



WHAT ARE THINK TANKS FOR? POLICY RESEARCH IN THE AGE OF ANTI-EXPERTISE

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THE FALL OF THE EXPERT

In early June 2016, the liberal thinking establishment was shocked to hear British Conservative Brexiteer Michael Gove claim on Sky TV that “people in this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms, saying they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong.”² Today, that statement seems even bland. The months that followed, from Brexit to Trump, saw the triumph of ‘post-truth’. Expert advice and the mediation of democratic institutions are increasingly bypassed. If lies can flourish, who needs the experts?

The paradox is that the attack on expertise happens at a time when it is most needed. Globalisation and technological change are making the world more interconnected and complex, and the slimming of the public sector have made governments less equipped to deal with such complexity. This has contributed to depoliticising of globalisation and the rise of ‘There is No Alternative’ approaches.

Assessing emerging challenges and their implications for society requires specialisation and in-depth knowledge. Designing policies to respond to these transformations demands holistic approaches and the engagement of a variety of stakeholders to carry forward policy in society. Getting the two together is the greatest policy challenge of our time. Meeting this challenge is what think tanks are for. The age of complexity and anti-expertise requires that think tanks reinvent their role in society and affirm the relevance of policy research.

1 The author would like to thank Joseph Barnsley, Michael Cox, Laura Groenendaal, Corinna Horst, Daniel Keohane, Lorenzo Robustelli and Antonella Santilli for their comments and feedback on this essay and for the many conversations had before putting ideas into words. Needless to say, responsibility lies entirely with the author.

2 The interview can be watched on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA>.

FINDING A PLACE FOR KNOWLEDGE

It is stating the obvious that globalisation, rapid technological advances, and interdependence are making the world more complex and the need for competence more evident, despite what Michael Gove may think. There are certainties, such as the pace and extent of climate change or Europe's global decline, but we are less knowledgeable about the exact impact, timing, and ripple consequences that these phenomena or trends may have on particular fields.

For example, the boundaries between policy areas are becoming increasingly blurred, including the great divide between domestic and foreign policy. As Chris Hill argues, multicultural societies live through a 'perpetual loop' of interaction between domestic and international issues in which policy is susceptible to inside-out and outside-in patterns.³ Migration policy is probably the clearest example of a multi-policy, internal and external challenge, ranging from housing policy to international diplomacy, but it is no longer the only one. Government foreign policy is increasingly shaped by domestic opinion too. Tony Blair ended his 10-year premiership recognising that "foreign policy is not an interesting distraction from the hard slog of domestic reform"⁴. Today, foreign policy can no longer be seen as only the elite's business.

These policy problems of greater complexity and with less respect for thematic boundaries are presenting themselves at a time in which knowledge has become increasingly specialised, compartmentalised, and segmented. However necessary, this trend in academic research has made the analytical community weak in understanding broad societal changes and the impact they have. The level of unpreparedness for 2016 shows that the risk of becoming lost in jargon and self-referential debates is real. Communities of expertise need to think about their own internal diversification and ability to interpret change.

This specialisation happened as prolonged budget cuts weakened the capacity of the state to implement policy change. Thus, part of the 'end of ideology' moment in the 1990s was to delegate some policy to the experts: "If the clashes of abstractions – communism, socialism, capitalism and so on – were finished, all that remained were practical questions, which were less subjects of political choice and more objects of expert analysis."⁵

3 Chris Hill (2013), *The National Interest in Question. Foreign Policy in Multicultural Societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 94.

4 Tony Blair (2007), 'What I've learned', *The Economist*, 31 May.

5 Mallaby (2016). Mallaby's focus is on the powers of central banks and the technocrats leading them.

The rise of populism has challenged such depoliticisation and empowerment of technocrats. The debate in the run-up to the Brexit referendum in the UK revealed the degree to which facts and analysis, rational argumentation and research findings not only do not influence public preferences – they simply are not believed in. The think tank British Future identified a number of ‘lessons for the liberals’ in how to talk about immigration and Europe (or not): avoid rational arguments and statistics about the benefits of immigration and EU integration to Britain’s economic growth.⁶

Why has this happened? When real decision making power moves away from national level, where political life still takes place, it fundamentally changes the relationship between citizen and representative democracy. Solutions to make international bodies representative have failed to create citizen engagement. For example the European Parliament, which is a democratically elected body with real powers in the EU, has failed to mobilise large numbers of voters. Local governments have been paradoxically given more responsibility for carrying out policy, but less resources to do so – and crucially, no more say in what those policies are.

In this context, the erosion of the legitimacy of the ‘establishment’ left a void filled by new actors, mostly outsiders to the traditional spectrum of politics and with no commitment to the idea that arguments must be based on facts.

POWER AND THE THINK TANK: REDRAWING THE BOUNDARIES

The wind favourable to the ‘experts’ turned not just because of these broad changes. The think tank environment too is in transformation. Over the long-term, the number of think tanks globally has grown to over 6,800, but in Europe and the US the rate of establishment has been in decline for the past decade.⁷

There are many diverse reasons for this. In Europe public funding has been declining since the recession, while US-style private funding may not provide think tanks with the ability to plan their longer-term sustainability and research capacity - especially when philanthropy is less focused than in the US on the value of think tank work.

6 Sunder Katwala, Steve Ballinger and Matthew Rhodes (2014), How to talk about Immigration, London: British Future, <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/How-To-Talk-About-Immigration-FINAL.pdf>; and Sunder Katwala and Steve Bollinger (2016), How (not) to talk about Europe, London: British Future, <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/EU-report.-British-Future.Embargo-6.1.16.pdf>.

7 James G. McGann (2017), ‘2016 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report’, TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports. 12. http://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/12

In both Europe and the US, the traditional think tank is increasingly in competition with universities setting up their own units and for-profit consultancies and law firms moving into the policy analysis business⁸. The relationship between the private sector and think tanks can provoke public controversy, as seen for example in Senator Elizabeth Warren's investigation into funding provided to the Brookings Institution.⁹

Similar questions apply to the relationship between think tanks and governments, which can cast doubts on the autonomy and independence of think tanks. In parts of Europe where democracy is in retreat or struggling, Western-style think tanks are suffering from a hostile environment.¹⁰

McGann (2017) identifies seven types of think tank affiliation to categorise independence (autonomous and independent, quasi-independent, government affiliated, quasi-governmental, university affiliated, political party affiliated, and corporate), but on a more basic level how can think tanks be truly autonomous?

There is little disagreement about what a think tank is in essence: an organisation providing research on policy issues for government and centres of decision-making. In many cases, it creates links with academic research by providing interpretations of academic research and concepts which are of practical use in solving policy problems.

But there are diverse views as to their relationship to society and to power. By competing in the 'market for ideas', think tanks promote policy pluralism and stimulate the participation of policy actors and citizens. But does their funding model create risks that think tanks merely become advocates or lobbyists for funders?¹¹

Think tanks have no natural constituency, thus they have no intrinsic role in a democracy. This dislocation from hard interests creates funding challenges but also provides the best think tanks with their value: integrity, quality, and autonomy from power.

8 Daniel W. Drezner (2017), 'The traditional think tank is withering. In its place? Bankers and consultants', *The Washington Post*: 6 April.

9 James Hohmann, Tom Hamburger and Elise Viebeck 'The Daily 202: Elizabeth Warren challenges Brookings over research backed by industry', *Washington Post*, September 29, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2015/09/29/the-daily-202-elizabeth-warren-challenges-brookings-over-research-backed-by-industry/?utm_term=.c9a67c90b322, last accessed on 18 August 2017.

10 Thomas de Waal (2016), 'Eastern Europe's Superfluous Men', <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=64926> captures the fall of those Western- and liberal- educated men leading the transition in post-Soviet Europe (Ukraine and Georgia). For the mixed picture in Central and Eastern Europe see Peter Vandro, Nicole Traxler, Reinhard Millner, and Michael Meyer (eds.) (2017), *Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, Vienna: Erste Stiftung, <http://www.erstestiftung.org/en/publication/civil-society-in-cee/>.

11 Pautz, H. (2011). Revisiting the think-tank phenomenon. *Public Policy and Administration*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 419–435.

The relationship with power is complex and there is no procedural way to be transparent about it. Policy analysis requires simultaneous access to and distance from policymaking. For think tanks influence depends on access – to information in the first place, but also to transmit their policy recommendations. The policymaking world is not always open to alternative ideas, and building relationships is a key part of the change process. Keeping the right balance is the ethical tightrope the think tanker must walk.

The starting point is in the internal make-up of a think tank. It needs to be transparent about its funding, motivation, and mission. It needs to reflect the diversity of society, which would entail quite a departure from the current dominance of the white, Western, middle aged men which populate all the senior ranks of think tanks in Europe and the US. It needs to diversify financial sources to ensure autonomy from and balance between funders; even a benevolent funder if too large can create dependency issues. Think tanks need to step out of their bubble and see themselves through the eyes of others.

With respect to the core business of think tanks – policy research and advice – the onus for self-critique falls on both decision-makers and think tanks. The policymaking community needs to make itself open to critique and alternative thinking, and the researcher needs to balance empathy to understand with rigorous methodology and analysis to critique. This is not always the case.

Policymakers and politicians all too often surround themselves with those of a similar worldview, and remain closed to fresh perspectives. It would be hard to explain some recent reckless decisions made by politicians (for instance, to call and lose referendums) without taking a look at the effects of groupthink. Echo-chambers and lack of diversity in the expert community surrounding policymaking validate the populist accusation that politics has become an elite matter.

Once experts enter the magic circle, it can be hard to keep the necessary distance. Edward Said had no time for the intellectual who does not want to appear “too political”, “controversial”, who wants to “keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate”, to be “asked back, to consult, to be on the board of a prestigious committee”. This, he argued, is “corrupting par excellence”.¹²

Policymakers can manipulate think tanks to provide government policy with legitimacy. According to Jeremy Shapiro, now of the European Council on Foreign Relations but previously a State Department adviser, the purpose of closed-door meetings is sometimes less to share ideas and information than to provide access

¹² Edward Said (1994), p. 101.

to power in exchange for validation of government policy.¹³ Think tanks can provide a useful tool for policymakers to communicate with stakeholders and, thanks to their media profile, with the public. This can be useful to policymakers, but harmful to think tank's autonomy.

Competition in the market for ideas also pushes think tanks to seek a constant media presence and place their names in the 'running commentariat' on contemporary affairs - in the op-ed pages of mainstream media, in blogs, and on social media. In the 'Age of the Take', in which a seemingly infinite supply of voices compete to tell us how to feel about the news¹⁴ think tankers feel compelled to contribute to the 24/7 debate. Communication and presence in the public debate is no doubt one of the key missions of think tanks, but it must not distract from the main goal of policy research or compromise quality for quantity.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

Think tanks should not be complacent in this malaise, but they need not reinvent themselves completely. The first order of priority is to be true to one's identity, the second to bring innovation which is not merely about using funky communication stunts.

Think tanks need to change their composition and structure to introduce greater diversity within, they need to innovate their research methodologies to find more collaborative and inter-disciplinary approaches in order to be relevant to policy, and they need to broaden their stakeholders to better embrace and understand societies.

But this can only work if quality continues to be the core goal of think tank work and the prime audience – policymakers – remain in focus.

13 Jeremy Shapiro (2014), Who influences whom? Reflections on U.S. Government outreach to think tanks, Brookings, 4 June, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/06/04/who-influences-whom-reflections-on-u-s-government-outreach-to-think-tanks/>, last accessed on 25 August 2017.

14 Oliver Burkeman (2017), 'Is the world really better than ever?' The Guardian Long Reads, 28 July, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/jul/28/is-the-world-really-better-than-ever-the-new-optimists>, quotes Steve Pool (2015), 'A take on hot takes', The Guardian, 18 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/18/steven-pool-hot-takes-instant-flip-opinions>. Both articles were last accessed on 18 August 2017.

Know yourself and stick to your mission

Think tanks are ideally placed to support approaches which bridge the dilemma between specialisation and the policy need for creative solutions.

Interpreting the old and emerging challenges of globalisation and technological change to societies requires a specialisation and in-depth knowledge, often home to highly specialised or academic bodies. Designing policies to respond to these transformations demand increasingly holistic approaches, interdisciplinary and cross-boundary capacity, and diversified tools. In between “professionals” and “amateurs”,¹⁵ think tanks ought to provide just that. This is their core mission.

There are demands to reach broader audiences, to engage with ‘outsiders’ from the traditional policy-related bubble, especially since the shock of 2016. Think tanks are often criticised for producing work which is readable only to a small group of experts and of poorly communicating to broader audiences. There is no harm in expanding activities and producing more literate and readable papers if this is an addition, rather than a substitute, to policy research. But quantity should not overshadow quality. The core purpose of think tanks must not be forgotten. Think tanks were created to provide independent analysis of use to policymaking: no more, no less.

So the importance of the race to place an op-ed needs to be measured and counterbalanced by the need to maintain the quality of research, the respect of methodology, the capacity to interpret data, and the ability to overcome the limits of specialisation and reach out to diverse stakeholders. The latter gives think tanks authoritativeness and legitimacy in their work, makes them listened to in the appropriate corner, and allows them to inform decision-making.

This is and should be the prime field of think tank business: the transmission belt between knowledge that is produced in-house, in academia, in inter-disciplinary, multi-national and multicultural contexts, and the policy shaping and policymaking worlds. Research needs to be useful to the policymaker, needs to acknowledge the political dilemmas behind policy options, and produce proposals that are realistically implementable by decision-makers. It also ought to connect with broader political contexts and ideas about how to organise society without necessarily being ideologically focused. When it is advocating specific policy preferences, it needs to be transparent about its motivations.

There is no short cut to this, and it cannot be substituted with a torrent of running commentaries on current events. Quality is the only antidote to the proliferation of opinion-givers.

¹⁵ The choice of words comes from Edward H. Said (1993), p. 82.

Speak truth to power

Autonomy and independence are being challenged not just by the changing market for ideas but also by the ambiguous relationships with power. It is hugely damaging to the think tank sector if it is seen as part and parcel of the establishment, or seen to lower its ethical guard within the group.

Being mostly highly educated, polyglot and well-travelled will always make the think tanker be seen as elite, notwithstanding his or her social background. But those engaged in the public debate for ideas should keep up their critique of the decision-making establishment, seek out alternative explanations, and push diverse points of view. To quote Edward Said again “speaking truth to power is no Panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the most change.”¹⁶

Academia and journalism, thanks to the role they play in society, have clearer and often strictly regulated ethical standards which think tanks lack. Yet there are ethics and responsibility in think tank work which, in the near absence of formal regulation, need to be upheld by individuals. Think tankers have a responsibility towards society through their contributions to the debate which they must not forget in the search for media attention or controversial idea.

Innovation through diversity

If think tanks are falling short of performing their core function, it is partly because they are reluctant to update their ‘business model’. Think tanks continue to give the impression of informality and creativity, but the reality is that they remain hierarchically organised. The top of the pyramid is mostly close to power, with senior positions overwhelmingly dominated by white Western educated males.

Diversity in ethnic, gender, and social and educational background is poorly represented, despite think tanks rightly priding themselves on being multi-national and multi-lingual environments.

Some think tanks have a poor balance between retired officials and young underpaid aspiring think tankers who spend too long moving from one internship to another. Some ghost-write for senior analysts.

¹⁶ Edward Said (1994), p. 102.

The first step to encourage innovative and creative thinking, cross-fertilisation of ideas, and different perspectives can only be from within - and that is by improving diversity. This should be the first step to innovation. Think tanks in search of the 'holy grail' idea or media coverage should instead of focus on their own management structures and organisation.

Innovate research

Finding the right package to attract funding and partners is a key goal of all research institutes to ensure continuity in their work. But avoiding cliché is another.

Expertise has been accused of 'getting it wrong': of not intercepting the signals prior to massive mood swings in societies and unexpected electoral outcomes in 2016, of not being able to warn the establishment of the upcoming rebellion against complacency in politics and policy, of not interpreting the reasons behind the crisis of legitimacy of the establishment. Expertise has been under attack because of their own failings, not simply because of the emergence of a hostile environment.

The quality of research is affected if its methodologies are stale. Research communities need to innovate their approach. Traditional research, mostly of academic nature, often sees 'dissemination' in a unidirectional way: from academia to policy, potentially mediated by think tanks which are supposed to be good at processing complex thoughts into accessible formats and possibly sound-bites for politics and the media.

Good policy research comes instead from a two-way process of listening and learning. Empathy with policy and political dilemmas will help research be relevant, early exchanges between research and policy will help shape the field, understand the demand, contextualise the challenge.

At the same time, bridging specialisations and ensuring diversity of perspectives requires collaboration. Collaborative research between diverse institutions needs to be further encouraged, as well as ways to make such research truly cooperative in all stages. For example, EU research funding does have requirements of inter-disciplinarity, multi-nationalism, and diversity in applications. These need to be better reflected also in the excellence requirements.

Collaborative research also advocates expanding the range of stakeholders.¹⁷ These should not be just passive recipients of dissemination of findings, but active participants in the research and consultation process.

Here too think tanks can play a role in ensuring diversity of people in the conversation, and perform those tasks of reaching outside policy circles to test, share, and listen. The core business of think tanks is to nurture the learning loop between knowledge producing institutions and policy, but this loop can also go through diverse intermediaries who can contribute to shaping ideas. Sameness of interlocutors is one reason for the poverty of good ideas.

This can even be a more 'political' function, providing it is transparent about its approach. Through collaborative approaches, think tanks can perform a role in connecting segments of society which are not always able to access policy, especially at a supranational level, or willing to engage directly with decision-makers, preferring other forms of mobilisation or political action. Think tanks can learn from them alternative views on public policy and help bring those ideas into the bubble.

Outreach and think tank's role in society

All think tanks are trying to keep abreast of technological transformations by upgrading their communications strategy. It is beyond doubt that being ahead of the curve in communications, at a time of rapid technological change and multiple sources of information, ought to be a priority for think tanks. This is usually designed to market the think tank, increase website and social media traffic, and maximise presence in the debate.

But there are other roles that think tanks can perform, especially if the drive is to move out of the self-referential bubbles. As interpreters of current events, with access to policy and power, think tankers have stories to tell beyond their traditional audience. These can be useful to broader sections of society, and interacting with citizens beyond the usual bubbles can feed the listening and learning loop that think tanks need to keep abreast of broader changes. Engaging with students (including school students), NGOs, local leaders and activists, and the private sector should not be seen merely as transferring policy knowledge to a wider network of stakeholders, but also as connecting society with policymakers. And a vital part of a think tank's responsibility to society.

¹⁷ Ben Scott (2016), *Collaborative Policy Development. From Think Tank to Civic Enterprise*, New America and Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, <http://www.newamerica.org/new-america/policy-papers/collaborative-politic-development/>, last accessed on 29 August 2017.

CONCLUSION

Between hoping that the world will recover its senses and rediscover the need for evidence-based analysis or embracing the post-truth age there is room for other approaches to assert the dignity and relevance of policy research.

It is a hard road to pursue, requiring self-reflective critique of past complacency about the role of think tanks (especially in the 'magic circles' of power), innovative structures and research methodologies, and building wider networks which are more representative of society at large.

That road may also require an assertive battle to be listened to in the corridors of power which have been more sensitive to 'the voice of the people', or the noisy populist backlash, than to passive majorities. Think tanks too need to affirm their principles tied to independent qualitative analysis if they want to find relevance for policy and a role in society. ■



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What role can and should think tanks play in a 'post-truth' world? In this Strategic Update, Rosa Balfour argues that to meet complex policy challenges think tanks need to improve their diversity, innovate, and re-focus on their core mission.

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