfortable and emotional process, having to deal with your own frustrations, excitement and anxiety as well as being exposed to the difficult feelings of others.

Fellows will need to reflect on their own and with others: solutions to problems are usually found through trying something and reflecting on it afterwards. They'll need to work with colleagues as well as other Fellows: learning and improvement is usually a social process, in which conversation and feedback is vital. And finally, Fellows will need to make sense of the abundance of resources that are available through the internet and, crucially, set aside enough time to do all this.

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HOW WILL OTT AND TTI FACILITATE LEARNING?

OTT and TTI will help selected Fellows to do this through the following activities:

- **Lectures and seminars:** Fellows were invited to the **TTI Exchange** in Bangkok where they were able to attend a number of key notes, plenaries and workshops on thematic issues (such as climate change and governance) as well as organisational development issues (such as funding, business models and gender). They'll also attend the **Winterschool for Thinktankers** in Geneva in early 2019, where they'll be able to attend sessions on management, research agendas, communications strategies and financial management. Additionally, we'll give Fellows access to webinars developed by the **On Think Tanks School**, covering a range of topics including data visualisation and monitoring and evaluating research impact.

- **Networking:** the 2018 TTI Exchange and Winterschool for Thinktankers provide opportunities for Fellows to meet established think tank professionals, policymakers, donor representatives and other people interested in influencing policy from around the world. This year's speakers include Simon Maxwell (former Executive Director of the Overseas Development Institute), Stephen Yeo (former Chief Executive Officer of the Centre for Economic Policy Research) and Sonja Stojanovich Gajic (Director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy). Through establishing relationships, and having discussions, Fellows have a chance to find answers to some of their key questions.

- **Mentoring and coaching:** each Fellow will be paired with an experienced think tanker with relevant skills and expertise. Through regular conversations and a supportive relationship with their mentor, Fellows will be encouraged to reflect on their practice and receive advice and encouragement, especially in relation to ongoing challenges they face at work. Mentors can draw on their own experience to support others in their work; develop a professional relationship; and widen their own understanding of how think tanks function in different contexts.

- **Small group work:** we'll provide opportunities for Fellows to take part in group work at TTI Exchange and the Winterschool side events. We're also exploring the possibility of facilitating small group work amongst Fellows using online tools such as Zoom, with the intention of drawing on **action learning** and **storytelling**

techniques. Supervised team-based work **has proven** to be effective in facilitating learning. For experiences to be internalised, it helps for them to be critiqued. So other people are indispensable. Without them experiences are arguably incomplete. Or put differently, **none of us individually is as smart as all of us together**.

- **Fostering a community of practice:** we've given Fellows the opportunity to sign up to an online community (using Slack) to facilitate communication amongst themselves, as well as with Fellowship alumni and those that were shortlisted for the Fellowship. The space gives Fellows the opportunity to share questions, spread news of interesting and useful practices and explore joint work together.

- **Writing and publishing:** finally, we'll encourage fellows to write and publish articles on the OTT website or other appropriate platforms. Writing something in your own words can help to clarify your ideas, or assimilate and consolidate knowledge that you might otherwise forget. It also encourages deeper thinking and can force you down the proverbial rabbit hole in order to find a unique perspective on a topic that's of interest to you. It also enables Fellows to share their experiences with a much wider audience.

We hope these activities will stretch Fellows intellectually, practically as well as experientially. Ultimately what they get out of the Fellowship will depend on what they put in.

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(…) Learning and improvement is usually a social process, in which conversation and feedback is vital.

Ajoy Datta
Author, *Helping emerging think tank managers to improve their practice with the OTT-TTI Fellowship*

SUPPORTING THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM'S 'BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE'

By Carolina Kern
Trainer and Associate, On Think Tanks

The University of Nottingham has embarked on an ambitious programme to better showcase its high-quality research. Their strategy comprises several elements, but chief among them has been the establishment of six 'beacons of excellence' that will receive an investment of around £60 million over the next five years.

The six beacons bring together transdisciplinary teams to research global challenges, building on areas that have had a track-record of success. For example, the medical MRI scan machine was invented at the University of Nottingham and is one of the foundations of the 'precision imaging' beacon. The beacons are designed to give the University strategic focus in its research and communications. Ultimately, the aim is for these beacons is to be self-sustaining.

THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM'S SIX BEACONS OF EXCELLENCE:

1. **Future foods**
2. **Ending modern slavery**
3. **Precision imaging**
4. **Propulsion futures**
5. **Green chemicals**
6. **Smart industrial systems**

To support this, OTT Consulting is working with the University to design and deliver a training programme to help staff communicate better and to tell a more compelling story about their cutting-edge research.

'Given the time it often takes to achieve policy impact, it is critical that both researchers and members of the [University] administrative team understand how to approach it,' explained Chris Sims, University of Nottingham's Head of Global Policy Impact, in early client discussions.

To maximise this skill building work, we agreed to experiment with a few different approaches to teaching. We incorporated plenty of after-action reviews and more formal evaluations to ensure that we were learning as much as possible from the process and responding to feedback throughout.

Step one involved running a set of sessions at the 2018 edition of Nottingham Engaged, a biennial policy engagement conference that aims to share experiences and best practices across the University and beyond. These face-to-face workshops, covering audience mapping, messaging, digital communications and events, allowed participants to get a flavour of the different elements of research communications.

Step two was much more comprehensive and remains ongoing. A cohort of 25 staff are currently participating in a 'policy academy', which involves eight online sessions on specific communications topics such as how to write a policy brief and how to develop a communications plan. The sessions include live discussions as well as personal tasks to help hone skills.

The final step, which is currently under development and will be delivered later this year, involves getting think tank leaders to share their policy and public engagement experience with a group of senior University staff. These more intimate sessions will not only explore the benefits of engagement, but will look at what is actually involved in achieving impact, and how best to structure teams to get results.

We hope to use this mixed method approach with other clients going forward.

CRITICAL DECISIONS SETTING UP AN INDEPENDENT THINK TANK IN COLOMBIA

By Leandro Echt
Research Associate, On Think Tanks

In 2018, OTT was asked to provide **strategic support** to a new Colombian policy institute during its foundational stage. The Institute had been founded to carry out, encourage and support research and knowledge production for the sustainable development of Colombia's energy sector.

The founders had two main concerns: the Institute's financial sustainability and its effective governance. OTT provided support to design a sustainable business model that promotes growth and impact in the short- and medium- term, and an effective governance scheme that strengthens independence and promotes efficient organisational management.

Behind these concerns, the new Institute faced a major challenge: its independence. The Institute was founded by two major private stakeholders with explicit interests in the energy sector (an oil company and an oil union). Moreover, Colombia's energy sector is highly polarised, partly because of the debate around the environmental and community impact of the oil activity.

Therefore, the funding scheme and the governance arrangements needed to be carefully designed to tackle these challenges. To this end, we embarked on a project that included consultation with key stakeholders in the energy sector. We discussed these challenges and critical decisions with the Institute's team, its temporary Board of Directors (and potential new members), academics, private entrepreneurs and policymakers in the field. These perspectives informed OTT's recommendations, along with our knowledge of other think tanks in different contexts that have addressed similar challenges.

Regarding the institutional model and governance scheme, OTT focused its advice on critical decisions that would help the Institute safeguard its credibility and legitimacy (two fundamental pillars to achieve influence in policy and intellectual debates). The two main strategies suggested by OTT were the renewal of the temporary Board of Directors (mainly comprising representatives of the founding institutions) to be as plural as possible, and the consolidation of an Advisory Group that had an outstanding trajectory and demonstrated diversity. In particular, we recommended:

- **Avoid shared members between the Assembly (composed by the founders) and the Board**, or limit it to only one, which could be the President of the Board.

- **Diversify the composition of the Board**, in order to achieve greater plurality and gather a balance of expertise that can give support to the Institute's work (thematic, methodological, communications, management and finance, and policy).

- **Promote a more plural composition of the Advisory Group**, especially in the area of gender, but also incorporating representatives of the relevant regions and civil society organisations.

Regarding funding, the initial endowment provided by the founders was an important asset. However, independence can reflect the diverse support that a think tank can achieve. In this regard, our advice was:

> *Diversify the composition of the Board, in order to achieve greater plurality and gather a balance of expertise that can give support to the Institute's work.*

- While new private sector support could be welcomed (for instance, by inviting private companies or their representatives to be associates of the Assembly), it would be important to develop a fundraising strategy that benefits from the extended linkages of the founding members, future members of the Board, new members of the Assembly and the Advisory Group.

- Although the Colombian philanthropic culture is still limited, OTT's assessment suggested that it would be strategic to approach the private sector and interest them in the work of the institute.

- A strategy of approaching government agencies related to the energy sector should be initiated.

- OTT discouraged an initial idea to set up a cycle of paid high-level dialogues. Charging for participation would be against the Institute's goal of contributing to plural debate and would discourage, or prevent, stakeholders with limited resources from engaging in the conversation.

- The proposed funding model should be underpinned by a very transparent policy that encourages the institute to make available its funding sources.

In addition to these key recommendations related to the governance scheme and the funding model, OTT also advised on the importance of hiring a director who is known within the energy policy community (but without explicit partisan links, or seen as a private sector advocate). OTT further advised not to include in the Institute's mission and values a concern for the strengthening of the energy sector per se, but rather as a means for the development of the country and its citizens.

This project is another in OTT's portfolio of support to setting up think tanks in developing countries (**see a previous reflection of a similar enterprise in Timor-Leste**). It's important to remember that 'context matters', and so the advice and strategies to overcome similar challenges (like independence and sustainability) will vary depending on the environment in which a think tank operates, as well as its goals. However, our experience in Colombia and the lessons we have shared intend to inspire other policy and research entrepreneurs that want to set up institutions to contribute to more evidence-informed policy decisions and debates, as well as provide the OTT team with relevant experience to continue to support these efforts worldwide.

"

It's important to remember that 'context matters', and so the advice and strategies to overcome similar challenges (like independence and sustainability) will vary depending on the environment in which a think tank operates, as well as its goals.

Leandro Echt
Author, *Critical decisions setting up an independent think tank in Colombia*

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE LATIN AMERICA EVIDENCE WEEK

By Sofía Ballón
Coordinator, Semana de la Evidencia

As think tank professionals, it's easy to be in tune with current events, policy research, evidence-informed policymaking, impact evaluations and the importance of public engagement. Through the *Semana de la Evidencia Latinoamericana* (Latin American Evidence Week) – an international festival of events celebrating, discussing and showcasing the work of different organisations in evidence-based decision-making – we sought to make this relevant for the Latin American public at large.

Research is more valuable and valid when it is informed by the public (or users). In 2018, the *Semana de la Evidencia* organised more than 90 events with more than 80 organisations in 16 countries. Evidence can come from a variety of sources, including citizens, and the public can

> *The public needs to be aware of the implications of policymaking and to seek feedback loops between them, researchers and decision-makers. Citizens should feel able to 'try out' policies and improve on them, and that documentation and evidence-based agreements are mechanisms to prevent corruption.*

engage with data evidence by being part of the process of collecting information, evaluating conclusions, questioning politicians, or by participating in activities that combine data evidence and political sentiment.

Informed and interested citizens make this exchange better, and the impact greater. The public needs to be aware of the implications of policymaking and to seek feedback loops between them, researchers and decision-makers. Citizens should feel able to 'try out' policies and improve on them, and that documentation and evidence-based agreements are mechanisms to prevent corruption.

But things can be complicated in a context like Latin America, where: scientific research is not a priority; corruption threatens people's interest and motivation to get involved in politics; evidence, empirical research and social sciences are undervalued; religion is strong and pervasive in policy; and a large percentage of the population is poor, under-nourished, illiterate or under-educated and misinformed.

Semana de la Evidencia provided a platform for a wide range of institutions and topics to come together, presenting an opportunity for participants to become more informed about the way governments regulate and source evidence; how to influence

non-governmental organisations and private sector research agendas; and the role of international actors in Latin American policymaking through financing and designing development projects.

The week's events: were interactive and promoted public participation (ideally at 50%); had gender-balanced panels, and definitely no all-male panels; included brief, entertaining and easily understandable presentations; and engaged actors and stakeholders from multiple sectors.

An active partnership with media outlets was also important to achieve public attendance at the event. Appearances in digital and traditional media enabled us to educate a broader audience about the upcoming festival and how public engagement in policy research is essential to improve people's lives. At the event, experts could grill politicians with the right questions to motivate better informed and transparent government actions. Interesting synergies could be formed from having a well-informed view of current events and being connected to multiple specialties.

In 2018, its third edition, *Semana de la Evidencia* sought to have more fringe events, such as photography exhibitions, music and drama presentations. This is something that will be expanded on in future years. Like media relations, alternative events can also garner the interest of a broader audience and provide opportunities to have more public engagement in research or the socialisation of a policy. There is always more work to be done in fostering such partnerships, making research and the concept of evidence-informed policy more accessible, and broadening communications. With more than 10,000 people in attendance (and thus more informed citizens), this should not be a challenge in 2019.

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THINK TANKS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

By Andrea Baertl
Research Officer, On Think Tanks

Do think tanks and social movements work together? What motivates this engagement? How do they work with each other? What difficulties do they face?

With the support of the **Open Society Foundations** we set out answer these questions and find out how and why think tanks and social movements work together. Through interviews with thinktankers, we learned that the relationships, motivations, impact and difficulties are as varied as the actors involved in them.

We define social movements as a network of individuals, groups and/or organisations engaged in collective action aimed at changing something in their context – be it the internal configuration of a social group, its relationship with other groups, with the state or other institutions, or aimed at changing social, cultural or political aspects of their context.

We define think tanks broadly as organisations or groups of experts who produce knowledge to inform and/or influence policy outcomes. These can include government research departments, university research centres, consultancies, professionalised NGOs and other sites of knowledge production and engagement.

We have found that indeed think tanks and social movements do work together. But because social movements, policy research organisations and the issues that they try to address are so varied, there is a multitude of options for engagement. Nonetheless the key finding, so far, is that think tanks and social movements work together to address an issue that they both aim to improve. Each brings to the table their key feature. Social movements mobilise the public and increase notoriety of the issue, while think tanks are able to convene actors and translate the demands of social movements into actionable policy demands. The success (or not) of the collaboration and the impact that it achieves depends on the context in which it operates.

There are many types of relationships between think tanks and social movements. Here are a few of the ones we have found so far:

DIRECT RELATIONSHIP

Actors within a think tank, and with institutional backing, engage with different organisations, including ones that are formal, informal or created out of the movement. A space for discussion is generated between these actors. The social movement actors

voice the demands of the public and move them to action. The think tank uses its expertise and the research it has done in the past to translate the demands into clear policy options for the government. The think tank's role is to advise which courses of action would be best, based on the knowledge they have.

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COALITION ENGAGEMENT

Another form of relationship is coalition engagement, in which formal civil society organisations (such as think tanks and NGOs) join forces to address a pressing issue, forming a joint committee. In parallel, grassroots movements organise themselves to address a similar, but not entirely overlapping, issue. Both groups generate a space for discussion in which they agree their demands to the government. Again, social movement actors voice the demands of the public and move them to action. The think tank uses its accumulated knowledge to translate the demands into clear actions for the government.

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THEMATIC NETWORK

This type of relationship is not directly between think tanks and social movements, but rather the relationship is fostered by a thematic network (with funding to pursue the agenda). It is the network that engages and connects researchers, think tanks and NGOs with a particular social movement. Social movements, in this case, have at their core other issues that relate to but exceed the interest of the thematic network. Thus, they engage only in some of the aspects of the problem. The network supports social movements to articulate the demands that address their cause (although not in their entirety) and supports social movements in helping them to achieve them, but do not act as intermediaries with specific governments.

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THE COMMONALITIES

The commonalities between these forms of engagement (whatever the type of the relationship) is that think tanks *think* and social movements *move*. In all cases, think tanks

Both think tanks and social movements are part of a chain of translation from the demands of the public to policy actions.

acted on their acquired knowledge on the issue and helped articulate the demands of the public; while social movement actors had the ability to move people into action, channel their interest to create space for discussion and communicate the agreed courses of action. In all but the thematic network, think tankers used their ability to convene to help social movements translate their demands into policy demands. In essence, both think tanks and social movements are part of a chain of translation from the demands of the public to policy actions.
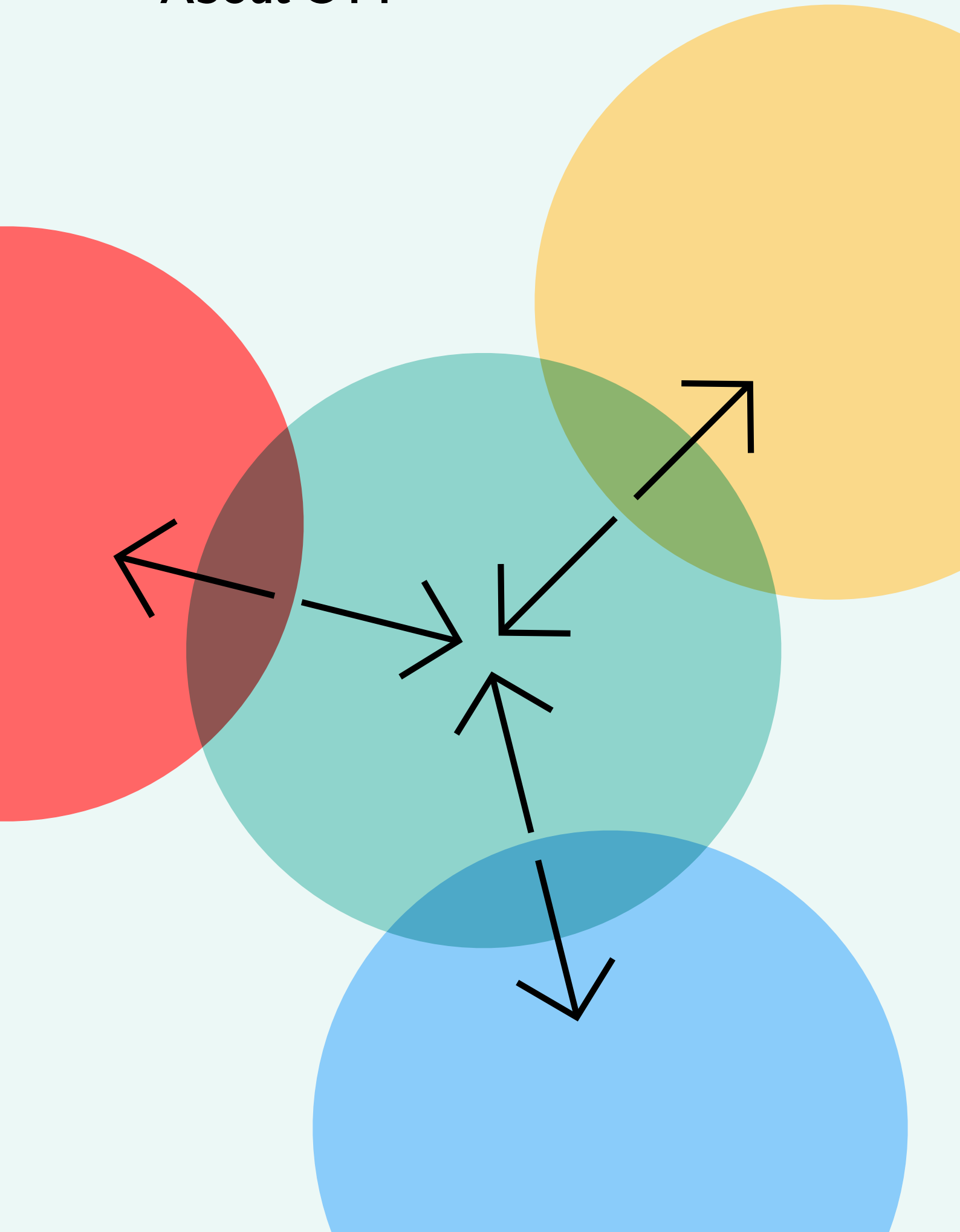
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Social movements mobilise the public and increase notoriety of the issue, while think tanks are able to convene actors and translate the demands of social movements into actionable policy demands.

Andrea Baertl
Author, *Exploring the relationship of think tanks and social movements*

About OTT

ABOUT OTT

OTT is a global platform dedicated to studying and supporting policy research centres.

Since 2010, we have written about think tanks and thinktankers, listened to the challenges they face, and debated strategies to address them. We try to encourage all think tanks and thinktankers – as well their funders and supporters – to reflect on what they do, why they do it, and whether it works or could be improved upon.

For us, encouraging these interactions and developing engaging relationships with thinktankers, research centres and their supporters are fundamental to our mission.

Our content is centred on five main themes: governance and management; research; communications and impact; funding and supporting think tanks; and understanding think tanks. We present a range of solutions to common challenges that think tanks face through our publications and resources, including briefs, reports, papers, books, manuals and videos.

OTT INITIATIVES

OTT Initiatives are programmes or projects that combine research and practice to strengthen think tanks and their supporters. They include local, national, and international efforts, often involving think tanks themselves as key partners. In the last few years we have launched:

OTT School: offers a range of capacity building opportunities for policy entrepreneurs, thinktankers, think tanks and policy research centres to develop their personal and organisational competences.

OTT TV: offers new insights into the world of think tanks. You'll find videos about think tanks and about their work, webinars, interviews, how to videos, and much more.

Latin American Evidence Week: *Semana de la Evidencia* is a festival of events in Latin America that seeks to understand, promote and celebrate the use of evidence in public policy.

Premio PODER al Think Tank del Año: OTT and Revista PODER in Peru promote an award that celebrates the great work of think tanks and policy research institutes.

Open Think Tanks Directory: A collaborative project to collect and capture a rich set of information about think tanks from all around the world. Our list currently comprises over 2,700 think tanks.

OTT Working Paper Series: OTT, University of Bath and Universidad del Pacífico have partnered to produce a series of Working Papers focused on the study of think tanks, to give researchers a chance to publish their ideas and reach a broader academic and practitioner audience.

See more.

2018
OTT in numbers

61 authors

95 opinion pieces

146 published articles

4 working papers

7 articles on research

22 interviews

43 posts on new events

2018
OTT in numbers

January
76
21
-20

February
136
62
N/A

March
82
39
192

June
64
37

May
95
29
-157

April
113
65
161
-214

July
106
123
327

August
49
-22
80

September
106
33
142

December
81
26
10

November
117
-6
13

October
164
213
24

New followers on Twitter   New followers on Facebook   New newsletter recipients

THE TEAM

The current team comprises 19 collaborators based in 10 countries

Ajoy Datta
Research Associate

Till Bruckner
OTT School Trainer /
Associate

Andrea Baertl
Research Officer

Leandro Echt
Research Associate

Melanie Rayment
OTT School Trainer /
Associate

Dena Lomofsky
OTT School Trainer /
Associate

Sofía Ballón
Coordinator,
Semana de la Evidencia

Michael Kleiman
Adviser, OTT TV

Jordan Tchilingirian
Research Director

Enrique Mendizabal
Founder and Director

Eva Cardoso
Programme Manager /
OTT School Coordinator

Annapoorna Ravichander
Editor at large (S.Asia)

Stephen Yeo
Adviser at large /
Research Associate

Erika Perez-Leon
Director of Communications

Andrea Ordoñez
Research Associate

Vanesa Weyrauch
Research Associate

Caroline Cassidy
Associate

Carolina Kern
OTT School Trainer /
Associate

Zuleyka Ramos
Programme Manager
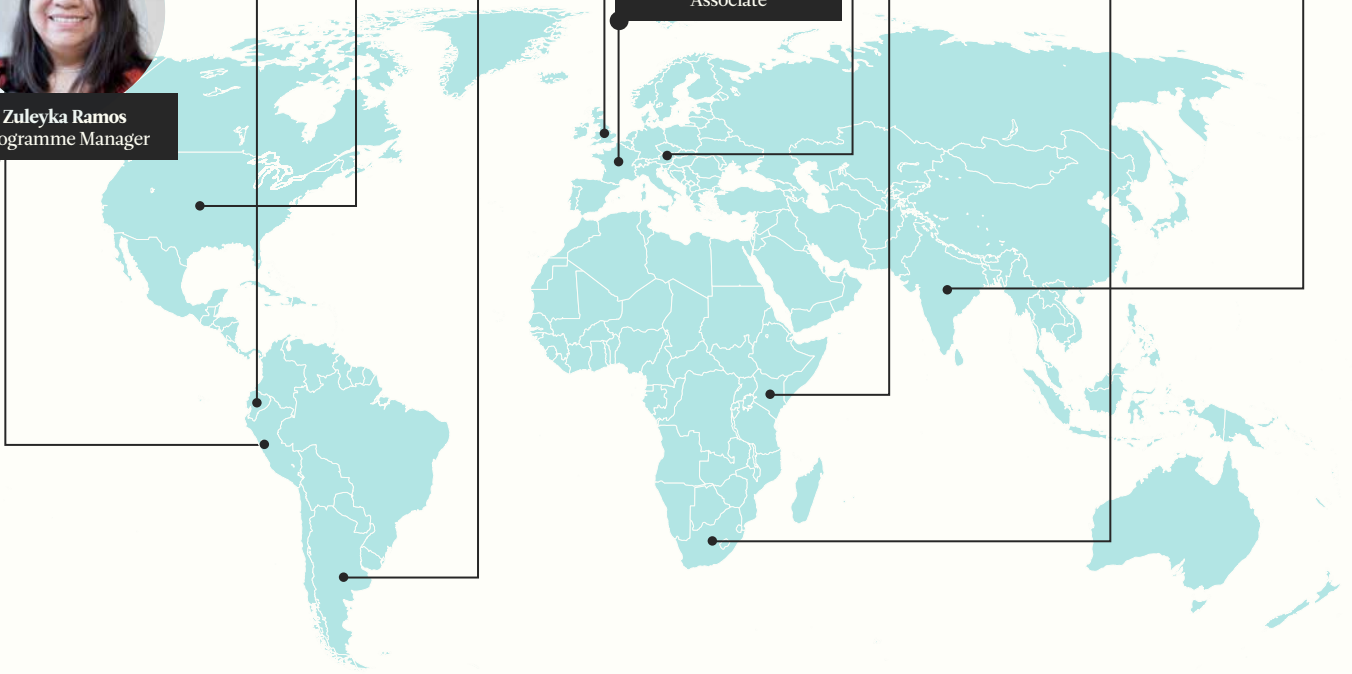
THE ADVISORY BOARD

Our Advisory Board is comprised of nine individuals from different professional backgrounds and encompasing, as a group, OTT's themes.

NORMA CORREA
Professor, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Norma is an anthropologist specialising in public policy and development with 15 years of professional experience in rural and urban research, senior management, technical consultancy and university teaching. Her research interests include: social innovation, economic inclusion, inequalities and gender.

RUTH LEVINE
Programme Director, Global Development and Population, Hewlett Foundation

Ruth is a development economist and expert in global health, education and evaluation. Since 2011, she has led the Hewlett Foundation team responsible for grantmaking to improve living conditions in low and middle-income countries, and to advance reproductive health and rights in developing countries and in the United States. Ruth is the author of scores of books and publications on global health policy, including *Millions Saved: Proven Successes in Global Health*.

LAWRENCE MACDONALD
Vice President, World Resources Institute

Lawrence leads the design and implementation of strategic communications plans and activities that help to make the World Resources Institute's big ideas happen. A development policy communications expert and former foreign correspondent, he works to increase the influence and impact of the Institute's research and analysis by leading an integrated communications programme that includes online engagement, media relations, events, and government and NGO outreach.

SIMON MAXWELL
Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute

Simon Maxwell is one of the UK's leading specialists on international development. He is a development economist with a career in research, aid management and policy advice spanning 45 years. He worked overseas for ten years, in Kenya and India for UNDP, and for the UK aid programme in Bolivia, then for fifteen years at IDS in Sussex, and for a dozen years as Director of ODI in London. He was until recently Executive Chair of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (www.cdkn.org), and a Specialist Adviser to the House of Commons International Development Select Committee. He is currently Chair

of the European Think Tanks Group (www.ettg.eu) . Simon is a past President of the Development Studies Association of the UK and Ireland. In 2007, he was awarded a CBE for services to international development.

JILL RUTTER
Programme Director, Institute for Government

Jill leads the Institute for Government's work on better policymaking and arm's length government and Executive Director of Institute for Sustainable Development Goals. She is an experienced former senior civil servant, having worked for HM Treasury, the Prime Minister's office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the UK. Her work includes studies on how governments make policy, general civil service issues including minister-civil service relations, governments and sustainable development, and government and business.

JOHN SCHWARTZ
Founder and Managing Director, Soapbox

John is a leading global expert on think tank communication. Having built Soapbox up from a freelance design practice to a thriving communications agency, John divides his time between running the business, checking the quality of its outputs and keeping his hand in as a designer. John began his career in publishing, running Politico's bookshop and imprint before becoming publishing manager and designer at the Institute for Public Policy Research, where he began developing his approach to policy communications. He studied philosophy and politics at the University of Warwick.

STEPHEN YEO
Independent Consultant and OTT Adviser at Large

Stephen has had extensive involvement in building capacity for policy research and analysis in Sub-Saharan Africa. He also has experience of monitoring and evaluation, in particular of policy research networks and policy influencing projects. Stephen was CEO of the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) and helped launch VoxEU.

XUFENG ZHU
Professor, Tsinghua University

Xufeng Zhu is currently Professor and Associate Dean at the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University. His research interests include: think tank and expert involvement in the policy process, science and technology policy, environment and climate policy, and public governance in transitional China. He is the author of *The Rise of Think Tanks in China*, *Expert Involvement in Policy Changes*, and *China's Think Tanks: Their Influences in the Policy Process*. He serves as Regional Editor of the *Asian Journal of Political Sciences*.

OUR FUNDING AND FUNDERS

OTT pursues a range of funding streams to remain sustainable. For 2018, these have included:

Grant and project funding provided to OTT and managed by Universidad del Pacífico:

Hewlett Foundation grant . . . . £ 131,250

Grants and project funding provided to OTT and managed by OTT Consulting Ltd:

IDRC OTT–TTI Fellowship grant 2018/19 . . . . £ 149,105

OSF New York grant . . . . £ 24,000

OSF Europe grant . . . . £ 7,070

OTT Consulting Ltd project funding: . . . . £ 196,331

Income generated by OTT School . . . . £ 10,559

**Total overhead generated by OTT Consulting Ltd
and allocated to OTT** . . . .£ 45,049

OTT Consulting Ltd financial contribution to OTT . . . . £ 22,710

We also received some in-kind help, including technical and communications support from Soapbox.

For a full breakout of OTT's funders see **our funding page**.

THE OPEN THINK TANK DIRECTORY: A JOURNEY

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By Andrea Baertl
Research Officer, On Think Tanks

In 2016 the idea of the **Open Think Tank Directory** was born: to create a public directory to benefit the entire think tank community. The directory would organise the scattered information available on think tanks, be open, transparent and able to be updated by think tanks themselves. In 2017 we developed it, in 2018 we launched it, and in 2019 we aim to strengthen the use of the database and make visible its potential. But in order to foster its use (by academics, think tanks, funders and everyone interested in think tanks and evidence-based policy) we must first reflect on the journey we have had so far.

Developing the idea came naturally to OTT. Over the years we have increased our services, knowledge and initiatives for (and on) think tanks and the broader evidence-informed policymaking world. The Directory aimed to solve the problem of a lack of publicly available and organised information on think tanks (and other policy research centres and expertise bodies). Thinking about it (dreaming it?) was the easy part. The challenge was to bring it to life.
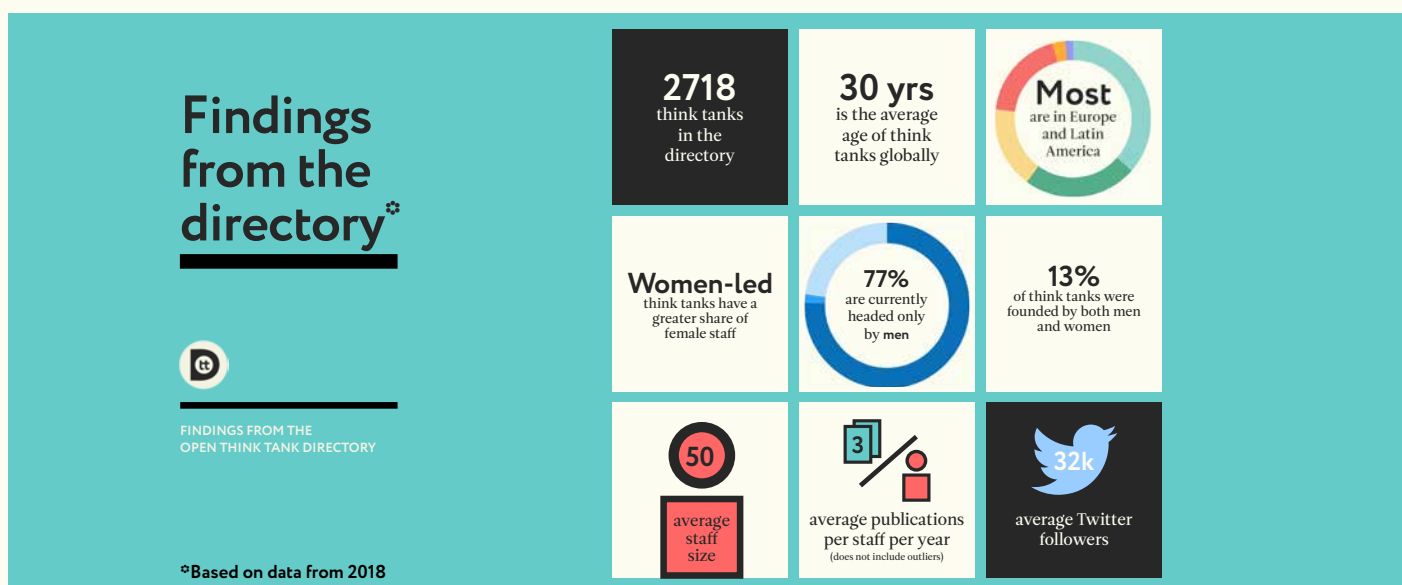
To make it happen we received funding from the Open Society Foundations and the Regional Programme Energy Security and Climate Change in Latin America from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Their funding enabled us to finance the titanic task of identifying think tanks and sourcing information worldwide, as well as developing the website. The first question and challenge we encountered was, what exactly is a think tank? We settled for broad inclusive criteria: the organisation had to carry out some form or research with the aim of informing public policy and have an identity of its own. When the organisation was on the boundaries of this definition, we decided to include them, highlighting that they did not exactly fit our definition, but that they did fulfil some think tank functions. Additionally, deciding on which variables to source information was an editing exercise. Categorising, and editing implies that the nuances would be lost, but enables information to be comparable. We settled on making information comparable. Finally, finding the information proved challenging as, apart from language difficulties, each organisation organises it differently, which led to a detective-like process of sourcing information.

In 2018, we officially launched the website and ran a communications campaign with the following objectives: generate visibility for the Directory, motivate think tanks not on the Directory to create their profiles, and motivate think tanks on the Directory to complete their profiles. Given the objectives of the campaign our target audiences were:
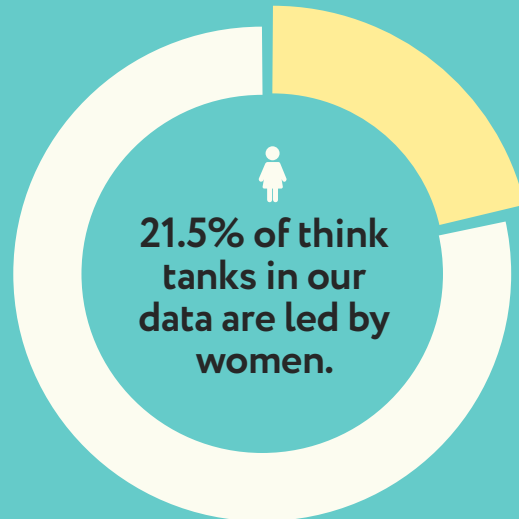
thinktankers and policy researchers (to increase the amount of information on the database, and to ensure that profiles are owned by the think tanks); potential donors (to increase funding to improve the website and expand it to new regions); and academics (in particular those studying think tanks or working in the evidence-based policy sector to whom the database could be useful in their research).

The communications campaign included: emails to 1,530 organisations to let them know that they had been included in the Directory; more than 250 tailored tweets tagging organisations to generate visibility; and several Facebook and Instagram posts. As a result, and through the year, more than 100 organisations have been in touch with us to update or create their profiles, and more than 88 people have asked to download the database. The database now holds information on 2,718 think tanks. Out of the more than 60 pieces of data that we aim to have for all organisations (including longitudinal data since 2016) the average of complete information for the database is 30%, ranging from 9% (name, description, website and country usually) to 87%. We believe this to be a success, but we want more.

Thus, in 2019 we will focus on using and sharing the information in the database to show what can be done with it. We will promote its use not only among think tanks and funders but also to think tank scholars, as we believe it is a valuable resource for everyone. Since we started collecting data in 2016, for some organisations we have data going back three years, one of the aims is to start showing trends, whenever possible. We also aim to strengthen the gender information that it holds, as of now we have some form of gender data (founder, leader or staff break down) for more than 1,100 think tanks, but it is not complete and so it can only give a partial picture of gender in think tanks. Our plans also include participating in data sprints, to find interesting ways to share the findings. We'll work hard to strengthen the use of the database and make visible its potential, but we need your help: if you work in a think tank, complete your profile; if you are a scholar, use the Directory and share your work; help us correct or update the information; and most importantly if you find it useful, spread the word.
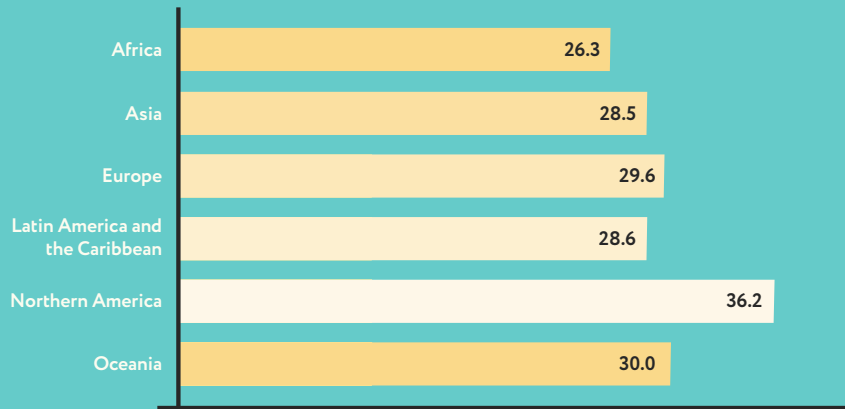
Findings from the directory*

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FINDINGS FROM THE
OPEN THINK TANK DIRECTORY

*Based on data from 2018

2718
think tanks
in the
directory

30 yrs
is the average
age of think
tanks globally

Most
are in Europe
and Latin
America

Women-led
think tanks have a
greater share of
female staff

77%
are currently
headed only
by men

13%
of think tanks were
founded by both men
and women

50
average
staff
size

3
average publications
per staff per year
(does not include outliers)

32k
average Twitter
followers

We gathered data on gender from 1050 think tanks across the world.*

21.5% of think tanks in our data are led by women.

*Based on data from 2018

AVERAGE THINK TANK AGE BY REGION*

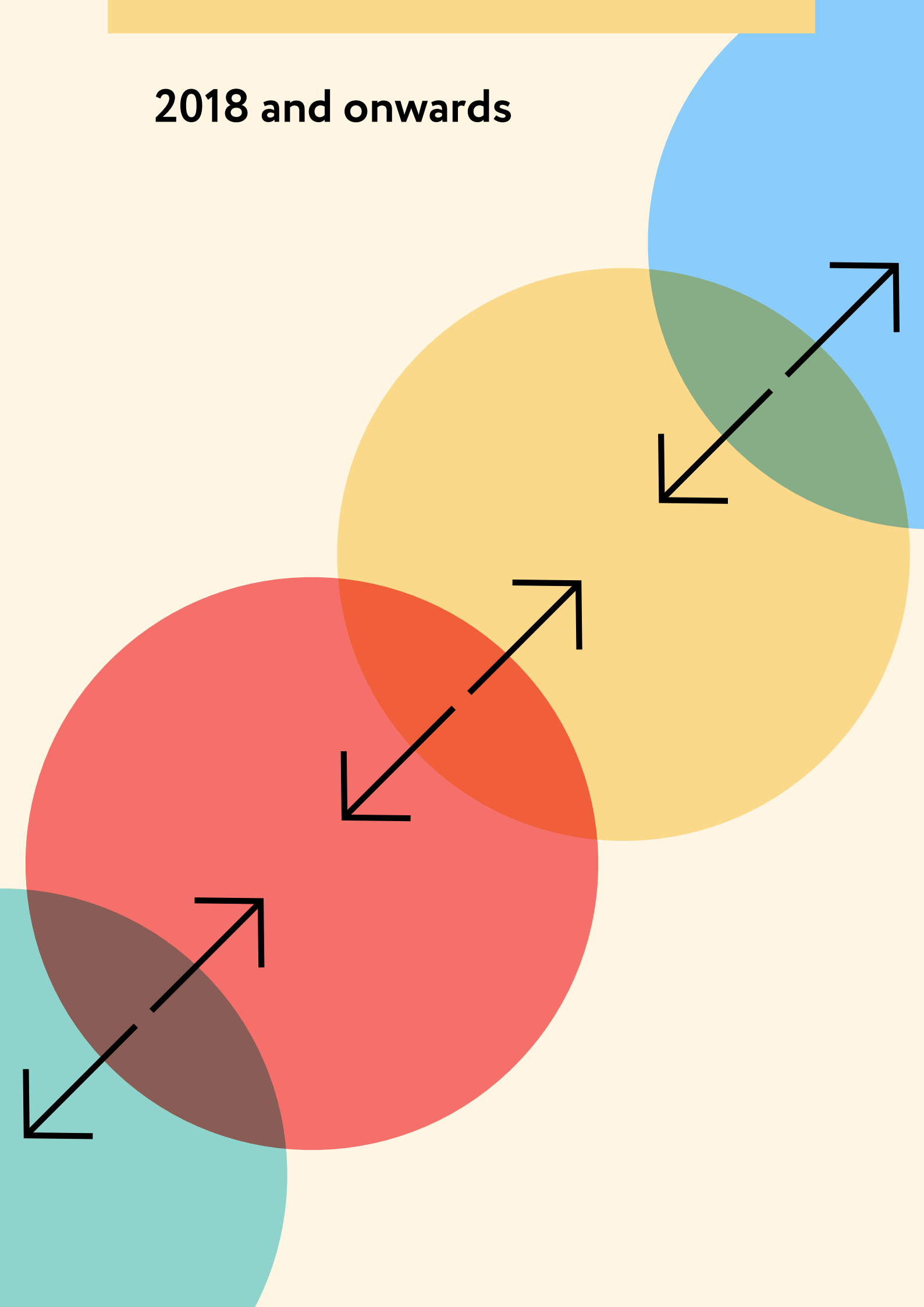| Region	Value
Africa	26.3
Asia	28.5
Europe	29.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	28.6
Northern America	36.2
Oceania	30.0

*Based on data from 2018

We gathered data on the gender of think tank founders for 410 think tanks in the Americas and Europe. Of these 80.2% were founded by men.*

12.7%

7.1%

Think tank founders

80.2%

*Based on data from 2018

2018 and onwards

LOOKING FORWARD

We asked the OTT team and friends to think back on 2018 and answer two questions for us:

TOP PICK

What is your top pick from 2018? This could be a groundbreaking study or publication, a new website, an effective campaign, an event, a policy change generated by a think tank, a new fund/funding initiative, a new think tank, or any relevant development in the broader field of evidence informed policy.

AND FOR THE FUTURE?

What do you hope to see in 2019? This could be a new development in research methods, a new debate, a focus on a particular issue, a fund, a new practice...

I am impressed with a new think tank in Bengaluru–**Antardhwani.** They are unique in their focus on health, do not have to worry about funds, chief mission officers have a journalism background, and the founder and chairman was in the government and a practioner. If all these ingredients are used well, the think tank should certainly be a good promoter of best practice.

I would like to see more collaborations within and outside regions. With crucial funding coming to an end for several think tanks, it is important to pool knowledge and experience and work together. Perhaps the **Open Think Tank Directory** could be a source to initiate this process.

Annapoorna Ravichander

Open Research Central (ORC). Although not new, it has picked up in the last two years with the involvement of large funders such as the Wellcome Trust and the Gates Foundation. ORC offers an opportunity to manage the publishing processes in an entirely open manner and with researchers in the driving seat of the process. If more policy research funders and national research funders used the service, it could revolutionise social science with important effects on think tanks.

Greater collaboration between think tanks across countries and regions. Regional and global challenges can only be addressed by common agendas and collaboration.

Enrique Mendizabal

My top pick for 2018 is **the new model for think tank communications by We Are Flint,** a London based communications consultancy. Whereas the old fashioned policy communications model was centred around a research report, a 21st century model focuses on the research story. Yes!

In 2019 I hope to see more research and communications think tankers working together on all aspects of a policy research project, from planning and design to outreach and influence. We each bring different skills to the table and we need both, from start to finish, for effective policy engagement.

Louise Ball

Carey Doberstein's paper **The Credibility Chasm in Policy Research from Academics, Think Tanks, and Advocacy Organizations** – it provides groundbreaking evidence on the importance of the source of an idea for policymakers, and the credibility think tanks still need to build among them.

I would be especially interested in the trajectory of the concept of '**Green New Deal**' in the think tank world. I remember hearing about it briefly in the months after the economic crisis, but only now it seems to be gathering traction.

Marcos Gonzalez Hernando

THERE'S MORE!

My top pick of the year is **Andrea Ordoñez' keynote speech at the last day at the TTI Exchange 2018**. It was eye-opening and empowering to hear her say 'we tend to see research that comes from the North as universal, while ideas that are coming from the South tend to be portrayed as only contextual or particular.' Her call to action 'the time is ripe for southern perspectives' will be one of my drivers in 2019.

I hope for a couple of things in 2019. First an increase in southern perspectives, and not only on the development issues the world faces but on evidence-informed policy more broadly. Evidence and informed discussions are struggling all over the world, and the rise of leaders who alter evidence in ways not previously seen is a worrying trend. So perhaps in 'Southern' perspectives we can find novel ways to deal with these issues. Additionally, I also hope for the continued rise of female thinktankers until this traditionally male space is more balanced. Work on the **Open Think Tank Directory** has shown that there is still ground to cover, but that the balance is steadily shifting.

Andrea Baertl

The foundation of the think tank "**Ponto**" in Austria (OTT WinterSchool 2018 alumni Ninja Bumann).

More grassroots initiatives.

Luca Brunner

I do think what the publication quartz are doing is pretty innovative (particularly their app which tailors to the readers preferences in a whatsapp style way). Also, **the D.C. Department of Forensic Sciences' annual report for 2017.**

I think there's more to be explored on information overload and how to combat that, especially as it seems to have struck a real chord given the feedback to **my blog**. Also - how to better embed learning from the behavioural sciences into communications (and make it more mainstream for the think tank sector).

Caroline Cassidy

The work of MediaTank Productions on the **#WeHaveRights project** with Brooklyn Defender Services & the ACLU. Not only an important piece, but a pretty awesome example of the power of audiovisual content. Also (and I know I am biased here!), I was pretty stoked about the launch of the **Open Think Tank Directory**.

An honest involvement of the public and new audiences in the discussion. I've heard it a couple of times this year (sometimes controversially): it's time for thinktankers to get off their high-horses and stop valuing only the contributions of their peers and political elites.

Erika Perez-Leon

AND MORE!

Robin Niblett's **speech on the future of think tanks**. I think he pretty much nailed many of the questions we need to address, especially in regards to communications and showed real leadership on this issue.

Clear strategic choices made around public engagement and promoting progressive values – leading to better targeted communications products.

John Schwartz

We Have Rights

A focus on multimedia stories that engage audiences with a combination of ideas, poignant narratives about individuals, and data.

Michael Kleiman

The end of the **Think Tank Initiative** is an important fact for those who have been part of that community in a way or another. The **TTI Exchange** in Bangkok showed that there is the willingness to build on the last 10 years' work and there is potential for more collaboration among Southern think tanks.

I'd like to see more debate on how political parties and think tanks can better interact to strengthen the programmatic capacity of political forces and thus the quality of public debate and public policies.

Leandro Echt

I'm interested in **Nesta's States of Change** seeking to embed new innovation behaviours in the public sector in Australia.

I'd like to see think tanks connect with society, not just through interest groups but more directly. To inform greater flow of knowledge in both directions that can inform policy. What if think tanks became alleys to helping the public's voice be heard on important issues?

Melanie Rayment

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab because it is a perfect example of a think tank attempting to solve a very real and pressing societal issue.

I'd like to see funders require specific communications outcomes as part of investments into programmes. And more substantial than vanity metrics e.g. likes, follows, views, AVE.

Tom Hashemi

Discovering a **book on interdisciplinarity,** which (finally) put emotion and feeling centre stage. Also, a **blog post** by Chris Mowles on leaders and transformation.

More critical thought given to strategic planning (and planning more generally) and why it is required.

Ajoy Datta

EXPERTS FROM ORGANISATIONS WITH ACRONYMS?

By Stephen Yeo

> '*I think that the people of this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong ...*'
>
> Michael Gove, UK Member of Parliament, June 2016

In many countries, the past two or three years have seen a startling rise in the level of political turbulence. Think tanks are relatively small and fragile actors in the world of politics, and so this turbulence strikes them like a gale force wind. If that were all, then think tanks might be best advised to batten down the hatches and ride out the storm. But the challenge goes much deeper, striking think tanks' legitimacy as political actors. Think tanks need to craft a response: business as usual is not really an option.

First, it helps to understand what has caused the present turbulence? In the editorial to the OTT Review 2018, Enrique Mendizabal attributes the political storm to disappointment and frustration with the ways in which governments handled the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. This is a common explanation. But it may be too simple because it ignores the steady rise in the inequality of income and wealth in many countries since the 1970s. It may also give too little weight to the dramatic changes in the nature of the global economy, in particular the rise of China and India and the economic and political upheavals this has brought with it. These upheavals are partly related to the process of globalisation, and partly to technological change (with more to come). The result is stress on the body politic in many developed countries, and the reaction to this stress has often had malign consequences. Technology, in particular increasing connectivity and the rise of social media, has clearly played a role in amplifying the turbulence and accelerating its spread.

Another factor, less often discussed, is the 'hollowing out' of politics following the consensus on the primacy of markets after the 1980s. There was widespread agreement that policy should let markets 'do their work' with government's role reduced to providing, at most, a regulatory framework to guide the markets. Regulation is, however, usually highly technical in nature and is therefore delegated to independent agencies, staffed by technocrats, who are given goals and left to pursue them as they think best. This leaves little for the political process to do: all the action is in the independent agencies, be they central banks or telecoms regulators. In many ways this development was very congenial for think tanks, because much of policymaking is delegated to technocratic experts, who think tanks love talking to. But whatever the economic case for this approach to policymaking, the impact on the political process does not seem to have been very healthy, as other (and often more divisive) issues have filled the vacuum left by the delegation of policymaking to technocrats.

> *Regulation is, however, usually highly technical in nature and is therefore delegated to independent agencies, staffed by technocrats, who are given goals and left to pursue them as they think best.*

Which of these theories is correct? The truth is that we don't really know. It may be some time before the dust settles and we have a clear picture of what has really happened and why.

Think tanks are small players in the political world, and nothing they do is likely to have much effect on the turbulence, or its sources. Does this mean they can ignore the turbulence? No. Quite the opposite. It has important implications for all aspects of their strategy and operations, from initiating and carrying out policy analysis (and who to involve) to communicating evidence (and who to communicate it to).

Most of the responses discussed so far involve giving much more emphasis to engaging with 'the public,' and much less emphasis to interactions with 'experts.' 'Public engagement' is an apt description, as well as the theme of this year's OTT Review. Enrique Mendizabal's editorial sets out a straightforward version of this approach:

> '*The public demands captivating narratives, guidance rather than instructions, nuanced yet simply communicated arguments and opportunities to engage as equals. In exchange, they will offer think tanks the support they need to regain the centre stage in evidence-informed*

policy debates, they will help communicate their ideas across society, and they will award them a new dose of credibility.'

This is an appealing suggestion, and it is hard to think of any reason why a think tank should not behave in this way. But on its own, it seems unlikely to prove a sufficient response. The problem with 'captivating narratives' is that stories based on fiction are almost always more captivating than stories based on fact. Narratives based on lies spread quickly, much more quickly than those based on evidence. In a battle of narratives, think tanks fight with one hand tied behind their back. The approach also seems to rest on an implicit assumption that the average member of 'the public' is willing to engage with a wide range of policy issues on a day to day basis. This seems implausible – we all prefer to delegate tasks that don't interest us to specialists (our cars to mechanics, our health to doctors and so on). The notion that a large proportion of the public are willing to spend significant amounts of time (and mental energy) engaging in policy discussions seems to fly in the face of experience. Lukas Hupfer takes a similar approach in his article describing the 'Policy Kitchen,' an online tool created by *foraus.* The approach starts from the premise that 'the public needs to be involved at all stages of research,' but the process begins with 'a diverse network of global thinkers.' And the public involved in using the tool seem to opt in to the system based on their interests, expertise and previous involvement with *foraus*, and it is not so clear how representative they are of the public at large

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John Schwartz and Joe Miller from Soapbox, in their article on 'the interested public at large,' offer a very lucid discussion of public engagement, noting that it should be seen not merely as a means to an end, helping think tanks bolster their credibility and legitimacy, but as an important end in itself. They endorse the views of the Director of Chatham House:

> '*the route to social progress runs through the participation of an informed population. Peace, prosperity, democracy and sustainability require civic debate around ideas and evidence.*'

Accordingly, one of their aims for public engagement is 'widening the ways that the public can participate in research, increasing the reach of our content and increasing capacity to moderate and

engage with this participation.' But here too it is not entirely clear in practice who from among the public will participate. There is a reference to a (very interesting) Chatham House project, the 'Commission on Technology and Democracy' but the project seems to kick off with a panel of experts to structure the debate and then draw in others by 'reaching out to anyone and everyone who can help.'

If individual citizens don't have the time or inclination to become deeply involved in issues of public policy, they may delegate this to an institution they trust.

Other approaches are possible, and some of them are featured in this Review. One obvious strategy is instead of trying to recruit individual members of the public, think tanks should engage with actors whose mission is to 'represent' the public in some way that is relevant to the policy issue under consideration. Such actors might include NGOs, social movements, trade unions or even political parties. If individual citizens don't have the time or inclination to become deeply involved in issues of public policy, they may delegate this to an institution they trust. On the face of it, this seems like a promising strategy, and the article by Andrea Baertl, reporting on joint work between OTT and the Open Society Foundations, focuses on how think tanks and social movements can collaborate.

Another unconventional, but highly promising approach to public engagement is the work done by think tanks to support the formal electoral process. There are a range of roles that think tanks can play: from providing evidence and information to fact-checking claims made by candidates during their campaigns, to helping organise debates between the competing parties. This is nicely described by Louise Ball and Leandro Echt in their article in this Review, which draws lessons from a set of case studies carried out by OTT and GrupoFaro. The experience of the 2011 and 2015 elections in Argentina suggests that think tanks need patience, perseverance (and a bit of luck) to carry this off, but if offers them a chance 'to step forward as the link between policy, evidence and the public.'

Another, and perhaps even more promising, option is engagement with citizen juries or citizen assemblies who play a growing role in the formal processes of developing new policies and seeking legislative approval for them. This is the subject of a fascinating **recent report** by the Alliance for Useful Evidence on 'mini-publics' – another way to connect the public with evidence. Citizens are randomly chosen to examine a policy issue. They meet in small groups and have the chance to interrogate experts

in the field in question before making their recommendations. The report by the Alliance for Useful Evidence tries to draw lessons from eight case studies of mini-publics: one is that mini-publics 'need to get smarter in their use of experts and evidence,' giving more emphasis to 'systematic reviews that look at all the available evidence, presented in a fair and accessible way.' There is clearly a role for think tanks here, and perhaps we will hear more about it in the 2019 Review.

THANK YOU

Perhaps the most significant development in 2018 has been the strengthening of our partnerships. The following years will be shaped by these relationships as we work in tandem with them to continue to deliver our mission.

We want to thank everyone who has contributed to making 2018 an outstanding year at OTT – it is your continued support that allows us to deliver our mission and to explore new ways to produce knowledge for the think tank community.

A huge thank you to the 61 authors on the platform this year and, especially, to our 9,000+ monthly users. We hope to continue providing research, ideas and advice with your support.

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We would also like to thank the contributors to this review:

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