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POLICY PAPER

THINK TANK PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECT





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A Policy Paper by CSIS Indonesia

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This research is cofunded by the European
Union's Horizon 2020 research and
innovation programme under the Marie
Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No
873119.

The CSIS Policy Paper is a means by
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The author(s) welcome comments on
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Background

Think tanks, also known as policy research institutes, play a crucial role in shaping public policy through research, analysis, and advocacy. As defined by Stone (2007), a think tank is an organization that engages experts in studying specific policy areas or a broad range of policy issues while actively advising policymakers and educating the public through multiple channels. Think tanks serve as an essential bridge between knowledge and policy, providing valuable insights based on empirical evidence. Their function extends beyond advising policymakers, as they also strive to engage the broader public. However, one of the primary challenges they face is effectively reaching and influencing public discourse in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The advancement of digital technology has transformed the way think tanks communicate and engage with stakeholders. Digital platforms present unprecedented opportunities for disseminating research findings on a global scale, overcoming traditional barriers of time and space. The digital era facilitates more efficient advocacy strategies, enabling think tanks to reach broader audiences with minimal logistical constraints. Social media, websites, online reports, and interactive content have become essential tools in enhancing public engagement and promoting evidence-based policymaking. These advancements allow for direct interaction with policymakers, researchers, journalists, and the general public, fostering a more participatory approach to policy discussions.

It is also important to decide on the most effective digital communication platform and define a strategy for combating misinformation and disinformation. The proliferation of false narratives and manipulated content on digital platforms poses a significant risk to public discourse. Studies have shown that audiences' behaviour has shifted due to digital technology, with a preference for interactive, shareable content (Connery, 2015; Dwivedi, 2021). Instead of passively consuming information, users increasingly seek platforms that allow them to engage, comment, and share their perspectives.

This shift requires think tanks to adopt communication formats that facilitate dialogue and encourage meaningful interactions rather than relying solely on one-way dissemination. Furthermore, research by the World Bank indicates that approximately one-third of its reports published in PDF format had never been downloaded (2014). This suggests that merely making research accessible online does not guarantee engagement. The reason was partly that busy policymakers and average citizens are often *too busy* to dive deeply into an academic paper or publication uploaded on the website (2015), highlighting the need for think tanks to adapt their communication strategies to become more appealing and attract an audience to engage. Today's audiences expect information

to reach them rather than actively searching for it. Therefore, digital strategies must incorporate concise messaging, visual storytelling, and interactive formats to capture and maintain audience interest.

Despite the advantages, the adoption of digital communication in think tanks is fraught with challenges. Scott (2020) highlights challenges in measuring the effectiveness of digital communication. Think tanks must find ways to evaluate their outreach success and translate complex policy research into accessible digital content. Furthermore, for Think Tank, digital engagement is not merely about keeping pace with technological advancements or managing digital tools, software, and platforms. It requires a well-designed communication strategy tailored to think tanks' unique objectives and contexts. Unlike corporations or media organizations, whose primary goal may be profit maximization or mass entertainment, Think tanks aim to educate and influence public policy. This distinction requires a specialized approach to digital communication that aligns with their research-driven missions. Think Tank should be able to design its digital communication to ensure that research findings resonate with diverse audiences. Simplifying complex ideas while maintaining intellectual rigour is a key challenge that think tanks must navigate in their digital transformation journey. Think tanks must discover strategies to ensure that the public and policymakers are exposed to diverse and rich information on important public policy issues.

Beyond technical considerations—such as the capacity to acquire digital technology, infrastructure choices, and technology selection—an equally crucial aspect of digital adoption for public outreach is the organisational dimension. This includes: 1. An alignment between the organisational vision and mission with the organization's digital communication development. 2. The place of the digital communication unit (DCU) within the organization structure. 3. Resource allocation for the DCU development. The alignment between the DCU development and the organisation's vision and mission is worth discussing, as digital communication plays an important role in the organizations. The strategy for digital communication should be directly linked to the organisation's broader objectives, ensuring coherence between research priorities and public engagement efforts. At the same time, the placement of the DCU determines its level of autonomy, scope of work, and interaction with other departments. Balancing between a centralized approach and providing a certain degree of autonomy for the DCU is important. In addition, resource allocation for the unit is crucial for ensuring the scalability and impact of digital communication initiatives. Funding, staffing, and technological investments are included in the resources.

This paper will focus on the key organisational considerations while also examining the primary challenges think tanks face in integrating and utilising digital platforms effectively. By analysing the interplay between technological advancements and organisational strategies, the study aims to provide insights into how think tanks can navigate the complexities of the digital era while maintaining their role as trusted sources of policy expertise. Without considering the organisational aspect, the adoption of digital strategies may lack direction, struggle with inefficiencies, and fail to maximise the institution's influence in public policy and research dissemination. It is also important to identify bottlenecks and develop strategies for overcoming internal and external challenges in adopting digital public communication.

Think Tank Policy on the Use of Digital Communication Platforms

A well-defined vision and mission are fundamental to the operations and management of any organization. A vision statement outlines the overarching purpose and aspirations of the organization, articulating its long-term objectives and the direction it seeks to take. Conversely, a mission statement defines the organization's core activities, objectives, and strategies for achieving its goals. These elements provide a foundation for setting clear and measurable objectives that guide the organization's initiatives and programs. Objectives and goals, in turn, are specific, actionable targets that can be translated into measurable activities and programs, ensuring the organization's strategic direction is effectively implemented.

For an organization to function efficiently, its members must have a clear understanding of its vision, mission, objectives, and goals. These components serve as guiding principles that shape decision-making, strategy formulation, and operational execution. Employees and stakeholders should be aware of their roles within the organizational framework, understand their targets and assignments, and be motivated to contribute to the broader mission. When employees align their personal motivations with the organization's purpose, they are more likely to be engaged, committed, and productive. The clarity in vision and mission not only enhances motivation but also fosters a shared sense of purpose and direction, ultimately benefiting both the organization and its workforce. The adoption and implementation of digital communication strategies must also be aligned with the organization's vision, mission, objectives, and goals. A well-structured digital communication plan should support the organization's purpose, values, and long-term aspirations, ensuring coherence, credibility, and impact.

Think tanks, as distinct entities with a unique role in evidence-based policymaking, must tailor their digital strategies to support policy advocacy, influence decision-making, and drive policy change. Effective digital communication enables think tanks to disseminate research findings, policy recommendations, and thought leadership to a broader audience through various digital channels, including publications, seminars, and online dialogues.

Digital communication should not be treated as an isolated function but rather as an integrated component of the organization's outreach and influence strategy. The organization's mission should serve as the primary driver for selecting digital platforms, developing content, defining target audiences, and ensuring messaging consistency. By aligning digital efforts with its mission, an organization can enhance its ability to communicate its purpose, maintain credibility, and achieve long-term impact.

Several key factors highlight the significance of an organization's vision and mission in shaping its digital communication strategies. Firstly, strategic alignment is essential. The organization's vision and mission define its core objectives and intended impact, and digital communication strategies must reinforce these objectives. Every piece of online content and every engagement effort should contribute to the organization's broader purpose. For instance, a think tank focusing on policy research should prioritize knowledge dissemination and policy influence through well-researched articles, expert interviews, and data-driven insights. At the same time, a nonprofit organization might leverage digital communication to advocate for policy changes and mobilize support for social causes. Without clear alignment, digital communication risks becoming fragmented, inconsistent, or detached from the organization's fundamental goals.

Secondly, maintaining consistency in messaging. A mission statement provides a framework for how an organization presents itself across various digital platforms. Clearly defining an organization's mission ensures that messaging remains consistent, preventing contradictions that could confuse stakeholders or undermine credibility. Whether through official websites, social media platforms, newsletters, or webinars, digital communication efforts must reflect a unified message, tone, and set of values. This consistency builds trust, enhances brand recognition, and strengthens the organization's authority within its field.

Thirdly, effective audience engagement. Digital platforms should be leveraged to meaningfully engage target audiences through informative content, interactive discussions, and collaborative initiatives. Organizations with a well-defined mission can tailor their engagement strategies to resonate with their audiences, ensuring that their digital presence fosters dialogue, mobilizes stakeholders, and facilitates knowledge exchange. For Think tanks, this means translating complex research findings into accessible formats such as infographics, policy briefs, and explainer videos that can reach diverse audiences and drive meaningful policy discussions.

Internally, aligning an organization's digital communication efforts with its overarching goals requires a well-structured internal communication system. Clear communication ensures that all members of the organization understand and support the digital strategy, fostering a cohesive approach to its implementation. According to Putro (2023), effective communication is essential for translating an organization's vision, mission, and strategy into actionable steps for its members. To secure internal buy-in for digital adoption initiatives, organizations must regularly update their members on progress, provide training on digital tools, and encourage active participation in digital engagement efforts.

Embracing digital communication is not merely about adapting to technological advancements; it is a strategic necessity for organizations seeking to enhance their outreach, influence, and impact in the digital age. By ensuring that digital communication strategies are aligned with an organization's vision, mission, and long-term objectives, think tanks and other organizations can maintain coherence, credibility, and effectiveness in their engagement efforts.

Digital Communication Unit Within Organizational Structure

The establishment of a Digital Communication Unit (DCU) or Knowledge Management (KM) unit is crucial as it enables Think tanks to amplify their message, strengthen policy advocacy, and foster meaningful connections with stakeholders. In the long term, this could strengthen think tanks' positions in an increasingly digital world. The specific task of DCU or KM is translating complex policy research into accessible content, managing digital branding and advocacy campaigns, maintaining the organization's online presence, and building digital capacity. However, the effectiveness of the DCU is significantly shaped by its position within the organizational structure, which dictates its authority, autonomy, and interaction with other units.

Organisational structure defines how tasks are allocated, coordinated, and controlled to achieve institutional objectives. Child (1972) describes it as the formal distribution of work roles and the administrative mechanisms used to integrate activities, including those that extend beyond formal boundaries. It determines how information flows within an organization, influencing efficiency, communication, and resource distribution (Aponte & Zapata, 2013; Bloom, 2010). In line with other scholars, Zerilli (1978) stated that the structure reflects the formal scheme of relationships, communications, decision processes, procedures and systems. Turi and Soroosian (2019) outline that organizational structure covers relationships, communication, decision-making, and procedural frameworks that support an institution's functions. According to Germain (1996), organizational structure also impacts productivity and innovation. Additionally, the structure facilitates the identification of knowledge sources, impacting the organization's ability to adapt, learn, and innovate (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

1. *Function and Authority*

Assessing the DCU's position within the organisational structure is crucial for understanding its functions and authority. The structure of the organisation dictates DCU's function for managing and distributing knowledge. It influences the organisation's ability to manage communication strategy and digital engagement, reach the public and shape public policy. The placement of a DCU within a think tank's hierarchy determines its authority, decision-making power, and coordination with other units. Centralised and decentralised structures influence DCU operations differently. If the DCU is positioned too low in the hierarchy, the DCU may lack the authority to influence strategic decisions or research priorities. It may seem like a technical support unit rather than a strategic partner in shaping the think tank's outreach. This is worsened by competing priorities within the Think tank, which place research and researchers as a priority, whilst communication and outreach are placed as a supporting system. Because of these

issues, the unit may struggle to enforce digital-first strategies without strong backing from leadership.

In a centralised organization structure, DCU or Knowledge Management (KM) operates under strict oversight from executive leadership, ensuring message consistency and alignment with institutional goals. However, this structure may reduce flexibility and responsiveness to emerging digital trends. A centralized structure ensures control and consistency but may limit creativity. In a centralised organization, the DCU often needs approval from senior management before implementing campaigns, publishing content, or responding to crises. This bureaucratic process can lead to delays in communication, making it difficult to react quickly to public relations crises, digital trends, or real-time engagement opportunities. The unit may also struggle to integrate with other departments, as centralised structures often silo functions, making collaboration with policy, marketing, or research teams more difficult.

Meanwhile, in a decentralised structure, DCU or KM grants more autonomy and fosters creativity and innovation. Autonomy is referred to as the degree of self-determination in how DCU or KM undertake public communication. To perform such roles, the DCU / KM needs sufficient freedom to pursue solutions to new problems. The objective is to improve work in an environment where new ideas are permitted and encouraged. Thus, it allows the unit to be more agile in responding to digital developments. However, as a decentralized organization, the DCU also faces challenges, such as enforcing unified branding, messaging, and content standards across multiple teams, making it difficult to maintain a strong and coherent organisational identity. Furthermore, without a centralized oversight mechanism, different departments might use contradictory narratives, which may lead to inconsistencies, weakening the organization's credibility and public trust.

To optimise its effectiveness, the DCU must balance institutional oversight and creative autonomy. A decentralised structure requires clear policies to maintain alignment with the institution's mission. A successful structure should ensure coherent authority while allowing for adaptability in digital strategy. Furthermore, it should mitigate digital risks by integrating security protocols into its operations.

In Indonesia, the DCU or KM is typically placed under executive leadership, following directives while maintaining some autonomy in executing tasks. This arrangement results in a more centralised structure, where decisions are top-down, but implementation is flexible within given parameters. Think tanks in developed countries such as Germany use a hybrid approach by balancing control and flexibility. The digital communication Unit

is more autonomous. It is managed through a blend of centralized oversight and decentralized execution.

2. *Interunit Relations and Collaboration*

Another important structural aspect is the interaction between the DCU and other units. Each unit in the organisation serves a different function and role, but they all serve the same organisational goals and objectives. The structure defines interactions between the DCU and other units, which influence the communication processes and the social interaction between organisational members. Interactions among different units reflect formal relationships, communications flows, and coordination systems that are crucial for organizational operations. The relationship between Digital Communication Units (DCUs) and other units within an organization significantly determines their ability to fulfil their role effectively.

Given that digital communication intersects with multiple functions—public relations, marketing, policy, and crisis management—coordination among units is essential to ensure consistency, efficiency, and credibility in external messaging. A well-integrated DCU with other organisational units facilitates effective knowledge dissemination, while a poorly structured one may struggle with limited influence or conflicting priorities.

Tushman and Nadler (1978) emphasise the need for an appropriate configuration of work units and linkages to ensure efficient information collection, processing, and dissemination. Additionally, it determines how information and knowledge are shared, impacting efficiency, resource distribution, communication, and social interaction within the organisation. Without such coordination, inconsistencies in public statements or digital campaigns can weaken the organisation's credibility and effectiveness.

Alignment among the organisation units facilitates seamless information flow and strategic alignment. Effective coordination mechanisms, such as cross-departmental meetings, shared digital platforms, and unified communication strategies, help prevent contradictions in messaging and enhance institutional coherence. An integrated structure, where the DCU operates as a central hub for communication, ensures that messaging is aligned with the organisation's broader goals while addressing the specific needs of different units. This integration can reduce duplication of efforts, optimise resource allocation, and improve responsiveness in crises.

In the organisation structure, DCU or KM could function as a mediator to avoid conflicting interests among units. Differences in priorities, branding strategies, or information disclosure policies of each unit can impede the effectiveness of digital communication. The DCU must navigate these tensions by aligning various interests through clearly

defined protocols, institutional guidelines, and leadership directives. Establishing an overarching communication framework can help resolve disputes over messaging control while ensuring that all units contribute their expertise without compromising organisational cohesion.

However, coordination issues occur when the DCU is viewed as an outsider unit, leading to difficulties in obtaining timely research updates or aligning messaging with researchers. Researchers may view collaboration with the DCU as unnecessary. Furthermore, researchers may resist adapting their findings into simplified digital-friendly formats (infographics, podcasts, videos). Weak coordination between researchers and the DCU can negatively impact the quality and effectiveness of dissemination and outreach efforts for research findings. In this case, meetings between DCU and researchers should be conducted regularly to enhance mutual collaboration. Collaboration and coordination among different units are also necessary to support resource optimisation. An integrated structure benefits all units by pooling resources—such as digital tools, analytics, and content expertise—leading to more effective and resource-efficient communication. For instance, research departments can provide substantive content while the DCU ensures accessibility and engagement through optimised digital formats. Marketing and PR teams can amplify messaging, while crisis management teams can leverage digital communication channels for rapid response. By fostering inter-unit collaboration, organisations can create a robust communication ecosystem where the DCU not only disseminates information but also supports and enhances the broader strategic objectives of all units. This synergy ultimately leads to improved operational efficiency, enhanced reputation management, and a more resilient organisation in the digital era.

3. Support and Resource Optimization

Digital communication is resource-intensive, requiring investment in technology, personnel, training, and content creation. Many think tanks operate under financial constraints, the challenge lies in balancing these resource needs with their broader strategic priorities, such as research, advocacy, and stakeholder engagement. Given budgetary constraints and competing demands, think tanks must allocate resources strategically to ensure that digital communication effectively supports their mission without undermining financial sustainability.

Think tanks usually only spend 1% of their budget on DCU. In some cases, digital communication budgets are weighed against competing priorities like research and policy engagement. The resources allocated will, in turn, define the role and significance of digital communication within the organisation. The low budget makes DCU understaffed, with only 1–2 people expected to manage an entire communication strategy. Due to lower salary competitiveness, think tanks faced difficulty hiring skilled

digital professionals. However, digital communication is vital for enhancing policy influence and stakeholder engagement, making it an essential rather than a secondary function.

A structured approach to resource allocation is essential in determining the funding and staffing required for a Digital Communication Unit (DCU). Proper planning helps ensure that the chosen technological tools and platforms align with the think tank's needs while optimising outreach and engagement. Several key considerations influence the allocation of resources to the DCU:

Prioritization in Budget Allocation

Think tanks should align digital communication investments with their mission. If outreach and policy impact are central goals, digital communication should receive proportional funding. Digital investments should be sustainable, integrating digital strategies with core activities rather than treating them as separate initiatives. Digital communication should complement, rather than replace, existing outreach efforts.

3.1. Overcoming Technical and Financial Barriers

The digital landscape evolves rapidly, necessitating continuous investment in updated software, social media analytics, cybersecurity, and multimedia capabilities. Technical barriers, such as network disruptions or software instability, can hinder effective communication and workflow efficiency. Budget constraints further complicate digital adoption. Think tanks, particularly in Indonesia, have adopted three key strategies to address these challenges: Firstly, selective technology adoption – instead of adopting every new technology, think tanks focus on tools that align with their objectives and audience engagement. Secondly, Cost-Effective Digital Formats – experiment with low-cost digital formats (e.g., podcasts and newsletters) before committing to expensive multimedia production. Utilizing open-source software and prioritizing tools that enhance content distribution and stakeholder engagement over costly, experimental technologies. Thirdly, Leveraging Automation and Open-Source Solutions – Implementing automation and using open-source digital tools can enhance efficiency while minimizing expenses.

3.2. Capacity Building Through External Support

Building internal expertise in digital communication requires training, which often incurs additional costs. However, digital platform companies such as Google and Meta frequently provide free capacity-building programs. These initiatives include research funding, digital literacy programs, and training workshops, which can significantly

enhance think tanks' digital capabilities without additional financial strain. While such support offers valuable resources, it raises concerns about independence and potential influence. Some critics argue that platform companies may subtly shape research agendas to align with their interests, potentially downplaying certain risks associated with digital platforms. Think tanks must remain vigilant and committed to maintaining their independence while engaging in such partnerships.

By adopting a well-structured, cost-conscious approach, think tanks can maximise the impact of digital communication while ensuring that resources are efficiently distributed across all strategic functions. Digital strategies should be integrated into the core mission, focusing on sustainability, stakeholder engagement, and policy influence. Ultimately, a balanced approach allows think tanks to harness digital tools effectively without compromising their broader research and advocacy goals.

Conclusion

The Digital Communication Unit (DCU) plays a vital role in maintaining a think tank's visibility and credibility by effectively communicating its research to the public and policymakers. As the organisation seeks to manage public communication through digital technologies, the DCU must deliver a coherent and unified message to ensure that all external communication reflects a consistent voice, reinforcing the organization's authority and trustworthiness. In contrast, fragmented communication from different units can lead to confusion, diminish trust, and weaken the organization's influence.

The effectiveness of the DCU is not solely determined by technology, tools and human capacity but, more importantly, by its ability to align with and execute the organization's vision, mission, and strategic objectives. The DCU's position within the organizational structure significantly impacts its role, authority, and ability to function effectively both externally and internally. A well-integrated DCU facilitates seamless internal communication, ensuring that information flows efficiently across different units. Therefore, because the Digital Communication Unit is as important as the research unit, the establishment should be part of the organization strategy with clear job descriptions, well aligned with organizational structures and other units and must receive sufficient budget and support.

To optimize its performance, the organisation must establish Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that provide clear guidelines on communication strategies, workflow processes, and engagement protocols. These SOPs will enhance consistency, efficiency, and accountability, enabling the DCU to operate smoothly, align with organizational goals, and respond swiftly to digital challenges. Regular reviews and capacity-building efforts will further strengthen the unit's adaptability and effectiveness in an evolving digital landscape.

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