CHAPTER

11

From perception to objectivity: How think tanks' search for credibility may lead to a more rigorous assessment of research quality

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Introduction

Academic research is undergoing a transformation across the world. Few are the research communities where the pressure to achieve and, most importantly, to demonstrate non-academic impact, is not on the rise (Villanueva and Mendizabal 2016). In some cases, this pressure is regulated and part of national science and education policies. In other cases, where domestic funding for research is wanting, this pressure is enforced by changes in the international development sector which have focused greater attention on measures of value for money and impact.

However, this pressure to have and demonstrate impact has not been matched by changes in the academic sector or, more practically, in the way that universities generate and communicate evidence. By and large, researchers in universities are still judged, for better or for worse, by publication in top academic journals which have only a relatively small effect on non-academic impact. This raises several dilemmas that universities face globally, including in relation to their intended roles in society.

In this chapter, it is put forward that think tanks, which are more often than not judged by a subjective assessment of their credibility, rather than the objective assessment of the quality of their research, offer a rich portfolio of alternatives for universities interested in maximising the non-academic impact of their research. Whether by adopting some of their practices or working in partnership with them, universities may have their cake and eat it, too. In other words, influence a layperson and inspire the experts. Research excellence need not be compromised.

This is partly because, as I argue, think tanks are beginning to successfully establish closer, deeper and more sustainable relationships with multiple (and often new) audiences in a quest to gain credibility. In these new relationships, it is possible to pay greater attention to more objective indicators of quality.

However, to achieve this, it is first necessary to understand research excellence from the perspective of think tanks and, then, consider how different forms of communication for impact may be employed.

It is not my intention to argue that universities ought to be more like think tanks. Nor is it to advocate for a narrow understanding of research that focuses on providing solutions to the questions posed by others – policy-makers, businesses, etc. I am also not suggesting that all universities are equal and I recognise rich regional and national heritages that explain the diversity of the sector across the world. This is diversity, if also found among think tanks. Yet, in almost every context, think tanks and universities overlap and define themselves in relation to each other.

The interaction between think tanks and universities makes it possible for the latter to learn from the former and adopt certain practices that may help them address, in particular, the challenge of assessing the quality of the research.

In the next section, I explore the concept of think tanks, research excellence and credibility to situate it in relation to academic research centres. In the following section, I consider some research and communication strategies that think tanks are pursuing which promote the development of trust with their different audiences. Finally, I put forward a series of implications for research centres and researchers.

Background

Think whats?

The literature on think tanks is heavily influenced by the notion of *waves* or *traditions* put forward most prominently by Diane Stone (Stone and Denham, 2004; Belletini 2007). The former refers to three waves of think tank development: from a few state-centric centres (often set up by governments themselves), to more diverse think tank communities with greater links outside the government and national borders, to, finally, a situation where think tanks are, in essence, acting transnationally.

The concept of traditions refers to regional or national characteristics or development moments that may be helpful in the study of think tanks. Various authors have adopted these ideas: such as Orazio Bellettini, James McGann, and even I, for instance, with Ajoy Datta and Nicola Jones (Mendizabal et al. 2010). However, these notions do not fit nicely with what we find in reality: it is possible to find countless examples of stark differences between think tanks in the same regions and countries –as well as similarities between them across diverse contexts. In a review of think tanks in Latin America, I found several co-existing traditions depending on the origin of the organisations (Mendizabal 2012): be it from non-governmental organisations, academia, the government or other public bodies, and aid-funded projects or networks, for instance.

Moreover, the idea of development *waves*, particularly the suggestion that think tanks are now acting transnationally – more so today than they ever did – more closely reflects the reality of think tanks in developed nations than in developing ones. It also contradicts the evidence: Chinese think tanks, from their very beginning, have been oriented to learning about the world outside China (Mendizabal 2016); Chilean think tanks would not have been possible without support from foreign funders, universities and think tanks (Puryear 1994); and the metaphors that have inspired and driven the formation of think tanks in developed countries have played central roles in think

tanks' national histories across the developing world. In other words, this transnationality is by no means new.

An alternative to the study of think tanks is to combine these ideas with perspectives of how politics work – and the roles that different political actors, including think tanks, play – within each polity.

This approach yields some interesting results when we look at cases across the world:

- Elitist, statist and pluralist political systems can play key roles even within the same country (and region) over time;
- Individual organisations can also be driven by more than one of these forces throughout their history;
- Waves of formation or development then cannot be expected to follow a particular linear trend – i.e. increased openness or *trans-nationality* – but reflect much more complex internal and external forces at play in the spaces that think tanks inhabit;
- Political and economic liberalisation, often assumed to be drivers of think tank formation and responsible for the so-called second wave, are in fact not necessary conditions for the emergence of think tanks;
- Even during periods of autocratic and military rule, think tanks can find fertile ground to develop – and they may in fact be drivers of change; and
- There are several important similarities between think tanks in extremely diverse contexts, which calls into question the relevance of studying think tanks within geographic regions, or even in the imaginary 'developing world' or the 'Global South'.

Out of this emerges an increasingly rich picture in which no single model of a think tank or a single approach to characterise their research, communication and capacity-building efforts – not even in a single country – easily applies.

As a crude oversimplification (Mendizabal 2013), some think tanks have emerged out of academic environments and follow strict academic rules; ever so eager to see themselves as universities without students.

But academic think tanks are not all the same, either. Some maintain strong connections to universities, often hosted by them; others are membership-based organisations which researchers use as contracting vehicles.

Think tanks have also emerged from advocacy or activist communities and therefore pay greater attention to the communication of existing or new research, partly via the development of narratives and discourses. These are rather common in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, where think tanks emerged from human rights groups and NGO activism around the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are many think tanks based within government that act as boundary workers between the fields of research and politics.

To complicate the picture further, there are also, increasingly, new private sector think tanks founded by consulting firms, large corporations and business groups. They can carry out high-quality research and cutting-edge communication, even if questions about their intellectual autonomy remain.

As a consequence, or as a possible explanation for this diversity, there is no law that regulates what a think tank is – or cannot be. Think tanks exist only as a label that is adopted or rejected for political, economic and social reasons (Medvetz 2012). This has provided think tanks with a great deal of flexibility in their engagement with their environment. They can play different roles in relation to research and its communication, depending on the contexts they face, the issues being addressed, and their own circumstances.

This diversity offers an advantage to think tanks that universities, by and large governed by similar rules across the world and which have emerged under similar patterns, cannot (and should not) exploit.

As a working distinction, though, I draw a dynamic and porous line between think tanks and research centres. The latter I understand to have an academic focus, either because of their location within an academic institution and the academic field or because of the purpose of the organisation.

Research excellence

This diversity presents an obvious challenge: what is the point of searching for a single measure of excellence when the interpretation of this concept is likely to be equally diverse. In developing countries, in particular, where think tanks fulfil roles that other weak institutions fail to (for instance, academia, policy-making bodies, civil society or the media) we would have to consider how excellence is defined by these other institutions, as well.

Can we compare excellence between think tanks undertaking teaching functions that universities fail to deliver, think tanks taking on public education and mass communication campaigns in the absence of credible news media or think tanks that provide policy analysis support to line ministries through consultancy or formal partnership agreements in light of limited policy analysis capacity within the civil service?

This diversity also opens the door to a common critique: think tanks do not care about research excellence, but only about their influence and their sustainability. This is what drives them and their choice of business model, their research agenda and communications strategies. This puts into question the legitimacy of their influence and the means they follow to achieve it. But, is it true that they do not care about excellence?

No think tank director would accept this. Short of asking them, one way to attempt to answer this question is to consider the way in which excellence is perceived by different types of think tanks; acknowledging that the types I will use are simply for illustration purposes and are gross oversimplifications, given the rich diversity mentioned above.

I draw on engagements with think tanks since 2010 through interviews, discussions and advisory work conducted as part of On Think Tanks to develop these perceptions. I also took advantage of the third Think Tank Initiative Exchange, held in Bangkok on 12–14 November 2018 and the third OTT Conference, held in Geneva on 4–7 February 2019 on the subject of public engagement, to discuss issues.

Think tanks with an academic origin or approach, for example, tend to perceive themselves as members of the academic community and are therefore bound to the same criteria of excellence as a research centre. This importance is illustrated in their choice of writing styles, the types of publications they prefer and the criteria they use to judge their performance: including publishing in academic journals, participating in academic conferences and staffing research positions with PhDs (as a proxy for an academic qualification). This is relevant for think tanks such as Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE) in Peru and African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) in Kenya. In evaluation terms, they are mostly concerned with the relationship between inputs (e.g. number of PhDs among their research staff) and outputs (e.g. number of publications of academic quality).

We could describe this as objectively verifiable excellence or what is traditionally recognised as an academic measure of quality. It is objective because there is little need to contextualise the indicators used.

Policy-driven think tanks, which would be comparable to the Anglo-American think tank model that is in most people's minds, but is far less common in developing countries, are far less concerned with academic credentials of excellence and instead seek confirmation that their research is relevant, timely and actionable. This is relevant for think tanks such as the Centre for Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka, Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA) in Nigeria or Grupo Faro in Ecuador. In other words, usefulness is included among the criteria of excellence. In evaluation terms, their focus shifts to the relationship between outputs and outcomes.

Think tanks with a strong membership base or close associations with other civil society groups such as workers' unions, business associations, political parties, grassroots or NGO networks would likely worry about the usefulness and ideological alignment of their research to that specific group. This is, coincidentally, also relevant for think tanks that depend on short-term consultancies from the government, the private sector or aid agencies. They are equally concerned about the alignment of their business models and their outputs to the interests and needs of their audiences.

Therefore, depending on how close they are to different communities (i.e. with academia, with politics and with civil society) and the nature of that relationship, think tanks assess research excellence differently. In consequence, we could argue that the only reason why academic think tanks worry about the robustness of their research methods or the verifiable excellence of their evidence is because that is the kind of thing that their main audiences, other researchers, would care about.

In other words, all think tanks search for is credibility within the communities they belong to or the communities they seek to influence.

Is the quality of the evidence produced by think tanks instrumental in awarding credibility?

The literature suggests that the quality of the research is not instrumental in awarding credibility, and therefore influence. Which does not mean that the quality of the research does not affect the quality of the advice and therefore the outcome of the decision made on the basis of said advice.

Fred Carden's often cited book, *Knowledge to Policy: Making the Most of Development Research*, does not consider the quality of the evidence used – in none of the 23 case studies included in the study (Carden 2009). The explanatory factors are mostly contextual and refer to the demand for evidence. In John Young and Julius Court's review of 50 case studies of policies informed by research, the quality of evidence is addressed only through the lens of the credibility of the evidence presented to policy-makers. 'Relevance – substantive and operational – clearly matters, but does the quality of the research? Although it is difficult to make a comment about the quality of the research in all the cases, the issue of credibility does come out as central' (Young and Court 2003: 16).

This study was one of the first to acknowledge the importance of considering different types of research and adopting a relatively loose definition 'from basic experimentation and social science research to policy analysis and action research' (Young and Court 2003: 9). Thus,

the authors are unable to establish if the objectively verifiable excellence of research has any bearing on whether it is used or not.

Credibility, they argue, is far more important. Unlike the actual quality of the evidence, credibility does have a clear effect on its potential to inform policy. Credible think tanks and researchers gain access to decision-making space; credible evidence is used in the drafting of legislation; and credible policy arguments are adopted by policy-makers.

How is credibility gained?

Is credibility objectively or subjectively constructed?

Credibility is not a condition that can be objectively determined. Instead it is a construct of the interaction between researchers and think tanks with multiple actors and factors, over time, which provides a shared statement of their expertise and trustworthiness (Baertl 2018).

There are several characteristics of the research process that think tanks can control to some extent, including the quality of the data collected; the methods used to gather, store and analyse it; the quality of the writing; the design and publication of reports, etc. Some are more easily confirmed than others. Data quality may only be confirmed after a careful review or through replication studies. In contrast, the clarity in writing is something that any reader may assess on his or her own. However, even this is somewhat subjective; what may be clear to one reader may be impossible to comprehend to another.

In fact, the main factors affecting credibility are subjective and are subject to the judgements of think tanks' audiences: these may be other researchers, policy-makers, expert or epistemic communities, the general public, etc. Andrea Baertl's study on credibility identifies several factors (see Table 1 below), which offer think tank audiences different signals about the organisation, its researchers and its research excellence (Baertl 2018).

The factors mentioned in this overview offer signals of expertise and trustworthiness, the key components of credibility. These signals

Table 1: Factors determining credibility

Factor	Definition	Signals
Networks	Connections, alliances and affiliations that an organisation and its staff and board have.	Expertise Trustworthiness
Past impact	Any effect that a policy research centre has had on policy, practice, media, or academia.	Expertise
Intellectual independence and autonomy	Independence on deciding their research agenda, methods and actions an organisation undertakes.	Trustworthiness
Transparency	Publicly disclosing funding sources, agenda, affiliations, partnerships and conflicts of interests.	Trustworthiness
Credentials and authority	Collected expertise and qualifications that a think tank and its staff have.	Expertise
Communications and visibility	How and how often the think tank communicates with its stakeholders.	Trustworthiness
Research quality	Following research guidelines to produce policy relevant research in which the quality is assured.	Expertise Trustworthiness
Ideology and values	Ideology and values are the set of ideas and values that guide an individual or organisation.	Trustworthiness
Current context	The current setting in which a think tank and its stakeholders are immersed.	Frames the assessment and gives prominence to certain factors

Source: Baertl (2018)

are subjective assessments which are made with limited information, or because of the limited information that audiences have about the organisations, the researchers and their work.

For different think tanks, and depending on specific circumstances, these factors will have varying effects on their credibility. For example, the audiences of academic think tanks may probably pay greater attention to research quality itself, although access to research from an academic think tank is still likely to be mediated by the networks it belongs to and the reputations of the individual researchers. But how likely are they to review and attempt to replicate every research output

published by the think tank – or are they more likely to rely on other signals? Did they use data sources that have been used in previous studies? Was it published in an academic journal? Who are the authors and where did they study?
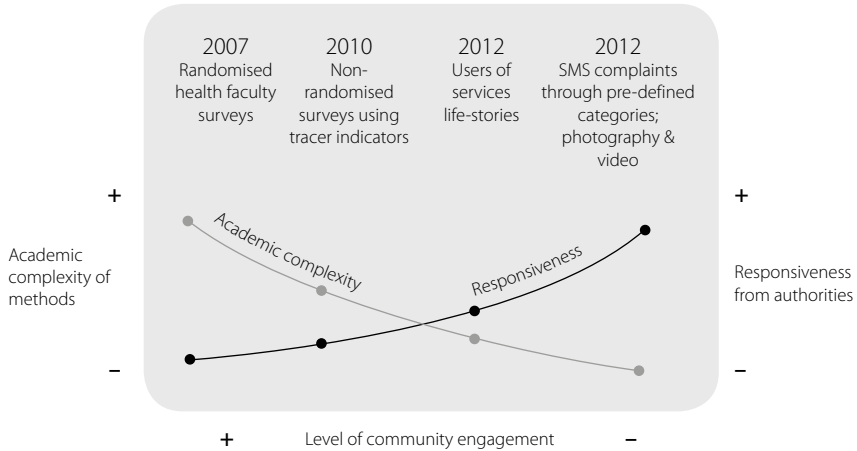
Policy-focused think tanks will probably find that past impact and their values or ideology carry greater weight among politicians, who will no doubt be reassured by the ideological agreement with the premises of the research and the reputation of the researchers. The media will be particularly interested in their communications and visibility and the clarity and consistency of the message.

Ideology is an interesting factor. It can simultaneously confer credibility to a think tank in a community that shares its value and strip it of credibility in a community that doesn't. Andrew Rich's 2004 study of think tanks' visibility and influence in the United States demonstrated how credibility is in the eye of the beholder: when the Democratic Party controlled Congress, the most required think tank by congressional committees was the Brookings Institution; when the Republicans gained control, the Heritage Foundation gained the top spot.

At first glance, the robustness of the research methods used does not play a leading role in the assessment of a think tank's credibility and, therefore, its potential to inform policy.

This is true at different levels. For instance, Walter Flores (2018) found out that there is an inverse relationship between the level of academic complexity of the research methods and the levels of community engagement and responsiveness from the authorities. Figure 1 shows how the Center for the Study of Equity and Governance in Health Systems, in Guatemala, shifted its research methods over time. When it relaxed its research excellence criteria, it found greater engagement from communities and responsiveness from authorities. Flores concludes that:

> In contrast to theories of change that posit that more rigorous evidence will have a greater influence on officials, we have found the opposite to be true. A decade of implementing interventions to try to influence local and regional authorities has taught us that academic rigor itself

Figure 1: Academic complexity versus engagement and responsiveness

is not a determinant of responsiveness. Rather, methods that involve communities in generating and presenting evidence, and that facilitate collective action in the process, are far more influential. The greater the level of community participation, the greater the potential to influence local and regional authorities. (Flores 2018: 12)

Does research quality not matter at all?

The factors put forward by Baertl, the reviews by Carden, and Young and Court, and the case study presented by Flores suggest that the objectively verifiable quality of research does not play a significant role in the construction of credibility and therefore the influence that a think tank may have on policy decisions. But these accounts are snap-shots of a moment in the lifetime of an organisation, a researcher or a single intervention.

These studies have not considered the long-term dynamics of credibility and how it is gained and lost. When we look at think tanks'

efforts to influence policy over time, the objectively verifiable quality of research would take on a greater, albeit limited, role. For example, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) in the United Kingdom (UK) has built, over time, a reputation as the 'umpire' of the British economic debate. Much of this reputation is sustained by its accurate analysis of the budget, which it delivers, year after year, on budget day. Shoddy research would not have allowed it to build a reputation as a credible source of evidence and opinion. However, a BBC Reality Check article which asks: 'Why should we trust the IFS?' fails to mention the quality of its research. The article lists: no party affiliations, multiple funding sources and the high calibre of their researchers.

Another way in which research quality matters is in the quality of the advice it informs.

Opportunities for research and communication

These insights into how think tanks assess their credibility and the relatively low (but not negligible) importance that objective assessments of research excellence have on whether research findings are used or not, present several opportunities for effective communication that some think tanks have been able to exploit. These approaches go beyond post-research communication (they are embedded in everything the organisation does) and maximise the engagement of the think tank with their audiences (maximising the depth and length of such engagement).

In presenting the following approaches to research and communication, I wish to highlight a common ground with the standards of rigour expected from academic research, the implication being that some of these approaches could therefore be adopted without compromising objectively verifiable quality.

In addition, they would enable the assessment of the credibility of research to go beyond the outward facing factors identified by Baertl and allow a more nuanced approach based on more objective criteria of quality. This is possible because all of these approaches have a common, secondary objective: to build trust between think tanks and their various audiences or publics. In doing so, think tanks are able

to establish a relationship that can look beyond subjective notions of credibility (because there is trust already) and focus on more objective assessments of quality.

Organisation-wide branding

John Schwartz, director of the communications firm, Soapbox, has written about the role of branding for research. Soapbox works with think tanks and universities, helping them to communicate recommendations, research findings and even their research practice, itself. In a recent series of articles based on their experience with the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Schwartz (2018) argues that brands help research organisations:

- Become the organisations they aspire to be;
- To own a piece of intellectual and cultural territory; and
- Produce the right kinds of communication for the right audiences.

In an environment saturated by information, research centres need to find new ways to stand out as the most credible sources. This means that every aspect of the organisation's work, from its office space to its research, publications, events and social media, is an opportunity to reinforce its expertise and trustworthiness.

In practice, research centres have left behind the project-specific and ad-hoc communication efforts of the past to instead develop coherent organisation-wide communication strategies. These encourage and nurture a relationship with their audiences which goes beyond specific individuals, research findings or recommendations and encompasses a broader range of services and experiences which maximise an increasingly nuanced engagement.

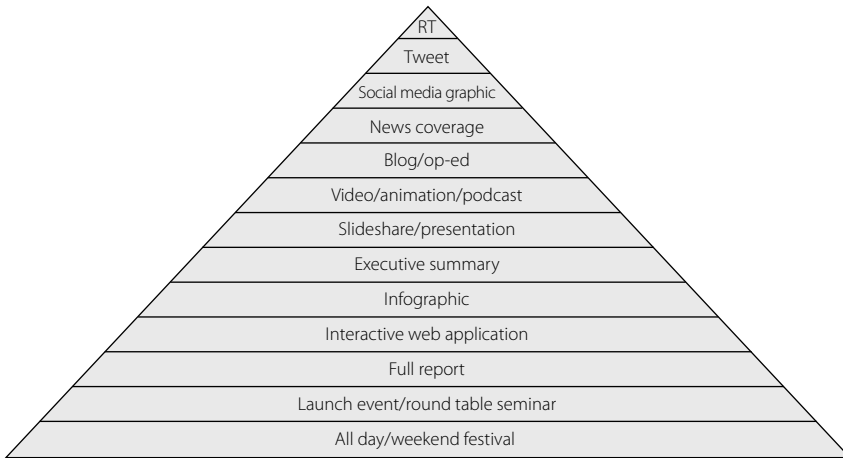## Public engagement rather than elite influencing

Think tanks are increasingly concerned about public engagement rather than direct policy influence. This is a result of two emerging ideas: first, credibility matters and, second, the general public is

an increasingly important player; both in awarding credibility and influencing policy. Nick Pearce, from the University of Bath and former director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, reflected at an event in early 2018 that, post-Brexit referendum, think tanks in the UK have recognised the importance that the public plays in the outcome of policy debates and policy decisions.

In liberal democracies where politics have taken a more polarised nature, think tanks have turned towards the public as a vehicle to reclaim more moderate, evidence-informed, debates. Think tanks in contexts where the civic space is rapidly, and violently, shrinking have adopted communication strategies increasingly aimed at boosting their credibility with the general public. At the same event, Sonja Stojanovic Gajic, from the Belgrade Centre for Security Studies, agreed that this applies to several think tanks in the Western Balkans.

However, meaningfully reaching the public demands a different approach to reaching the political, economic or social elites to which think tanks have been accustomed. The public's interest and understanding of the issues is highly heterogeneous. Also, the means by which they have arrived at that understanding or the opinions they hold may be different to those preferred by think tanks and the scientific community more broadly. There are no obvious policy recommendations for them to act on. And, their knowledge of, or their opinion of, think tanks themselves is limited – with obvious consequences on their credibility. Recent polls in the US (Hashemi & Muller 2018a) and in Britain (Hashemi & Muller 2018b) show that the majority of the public do not know what think tanks are or what they do. Why would they trust them?

This requires an approach that combines audience segmentation, developing narratives and different levels of engagement. In practice, this means that policy research centres are increasingly investing in editorial capacity (to write for different audiences), paying greater attention to the development of comprehensive narratives and producing multiple communication outputs which are disseminated through multiple communication channels (to facilitate different types and levels of engagement from these different audiences).

Figure 2: Pyramid of engagement

Richard Darlington argues for a pyramid of engagement for research (Darlington 2013). In Figure 2, Darlington presents this as an alternative to what he calls the 'submarine strategy': when researchers go deep under water for long periods of time while they study an issue in full and until their work is finally published (Darlington 2017). This approach fails to recognise the progressive nature of change, and it assumes that the robustness of the evidence, when it is published, will be sufficient to sway opinions.

Greater engagement offers multiple opportunities to address entrenched beliefs based on incorrect evidence or in spite of the existing evidence. Over time and through different engagement activities, think tanks may build trust – a key component of credibility – and progressively sway opinions. They may also help the public, and particularly those among them who distrust the scientific method, to better understand the research process, the evidence it produces and its implications.

Again, this is in contrast to the traditional, one-way approach to research or scientific communication, which assumes that the public

holds opinions contrary to what the evidence suggests, because the public has not had access to that evidence.

Greater engagement also exposes think tanks to sustained scrutiny from multiple audiences and over a longer period of time. This is meaningful in a polarised context: every policy recommendation is likely to be met with criticism from one side or the other of the aisle. Therefore, continuous engagement with the public can help identify, raise and address those criticisms throughout the process, thus avoiding a head-on collision at the end.

Conveners, not influencers

Aware that their reputation, and credibility, is as good as their last growth prediction or policy recommendation, think tanks are increasingly turning their attention to creating spaces to convene, rather than actively and overtly attempt to influence, policy actors. One of Chatham House's most recent approaches to communication is the use of simulation exercises that present them with the opportunity to offer their evidence and advice in a safe environment and in a useful way. According to its head of communications, Keith Burnett, this approach also allows the centre to incorporate evidence from multiple sources, thus emphasising their position as trusted conveners (Burnett 2019).

Think tanks across Latin America have turned their attention to electoral processes (Echt 2015; Echt and Ball 2018). While some of these efforts aim to present clear policy recommendations and seek to directly influence the agendas of future governments, most, in fact, have focused their efforts on informing the debate and, on occasion, staging the technical and presidential debates themselves. They have been more successful when their efforts have involved multiple organisations and voices.

This presents them as party neutral and impartial, knowledgeable and well connected; in other words, as credible, and it promotes greater engagement between the research and the researchers and their audiences.

Windows of opportunity

The focus on elections stems from the recognition that most think tanks' resources are limited. Sustaining a prolific research and communication production all year long is possible only for a handful of think tanks. Most think tanks are small, resource-strapped and only occasionally influential. Furthermore, their funding is mostly project based, which makes it difficult to focus on a single issue in the long term.

How, then, can they build the credibility they need to be influential and offer their multiple audiences the appropriate opportunities for engagement? An effective strategy is to target predictable policy windows with research and engagement campaigns.

For example, the British IFS has become the most credible source of analysis of the budget on budget day (Akam 2016). Arguably, the quality of their analysis is greatly responsible for this. But of similar importance is the manner in which they have turned the entire organisation on this brief, albeit important, window of opportunity.

This approach can have long-lasting effects. Elections are also excellent windows to consider. The Center for the Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC), in Argentina, has successfully targeted several presidential elections to take centre stage in the policy debates that dominate the news media. On its third attempt, CIPPEC had positioned itself to inform and staff President Mauricio Macri's administration. Its policy recommendations were presented at the exact moment when the future government was in search of ideas and people (Echt and Ball 2018). A year earlier, the same ideas and people would not have attracted the same level of interest. As a consequence of this, the new government turned to CIPPEC in search of experts to join their ranks. This, in turn, makes it possible to better inform policy-making.

In Chile, the smaller and newer Espacio Público also used Chile's 2018 elections to establish its reputation on corruption. It launched a research-based campaign on party financing which succeeded in setting the agenda by taking advantage of the public's natural distrust of political parties and electoral financing. At any other moment in

time, the complex nature of the subject would not have attracted the same level of support. The campaign has led to the establishment and launch of a regional network focused on research on anti-corruption policies.

A focus on transparency

The Transparify initiative, launched in 2014, has helped usher a new wave of efforts from think tanks, their funders and the media to promote the financial transparency of public policy research. Although Transparify only covers a small number of think tanks in the world, many have adopted their approach and have even requested a bespoke review. This effort to open up presents think tanks with an opportunity to engage with an audience that is increasingly incredulous about the credentials that experts claim for themselves.

Implications

In this chapter I have attempted to explore the effect that a focus on credibility, rather than objectively verifiable quality, has had on think tanks' strategies. Regardless of their business models, think tanks have elected to adopt research and communication strategies that effectively maximise the depth and length of engagement with their different publics and attempt to draw attention to the factors that help build their credibility. In other words, think tanks are segmenting their audiences to establish a closer relationship with individual groups.

Somewhat counterintuitively, these trust-building strategies present an opportunity and represent an effort to move away from a notion of credibility based on perception (e.g. networks, visibility, past impact, etc.) towards one based on a more rigorous assessment of quality. That is, to establish an evidence base for expertise and trust that may be objectively verified by the members of the spaces that think tanks now share with their audiences.

These approaches have important implications for university research centres and researchers. First, they demand a greater commitment to public engagement that most currently have. In particular, the

public here must be understood to include not just the student body and alumni, but also the individuals and institutions that belong to their polity. Naturally, this involves an effort by the entire organisation and not only communicators. The experience in Guatemala illustrates this. Researchers have had to adapt their research methods and involve communicators in their design. Furthermore, the organisation has had to adapt and encourage innovation in this field.

Second, these approaches reject the claims of influence and rankings. What matters is not the number of citations (which may or may not be based on a nuanced assessment of quality) but the quality of the engagement of key audiences with the research, the researchers and the organisation.

Third, the research output is no longer the bridge between producers and users of evidence and knowledge. The focus must be on the relationship between them, and this relationship is fundamentally held by individuals and their practice.

Finally, across all approaches, one finds a greater commitment to disclose the role of the organisation and the way in which evidence and advice is formulated. Greater transparency (financial and otherwise) can significantly contribute to the development of stronger relationships and a more nuanced assessment of quality.

Conclusion

The diversity of think tank formation and development has created fertile ground for innovation with respect to how they communicate evidence and advice. Their emphasis on non-academic impact demands that they pay attention to how multiple audiences perceive them and their work. While objectively verifiable assessments of the quality of their research are important, subjective factors make a greater contribution to the credibility of think tanks and their research.

In their search for credibility they have adopted rather successful approaches to communicating evidence that are compatible with research centres which, by their nature, place greater emphasis on objectively verifiable indicators of research excellence. These approaches, in fact, make it possible to develop new relationships that

facilitate a deeper and longer engagement, which has the effect of refocusing the assessment of credibility from subjective to objective criteria.

To establish and maintain these relationships, however, university research centres will have to usher in important changes to the way they are managed, funded, the way they undertake research, and the strategies they use to communicate. This does not demand a change in their missions but an acceptance that they may be better served by adopting a more nuanced understanding of research quality and impact.

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