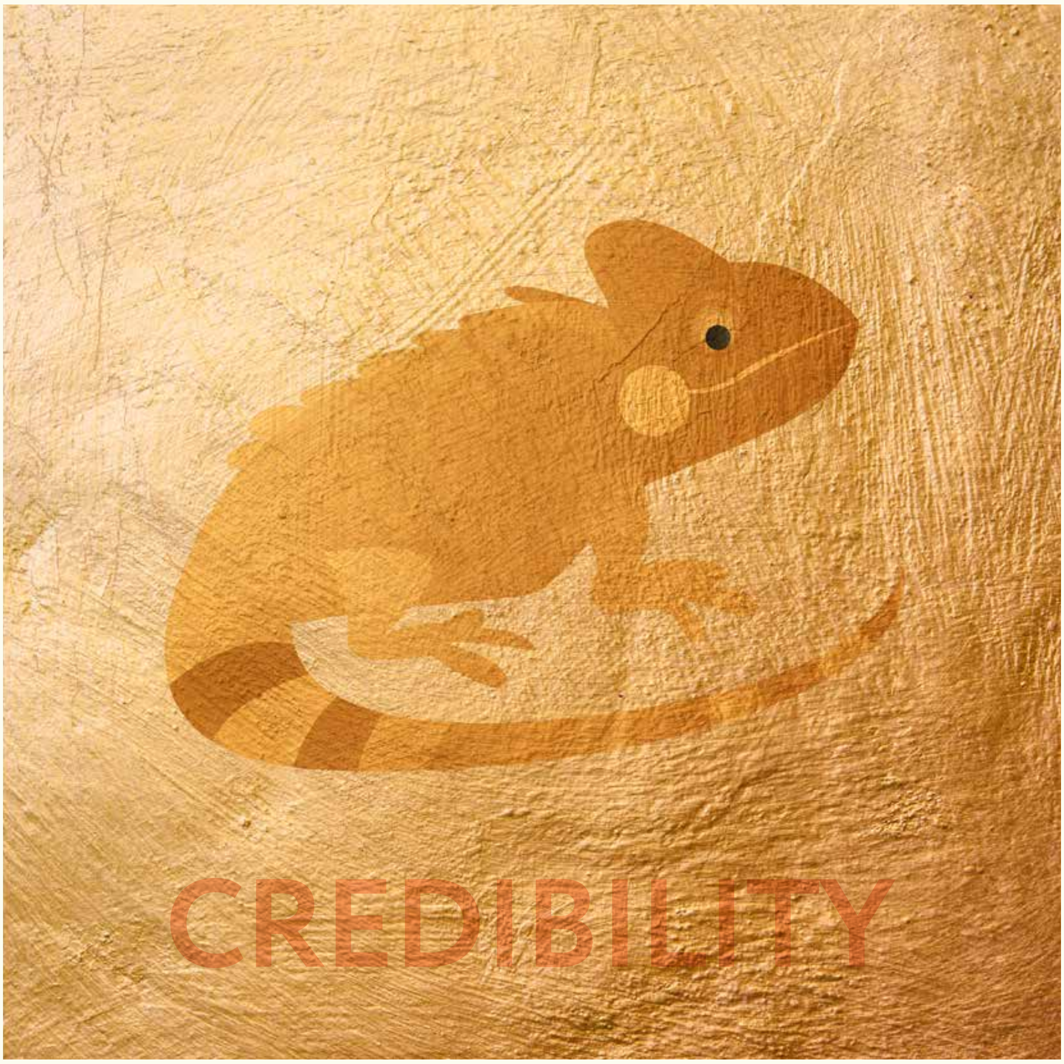


ON THINK TANKS – 2017

annual review

On Think Tanks

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH, IDEAS AND ADVICE

“The work of data scientists, evaluators and researchers – the people who engage in generating the information and evidence for programme design and policymaking – is fundamentally about revealing truth.”

RUTH LEVINE

Author, *The moral case for evidence in policymaking*

EDITORIAL

Over the years, the On Think Tanks (OTT) team has become very familiar with the many dilemmas that think tanks face. I remember a lengthy conversation about independence with research institutes in China, back in 2011. In Kenya, just a few years ago, there was a discussion about whether think tanks should only hire PhD graduates. I have lost count of the number of times that the mention of using modern communication practices to improve the uptake of research has met resistance, with organisational reputation being a particular concern.

In one instance, researchers were keen to get advice on how their directors' links to political parties could affect the independence of their work. In another, funding was cut to a promising think tank in Southern Africa due its proximity to the ruling party, and senior management were keen to discuss their options going forward.

An executive director we worked with in Latin America was worried about how and when to announce plans to leave his organisation, convinced that if he triggered a search for his successor too soon donors might panic about the think tank's sustainability. The leadership transition at this think tank has taken almost four years to complete.

Evaluations, too, are particularly thorny exercises that raise concerns among thinktankers. Few think tanks want them and even fewer are willing to share the lessons learned from them; worried about what their stakeholders might think.

Looking back at these conversations I realise that they were all broadly about one issue: credibility. At OTT, we have written at length about business models. We have also argued repeatedly that think tanks trade on ideas, and have insisted that their greatest asset is their people: boards, senior managers, researchers, communicators, managers and administrators.

While all of this is true, we somehow managed to leave credibility out of the discussion, even though it is absolutely fundamental for all think tanks. Ideas and people matter a great deal, but they do not get far without credibility. Governance and management skills, research quality and great communications are all necessary, but not sufficient.

If credibility is lacking, there is no pantheon of board members, no endowment, no academic pedigree and no communications strategy that will help a think tank deliver its mission.

And yet credibility is not entirely within a think tanks' control – it must be built through the interactions they have with their environment. What is more, to nurture

We cannot address intellectual independence, research quality, talent, funding, communications and leadership in silos. Think tanks must face multiple challenges simultaneously, strategically and systematically.

it, think tanks must be prepared to move out of their comfort zones and explore new forms of communication, develop more open and accessible research methods and implement more transparent business models.

This requires new skills and competencies, robust data and knowledge about think tanks and their environment and reliable guidance and advice. It means thinking about the various dilemmas think tanks face as parts of a broader whole, rather than in isolation from one another. To put it another way: we cannot address intellectual independence, research quality, talent, funding, communications and leadership in silos. Think tanks must face multiple challenges simultaneously, strategically and systematically. Similarly, we cannot solve these dilemmas with one-off interventions (and rarely on the first attempt).

OTT will continue to be a credible source of research, ideas and advice to support these efforts.

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

Founder and director, OTT

SPOTLIGHT: CREDIBILITY

CRE DI BI LITY

Think tanks rely on their credibility to attract funds and talent, and to achieve impact. However, we do not know enough about how they may gain, sustain and lose it.

Are think tanks facing a crediblity crisis? Is it time for a paradigm shift to assess research quality? What role does communications play in building an organisation's credibility? Does transparency help? What do funders have to say?

“Credibility is relational and it entails trust and believability. To be credible, an organisation or person needs someone to trust and believe in them. Without the other, the object in question neither lacks nor has credibility.”

ANDREA BAERTL

Author, *Are think tanks facing a credibility crisis?*

ARE THINK TANKS FACING A CREDIBILITY CRISIS?

BY ANDREA BAERTL
Research officer, OTT

Think tanks are facing a credibility crisis. But it is bigger and broader than they think, affecting scientific research more broadly. There is also a growing lack of trust towards knowledge-focused institutions in general.

This sounds ominous and worrying, but it is also an opportunity. A crisis, though difficult, does not necessarily imply a negative outcome. A crisis is a turning point. A critical phase in the state of affairs in which change is impending. A time when a difficult or important decision must be made. To decide on our course of action, however, we need to step back and ask:

- What does a credibility crisis mean?
- What is fuelling this crisis?
- How did we reach this point?

Credibility is relational and it entails trust and believability. To be credible, an organisation or person needs *someone* to trust and believe in *them*. Without the other, the object in question neither lacks nor has credibility. A credible person or organisation is trusted to have relevant expertise, and believed to be able and willing to provide information that is correct and true. Credibility is also constructed by the interaction of the qualities and current circumstances of a person or organisation.

With this in mind, the credibility crisis that think tanks are facing is essentially a relationship problem, where partners have lost trust in each other. Until that trust is rebuilt, the relationship will not move forward.

There are many things that have precipitated this crisis. Fake news, fake think tanks, bad and fake research abound. The shadow of misinformation seems to be everywhere and the credibility of experts is being increasingly questioned. This is producing

> "The credibility crisis that think tanks are facing is essentially a relationship problem, where partners have lost trust in each other. Until that trust is rebuilt, the relationship will not move forward."

ambiguity about who the experts are, who is responsible for generating and sharing information, and ultimately who we can believe.

And scientific credibility is under the spotlight too. Though 'the sciences' have always been linked with objectivity and neutrality, recent allegations and evidence about bad research have tarnished this reputation. If scientists can be wrong, use flawed methods or data, and even alter methods or results to suit the wishes of powerful donors, then credibility is truly at risk.

In the case of think tanks, the are several factors that are fuelling this credibility crisis. Accusations (and evidence) of lack of transparency are at the forefront, as are unreported conflicts of interests that might influence their research and advice. Questions around intellectual independence are also being raised, including accusations of lobbying on behalf of corporate interests and allegations that think tanks are vehicles for foreign powers to influence domestic policy.

The case of the New America Foundation is a good example. In August 2017, it fired a researcher who had criticised Google (one of the its funders)[1]. The think tank received criticism for the action, for how they handled the crisis and for and the lack of intellectual independence it showed. All of this has undermined their credibility, but also affected the credibility of the sector in general. What is more, it feeds the distrust that some sections of the public have for all research centres.

In January 2018, the policy and evidence sector suffered another blow with allegations that changes in the methodology of the World Bank´s *Doing Business* rankings were unfairly depicting Chile. There were additional accusations that the report's methods had been manipulated for political reasons to depict the country more negatively under the socialist president Michelle Bachelet. This has brought into question the credibility of the World Bank, which even though not a think tank, is a major player in the global knowledge sector. Research quality is foundational to the credibility of any research-oriented organisation. When it is compromised, the building collapses. In this case, either researchers at the World Bank made a methodological error (expertise suffers) or they did it on purpose (trust suffers).

1. The full case can be read here

> "The raison d'etre of think tanks is to carry out research that informs policy (and practice). For this to happen, they need to be perceived as credible sources of information. A focus on restoring trust is therefore imperative. The growing push for more transparency in the sector will help in this effort, as will investment in better communications that meets the needs of key audiences."

The wider crisis of trust in which the credibility crisis is set stems from, and is fuelled by, the post-truth world we are in. Where trust in facts and evidence is eroding. The recently released Edelman trust barometer shows that trust in government, media, business and non-governmental organisations has plummeted in the United States, though interestingly it has risen in China. It is the first time this has happens without an actual external crisis. What is more, a total of 20 out of the 28 surveyed countries now fall into the 'distrust' category – the first time this has happened since the survey started 14 years ago. Trust in media has seen a particularly dramatic decline, a trend blamed on the rise of fake news, leading to confusion about what is fact and what is fiction.

But it is not all doom and gloom. The barometer also shows a renewed confidence in experts and academics. It highlights the fact that people are concerned about fake news and want to find ways to stop it. In this sense, there is light at the end of the tunnel. But how do we get there?

The raison d'etre of think tanks is to carry out research that informs policy (and practice). For this to happen, they need to be perceived as credible sources of information. A focus on restoring trust is therefore imperative. The growing push for more transparency in the sector will help in this effort, as will investment in better communications that meets the needs of key audiences.

Ultimately, the public needs to know that think tanks are intellectually independent through information on who funds them, what networks they belong to, who is on their board, what affiliations their staff have and how the quality of research is ensured. But let us not forget that organisations are comprised of people and it is they who have the power to help bring credibility back.

The crisis is here. What are we going to do about it?

CREDIBILITY & RESEARCH QUALITY– TIME FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT?

BY ROBERT MCLEAN
Senior programme specialist, Policy and Evaluation Division, IDRC

As researchers we care deeply about the credibility of the work we do. One way we embrace this is through a meticulous attention to quality in our work. We are careful about controlling for confounders and bias. We triangulate using multiple sources. We document everything to allow for future replication and meta-research. After all, we are serious researchers who approach things scientifically.

But how do we judge this hard work?

Across disciplines – be they social or natural – research evaluation begins with peer-review. Put simply: we ask a colleague for their opinion. Even though this opinion is typically qualified as expert and unbiased, the result remains opinion. Very rarely is empirical evidence gathered or assessed.

Following peer-review, the quality of research is increasingly being determined by analytic 'metrics' such as bibliometrics and scientometrics, both of which include forms of academic citation analysis, or altmetrics, which are based largely on social media attention. Whichever of these metrics is used, however, the result is essentially a proxy indicator of the popularity of a publication. These measures tell us very little about the importance of the research topic we chose to tackle, or the scientific rigour our work demonstrated, let alone whether our findings influenced policy or practice. Whether they made an impact in society.

This current view of quality is problematic because it has an impact on decisions about what (and who) gets valued, communicated and funded. These approaches are not wrong per se, they are insufficient. It is time to advance a more holistic and systematic means of evaluating research quality.

> This current view of quality is problematic because it has an impact on decisions about what (and who) gets valued, communicated and funded. These approaches are not wrong per se, they are insufficient.

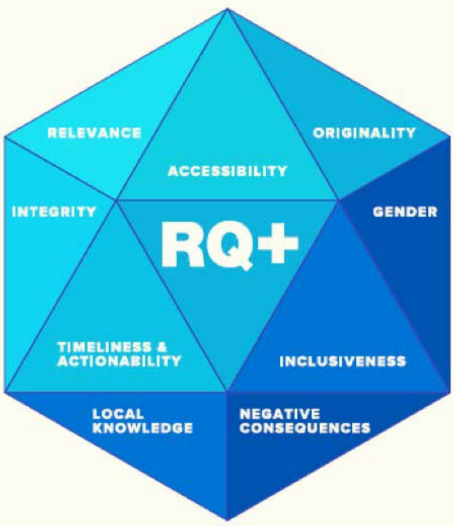
A WAY FORWARD

I work within the Policy and Evaluation team at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). We are a Canadian institution that supports research across the Global South, and we care deeply about the credibility of this work. In our view, credible research underpins a prosperous future.

Inspired by stories from our diverse research community, we undertook to capture a new view of what it means to produce credible research. We asked ourselves: why are some research organisations more valued than others in terms of peer-review and metrics?

To unpack this issue, we worked with our research partners and with colleagues Zenda Ofir (*Independent Evaluator and Honorary Professor at the Stellenbosch University*) and Thomas Schwandt (*Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*). What resulted is a novel method of research evaluation we call Research Quality Plus, or RQ+. RQ+ has shown us that a more holistic and scientific approach to research quality determination is both feasible and essential. Below, I outline the core components and how they embrace three fundamental developments. You can read more about what RQ+ is, how we used it, and how it might be used in other settings in English, Spanish, or French.

Figure 1: RQ+



RQ+ suggests three essential criteria:

1. **ACCEPT A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF QUALITY IN RESEARCH.** Scientific rigour is likely a non-negotiable, but concepts of quality should include other values and objectives that matter to our institutions. For IDRC, these are exemplified in figure 1. For other funders, think tanks, journals and universities, these dimensions may be very different. This is a good thing.

2. **TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE CONTEXT IN WHICH RESEARCH HAPPENS.** The predominant forms of research quality assessment tend to isolate research from its environment. But there is much to learn by considering research within varying political, organisational, disciplinary and data settings. Doing so reinforces good systems thinking.

3. **AS WITH THE RESEARCH WE CONDUCT, OUR JUDGEMENT OF QUALITY MUST BE UNDERPINNED BY EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE.** Not just opinion. With this in mind, go out and ask the intended users of a research project for their insights, and balance these against the voice of beneficiary communities, other researchers in the same field, and the bibliometrics.

TIME TO ACT

We continue to develop the concept with key research partners. For example, in late 2017, we worked in collaboration with the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, a think tank based in Islamabad, Pakistan, to look at how the RQ+ approach might support and advance the research credibility agenda for think tanks in the South Asian region. The ideas and opportunities generated as part of this process were deeply inspiring.

We encourage Think Tanks, researchers, and funders to join us in re-thinking our approaches to conceptualising and evaluating quality and credibility. RQ+ presents a practical starting point, and we hope that it is tailored, tested, and improved by others.

When it comes to improving research credibility, the good news is that the solution to the challenge involves researchers doing exactly what they do best: innovating and experimenting.

"When it comes to improving research credibility, the good news is that the solution to the challenge involves researchers doing exactly what they do best: innovating and experimenting."

ROBERT MCLEAN

Author, *Credibility & research quality – time for a paradigm shift?*

THINK PREVENTION RATHER THAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

BY ANDREA ORDOÑEZ
Director, Southern Voice

I learned about the importance of how research quality affects credibility the hard way. I had never worked at a think tank before, but the research team I was assigned to was very successful at the time. As part of it, I was involved in the production and launch of a series of popular papers. But at one point we made a big mistake, which we did not realise until we had already published the report.

Where did we go wrong? We used inaccurate public information for our analysis, which invalidated the results. While it was not 'technically' our fault, think tanks cannot fall back on this sort of poor justification if they are to remain credible. Looking back, the incident was preventable. We had become overconfident and in doing so failed to implement effective checks and balances. Had we involved an external expert, or a public official, they would likely have either highlighted the mistake, or questioned the results we were obtaining from the data and made us dig deeper.

For me, the lesson from this experienced is that think tanks need clear processes to ensure research quality. Of course, employing high-quality researchers is essential, but researchers can be fallible. There are two reasons why these processes are particularly important. First, they can help identify problems before it is too late. Secondly, if a credibility crisis does arise due to a research error, having clear processes in place makes it much easier to show that the mistake is due to human error, rather than a lack of capacity or integrity. During my crisis, my research team had nothing to hold on to, which made overcoming the problem even harder.

The editors of the British Journal of Pharmacology wrote an editorial recently about an article they had published, which did not meet the journal's quality standards. While the piece had been peer reviewed, the editors included the paper without noticing the poor quality of the reviews. In the analysis of what went wrong, the editors realised that some reviews were even fake. This case highlighted serious gaps of their editorial process, which needed attention.

> "Think tanks need clear processes to ensure research quality. Of course, employing high-quality researchers is essential, but researchers can be fallible. There are two reasons why these processes are particularly important. First, they can help identify problems before it is too late. Secondly, if a credibility crisis does arise due to a research error, having clear processes in place makes it much easier to show that the mistake is due to human error, rather than a lack of capacity or integrity."

Think tanks who have an active communications operation can be particularly vulnerable to credibility problems. They are the ones who can make headlines. For these sorts of organisations, having research quality processes in place – and publically available – is very important. Bruegel, a Brussels-based economic think tank, offers a simple and practical example that other organisations could copy. They publish conflict of interest statements from all its researchers on their website.

Establishing research quality processes improves think tank performance, while also being critical to their credibility. They are like an airplane's black box: unnoticed when everything is working well, but critical if something goes wrong.

CREDIBILITY AND THINK TANK COMMUNICATIONS

BY JOHN SCHWARTZ
Founder, Soapbox

Credibility is at the heart of all effective communications, and is especially so for think tanks.

As thinktankers, our mission is to turn evidence and ideas into social progress. And the primary way we do this is by communicating our research and inviting debate around it – persuading those who can take action to do so in an informed way.

But there are plenty of other voices communicating with those in power and a crowd of organisations and individuals, often yelling as hard as they can, in any policy debate. Why should policymakers listen to your voice? What makes your communications *credible*?

I would argue that to build credibility – from the smallest tweet to the biggest website – think tank communications needs to fulfil three criteria:

1. **BE EVIDENCE-BASED.** You are making a claim to truth. Back it up with clear evidence, reported in full and presented with care.
2. **BE BRAND-CONSCIOUS.** Honour the history, positioning and values of your think tank. Make a conscious effort to build consistent arguments over time.
3. **BE USEFUL.** Work *with* and *for* your audiences. Make your ideas and evidence easy to find and use in research, debate or action.

BE EVIDENCE-BASED

Over the last decade think tanks have sought to engage a wider public in policy debates and new digital tools and channels have given them the means to do so. These are positive developments, but at the same time there has been a tendency to concentrate effort on ever-more bite-sized communications or contributions to public debate, and spend less time on the careful presentation of full reports or evidence sets.

> Producing your reports and data visualisations with attention to editorial and design standards will give you a firm foundation from which to branch out into punchier communications for wider audiences.

Often this results in reports that are poorly edited, poorly fact-checked, lack clarity or consistency and are badly presented. Or it results in graphs or infographics that are superficial and badly designed – or (the worst sin of all) copied from someone else's report.

This gives the impression that the think tank does not really value its reports (or audiences) enough to treat them with care. The result is a loss of credibility.

At Soapbox, we often conduct user research on behalf of think tanks. When we talk to media, research and political audiences, they consistently tell us they want to see a full report. They may just skim it, but they want to see that it exists and that the researchers and communications team care about it, believe in it and have the evidence to back up their claims.

Producing your reports and data visualisations with attention to editorial and design standards will give you a firm foundation from which to branch out into punchier communications for wider audiences. This will build your credibility as an organisation and should never be an optional extra.

BE BRAND-CONSCIOUS

Your brand is a set of promises that your stakeholders can expect you to fulfil – the ideological and market position you occupy, the experience you bring to the table, the values you represent.

Your brand is also about staking out a piece of intellectual or cultural territory. You might say, for example, "we are the leading centre-left think tank" or "we shape policy and practice in the health sector". These are claims about your legitimacy and credibility in a particular arena. A key part of building the brand of think tank is establishing a body of work that advances an argument or position over a long period of time.

Graphic designers, like those at Soapbox, use your *visual identity* – your logo, fonts, colours, templates, etc., as a shortcut to let people know that a particular piece of work carries these promises and belongs in this piece of intellectual territory and body of work. If a piece of think tank communications does not live up to these promises or is in an area that people do not associate with the brand then it lacks credibility – the whole brand is damaged.

I would push the argument further and say: when done properly, brand, reputation and credibility are virtually synonymous.

BE USEFUL

If people can easily use your work to help advance their own research or argument, or, even better, put it to immediate practical policy use, then they will know where to come next time. This massively boosts your credibility.

Utility can mean giving people a punchy infographic that they can retweet to lend credibility to an argument. It can mean making full datasets available so that researchers can check your findings or reuse the date in different ways. It can mean making report material available in HTML as well as PDF and print so that it is more searchable, shareable and accessible. It can mean transparency around funding or methodology so that users can make an informed judgement about how to best use your work.

Perhaps most importantly, it means approaching your communication products, especially your website, in a user-centered way which makes your work easy to find and easy to use.

Think tanks are getting better at taking UX design seriously and user research is becoming commonplace for bigger organisations. But too often, internal considerations still crowd out what real users are telling us.

FUNDAMENTALS OF CREDIBILITY

In over fifteen years of working with think tanks I have observed that those who enjoy the greatest credibility are the same ones who take the greatest care over editorial and design standards in their communications.

These think tanks certainly move with the times, but the fundamentals of credibility are timeless.

Credible think tanks produce carefully crafted reports to underpin their more eye-catching messages. They have a clear understanding of their brand and apply it with consistency. They build a coherent body of research and argument. Most of all, they are attentive to their stakeholders and to those who benefit from their work.

Soapbox is a creative communications agency working on reports, infographics, websites and brands for many of the world's leading think tanks.

“As thinktankers, our mission is to turn evidence and ideas into social progress. And the primary way we do this is by communicating our research and inviting debate around it – persuading those who can take action to do so in an informed way.”

JOHN SCHWARTZ

Author, *Credibility and think tanks communications*

3 STEPS FOR USING VIDEO CONTENT TO BOOST YOUR THINK TANK'S CREDIBILITY (without breaking the bank)

BY MICHAEL KLEIMAN
Founder and director, Media Tank Productions

I had a professor in graduate school who was a particularly active member of the 'grammar police'. Run on sentences, missing punctuation, turns of phrase that just did not sound right were all deadly sins that had a disproportionate impact on our grades. "If your presentation is sloppy," his reasoning went, "people will assume that your ideas are sloppy too."

As creating videos and providing a steady stream of multimedia content increasingly becomes a requirement for think tanks interested in influencing public opinion, my professor's words are worth remembering. Strong stories told through well-crafted videos not only help think tanks get their policy ideas into the world, they also boost institutional credibility. Poorly produced videos, however, can have the opposite effect. At best, they can prompt your audience to move onto the next thing in their feed. At worst, they can affect your status as a reputable content source and tune out your ideas.

This presents a problem for think tanks who are interested in using video to disseminate their ideas and boost their standing, but do not have a Hollywood budget. There are three ways to get around this issue.

1. **Share high quality content produced by peer organisations.**
   How did Netflix become Netflix? The streaming service and production studio that is taking the movie industry by storm only moved into the original content space recently. For years, it built up a customer base (an audience) by becoming a reliable purveyor of high-quality content. Your think tank can do the same without spending a dime.

Do some research into other organisations who are working on similar policy issues and find the ones who are putting out high-quality video content. Then share this content through your own social media channels, but offer a quick take or unique insight with your post. Do not worry that you have not produced the content yourself. By sharing it with a diverse group on a consistent basis, your organisation will become a place where users can turn for engaging and insightful content. This will help build up an online audience that trusts you as a curator of ideas, creating more opportunities to share your organisation's own products online. A secondary benefit is that by sharing this content with your networks, you will be building up valuable online social capital to be cashed in when you have your own content to share.

2. **Use social media to share short and engaging content that highlights your organisation's personality**.
   Through new online video platforms like Snapchat, Instagram stories and now Facebook's own stories feature, videos filmed on smart phones have a growing role in building you up as an active member of the online video sharing community. Think tanks run into trouble when they try to use smart phones to create high-quality video content. However, when used well and appropriately, smart phones can serve as an ideal tool for creating short and intimate content that offers a behind the scenes look at your organisation, helping to build an institutional personality.

   This content should be unscripted and unedited with far less regard for camera angle and lighting. The only rule here is to be engaging, timely and consistent. And remember, the video style should follow the content: informal and honest. Stay away from stiff, formal interviews and try brief, casual conversations with a coworker as you walk together and discuss a pressing topic. Try to post short videos like this multiple times a week if not daily. To ease the burden, share the responsibility for creating these videos and make them just a few seconds long.

3. **Use your limited resources to create well produced, high-quality 'signature' content.**
   As you build your audience by following the steps above, it is important to invest in 'signature' content from time to time. This can anchor your video channel with high-quality, original content. Depending on your budget, you may only do this annually or every quarter. These videos should be tied to a high-priority policy initiative or report that your organisation is already heavily invested in. Take your time with this sort of content and remember: "if your presentation is sloppy, people will think your ideas are sloppy too."

> "Strong stories told through video in a well crafted way not only help think tanks get their policy ideas into the world, they also boost institutional credibility."

As the head of a video production company that works almost exclusively with think tanks and other non-profits, I have seen many organizations struggle. Given the costs, many organisations decide to take short cuts, producing low quality content that wastes resources and can have a negative impact on their credibility. By first refocusing on curating content, think tanks can build up their credibility along with their audience, saving their resources for when it makes sense to produce their own original content.

CREDIBILITY – THE ROLE OF TRANSPARENCY

BY HANS GUTBROD
Executive director, Transparify

Transparency cannot guarantee credibility for think tanks. But in many ways, it is a necessary step towards being credible. Credibility is essential: if the public does not trust an institution, its best research is unlikely to have an impact.

When reflecting on credibility, it is useful to ask about how people establish truth. Broadly, there are three standards: correspondence, coherence and consensus. Do observed phenomena correspond to the theory? Are the claims internally coherent? Does a scholarly community agree with the claims?

Transparency can play a role in all of these standards. Providing a full dataset, for example, allows people to check whether the data corresponds to the theory. Similarly, making details of the full project methodology and implementation plan available makes it possible to check whether claims are internally coherent. And cross-references to other work and funding enable people to see whether there is consensus around the issue.

Yet in other ways, we are unable to evaluate scientific method. We can fly around the world and conclude that it does not appear to be flat, but there are many other claims that we cannot verify in this way. How can we be sure about the real impact of tax policies on the economy? How can we confidently say that the quality of pre-school has an impact on teenage pregnancy rates?

Some degree of trust is involved. Claims to expertise and authority are only credible if the audience has reason to believe that researchers and analysts orient themselves around assessing facts, rather than on advocating hidden interests. With this in mind, being transparent about who funds research is critical. It makes it clear who is driving the agenda, which provides important context when interpreting evidence.

Transparency can also contribute to a more sensible debate on credibility. People can be motivated by particular interests and still be credible. Being open about our

> Claims to expertise and authority are only credible if the audience has reason to believe that researchers and analysts orient themselves around assessing facts, rather than on advocating hidden interests.

motivations (and not just with regards to funding) can contribute to a better debate. After all, all social science research has some interest and motivation behind it. (Richard Rorty has an excellent essay on this, *Trotsky and Wild Orchids*, that is well worth reading, on the quirks of private interest.) Being upfront about interests is better than pretending that there is a sphere of pure enquiry that is free of all motivation.

In a context of populist resurgence and widespread cynicism, developing and maintaining this trust is more important than ever. In 2014, in a draft for Transparify's first report, a colleague wrote about a 'crisis of credibility' for think tanks. We cut this line because we felt it might be alarmist. In retrospect, we should have left it in. The crisis of credibility for experts is real. Too often, there is a feeling that experts are in it for themselves. Part of gaming the system against ordinary people.

Transparify's five-star rating system provides a useful approach to rally against this crisis. It provides transparency on research funding and it does it for hundreds of think tanks. Each report we produce shows improvements in transparency, but a review in 2017 also showed slippage. It highlighted the fact that transparency is not yet routine.

This is where donors come in. Along with providing core funding to think tanks so that they can produce evidence that matters, donors can have an impact by nudging them to be transparent. This could be as easy as requiring think tanks to declared their funding publicly, through a simple page on their website. If half a dozen big donors (among them bilateral and multilateral agencies as well as large global foundations) did this, we would likely see a huge improvement in transparency of funding. This would allow us to move on to other important questions, like how to make sure research is credible.

"When reflecting on credibility, it is useful to ask about how people establish truth. Broadly, there are three standards: correspondence, coherence and consensus."

HANS GUTBROD

Author, *Credibility- the role of transparency*

THINK TANK CREDIBILITY: LESSONS FOR FUNDING AGENCIES

BY SAMAR VERMA[1]
Senior programme specialist, IDRC

The importance of think tank credibility cannot be overemphasised. Credibility conveys the character of an organisation and defines its persona. It impacts on respect as well, and by extension on a think tank's ability to influence policy communities including donors.

But credibility is often narrowly interpreted as 'financial independence' – the extent to which research agendas and impact pathways are influenced by the source of funding. Think tanks have recently been accused – directly and implicitly – of acting as policy lobbyists on behalf of funders, exposing them to allegations of being 'foreign agents' or 'corporate sector lobbyists'. Admittedly, being an active policy interlocutor in seeking to influence policy can be precarious.

It is important to bear in mind that financial independence is only one dimension of credibility. The Think Tank Initiative (TTI) has developed ways to assess this fragile concept in practice, looking more broadly at how research agendas are set, the quality and profile of senior researchers, and perhaps most crucial, the quality of leadership and governance.

The credibility of a think tank also depends on the quality of research itself. Good-quality research should be able to stand independently of its origin (including the researcher and the affiliated think tank). Though it may not influence public policy debates in the short-term, it adds to the stock of knowledge that subsequently feeds into further research and future policy influence. Ultimately, 'impact' may or may not be directly attributable to the original piece of work.

1. Views are personal.

But think tanks who only do research for long-term influence may also face problems and struggle to be seen as credible by their stakeholders. Decision makers are primarily interested in addressing policy issues that are pressing and of immediately relevance. They call upon research centres who can give them quick results and clear answers. This is forcing think tanks to choose between 'quick and dirty' analyses to feed into topical policy issues on the one hand, and longer, rigorous analyses on the other. As such, institutional research quality mechanisms play a critical role in ensuring minimum standards of quality for all research products.

Similarly, the ability to set research agendas independently – including a mix of research that is relevant to contemporary policy issues, together with a more forward-looking set of themes – and to invest in pathways for research uptake by stakeholders, are also crucial elements of think tank credibility.

An interesting question here is whether donors – be they public agencies or corporate foundations – are willing, or able, to fund think tanks in a way that strengthens their credibility. Is money actually available to enable independent research agenda-setting or to facilitate dedicated investment in research-to-policy uptake? The sad reality is that, in most of developing countries at least, the answer to this question is no.

Consequently, organisations remain dependent on research project funding to survive. They are unable to set their own research agendas, develop institutional quality assessment mechanisms and deepen their expertise in core areas that support their mission. Long-term sustainability therefore continues to be a challenge, and think tanks remain vulnerable to accusations of partisanship.

By providing non-earmarked, long-term, core funding together with bespoke capacity building support to some 40 organisations in over 20 developing countries since 2008, TTI has made a modest contribution to catalyse change in this area. As TTI approaches the end of a 10-year tenure, the think tanks we have engaged with are reporting a significantly enhanced ability to define their own research programmes. They have also established research quality control mechanisms and continue to dedicate institutional resources to leverage their research in a way that supports policy change.

To help ensure accountability and draw meaningful lessons from this approach to research funding, TTI has developed comprehensive and rigorous monitoring and evaluation tools. What we have drawn from this process, and can share with other donors, is that taking a holistic view of the wider role of think tanks is crucial. A narrow focus on research outputs fails to effectively support the use of evidence in policymaking. Through our work, we can confidently say that core support has enhanced the credibility and sustainability of think tanks. This will benefit policymaking in the short-term, and will also contribute to developing human and knowledge capacities in societies in the long-term.

ABOUT ON THINK TANKS

OTT is a global platform dedicated to the study and support of policy research centres. Our team live and work in six continents and our readers reflect this diversity.

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

2017

We believe that decisions are better when they are informed by evidence. The emergence and growth of think tanks across the world and, particularly, in developing countries is promising. It means locally informed solutions can help solve locally specific problems. We want to keep supporting this growth, and encourage think tanks to reshape themselves, adapt to their contexts and continue to generate research that informs policy.

Our content is centred around five main themes: governance and management, research, communications and impact, funding and supporting think tanks, and understanding think tanks. Our publications include briefs, reports, papers, compilations and books. Our resources include manuals, videos and publications. They present a range of solutions to common challenges that think tanks face.

2017 was an important year for OTT. It kicked off with the first Winterschool in Geneva in January and the first OTT Annual Conference in London in February, where the team had the chance to meet, in person, for the first time. The conference was also an opportunity to exchange ideas with other members of the think tank community.

Throughout the year, we focused on larger, long-term projects, many of which will be officially launched during the second OTT conference in February 2018. These include the Open Think Tank Directory, the Working Paper Series and a Communications Health Check.

We also reached new audiences, increasing visits to the platform by more than 15%. Likewise, we saw a growth in followers in all our social media channels.

Like most organisations working in this field, we are conscious that to ensure our sustainability, we have to develop new services. As part of this effort, we created OTT Consulting. This new venture has already yielded 12 projects for organisations based around the world – and has contributed to OTT's financial sustainability.

We are also aware that we must constantly keep evolving. With this in mind, we have made improvements to the platform in an effort to make it more user friendly. This is something we will continue to invest in throughout the next year. We have also reached out to experts in fields that sit outside the usual research-policy sphere. For example, we will be developing a series of resources on design thinking and how user experience and service design should be considered when generating research outputs.

The plurality of voices in the OTT website, and our continued openess to different and differing opinions, is one of the way we ensure our creadibility. In 2017, we had 60 contributors based around the world and from different professional backgrounds.

In the following pages, we welcome you to take a look at OTT's 2017.




On Think Tanks Conference
London, February 2017



ABOUT

The team

THE TEAM

The current team is comprised of 17 collaborators based in nine countries.

















THE TEAM

READ THEIR BIOS ON:

WWW.ONTHINKTANKS.ORG/ABOUT/OUR-PEOPLE

Andrea Baertl, Research officer

Sofía Ballón, Coordinator, Semana de la Evidencia

Till Bruckner, Trainer, OTT School

Eva Cardoso, Programma manager

Leandro Echt, Research associate

Carolina Kern Trainer, OTT School and research associate

Michael Kleiman, Trainer, OTT School

Jeff Knezovich, Editor at large for communications and research associate

Dena Lomofsky, Trainer, OTT School and research associate

Enrique Mendizabal, Founder and director

Andrea Ordoñez, Research associate

Erika Perez-Leon, Digital content editor

Zuleyka Ramos, Programme manager

Annapoorna Ravichander, Editor at large for South Asia

Jordan Tchilingirian, Research director

Vanesa Weyrach, Associate

Stephen Yeo, Adviser at large and research associate

THE ADVISORY BOARD

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

NORMA CORREA

Professor, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

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

PRIYANTHI FERNANDO

Executive Director, International Women's Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific

Priyanthi is a social development and communications professional with over 30 years of experience in Sri Lanka and overseas. She has worked in the areas of technology, infrastructure and poverty and has led several organisations including: the Centre for Poverty Analysis, the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development and the Intermediate Technology Development Group's Sri Lanka programme.

RUTH LEVINE

Programme Director, Global Development and Population, Hewlett Foundation

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

The advisory board

LAWRENCE MACDONALD
Vice President, World Resources Institute

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

SIMON MAXWELL. *Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute*

Simon is a development economist, who has worked internationally since 1970. He worked for ten years overseas, then for fifteen years at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. In 1997, Simon became Director of the Overseas Development Institute, the UK's leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. In 2007, he was made a CBE, for services to international development.

JILL RUTTER. *Programme Director, Institute for Government*

Jill leads the Institute for Government's work on better policymaking and arm's length government. She is an experienced former senior civil servant, having worked for HM Treasury, Number 10 and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Her work includes studies on how governments make policy, general civil service issues including minister-civil service relations, governments and sustainable development, and government and business.

JOHN SCHWARTZ. *Founder and Managing Director, Soapbox*

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

STEPHEN YEO. *Independent Consultant and OTT Adviser at Large*

Stephen has had extensive involvement in building capacity for policy research and analysis in Sub-Saharan Africa. He also has experience of monitoring and evaluation, in particular of policy research networks and policy influencing projects. He is currently involved in the evaluation of the International Growth Centre.

XUFENG ZHU. *Professor, Tsinghua University*

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

OUR FUNDING

OTT pursues a range of funding streams to remain sustainable. For 2017, these have included:

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

Hewlett Foundation grant . . . . £ 159,217

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) . . . . £ 14,341

Intended to develop the Open Think Tank Directory Latin America.

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

Foundation Open Society Institute (FOSI) grant . . £ 7,560

Intended to support the participation of four think tank leaders in the 2018 OTT Conference.

OTT Consulting Ltd project funding . . . . £ 100,967

Income generated by OTT School . . . .£ 14,341

Total overhead generated by OTT Consulting Ltd and allocated to OTT . . . . £ 13.544

OTT Consulting Ltd financial contribution to OTT . . .£ 28,244

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

A YEAR IN REVIEW

In 2017, we published over 80 articles from 60 authors based around the world.

In 2017, we also produced a new set of videos on interviews from the OTT team, along with five new series on funding, communications and governance. One of these series is a compilation of interviews from executive directors in South Asia, an area that is seeing growth in think tanks and policy research centres.

A YEAR IN REVIEW

OTT in numbers

60 authors based around the world

16 new interviews with executive directors and thintankers in 15 different countries

22 new resources including manuals and videos

82 new articles

3530 newsletter subscribers

173 participants in the OTT School *from* **112** different organisations

7099 monthly users average

On September 29 we had 2,245 page views, which makes it the busiest day in 2017.

5 new series

57 advertised job posts

33 advertised events

5748 twitter followers

2 new initiatives

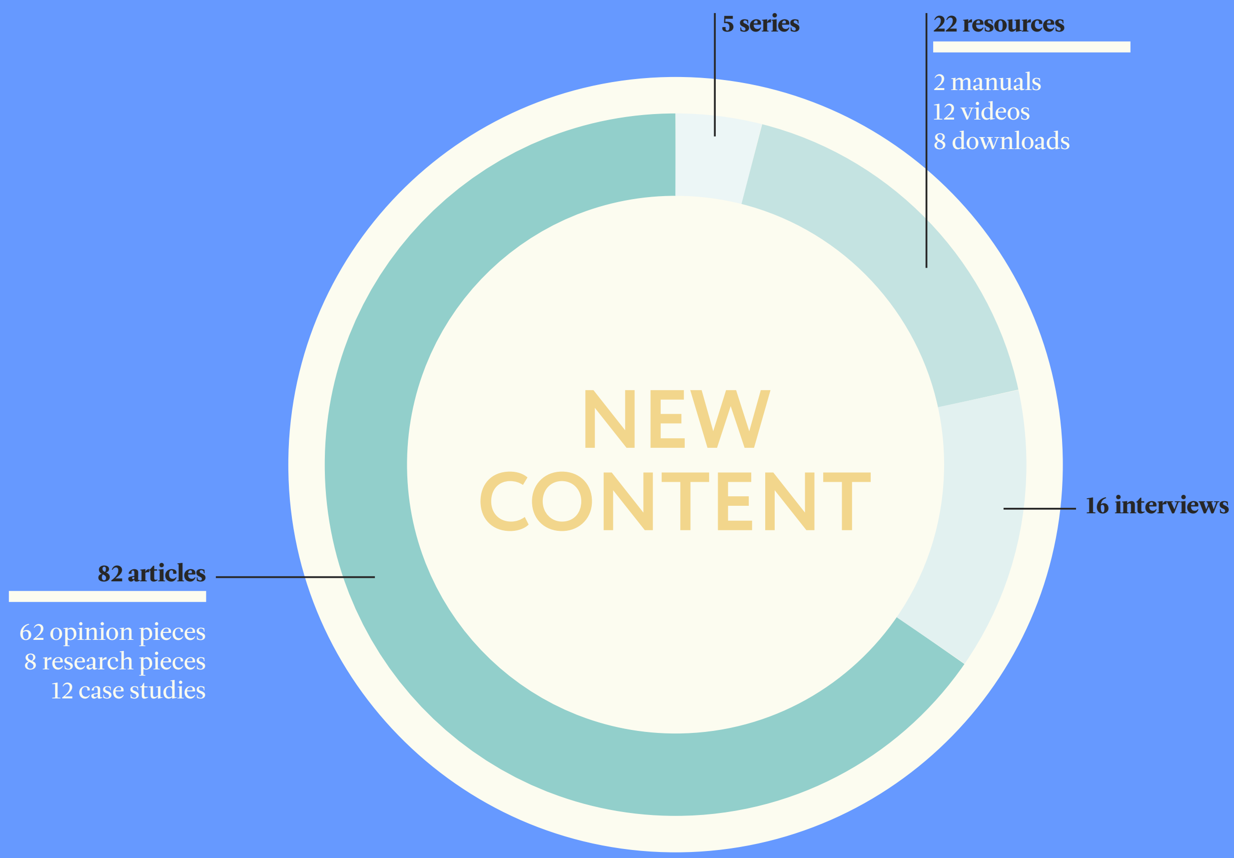
3590 facebook followers

10 online learning opportunities

the majority of our readers are between 25 and 34 years of age

12 trainers

OTT IN NUMBERS



It has been a busy 2017, with over 100 new pieces of content. The number of new authors in our network rose by 33% compared to 2016, we produced more content and we increased our social media reach.

OTT in numbers

OTT ON TWITTER:

Followers	5748
Male followers	51%
Female followers	49%

72% of them come from:

United Kingdom
United States
Peru
Canada
Spain
Kenya
India
Australia
Mexico
Germany

Average monthly:

Tweets	92
Profile visits	1951
Mentions	95
Impressions	60k

TOP MENTIONS IN 2017 BY:

Think Tank Hub GVA
Think Tank Watch
Alejandro Chafuen
Joseph Barnsley
CIUP
Richard Darlington
Abid Qaiyum Suleri
Julio López P.
Leandro Echt
Duncan Green
David Walker

TOP TWEETS:

January

What is a thinktank? Defining the label onthinktanks.org/articles/what-… #thinktanksmatter pic.twitter.com/8KDzEqYZ1g

February

Excellent long read: How Think Tanks Became Engines of Royal Propaganda by Jacob Soll via @tabletmag tabletmag.com/jewish-news-an…

March

The end of the think tank century? - Policy Options policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/marc…

April

Excellent approach to transparency by @Bruegel_org Personal Declarations of Interest onthinktanks.org/articles/can-t… @transparify

May

Call for cases of how Think Tanks have contributed to electoral process onthinktanks.org/announcements/… submit your story pic.twitter.com/7YiyMUbUHi

June

Twitter Manual for Governments. Digital services serveisdigitals.gencat.cat/en/serveis/xar…

July

New job at @lseideas Communications Officer for the Dahrendorf Forum onthinktanks.org/jobs/dahrendor… @WonkComms @soapboxcoms #workforathinktank pic.twitter.com/Q5MjrNQxUQ

August

A great long read by @RstruykJ on good practices for archiving research projects: onthinktanks.org/articles/good-… pic.twitter.com/qXkjPHOlnj

September

Role of Think Tanks in Iran jebhpme.ssu.ac.ir/article-1-63-e…

October

Great opportunity to work at @nesta_uk onthinktanks.org/jobs/eu-projec… #workforathinktank #eu #startupeurope pic.twitter.com/z7nE9zhZ8L

November

10 lessons on evidence informed policy from the 2017 Latin American Evidence Week: no.8 Evidence can empower vulnerable groups (but whose evidence?) #semanadelaevidencia @Hewlett_Found @sarahtlucas @fp2p @3ieNews @HowardNWhite @A4UEvidence @resultsforall onthinktanks.org/articles/latin… pic.twitter.com/FVNPceEYzJ

December

Three great jobs at @foraus Executive Director, IT Project Manager and Intern: onthinktanks.org/jobs/ Apply today and join this excellent #foreignpolicy #thinktank @polis180 @ArgoThinkTank @AgoraThinkTank pic.twitter.com/n0hTy7IAbj

OTT in numbers

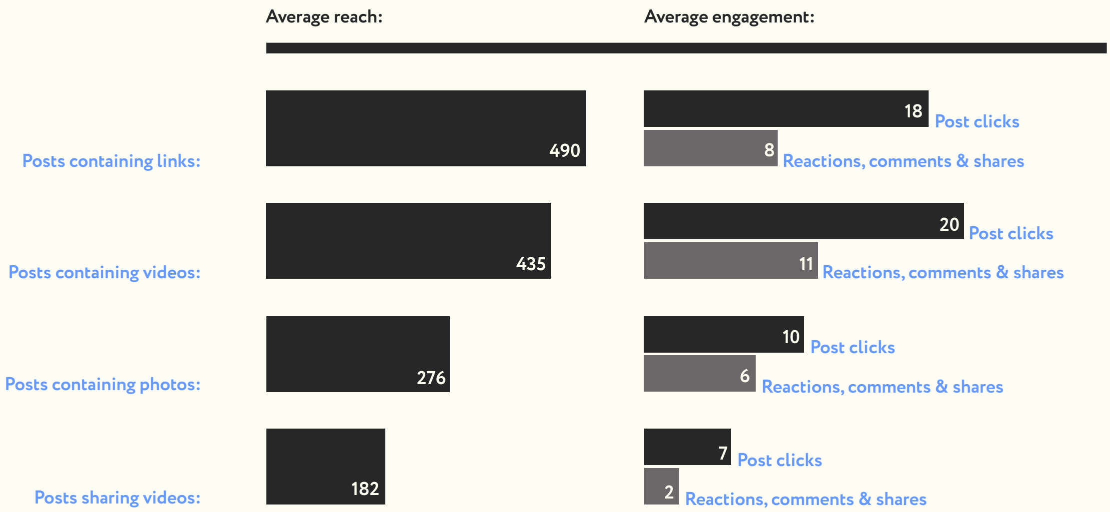
OTT ON FACEBOOK:

Followers	3590
Likes	3578
Female followers	45%
Male followers	55%

The majority of our followers are between 25 and 34 years old, and come from 45 different countries. The highest number of followers come from:

604 from Peru
360 from India
250 from the USA
238 from Brazil
179 from the UK

OUR DIFFERENT POST TYPES & HOW THEY PERFORMED



OTT in numbers

NEWSLETTER:	
Subscribers	3530
Newsletters	34
Open rate (Industry average: 16%)	16%
Click rate (Industry average: 2%)	3%

EMAIL BLASTS:	
Recipients	2306
Sent	12
Open rate	21%
Click rate	4%

WHAT WE SHARED:

January	New articles and OTT TV episodes, our newly appointed Advisory Board, and there's still time to apply for the Fellowship Programme.
February	Registrations are now open for the Evolving Think Tanks Series 2017. Early bird discounts available! Plus new articles, interviews, and events.
	The first On Think Tanks Conference was held in London, OTT's 2016 Annual Report is out, and registrations for the MEL short course are open.
March	Advice on impact, new resources, OTT consulting, an updated jobsboard, and three new capacity building opportunities from the OTT School.
April	More resources and a new series, a survey, more courses from the OTT School, job opportunities and two new OTT team member profiles.
May	Lots of new content this month! New articles, announcements, videos, job opportunities and two new initiatives.
June	New articles and resources, a new series, more videos and opportunities for think tanks.
July	A new long course, more articles and resources, a series on funding, and new opportunities for thinktankers and think tanks.
August	New articles, interviews and resources. Registrations open for individual units of the comms long course and a short course on advocacy coming up.
October	A new series on think tanks in China, new articles, and capacity building opportunities from the OTT School.
	Improve your governance skills with our upcoming short course, apply for #WISCH18, and more new content.
	New job, funding and capacity building opportunities. Get the latest!
	Featured content, an ongoing series on best practices for think tanks, and more opportunities from the OTT School.
November	Gender and policy research, funding opportunities and a short survey.
	Think tank communications, governance and management structures, and new job opportunities.
December	Happy holidays!

OTT in numbers

HOW HAVE WE GROWN?

Between January and December 2017, OTT averaged more than 10,000 sessions per month. In users, this represents an average of 7,099 and 17,989 page views. Articles generated 55% of traffic to the site followed by advertised events, which generated 12% of traffic.

60 AUTHORS IN 2017

That's 33% more than the previous year.

16 INTERVIEWS IN 2017

That's seven more than last year!

22 RESOURCES IN 2017

That's eight more than last year!

62 OPINION PIECES

That's eight less than the previous year.

5 NEW SERIES

That's three less than the previous year.

Average monthly:

SESSIONS

2017: 10,543 vs 2016: 9,000

17% increase

USERS

2017: 7,099 vs 2016: 6,617

7% increase

UNIQUE PAGE VIEWS

2017: 17,989 vs 2016: 15,778

14% increase

THE OTT SCHOOL

5 NEW TRAINERS

7% MORE PARTICIPANTS

2 NEW LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

ON SOCIAL MEDIA

5% more newsletter subscribers

20% more followers

22% more followers

A YEAR IN REVIEW

Most popular article in 2017

OUR MOST POPULAR ARTICLE IN 2017 WAS....

A YEAR IN REVIEW

Most popular article in 2017

A PERMANENT REVOLUTION IN THINK TANK COMMUNICATIONS

BY JOHN SCHWARTZ
Founder, Soapbox

Communications is not just about content.

It's about relationships. It's about values. It's about timing.

The digital think tank

Those of us who work in think tank communications have been slightly obsessed over the last few years with going "digital first".

Mike Connery's 2015 article The Digital Think Tank remains the best explanation of the reasons behind this shift and some of the changes we can expect. As Mike says:

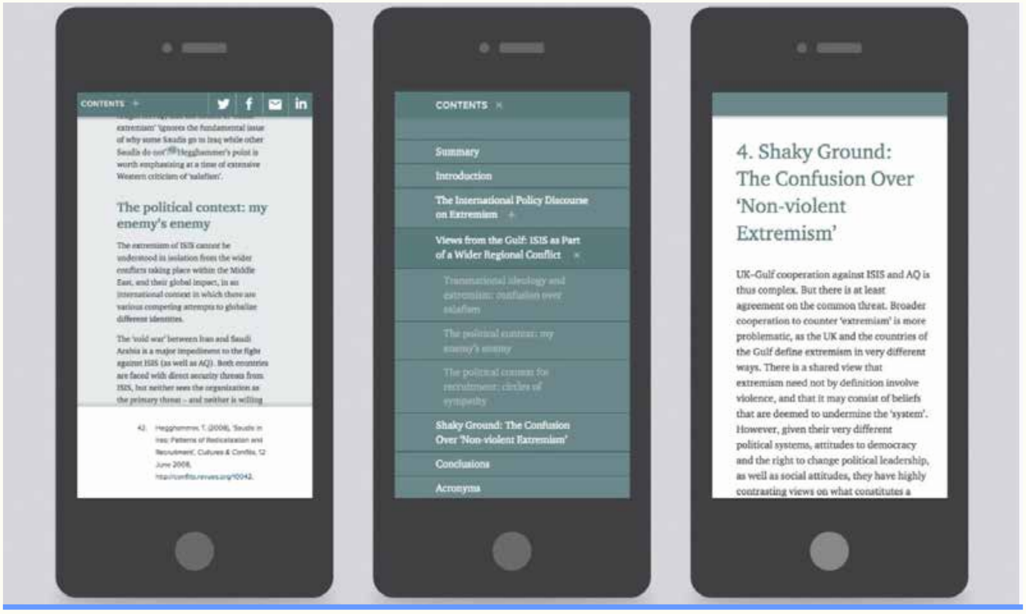
> "Today, audiences are used to information finding them. It's a model sprung from digital media, and one that privileges brevity, shareability and a highly visual approach to content."

So we've all spent an awful lot of time thinking about content and ways to deliver it.

At Soapbox, that meant that we spent much of 2015 writing, designing and building scrolling, media-rich, longform microsites – like this one for the International Rescue Committee.

This article was first published at OTT on February 24, 2017

Most popular article in 2017



The Chatham House multichannel reader on mobile

Then in 2016, we built several different ways for think tanks to deliver long-form research content from within their own websites. This included a multichannel publishing solution for Chatham House.

This year we have started rolling out websites built with modular content management systems, an innovation well described in a recent article by Joseph Miller:

> You write, edit, and approve a single source of content. Since the content is modular, you can create different combinations of modules. And ... you can push different content combinations to different platforms.

You write, edit, and approve a single source of content. Since the content is modular, you can create different combinations of modules. And ... you can push different content combinations to different platforms.

The first modular content management system we built was for the LSE's Urban Age site. The latest is the new Nuffield Trust site, but there are others in the works, each one building on the last.

Digital first has unstoppable momentum and – while we have still have a long way to go before we are actually producing content in this way as standard – there is a fairly good consensus on what the content will look like when we get there.

But, as I said, communications is not just about content.

Most popular article in 2017

BEYOND GOVERNMENT

In his 2016 RSA lecture Matthew Taylor offered a critique of what he dubbed "the policy presumption":

> "By this I mean an assumption among ministers, civil servants and policy advisors, but equally all of us ... that, on the whole, the most effective way to accomplish social change is to pull the big levers of central government policy."

Yes, policy still needs to be evidence-based. But that is not sufficient. People are mistrustful of political elites. They feel let down and not listened to. In massive numbers, they are looking elsewhere for change. We are realising that successful policy involves engaging with values, feelings and relationships – and with the lived experience of people who deliver and receive public services.

Policy impact often means changing the conversation gradually over years but it also means acting opportunistically when the time is right. And it can mean building coalitions to stand up for what we believe and challenging those in power when they act against evidence and against progress.

Politics has changed. The public perception of politics – and by extension policy – has changed. The ways that policy is delivered on the ground and that services are designed has changed.

In a recent publication on think tank impact, Julia Slay writes that:

> "Some think tanks are beginning to look beyond government as the source of change and towards other organisations and activists that can build grassroots support among the public, campaigners and organisational partnerships."

Think tanks have always been good at public affairs and media communications – working directly with political decision makers or through the media to create impact. But we've rarely been very good at capturing the public imagination. And we've never been very good at mobilising mass support.

That's because we never had to. Until now.

Most popular article in 2017

GOING PRO

I believe that digital first is actually part of a wider movement towards the professionalisation of think tank communications which has been going on for over a decade now – a kind of ongoing revolution in think tanks comms.

I often tell young Soapboxers that when I started working on think tanks reports they were all A5 size, all typeset in Times New Roman and all had a picture of Big Ben on the cover. It's only a partial lie.

Design standards in think tank reports started improving dramatically about ten years ago.

About seven years ago we started trying to present data in more imaginative, accessible ways.

Five years ago think tanks started to take their visual identity more seriously.

Three years ago we started getting report content online in full – the beginning of the long death of the PDF.

This year modular content is taking off.

Constant change. Constant progress. A constant move to more professional communications.

The change is driven not just by the digital revolution in content, but also by the changing ways think tanks create impact and the much wider range of audiences we seek to engage.

We need to take a step back and ask what kind of communications framework can meet these challenges.

What is the next step in our permanent revolution?

WE NEED TO TALK…

I'm going to discuss four concepts which are commonplace for professional communications in other sectors, but which think tankers have struggled to get to grips with, ignored or actively turned up their noses at over the years.

Corporate communications started taking these concepts seriously in the 1960s and 70s, with big charity and political comms not far behind. So it's time we got with the picture. I'm afraid we need to talk about:

- Brands
- Markets
- Services; and
- Campaigns

Most popular article in 2017

The good news is that think tank comms has been secretly making strides in all of these areas for at least ten years now – but we need to get even better, we need to join up the dots and we need to come out of the closet as communications professionals.

BRANDS

For many modern corporations the bulk of their equity is vested in their brands – no wonder they spend billions promoting and protecting them.

By contrast, in 2005 when I designed this logo for IPPR (let's call it the *classic* IPPR logo), what happened was that IPPR's then Director, Nick Pearce, stood behind me for about fifteen minutes while we looked at different colours on my screen. Job done.

IPPR logo circa 2005

We've come a long way since then.

Wally Olins, who more or less invented the modern practice of branding, used to say that branding is about delivering on promises:

> "The only requirement of a symbol is that it have substance underneath: The first thing to do is to try to establish the substance."

In other words, branding is about substance. It's about giving people something they can trust.

And as a think tank, you need people to trust you.

When we worked with ODI in 2012, this was the first think tank rebrand I had been involved in that actually took this notion seriously. We tried to create a brand that reflected the values of the organisation, its personality and unique positioning. We based the visual identity on research with external stakeholders and a lengthy internal dialogue with the organisation. We wanted to make a brand that would help it *become* the organisation it aspired to be.

Nowadays, that kind of process and aspiration is normal in our branding projects. But we are starting to take it further, producing full-scale brand strategies alongside visual identities.

Most popular article in 2017

Branding at the ODI offices in London

If you really want to take your communications to the next level, then you need to understand your organisation's personality and narrative, what you are promising your audiences and your value proposition in the market. And you need a strategy to maintain, reinforce and grow these positions.

You need to take branding seriously.

MARKETS

It is not a very profound observation to note that different groups of people will respond to different types of communications across different channels, but it is an observation that think tanks have struggled to get to grips with.

Thinking about audiences or markets has often not gone beyond the superficial. "People have short attention spans, let's give them an infographic" is a typical brief from some of our clients.

We need to do better. We need to segment our markets.

Think tanks are increasingly asking us to create audience strategies for them, mapping different markets, creating personas and user journeys and making suggestions that influence the type of communications produced.

OTT TV produced a short film about the New America think tank and their work to communicate education research to different audiences: parents, educators and policy makers. The overall policy message to each group is the same, but New America's website lets users easily navigate to resources and actions that are tailored to their particular perspective.

Most popular article in 2017

Which brings us to the need to involve users in the creation of our outputs. Thankfully, these days user testing of websites is seldom seen as an optional extra, by think tanks, but we can take user-centred design much further.

We worked with the Making Every Adult Matter coalition on a research project about people with severe and multiple needs. The outputs were codesigned with actual service users, and culminated in an exhibition at the Centre for Voluntary Action in Birmingham rather than a conventional research report. The exhibition ran for five months rather than the planned six weeks. It engaged thousands of service users and practitioners as well as local policy makers.

Making Every Adult Matter exhibition in Birmingham

We not only need to understand our users, we need to get out and actively engage with them and create alongside them.

SERVICES

Thinking about markets in this way can help us reconceptualise our work as researchers and communicators around the idea that we are providing a *service*.

Our purpose as think tanks is to carry out research and come up with ideas that change policy. Another way to look at that is that we are carrying out a *service* for those who need or want policy to change. These can be policymakers, practitioners, funders or the wider population who rely on public services.

So what do we owe to our service users? What service are we offering?

- We owe them our ability to conduct research and communicate its findings.

Most popular article in 2017

- We owe them our ability to come up with policy ideas and solve problems.
- We owe them our contribution to policy debates and our ability to convene and provide a forum for those debates
- And we owe them factual information and data as well as an informed opinion.

I would argue that once we conceptualise think tank work in this way, as a *service* with *users*, it becomes entirely impossible to defend any kind of "ivory tower" model of research whereby clever researchers lock themselves away until they are ready to come out and deliver their brilliant ideas to political elites.

Regular contributions and day-to-day engagements in policy debates are the very essence of the service think tanks are providing.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently commissioned the service design agency Snook to rethink their communication functions as services to their users. Instead of handing down communications from on high JRF are seeking to maximise impact by asking what communications are actually *useful* to different groups.

We will be seeing the results over the coming months, but one early example of the insights gained is that particular groups would like to have advance information on what reports are coming up so that they're better prepared to respond. This included politicians who wanted to be ready to amplify and react to JRF's messages.

As a result, JRF have already added a "what's coming up" section to their weekly newsletter. It's a simple change that seems obvious in retrospect, but one that could make a big difference.

CAMPAIGNS

You may be worried that all this talk of brands, markets and services means we need to create a large volume of outputs. A large volume that you can't afford.

Structuring outputs around campaigns – and by this I mean communications campaigns, not political campaigns – not only allows us to increase impact by banging on about the same simple messages day after day but also to bring efficiencies and economies of scale to our content production.

To produce content that can be used across multiple channels for multiple audiences you need to start with two things:

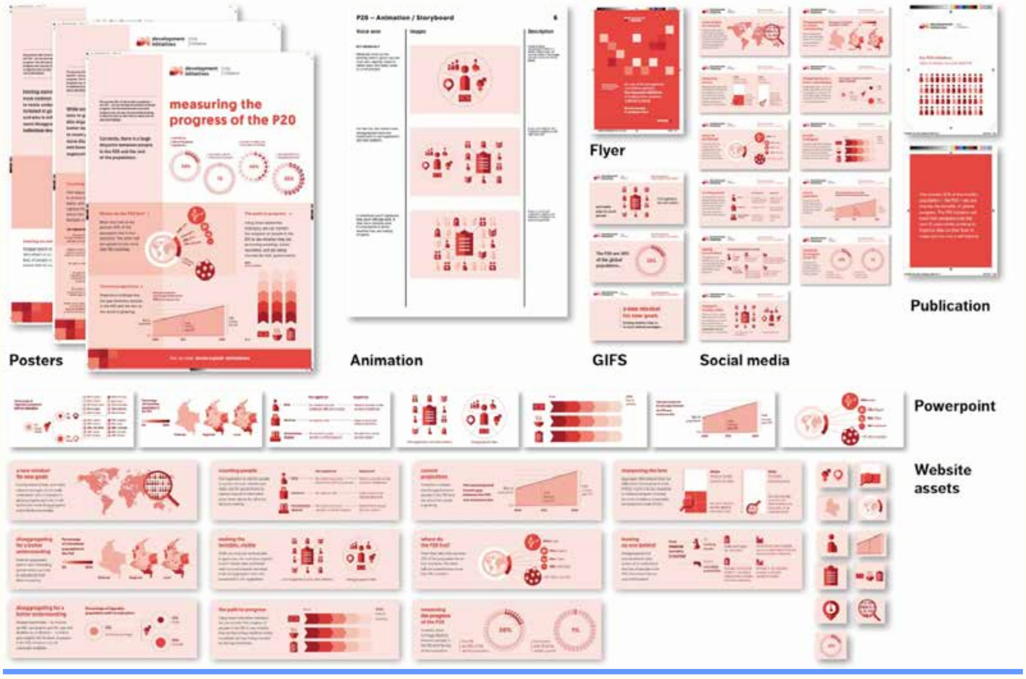
1. a set of key messages; and
2. a set of content that illustrates and supports those messages. This can be infographics, videos, case studies, photos, audio – whatever does the job.

Most popular article in 2017

This is the the same point as the modular content management systems we mentioned earlier – you create content modules once and then put them together in different combinations for different platforms.

Development Initiatives recently launched their P20 campaign looking at the world's poorest 20% of people. We worked with them on to refine a set of simple key messages and used their data to create supporting infographics.

We then put these together in different combinations to create posters, an animation, a publication, powerpoint slides, animated gifs for Twitter and Facebook and static infographics for the website.



P20 campaign outputs

And we could do even more if they wanted: they could have an exhibition, or a scrolling microsite or project the infographics onto the Houses of Parliament – anything really.

The point is that once you have the foundational elements then the rest is relatively easy and cheap.

If you structure your content around campaigns and plan carefully, then you can serve a range of markets while maintaining economies of scale.

BRANDS, MARKETS, SERVICES AND CAMPAIGNS

Think tank communications are professionalising and have been for some time. This is driven by the digital media revolution but also a revolution in how policy is made, how it is experienced and how we can generate impact.

Most popular article in 2017

Adopting a professional communications framework can help us define realistic and objective goals for our comms activities and better monitor impact:

- What percentage of stakeholders can accurately associate our brand name with our value proposition?
- What percentage of a particular target market have we reached?
- How many citations does our output in a particular policy debate generate?
- How many people took a particular action as a result of our campaign?

We can start to ask these kind of questions and generate actionable data as a result.

We need:

- Communications that build trust in think tanks by reinforcing their values, and positioning.
- Communications that connect with their intended audience, or even better, are co-produced with the intended audience.
- Communications that contribute or assemble knowledge, ideas and opinions in ways that are useful and positive.
- Communications that are efficient and adaptable.

The next step forward for think tank communications is to start thinking in terms of brands, markets, services and campaigns.

Then we will have a framework to create communications – digital first and otherwise – that are well-targeted, values-driven, evidence-based and, above all, impactful.

&

OTHER CONTENT WE WANT TO HIGHLIGHT

12 QUESTIONS FROM THINKTANKERS IN 2017

BY ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
Founder and director, OTT

During 2017, OTT delivered a series of initiatives and projects that involved mentoring. These have been both complex and rewarding efforts. The Fellowship Programme was one of them (see pX). Another was a project to support the Latin American Network of Think Tanks (ILAIPP) (see pX). There were also a range of other events and meetings, where I had the opportunity to interact with thinktankers from around the world struggling with questions about governance, sustainability, research and communications.

For the most part, I find it difficult to offer straight answers to many of these questions. It often depends on context. On capacity. On money. In lieu of a formal New Year message, let me share some reflections with you.

What follows is a small sample of the kind of issues I have tried to address over the year. If you have a better answer (which I am sure you do), please, do share it with us.

1 HOW CAN I SHINE AT AN EVENT I AM INVITED TO SPEAK AT? AND WHAT ABOUT EVENTS WHERE I'M NOT ONE OF THE SPEAKERS?

Speaking at a public event is a great way for researchers and think tank leaders to raise their profile, make connections and advance the interests of their organisation. However, more often than not, we fail to take advantage of these opportunities. There are a number of reasons for this, and an equal number of ways to get around them.

Firstly, event organisers are often unclear about the format of the event or panel they want you to participate in. This makes it hard to plan ahead. Should I take cards, postcards or publication samples? Will there be a place to showcase them? How many minutes will I have to present my paper? What will the room set up look like? Who will

This article was first published as the end of the year review at OTT

be in the audience? What will others in my panel present on? When in doubt, ask. The most effective and memorable speakers are the ones who have done their homework. They make it look simple, but there is a lot of planning that goes on behind the scenes.

It is also worth remembering that most bad presentations have one thing in common: they are wrong for their audience. So, think carefully about your audience when preparing your talk. Use the right language, the most appropriate support and moderate your style.

The second thing thinktankers do is to operate on autopilot. We go to events, but without specific objectives in mind. We say to ourselves: "it is a networking opportunity" or "it is a chance to disseminate my latest report". This is not enough. We should know who we want to talk to and what for. Our presentation should have a very clear ask or 'call to action'. Think about what you want them to *do* at the end of your presentation.

A third issue applies to thinktankers who are not presenting at all. In these situation, we may feel that our chance to shine is limited. This is far from the case. Take advantage of the opportunity by asking good questions or offering your own views (but be brief, do not steal the show). Approach other participants after the event. However, avoid rushing to the stage. The most interesting people are often sitting right there with you, in the audience. Take note of who asks the best questions. Also, be aware that presenters are unlikely to remember you among all the other people who come to speak to them, so having business cards or other 'leave-behind' material is critical.

> "Our presentation should have a very clear ask or 'call to action'. Think about what you want them to do at the end of your presentation."

And speaking of business cards: do not cut-corners on design. OTT's cards have a simple and clean front (name, job, email at the bottom of an otherwise off-white card). The back has a hand-drawn cartoon on it (10 cartoons in total, drawn by me). People always comment on these cards. It is a great conversation starter. When I give my cards to a group of people and they notice that the cartoons are different, they compare and even trade them.

2 SHOULD WE BUY SHAREPOINT?

Another practical question. Do we need an intranet? What kind of intranet should it be?

Sharepoint alone will not solve your internal communication problems. It is just a piece of software (with a lot of need for customisation and training). So, before thinking about technological solutions, think tanks must look at what is preventing staff from talking and collaborating, and explore ways to shift the organisational culture in the right direction.

An intranet is certainly necessary, but tools like Dropbox or Google Drive can be good starting points in the early days. The main priority is to eliminate 'my documents' folders and force all staff to keep their files in a shared drive. Really force them. This will not work if only some comply.

It is also worth noting that internal communications can be improved by rearranging your office. Open plan can help, but the location of the kitchen and meeting rooms is key. Putting younger researchers together can also make it easier for information to flow across teams or programmes.

A calendar of regular meetings (e.g. all-staff, senior management team, etc.) is also useful. But be sure to invest in making sure these meetings happen consistently or people will lose interest. Finally, an internal newsletter or Facebook page can help to keep staff informed of what is going on in the organisation and to put a face to a name in larger think tanks. For more immediate collaboration, the OTT team uses Slack, which is an excellent tool to communicate across teams and regions. Increasingly, think tanks are also using it to manage their internal information flows.

3 SHOULD EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS KNOW IT ALL AND DO IT ALL?

New executive directors, in particular those who have been appointed from within, face a dilemma when it comes to reorienting themselves vis-à-vis their staff. The temptation is to try to overachieve. To demonstrate that they are able to do everything: from data collection and analysis, to publishing and managing. Of concern to some is not being able to keep up with the latest research in their field, or the latest methods. All of this can culminate in self-doubt about their new role.

Think tank leaders (at all levels) do not need to *know* it all, and they certainly should not try to *do* it all either. They must recognise that they now play a new role and must offer support to their staff in different ways.

While it is unlikely that a head of programmes or an executive director will be able keep up with the details of every research project, they should be able to act as sounding boards to their staff's ideas and plans. They can play a particularly crucial role in guiding researchers to define policy and research questions; offering advice on how to develop and present their arguments; facilitating connections with relevant stakeholders; and mobilising funds.

Similarly, a head of research in a think tank should be able to discuss and advise staff on tried and trusted research methods. But it is also possible for younger researchers to

> "Think tank leaders (at all levels) do not need to know it all, and they certainly should not try to do it all either. They must recognise that they now play a new role and must offer support to their staff in different ways."

explore, test and master methods that the head of research may not be familiar with. In fact, this should be encouraged.

4 HOW DO WE AVOID LOSING OUR TOP RESEARCHERS? WHAT SHOULD WE DO IF THEY DO LEAVE?

This is frustrating. You seek out or train great researchers and they go on to take better paying jobs at other research centres, government departments or international organisations. This can have debilitating effects on a think tank's capacity to deliver on its commitments, raise funds and maintain influence in certain policy spaces.

There are at least two things organisations can do about this.

Firstly, think tanks should consider developing appropriate career paths for their staff (all staff, not just researchers). What are the options for a young researcher, for example, after a couple of years on the job? Is there a clear career path? From research officer level 1 to level 2 and 3, and then research fellow level 1 to level 2 and 3 and then … what?

And what benefits are gained from sticking to this path? Are there fair short-cuts? Career paths should also consider opportunities to return to the organisation after a period away.

Secondly, think tanks should be more relaxed about losing top staff and see it as a sign of success. Policy research centres are not simply factories of ideas. Their greatest assets are their people. They are also the most effective tool for policy influence. With this in mind, think tanks should see the silver-lining when government, international development partners or foundations poach their researchers. This means that their ideas will make it into these other important policy fields.

To make up for the gap in fee-earning potential brought on by researchers leaving, turn these losses into gains. How? By measuring and claiming success using the numbers and the profile of the poaches. This will help attract funding.

Be sure to encourage former staff to come back to your think tank through brown-bag lunches, public events and even a job offer (after they have been away a while). This will help improve the policy relevance of your research and even help you gain valuable information. In short: do not forget about your former staff. Keep them on your website and involve them as much as possible. This will encourage them to return and bring along their new networks, knowledge and income opportunities.

5 WHAT SHOULD OUR HIRING CRITERIA BE?

Hiring well is one of the most effective ways to deliver your think tank's mission. Good researchers need less quality control; good communicators will strengthen your researchers' arguments; and great managers and leaders will empower the entire organisation. But hiring well is a skill in itself. If we do not have a professional and well-resourced human resources team, what are the options?

Over the years I have made very bad hiring choices. I still make mistakes, but here are the tricks I use to help me find great staff:

- Have a strategy *before* starting any recruitment and think carefully about how the people you interview fit your strategy.
- Make sure that the people you hire have the skills to improve, and even challenge, your strategy if necessary.
- Work carefully on developing a clear job description.
- Cast the net widely even though it can be tempting to just hire someone you know.
- Focus on competencies and develop ways to test potential candidates on these competences.
- Be up front and transparent about the organisation, the job and its key responsibilities (e.g. fundraising, management duties).
- Cast aside any preconceptions and avoid hiring researchers that look exactly like your idealised researcher.
- Ask others in your organisation to help put together the job description and join the interview process.

6 HOW CAN WE BUILD TRUST IN OUR ORGANISATION?

New think tanks, as well as older ones in polarised contexts, find it hard to build trust and raise funds. How can they reach out to new stakeholders and audiences, or potential supporters?

I draw inspiration from Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento (CIPPEC), a think tank in Argentina. Back when they started, the founding directors developed and implemented a simple but effective strategy to raise funds and support.

They visited someone they knew in the private sector and told them about CIPPEC. They talked through the organisation's mission – what they wanted to achieve. At the end of the meeting, they asked this person to introduce them to two or three other people who might be interested in their work. They did not ask for money. Just names.

Slowly but surely their networks grew, and so did their funding.

This is a great way to build trust, get to know who is interested in your work and get feedback from them. The same approach can be used to build interest and trust in our research.

Another approach to consider is to place transparency at the core of everything you do. Ask Transparify to rate your organisation, be forthcoming with information about funding, staff affiliations, board members, foundation facts, etc.

7 WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO SET UP A THINK TANK WITHIN A UNIVERSITY?

Some think tanks exist within universities or larger institutions. For this reason, their governance, management, research agendas and communications cannot be handled in the same ways as independent, standalone think tanks.

When thinking about establishing a think tank, within a university for example, there is value in looking over an article I wrote about how to set up a think tank (step by step) to see what applies. There is a particular section in the piece where I suggest starting a project within an existing institution that might be of interest.

Before moving forward, however, it is worth noting that many universities do not have the organisational competencies needed to host a think tank. So be careful.

A university's research function is driven by academic considerations. Incentives are stacked in favour of academic publishing and against media appearances. What is more, the relationship between researchers in an academic body demands a certain degree of freedom and horizontality that make it hard to establish top-down or long-term policy objectives.

> "Universities may find it easier to raise funds for research presented by think tanks as they tend to offer more tangible results."

Think tanks disturb this. But the disruption may be necessary. This is because universities may find it easier to raise funds for research presented by think tanks as they tend to offer more tangible results. They are also excellent vehicles for accommodating researchers-teachers whose academic credentials stem from experience rather than scholarship. A former head of policy for a government department, for instance, is likely to make a great policy researcher and as good a teacher as any post-doc fellow.

So, how do you go about setting up a think tank in a university without disturbing the positive aspects of academia? One way is to establish an independent organisation with whom the university can have a formal relationship. In the UK, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) is an independent NGO (and policy research centre) that pays a rent or fee to the University of Sussex for the use of its facilities and services. On top of the fee (but also as a way of raising funds) IDS offers graduate degrees to the university. Staff at the centre may be employed under terms of reference that fall outside the pay-grades and responsibilities expected of typical university staff.

Another approach is to bring together a team of researchers from various disciplines (or departments) under the leadership of a senior researcher and establish a special project to address a policy sector or issue (e.g. health policy). For all internal purposes, nothing changes; but externally, the project may be presented as an autonomous think tank or policy research centre. Autonomy can be established through the project's branding, governance and staffing structure (e.g. separate advisory group, dedicated support staff).

Regardless of the model, universities should consider developing a policy to establish and host think tanks or policy research centres. Setting them up on an ad hoc basis can lead to confusion later on.

8 WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO ORGANISE, AND GET THE BEST OUT OF, OUR STAFF RETREATS?

Think tanks use staff retreats (often annual affairs) to reflect on the year behind and plan the year ahead. But how can they be effective triggers or platforms for change?

Four different people I worked with over the course of 2017 asked me this very question. Here is my advice for planning and executing a decent annual retreat:

- **Plan:** It takes time to plan a retreat. You cannot just wing it. Every session ought to be designed so that it contributes to a final objective.
- **But do not over plan:** Ensure to leave some elements of the retreat open so that staff can shape it in a way that suits them best.
- **Remember that administrative staff are brilliant:** Do not be elitist. Administrative staff have a lot to add to a retreat so create spaces where their voices can be heard. The number one concern of an executive director is funding. Who manages most of the day-to-day tasks related to funding? Administrative staff.

- **Do not just focus on outputs:** When looking back on the year, do not just create a list of activities. Think about your impact: on people, on ideas, on policy and on society more widely.
- **Do some self-reflection:** Impact is not just about what you were able to achieve outside of the organisation. Think about whether your think tank is a great place to work (and why). Think about how you have changed – for better or worse – and what is driving this change.
- **Ask:** what don't you know? List the questions that you want to answer in the year ahead. Do not focus on outputs, but on the questions themselves. This will help develop a cohesive agenda.
- **Have fun:** Finally, retreats are a great opportunity to build cohesion between the staff. Do not miss out on that opportunity.

9 HOW CAN WE IMPLEMENT A GREAT CROWDFUNDING CAMPAIGN?

Think tanks are getting creative about fundraising. Some are even experimenting with crowdfunding. In perusing this approach, a lot of questions come up. What platform should we use? What projects should we attempt to crowdfund? How can we craft a convincing argument for support? Is it worth the effort?

Since 2015, I have worked on a variety of projects to look at crowdfunding for think tanks. I plan to reflect on this kind of fundraising more in 2018. A few considerations based on recent work:

- A good crowdfunding project has to deliver something that feels tangible to the potential funder. An academic report might not be it.
- When it comes to choosing a platform, Kickstarter is the most popular, but it is worth noting that is also hosts the most popular projects too. This means you will be competing with films, hover boards and other far more interesting projects. When choosing the most appropriate platform, consider:
    - **Audience** – what are they looking for?
    - **Services** – will they support you and give you feedback on your campaign?
    - **Funding arrangements** – are you able to start even if the minimum has not been met? Can you combine online with offline funding?
- You will need seed funding for your crowdfunding campaign. There are no short-cuts. Crowdfunding is not necessarily cheap, and it is not an easy way to raise funds. It requires significant effort from the organisation. Interestingly, however, it also offers your communications team the chance to demonstrate how its work can contribute to sustainability.

10 WHAT CAN WE DO TO INCENTIVISE OUR RESEARCHERS TO FUNDRAISE?

Tired of carrying the fundraising load, think tank leaders are increasingly interested in passing some funding responsibilities to their senior researchers. But how can they incentivise them to raise funds when few researchers think of fundraising as part of their job description?

First, leaders need to accept that asking researchers to take on greater fundraising responsibility, must be accompanied by greater rights to the money raised. Funding cannot just be used for overhead costs. At least some of it should be channelled to specific projects or at least thematic areas. For instance, a programme team leader could be allowed to 'keep' 50% of all income generated beyond a certain target for his/her programme.

Secondly, executive directors need to lead by example. They need to show their fundraising potential and outline how they achieved it.

Thirdly, not every researcher should to be treated equally. Some researchers will be great fundraisers, but others will struggle. Some will work on issues that are popular among funders, others will not. Some will have more time on their hands. The challenge is not to get everyone to fundraise but to get everyone to work together to fundraise.

> "Executive directors need to lead by example. They need to show their fundraising potential and outline how they achieved it."

For instance, back when I worked at ODI and headed the RAPID programme, I asked three of the researchers in my team to raise funds to meet our programme's annual target; and allowed two others to 'make a loss'. One of the researchers who did not meet his target was working on a very important project, a network, which gave the programme access and legitimacy. The other researcher was still young and had not yet made a name for himself, so I asked him to maintain a focus on research.

Fourthly, work on fundraising incrementally. Begin with symbolic incentives to encourage staff to raise funds for the organisation. Then establish very low targets (per group or programme). For example, 50% of their annual budget in two years. This helps to monitor progress, identify potential fundraising 'naturals', and establish a baseline. You can eventually raise this to 100% and then, later on, to targets that cover each programme's contribution to the think tank's overhead.

Finally, encourage cross-funding. That is, researchers in programme A, finding funds for programme B. This boosts internal collaboration, and may also allow researchers whose policy issues may not be in great demand at the time to meet their targets nonetheless.

11 HOW CAN WE RAISE INTEREST AND TRUST IN OUR RESEARCH?

In highly polarised contexts, it is unlikely that a policy idea will be met with general praise. In certain cases, a policy proposal might be rejected to such an extent that it sets your think tank back in its efforts to establish itself on the public agenda. How can researchers engage effectively in these environments without compromising their integrity?

The RSA – Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce – offers an interesting approach: commissions. For example, the Inclusive Growth Commission, formed in 2016, is designed to understand and identify practical ways to make local economies across the UK more economically inclusive and prosperous. Here's how they describe themselves:

What the commission model does is open the research process to participation by the public. In the end, the commission's recommendations come as no surprise to the most relevant stakeholders. In fact, they can see themselves represented in them.

> "To achieve these objectives, the Commission plans to present a robust, authoritative and compelling case for change and devise new, ambitious measures and mechanisms for how this change can happen. It will seek to create momentum for change throughout the lifespan of the Commission (and thereafter) by working with a range of stakeholders across local and national government, as well as business and civil society leaders, and turn our project stakeholders into leading advocates of the Commission and its recommendations."

Another example is the City Growth Commission, which focuses on investigating what is needed to enable cities to thrive. Over the course of its 12-month inquiry, the commission put out an open call for evidence; commissioned research; and held high-level seminars and round tables to promote dialogue and debate.

12 SHOULD WE ADVOCATE AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS ON A SPECIFIC POLICY ISSUE, OR AVOID TAKING A STAND?

Some think tanks, especially those who depend on foreign aid or contract work, worry about the effect that 'taking a position' might have for their future funding prospects.

Sometimes the policy context itself promotes this 'fragmentation of opinion', because different parts of government might have conflicting views on how to solve policy challenges. For example, a pro-trade ministry of finance might like to hear about policies to promote free trade agreements, while a more cautionary labour ministry might be more interested in initiatives that protect local jobs.

Different parts of government may also prefer different types of evidence. For example, ministries of finance tend to like cost-benefit analysis, while ministries of culture or sports prefer qualitative studies. In these cases, it might be wise for think tanks to avoid taking very clear positions on single issues.

However, if think tanks want to have meaningful impact, they will have to, at some point, take a stand on an issue and develop associated recommendations. This is inevitable.

My advice is that think tanks need to recognise that the nature of their work involves some degree of opposition. They cannot expect to make everyone happy all the time. This needs to be contextualised of course by asking questions like:

- Who is in government?
- What is the prevailing narrative?
- Are there any opportunities for change?
- What is on the public agenda?

This process of mapping the policy context then needs to be communicated to funders, who must understand that when the political context is at odds with their beliefs, the opportunity for influence is limited. Other times, when political discourse coincides with their views, they will have a greater chance to be relevant policy actors.

“However, if think tanks want to have meaningful impact, they will have to, at some point, take a stand on an issue and develop associated recommendations. This is inevitable.”

This has important implications for think tank business models. Are there structures in place to allow organisations to grow and shrink according to a changing context? Are funders interested in long-term efforts (through the ebbs and flows of political cycles)?

Sometimes business models make it very hard for organisations to take a side. For example, more academic think tanks (and think tanks based within universities) might not have clearly identifiable ideologies and their researchers' intellectual independence might often be at odds with their colleagues. In these cases, the RSA style commissions might be a good way forward. Another option, might be to play a greater convening function and seek to host discussions and debates on an issue.

Do you have other questions? Do you have better answers? Join the conversation!

"Policy research centres are not simply factories of ideas. Their greatest assets are their people. They are also the most effective tool for policy influence."

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

Author, *12 questions from thinktankers in 2017*

INTRODUCING THE BEST PRACTICE SERIES

BY RAYMOND J. STRUYK
Author, *Improving think tank management*

In 2017, OTT published a set of documents under the OTT Best Practice Series. Each document dealt with a different topic and produced a best practice statement, based on the experiences of different think tanks. Each post also dealt with the issue of credibility in one way or another, and the key message that came out was this: use of best practice in management, communications and governance helps to increase respect for think tanks and improve their effectiveness and efficiency.

But what is a 'best practice'? Simply put, it is a demonstrably effective way of executing a task, as identified from the way that several think tanks that are perceived as well-managed, carry out such task. The best practice documents distill the actual policy and procedures of these multiple think tanks on a specific issue along with the author's wider experience to produce the best possible practice statement. Naturally, the practice may need to be adjusted to the specific environments of those who adopt it.

Think tanks who use best practice tend to be respected both inside their organisation – by staff, senior managers and board members – and outside, by other think tanks, policymakers and the broader policy community (including donors).

Consider the effects of a staff appraisal system that uses best practice – one that puts a strong focus on producing a concrete 'staff development plan' containing goals and commitments for staff and their manager. The staffer could commit to taking on

“Think tanks who use best practice tend to be respected both inside their organisation – by staff, senior managers and board members – and outside, by other think tanks, policymakers and the broader policy community.”

technically more demanding tasks or responsibility for managing a couple of junior researchers. The manager could commit to adjusting her work mix in order to provide the essential mentoring during the early stages of the transition to the new work. The staffer may also commit to taking an outside course and the manager to supporting strongly her application for course financing to HR. Such a system, if implemented consistently and including each and every staff member, would contribute to boosting staff morale and productivity, and may even extend how long staff stay at the organisation. It would also strengthen the think tank's reputation as a great place to work, thereby enhancing the quality of its applicant pool.

Using best practice principles to build a strong external communications operation provides another example. There is general agreement within think tanks that identifying and targeting a few high-priority audience groups is important when it comes to the uptake of evidence. But in practice this does not happen consistently. Best practice suggests that a commitment to regular audience mapping exercises is key, as is the involvement of senior management staff. One best practice is for the director of communications, the executive director, or the research director to participate in planning communications strategies for different projects. After all, if targeting is not rigorous, then a great deal of the communications effort is wasted.

> "One best practice is for the director of communications, the executive director, or the research director to participate in planning communications strategies for different projects. After all, if [audience] targeting is not rigorous, then a great deal of the communications effort is wasted."

A more controversial best practice for think tanks has to do with time management systems – specifically, the implementation of a timesheet system. Though this sort of initiative often receives a lot of push back, there are many benefits to it. For example, it helps individual researchers or analysts understand how much time it really takes them to complete a task. It also allows project managers to monitor the expenditure of funds on their projects and make early adjustments where it is clear that too many resources are being used for specific tasks. Senior management can, in turn, use this at a more macro level to monitor spending across projects and support functions. For external stakeholders, especially donors, time management systems can contribute to the overall credibility of the organisation. With labour accounting for about 70% of think tanks' cost, this is critical.

Introducing the best practice series

So far, there have only been a handful of articles under the Best Practice Series. More are needed, especially ones that provide best practice on a specific issue relevant to the operation of think tanks. As far as I know, no other organisation is featuring this kind of advice.

My sense is that the most effective contributions are those that address a comparatively narrow topic and develop a statement from a combination of the actual practices of strong think tanks and a careful review of the published and grey literature. The resulting best practices are more detailed (and probably better informed) than the treatment that can be given to each topic in general-purpose books on think tank management or governance. While these books are useful, OTT would like to build something much more practical and relevant as the series matures.

THINK TANKS IN SOUTH ASIA: AN OVERVIEW

BY ANNAPOORNA RAVICHANDER

Asia claims to have seen the biggest growth in think tanks over the past two decades. Aside from standalone organisations, many research focused centres are based within universities or are embedded in government departments. The complexity of public policy work across the region has encouraged evidence-based analysis and the development of practical solutions to a growing range of problems. Rapid economic growth has also encouraged new organisations to spring up.

> “The complexity of public policy work across the region has encouraged evidence-based analysis and the development of practical solutions to a growing range of problems. Rapid economic growth has also encouraged new organisations to spring up.”

Think tanks in this part of the world play a multifaceted role and carry out diverse activities. Some are very research-oriented, while some are more action-focused with strong advocacy and public participation components. Others do both – getting involved in actually implementing the evidence-based recommendations they promote. There has been an interesting trend of corporate sector bodies taking interest, especially in research where technology is involved. This has moved companies, trusts and foundations into the think tank space.

Aside from conducting research and developing reports to feed into policymaking processes, think tanks provide behind-the-scenes advisory services and capacity building, as well as constantly engaging with policymakers to understand what the government needs and helping to fill those gaps. Working in consortiums has also become an important activity.

STORIES OF POLICY INFLUENCE

All this work has paid off. There have been many instances of think tanks successfully influencing policy process over the last few years. In Pakistan, for example, the Social Policy and Development Centre (SDPC) provided technical support to help strengthen the Sindh provincial government's case for decentralising the collection of general sales tax on goods, from federal to local governments. This has boosted the income of provincial governments and is helping to decrease their dependence on federal government budgets. SDPC achieved this impact by developing a strong report on the issue, published in time for a key working group session. The report not only prompted debate, but also gave provincial authorities the tools they needed to argue their case more effectively, ultimately triggering an important process of reform.

In India, the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) was asked by the Kerala State Planning Board to help them draft a more gender-responsive budget for 2017-18. CBGA focused on scrutinising previous budgets from a gender perspective, devising actionable recommendations and providing direction for departments to become more gender-aware. In the coming years, this is expected to lead to an increase in budgetary priority for programmes and schemes designed for women and girls.

> "Think tanks continue to face challenges. Some have to do with rapid changes in the political and economic situation of different countries in the region, and by extension shifts in policy priorities, while others are more specific organisational issues, related to funding and human resources."

KEY CHALLENGES

Think tanks continue to face challenges. Some have to do with rapid changes in the political and economic situation of different countries in the region, and by extension shifts in policy priorities, while others are more specific organisational issues, related to funding and human resources. In response, think tanks have had to adapt and come up with strategies to stay relevant. CBGA has chosen to invest in its communication efforts, with a particular focus on using social media platforms to get their messages heard. They have complimented this with a strong focus on relationship-building within key policy bodies and institutions.

As in other regions, securing predictable funding remains an issue, especially for research that spans beyond donor funding cycles. Working in consortiums has been a way to get around this. Think tanks have also started approaching the private sector for funding to fill gaps.

The lack of sufficient funds to hire, build capacity and retain staff continues to be a challenge. As a rule, most think tanks require researchers who are not only highly skilled, but who are also good managers and communicators, and who can respond and address topical issues that may be beyond their current area of focus. In some cases, organisations are struggling to find candidates that tick all these boxes. As a result, organisations who manage to find the right people are putting more effort into developing and motivating their staff so that they stay longer.

WHAT WILL THE COMING YEARS HOLD FOR THINK TANKS IN THE REGION?

Think tanks in South Asia have matured and grown to become strong influencers. Some have oriented themselves to help address issues relating to public policy and others have become part of movements that support grassroot-level activities. Still others have emerged as leaders in their domain, seen as experts within government bodies.

There is likely to be a continued expansion in the range of activities (e.g. research, advocacy, advisory services) that think tanks undertake, as well as in the areas that they focus on. Addressing gender and environmental issues – including women's empowerment, reducing violence, mitigating pollution and saving energy – are particularly topical in the region at the moment, with research-oriented bodies coming up with innovative contributions. In India, the use of solar vehicles to combat air pollution has become a primary activity. Creating 'smart cities' that are sustainable and meet the needs of the population is also becoming an area of focus for some think tanks.

> “Think tanks in South Asia have matured and grown to become strong influencers. Some have oriented themselves to help address issues relating to public policy and others have become part of movements that support grassroot-level activities.”

ANNAPOORNA RAVICHANDER

Author, *Think tanks in South Asia: an overview*

OTT INITIATIVES

2017 saw a growth in our existing initiatives, particularly in our capacity building efforts. We also launched two new initiatives.

At OTT, we try to put our ideas into practice. As part of this effort, we develop and promote initiatives that support the generation, communication and use of evidence for policy. This work also helps address the challenge of credibility.

THE ON THINK TANKS SCHOOL

8 short courses, 1 webinar and 1 long course

173 participants from 112 different organisations

Our participants came from different 41 countries

12 trainers

The OTT School, through its various courses, offers thinktankers the opportunity to strengthen their competencies and skills to make sure that there are few, if any questions, about the quality of their governance, research or communications.

> “Effective communication is more critical than ever before in a world where information overload is a growing issue, and ‘fake news’ a sad reality – where finding ways to reach audiences beyond the traditional political elite has become necessary.”

CAROLINA KERN & JEFF KNEZOVICH

Authors, *Inspiring policy change through better communications*

INNOVATIVE AND INTERESTING WAYS TO FACILITATE ACTIVE LEARNING

BY VANESA WEYRAUCH
Associate, OTT

"I am still learning", proclaimed Michelangelo at the age of 87.

Acknowledging the role that continuous learning plays in our lives, the On Think Tanks School (OTT School) helps bring passionate and high-quality trainers together with think tankers who want to improve their skills and knowledge. We offer training across a diverse set of functions, from funding and research approaches to strategic communications and advocacy.

In 2017, we grew substantially. Our network of trainers almost doubled, from seven to 13, and we added to the already extensive range of topics we cover by including short courses on how to create videos and how to develop and implement advocacy strategies. In addition, we created a long course on strategic communications comprised of eight units (see page 83). This contributed to a steady growth in the number of participants in OTT School programmes from 170 in 2016 to 173 in 2017.

At the same time, we worked to ensure the OTT School's sustainability by streamlining administration and coordination processes, and foster synergies between different activities.

Evaluations and informal feedback suggest that participants valued our efforts. Many organisations took part in multiple courses, across a range of different themes, and went on to recommend courses to their colleagues. Participants highlighted their preference for more practical webinars, which taught them how to use specific tools and provided examples or case studies. With this in mind, courses on different communication techniques (e.g. videos, data visualisation, writing) were particularly popular.

We also faced challenges, which we need to work on. Our operation is small and the majority of our staff are not full-time employees. At times, we were overwhelmed by the range of activities we had to engage in, from inputs into marketing strategies, to managing course evaluations.

We also noted a need to come up with a better way to accommodate participants working in different time zones, and find a more appropriate platform to facilitate interaction outside the live sessions. All of this learning has fed into the development of a new strategy for 2018.

Innovation drives the way we operate at the OTT School. In late 2016, based on personal interactions and mentoring with thintankers, we recognised that the traditional ways in which certain think tanks are structured and managed are no longer fit for purpose. Young people, in particular, are challenging traditional organisational models demanding greater flexibility and transparency, space for innovation, and better working conditions.

In response, we created a comprehensive and unconventional programme – Integral Leaders for Global Challenges – targeted at young leaders working in think tanks. This initiative aimed to facilitate the emergence of a new leadership model, inspired by cutting-edge developments in leadership thinking. This effort complements the already established Geneva Winterschool for Thinktankers (see page 81), also aimed at future think tank leaders.

> “The trainer was able to divide a vast content in capsule-like pieces.”
>
> Participant of the data visualisation short course

> “Thanks so much for the great course!!! I thought it was super helpful in getting me to think more strategically about how to capture the type of impact that our organisation intends to achieve. I referenced the [OTT School] lecture slides quite a bit in developing our MEL framework! I just thought it might be an interesting course for one of our directors to go on if it’s available again.”
>
> Participant of the MEL short course

The programme brought together 11 promising leaders from nine different countries, who took part in developing and implementing a leadership development programme. They did so by devising their own development plans and sharing challenges and ways to address them. Participants then went one step further by working together to come up with practical ideas to inform the development of a whole new leadership paradigm for think tanks.

Using a mix of design thinking and Theory U, fellows have co-created a guide to help leaders transitioning from peer relationships to a higher position in the organisation. This guide will provide them with insights, methods and tools on how to engage their team to jointly develop a vision. This is an opportunity for personal and organisational growth.

At the OTT School, we are committed to finding new, smart and interesting ways to facilitate active learning, which incorporates diverse positions and perspectives.

> "For me, one of the most exciting things about the OTT was the opportunity to engage with peers from most continents of the world. It was a simple but powerful discovery, that while we come from entirely different contexts, we still deal with very similar challenges. We are trying to be better leaders, connect with our teams, and bring big ideas to life. The Fellowship has allowed me to expand my understanding of the think tank world, connecting the experience of Georgian Institute of Politics to the global context. I've also had an opportunity to reflect about my own leadership style, and find inspiration for change."
>
> Renata Skardžiūtė –Kereselidze, OTT Fellow

WINTERSCHOOL FOR THINKTANKERS

BY YAN LUONG
Deputy director at *foraus* and head of the Think Tank Hub Geneva

In January 2017, together with OTT, we hosted the first edition of WISCH – the Winter School for Thinktankers. We welcomed 17 young policy entrepreneurs and think tank leaders to Geneva, Switzerland for a week-long intensive programme, where they learned from prestigious experts and discovered some of the key actors of global governance.

The reason we created this programme is because we recognised that a successful think tank leader cannot just be great researcher and intellectual. They need to be an excellent manager and a savvy political strategist as well. They also need to be effective communicators and relentless networkers.

“[...] A successful think tank leader cannot just be a great researcher and intellectual. They need to be an excellent manager and a savvy political strategist as well. They also need to be effective communicators and relentless networkers.”

Breaking away from the formalities of theory-based courses, we developed a practically-oriented learning format with real life examples and an emphasis on take-home practical tools for participants. Lecturers built upon their own experience, highlighting challenges they had faced and outlining the solutions that had used to overcome them. Themes included:

- Developing a research agenda
- Tools for communicating effectively

- The importance of M&E and impact
- Financial management and funding
- The role of governance in think tanks

Alongside New York, Geneva is a key international governance hub. It is the European headquarters of the United Nations and the most active location in the world for multilateral diplomacy. Today it hosts 30 international organisations, 250 international non-governmental organisations and 172 states.

WISCH students had numerous formal and informal occasions to meet and interact with representatives of international organisations in Geneva.

foraus, the Swiss think tank on foreign policy, and The Think Tank Hub, whose mission it is to create a dynamic and innovative space for think tanks in Geneva, were honoured to work with OTT in this exciting endeavour. Maintaining an active and dynamic community of think tanks and supporting the creation of new ones is highly important for democratic governance and sustainable development.

SPEAKERS AT THE 2017 WINTERSCHOOL FOR THINKTANKERS

When you have developed a vision for yourself, it will be much easier to talk to others about who you are and what you think.

Verena Parzer-Epp
Head of Communications,
Avenir Suisse

A good think tank understands the political and policy framework context, and is able to develop solutions that have a chance of responding to a problem.

Will Paxton
Director,
KIVU International

The straightforward aspects of M&E are nothing to worry about, provided you start early with a plan.

Stephen Yeo
Former CEO,
Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR)

Have some income generating activities to be able to make reserves.

Sonja Stojanovic
Director,
Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

INSPIRING POLICY CHANGE THROUGH BETTER COMMUNICATIONS

BY CAROLINA KERN AND JEFF KNEZOVICH
Trainers, OTT School & researcher associates, OTT

Think tanks and research institutes have really stepped up their communications game over the last couple of decades. They have worked hard to make their outputs more accessible, to tailor messages to different audiences, to harness the power of new technologies and to use effective design to bring their stories to life. Gone are the days when a lone publications manager sat in a room proofing and preparing manuscripts for publication, or when mailing a research report to a few dozen people sufficed.

But others have failed to keep up. And yet effective communication is more critical than ever before in a world where information overload is a growing issue, and 'fake news' a sad reality – where finding ways to reach audiences beyond the traditional political elite has become necessary.

This is not completely unsurprising. The lack of materials available to guide think tanks is striking. Compared to the wealth of literature on corporate advertising and marketing, there is a real dearth of resources specifically related to communicating research effectively. Aside from OTT's own resources, one of the only practical guides out there is a new book by staff at the London School of Economics, *Communicating your research with social media*, which covers blogging, podcasting and data visualisation.

To fill this gap, and following the success of our short courses, the OTT School developed a comprehensive long course focused on research communications. While we included material on key channels such as publications, websites, events and podcasting, we also thought it was necessary to go back to basics and review the systems, policies and protocols that should be in place to be able to run an efficient (and legal) communications operation. We covered issues like privacy and accessibility policies, disclaimers for blogs and how to create and operationalise the use of templates.

Drawing on our experience of working with a range of think tanks around the world, we also included an overview of the typical communications functions that should be considered when making decisions about resourcing, and provided different staffing model options (e.g. centralised vs. devolved vs. skilling-up researchers).

Organisations come in different shapes and sizes, of course, so we stayed away from advocating a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, we encouraged participants to review their own organisational objectives and resources in order to help them define what combination of staff and skills they might need to enhance their impact. We also reminded them that donors and other funders are no longer happy with top-notch research. They now demand slick products and clear dissemination strategies, and expect knowledge-focused organisations to step up to the challenge.

The eight-unit course was delivered by five highly-experience trainers who put together material based on more than a decade's worth of experience testing and refining different approaches – discovering what works, when and for what purpose, not to mention which approaches are best avoided. In this way, the course was both strategic and practical.

OTT's long course, *Cutting-edge communications for research and policy*, ran from 5 September to 12 December 2017 and included 31 participants from 17 different countries. Course feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with every single participant reporting that the course met their expectations and that they would be interested in taking similar OTT courses in the future. The quality of our trainers and course material was also rated very highly.

> "This course was very practical, user-friendly, and engaging. It was extremely relevant to my work. The every other week format was great."
>
> Participant, *Cutting-edge communications for research and policy* course

> "Overall, it has been a great experience. What I enjoyed most was the direct applicability of techniques described and having a pragmatic refresher / panoramic snapshot of each sub-topic."
>
> Iria Belenguer, Communications Assistant at Bernard van Leer Foundation, Netherlands

WHY STARTING BY ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR LIMITATIONS IS THE BEST APPROACH TO LEADING A THINK TANK

BY FAJRI SIREGAR
Former executive director, Centre for Innovative Policy and Governance & OTT Fellow

By the time this piece goes to print, I will have left the Centre for Innovative Policy and Governance (CIPG) in Indonesia – a think tank I have directed since 2016. Given that I only became part of the OTT Fellowship Programme in 2017, it feels like a bit of a strange time to leave.

And yet, at the same time, the timing is perfect because the skills and insights I took away from the experience are proving useful in helping me prepare for the next phase of my career. I am about to start my PhD, having been involved in Indonesia's think tank sector for the last five years.

There are two things in particular that the fellowship programme confirmed for me. The first is that think tanks need to invest in a constant process of organisational development. This involves internal capacity building, reflecting upon organisational goals, and working to improve the general working environment. The second is more personal and has to do with overcoming my own perceived limitations.

When I first took up my position at CIPG, I was well aware of my tendency to reflect too much and too critically on my own work. In fact, overcoming my self-consciousness became a key goal of mine. I realised quickly that the volume of work I had to get through meant I had to adopt a new way of working. To focus on getting things done, rather than overthinking every task.

The Fellowship Programme reminded me of the importance of analysing my own approach to learning and to see my development as a leader as an iterative process. The different topics and courses also helped me to look at organisational challenges through a range of lenses, using fresh approaches such as Design Thinking or Theory U.

Below are my top three reflection from the OTT Fellowship Programme:

CAN RESEARCHERS DO MARKETING?

Promoting my organisation – or 'selling it' to put it more bluntly – was probably what I found toughest and most demanding in my role as executive director. It was also the biggest role reversal I have ever experienced. I remember doing promotion work back when I was still a research fellow. At workshops and other events, it felt very like 'light work' to promote CIPG and its projects. Exchanging business cards was easy. I did it without hesitations or thinking too much about its consequences.

> Instead of exchanging business cards because of mutual interest, you start to do it for long-term strategic reasons. Marketing becomes something you need to do, rather than want to do.

This changed when I became a senior manager. You are invited to higher-level meetings and conferences with bigger, more demanding expectations. The process of networking and promoting – something that felt natural before – suddenly comes with an added amount of pressure. Instead of exchanging business cards because of mutual interest, you start to do it for long-term strategic reasons. Marketing becomes something you *need* to do, rather than *want* to do. What is more, it is a much bigger part of your day-to-day role. This becomes challenging when networking is not your strongest suit.

CAN INTROVERTS LEAD?

People automatically expect directors to be outgoing and lively. The kind of people who can easily hold the attention of a group from the moment they start speaking. But that is not the only approach to leadership. I do not mind admitting that I will never be such a person. Though I have developed my skills as an extrovert, psychometric tests would put me firmly in the introvert camp. My strengths lie in reacting and responding to what other people have to say.

CAN YOU GROW AN ORGANISATION BY NOT ASSERTING AUTHORITY?

When leading a think tank, you often have to aim high, even if you are critical of the quality of your projects or the capacity of your personnel. But this raises an important question: should you invest in growing the different parts of your organisation (staff, systems, etc.) or take things into your hands and try to do it yourself? This is probably the ultimate test that any leader faces, especially those working in the knowledge sector.

The Fellowship Programme reminded me that this is not an 'either/or' sort of question. You need to analyse *yourself* in order to analyse the work of your *organisation*. For example, by determining how comfortable you are with delegation and whether your need to control things is actually necessary. This requires a certain amount of reflection of how much you are willing to trust your team. It is only by going through this sort of self-analysis that you can abandon the illusion that leading is a lonely job.

“When leading a think tank, you often have to aim high, even if you are critical of the quality of your projects or the capacity of your personnel.”

FAJRI SIREGAR

Author, *Why starting by acknowledging your limitations is the best approach to leading a think tank*

OTT INITIATIVES

OTT Working Paper Series

OTT WORKING PAPER SERIES

Thinking about Trump: American think tanks and their new political reality

Working Paper | 1 | August 2017

Christopher J. Rastrick

Political and economic transition in Vietnam and its impact on think tank traditions

Working Paper | 2 | December 2017

Ajoy Datta
Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

Enrique Mendizabal
On Think Tanks

Political Knowledge Regimes and policy change in Chile and Uruguay

Working Paper | 3 | January 2018

Universidad de la República de Uruguay

The OTT Working Paper Series promotes the emergence of research on think tanks and on evidence-informed policy worldwide. It gives new, and more established, researchers a chance to publish their ideas and reach a broader academic and practitioner audience.

ON THINK TANKS WORKING PAPER SERIES

BY ANDREA BAERTL
Research officer, OTT

In 2017, we launched the OTT working paper series, in partnership with the University of Bath and Universidad del Pacífico. The series aims to encourage evidence-based policy through a better understanding of how think tanks operate, with a particular emphasis on developing countries and emerging economies.

Our first round was a success. We published three papers that reflect various aspects of our broad and ambitious research agenda and achieved a wide geographic spread with papers focusing on the United States, Vietnam, Uruguay and Chile. We also have four other papers in the pipeline and several other authors have also approached us about submitting papers in the future.

One of the first papers to be submitted fell under our 'populism and evidence scepticism' stream of work. Following the election of President Donald Trump, it analyses the new political reality that American think tanks are facing, including the increase in evidence scepticism. It also identifies a range of opportunities for think tanks to consider in this context.

Two papers focused on our 'expanding and deepening think tank research' theme. One provided a historical analysis of think tank traditions in Vietnam. Specifically, it analysed the impact of key political and economic changes in the country on the production of policy-relevant knowledge. The other paper focused on the framework in which evidence-based policy happens and how knowledge regimes affect the use of evidence in policy (link pending) using Chile and Uruguay as case studies. It provides useful recommendations for how Latin American countries can strengthen the use of evidence in policy.

The next paper, to be published in March 2017, clearly sits in the 'quality and credibility' area of our research agenda, as it deconstructs the concept of credibility itself. It looks at how people understand and assess credibility and how they award it (or not) to think tanks.

OTT RESEARCH AGENDA

- Expand and deepen think tank research
- Think tanks in a time of populism and evidence scepticism
- Sustainability of think tanks and the policy research community
- Quality and credibility
- Changing organisations: how think tanks evolve
- Towards an anthropology of think tanks

To promote the working paper initiative, we ran a comprehensive social media campaign to advertise the call, disseminate the papers and encourage new researchers to publish. In addition to our traditional communication channels, we also published the papers in Medium – an innovative publishing platform. Going forward, we will build on this approach, but also make better use of our growing network of authors to promote our next round.

But we also learned lesson from our first year, which will feed into future planning. When we launched the call, we naively thought that our six-week review and publication schedule would be easy to stick to. We expected papers to immediately be ready for peer review, and hoped that comments would be easily, and quickly, incorporated by the authors. The reality was quite different.

Researchers from different parts of the world have different styles, standards and bodies of knowledge. Managing this can be difficult. While some papers moved through the production schedule quickly, others required a lot of support from the OTT team. In order to stick to our goal of publishing innovative and interesting work from new and diverse authors, we had to readjust our processes.

We built in time to work in-depth with authors, providing comments on early drafts, asking questions and supporting them with messaging. This has obviously slowed down the process and is the reason we have only published three of nine papers so far. That said, it has made the work all the more enriching.

Do you have a paper you wish to publish? Can you help us spread the word?

This work could not have been possible without the commitment from our reviewers, who voluntarily give their time. They are Jordan Tchilingirian (University of Bath, Lecturer), Enrique Mendizabal (OTT, Director), Felipe Portocarrero (Universidad del Pacífico, Principal Researcher) and Marcos González Hernando (University of Cambridge). And also of Erika Perez-Leon, Digital Content Editor for OTT, in charge of design and communications. Finally, the Working Paper Series has been made possible thanks to the generous support of our donor, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

OTT INITIATIVES

Semana de la Evidencia

SEMANA DE LA EVIDENCIA

EVIDENCE WEEK

Evidence Week constitutes an effort to raise the profile of research institutes and the role of evidence in policy. **In 2017, Evidence Week delivered 53 events across 10 countries.**

BUILDING ON SUCCESS TO MAKE EVIDENCE WEEK BETTER THAN EVER

BY SOFÍA BALLÓN
Coordinator, Evidence Week (SE)

For the past two years, I have been involved in coordinating Evidence Week events across Latin America. Evidence Week, or Semana de la Evidencia as it is known, is an initiative that blossomed out of Peru's alliance for the use of evidence (Alianza Peruana para el uso de Evidencia). Both initiatives were created and strongly promoted by OTT to increase the use of evidence in public policy and bring together likeminded professionals from across the region.

Events in 2017 made these initiatives more relevant than ever. A major and widespread corruption scandal has shaken large parts of the region, putting presidents – both past and present – in jeopardy along with mayors, governors, and even losing candidates. The Lavajato case started in Brazil in 2013 when Petrobras, its state-run oil company, was implicated in a money laundering investigation. It was later discovered that Odebrecht and other Brazilian infrastructure companies were being contracted for important projects around Latin America based on bribes given to government employees and popular candidates. Sadly, what this demonstrates is that policies continue to be driven by the financial interests of people in power, rather than on well-informed proposals that respond to the needs of citizens.

While there is clearly a need to maintain conversations about the use of evidence in public policy debates, managing a successful series of Evidence Week events has been difficult. Coordination and promotion is done on a shoestring and the funding we receive can be rather ad hoc. This means that decisions about the format or content of the initiative change frequently and, in some cases, workshops have to be cancelled all together, which can have negative reputational consequences. Due to budget constraints, a lot of communication between the organisers also has to happen virtually, which can also create challenges in terms of maintaining continuous dialogue or when decisions need to made quickly.

But the initiative works because of the commitment and willingness of our partner institutions to pitch in. They provide staff and student volunteers. They help with media engagement activities. With our support (we provide guidance notes on how to structure events as well as social media packs to help amplify reach), they also organise their own high-quality events on new and interesting topics.

One of the new things we introduced in 2017 was webinars, which allowed for a much larger programme of events. In addition, we streamed or created podcasts of our live events to allow people all over Latin America (and the world) to get the most out of what has become an important regional platform. In practice, this meant that participants attending Peru's Evidence Week events could catch up on conversations that were happening in Colombia or Ecuador. We also made a point to run events outside of capital cities and committed to doing the same in 2018. This is important to draw national and international attention to the needs and policies of rural populations and other peripheral areas.

Evidence Week is a much needed platform to raise awareness of the value of evidence in policymaking. Since it began, back in 2016, its success has grown markedly, largely thanks to generous contributions of time and money from a range of actors. To build on this momentum and make Evidence Week 2018 even better, we will need a stronger and larger core team with clearer functions and responsibilities. More regular meetings and a better system for sharing information will be key. We also need a more power communications strategy. In particular, we will need to pay more attention to developing a set of key messages that all institutions can promote and we could partner with a media house in order to broaden our reach. This communications push could be enhanced through efforts to broaden our reach, for example by devising a media and outreach strategy that specifically focuses on making ordinary citizens more aware of how evidence feeds into policymaking.

All of this will not be easy, but we have an incredibly strong foundation, with a growing coalition of partners who are passionate about enhancing the quality of public policy.

EVIDENCE WEEK 2017: NOW A TRULY REGIONAL EVENT

- **ILAIPP in Ecuador**– coordinated with its members in Honduras, Guatemala, Peru, El Salvador, and Paraguay to organise events and hold its own virtual webinar. It also helped with the general organisation and delivery of Ecuador's Evidence Week.
- **Soluciones Prácticas in Perú**– motivated its Bolivia office to organise a virtual event with REDMEBOL – the Bolivian chapter of REDLACME.
- **Rimisp in Chile and Corpoica in Colombia**– organised events being entities supported by IFAD – also our main financial sponsor.
- **Senacyt in Panama** – hosted its Second International Public Policy Workshop: Research and Innovation Indicators, during Evidence Week.

EVIDENCE WEEK: A SPACE FOR LEARNING AND COLLABORATION

Lessons from Ecuador

BY MARCELA MORALES
Co-founder and operations coordinator, Red Ecuatoriana de Mujeres Científicas (REMCI)

Since its inception in 2016, Evidence Week (Semana de la Evidencia) has created an exciting space to discuss and debate the use of evidence for policy and decision-making in Latin America. This year, Evidence Week included a series of events in Ecuador and generated some important lessons for reflection.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

We tend to underestimate the importance of collaborative work. The value of creating alliances and of sharing resources (be it time or money). Our experience in Ecuador showed that multi-sector, multi-actor initiatives are not possible without a focus on teamwork and partnership. Since we can all benefit from such spaces, we must improve our approach to strategic collaboration, applying a long-term vision.

This means including new actors and new voices in the mix. Evidence Week in Ecuador was led by a diverse group of young civil society organisations working on topics such as gender equality (Ecuadorian Network for Women in the Sciences-REMCI), data and communication (DataLat, MediaLab), evaluation (EvalYouth Ecuador), social development (Fundación Kiru) and implemention of the Sustainable Development Goals (ODS Territorio Ecuador). Key event partners also included the Higher Education Center for Communication Studies in Latin America (CIESPAL), the Ecuadorian Network for Research and Post-graduate Education (REDU) and the Organization of Iberoamerican States (OEI). The variety of partners and organisations involved shows how appealing such a platform is across various sectors operating in the country.

> Actors in the public, private and academic spheres must work to make their evidence available in different formats so that different audiences can use and incorporate it into policymaking processes. Generating evidence is pointless unless it is used.

THE PRIVATE SECTOR IS STILL UNDERREPRESENTED

Despite the wide array of organisations involved in Evidence Week 2017, the private sector was notably absent from debates. This is worrying considering the fact that the private sector has been recognised as a key player in helping to achieve the 2030 Agenda. When thinking through strategies to bring the private sector into these spaces, it is important to more clearly communicate the mutual benefit that public-private collaboration can bring. For example, private actors have the potential to collect and generate data that can be used to improve social and economic conditions across countries. At the same time, private actors can benefit from evidence generated by other sectors as this can inform their decision-making processes.

WE NEED TO PRIORITISE HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE AND SHARE DATA

Ecuador has made important advances in the generation of data and evidence. In fact, valuable efforts have been made to institutionalise statistical systems and mechanisms for public policy design and evaluation. However, disconnections between the spheres where different actors operate (for example the public vs. the private, profit vs. non-profit sectors) prevent them from sharing this data and evidence. This results in gaps in access to knowledge, experience, and resources. Actors in the public, private and academic spheres must work to make their evidence available in different formats so that different audiences can use and incorporate it into policymaking processes. Generating evidence is pointless unless it is used.

GENDER APPROACHES TO THE GENERATION AND USE OF EVIDENCE REQUIRE ATTENTION

Gender issues were considered at all the stages of planning the events. We took care to cover gender equality issues in the debates themselves, but also made sure that the panels were gender-balanced. Despite these efforts, gender as a criteria to generate and use evidence is still limited and is still understood in binary terms. And yet data disaggregation is key to understanding deeper inequalities and to give visibility to the challenges faced by underrepresented groups. We need better strategies to effectively mainstream gender perspectives into the generation and use of evidence and to raise awareness of its relevance in the policymaking process.

Being involved in a regional event gave us the opportunity to compare experiences and discussion topics between countries and identify different levels of interest and commitment, strengths and weaknesses in the use of evidence. Although the discussion around the use of evidence has become a topic of interest in many countries in Latin America, there are still disparities in the depth of the debate. While some countries in the region, such as Ecuador, are in the early stages of debate about the role of evidence in policymaking, other countries, such as Peru, are already moving towards the implementation of strategies to improve the generation and use of evidence and strengthen collaboration between relevant actors. Different stages in the debate and levels of expertise provide valuable lessons for countries and policymakers in the region. Besides providing valuable spaces for discussion in different countries in Latin America, Evidence Week has the enormous and valuable potential to generate regional collaborations for experience and knowledge sharing.

“We need better strategies to effectively mainstream gender perspectives into the generation and use of evidence and to raise awareness of its relevance in the policymaking process.”

MARCELA MORALES

Author, *Evidence week: a space for learning and collaboration, lessons from Ecuador*

ECUADOR'S EVIDENCE WEEK

BY JULIO LÓPEZ
Co-founder, Datalat

Ecuador has made important investments and reforms to improve the production of knowledge and academic research, but a lot remains to be done to ensure that it is put into practice.

Scientific research has grown and overseas scholarship programmes, targeted at government officials, have produced professionals that are well-trained and more confident. Better statistical information systems and spaces for the design and evaluation of public policies have also been promoted. However, all this research and knowledge still fails to consistently inform public debates, planning process or reviews of policy. Overcoming these issues was a key area of discussion at Evidence Week 2017, which took place across Latin America in October.

A series of Evidence Week events took place, for the first time, in Quito organised by coalition of organisations working to promote the use of research and data to find innovative solutions for local problems. This coalition included Datalat, the Ecuadorian Network for Women in Science, MedialabUIO, Fundación Kiru, EvalYouth Ecuador, Economica and ODS Territorio Ecuador.

A total of nine events were delivered (including conferences and workshops), which brought together 360 participants and 28 panelists from the public sector, multilaterial organisations, government departments, academia and civil society. Ecuador's Evidence Week was envisioned as a space for dialogue, where challenges could be freely aired and new ideas proposed.

While there is clear demand for incorporating research findings and evidence into decision-making and public policy processes at different levels, there are also obvious gaps in the consistency and quality of context-specific information. Data on key issues such as gender, mobility, entrepreneurship and technology is particularly weak.

However, rather than being an insurmountable constraint, this may be an opportunity for research institutions, think tanks and government agencies to reorient themselves so as to start filling these gaps and generating much-needed evidence. This could also involve incorporating new methodologies and processes to collect and analyse data.

Plans are already underway for Evidence Week 2018. Our multi-sectoral committee is looking to include even more voices in the next edition of this important event. We also want to work on improving the quality of events and on reaching a wider audience.

A RANGE OF INTERESTING AND PROVOCATIVE TOPICS WERE DISCUSSED INCLUDING:

- Understanding the gender gap in the academia
- Collaborative mapping for citizen participation
- National statistics for policy making: what is their relevance?
- Data and sustainable mobility
- Monitoring and evaluation of public policies
- How to encourage research at universities

A complete report of this event is available in Spanish at www.datalat.org/seecuador. For updates on upcoming events follow us an Twitter at @datalat.

Datala promotes the openness and use of data to incorporate innovative solutions to local problems.

OTT INITIATIVES

Premio PODER al think tank del año

PREMIO PODER AL THINK TANK DEL AÑO

The Premio PODER al Think Tank del Año is an effort to celebrate the work of think tanks and policy research institutes in Peru. It has been held every year since 2013 with the support of a panel of judges that include former and current ministers of state, academics, business leader and opinion makers.

PREMIO PODER ALL THINK TANK DEL AÑO

BY ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
Founder and director, OTT

One of the biggest challenges think tanks in developing countries face is that few people know what they are or what they do. This makes it particularly hard for them to raise funds and influence policy.

Since 2013, in partnership with PODER magazine, OTT has promoted the PODER Awards to the Think Tank of the Year (Premio PODER al think tank del año). The awards offer an opportunity for think tanks in Peru to reach new audiences and share their own stories.

In 2017 the award was celebrated as part of the 2nd Latin American Evidence Week. The ceremony brought together think tanks from across the political spectrum and focused on a range of policy issues. The cases submitted for the judging panel to assess covered issues ranging from the rights of vulnerable groups and minorities, to regional competitiveness and natural disaster prevention and response.

The winners of all categories had a key quality to successful think tanks: the cases they submitted had all completed the ‘full cycle’. The winning organisations identified key problems and helped to develop them when nobody else in the research community had been interested in them. Over time, they introduced these issues onto the public agenda, translated their research into policy recommendations and, finally, pursued engagement and communications strategies to generate change.

These full cycles took time and resources. To be successful, researchers and their organisations had to make considerable investments, often committing to them even when they faced little or no interest from policymakers, the media or funders.

In most cases success was also highly dependent on what John Young at the Overseas Development Institute calls ‘strategic opportunism’: when windows of opportunity opened, the think tanks were ready to act. In other words, making the most of a lucky break.

> In a context in which international support for policy research is fast decreasing, the Premio PODER presents an invaluable opportunity to introduce think tanks and their contribution to society to potential domestic supporters, among them emerging philanthropists.

The winner of the 2017 awards, Soluciones Prácticas, had worked on disaster prevention and response for at least two decades before the El Niño current hit the coast of Peru in the summer of 2017. Faced with an emergency, the government, media and civil society organisations began to look, finally, for evidence and advice. Soluciones Prácticas was ready and willing to step in and offer a way forward.

Soluciones Prácticas won not simply because they had done the research and communicated it effectively. They were also relevant when the most important event of the year happened.

The prize offered Soluciones Prácticas a chance to present their work to their peers and to an audience that had hitherto been quite oblivious of their contribution to the field. It helped to award value to and raise the visibility of their efforts. Until the awards, few outside the field of disaster prevention in Peru knew of the sustained contribution that Soluciones Prácticas had made.

In a context in which international support for policy research is fast decreasing, the Premio PODER presents an invaluable opportunity to introduce think tanks and their contribution to society to potential domestic supporters, among them emerging philanthropists.

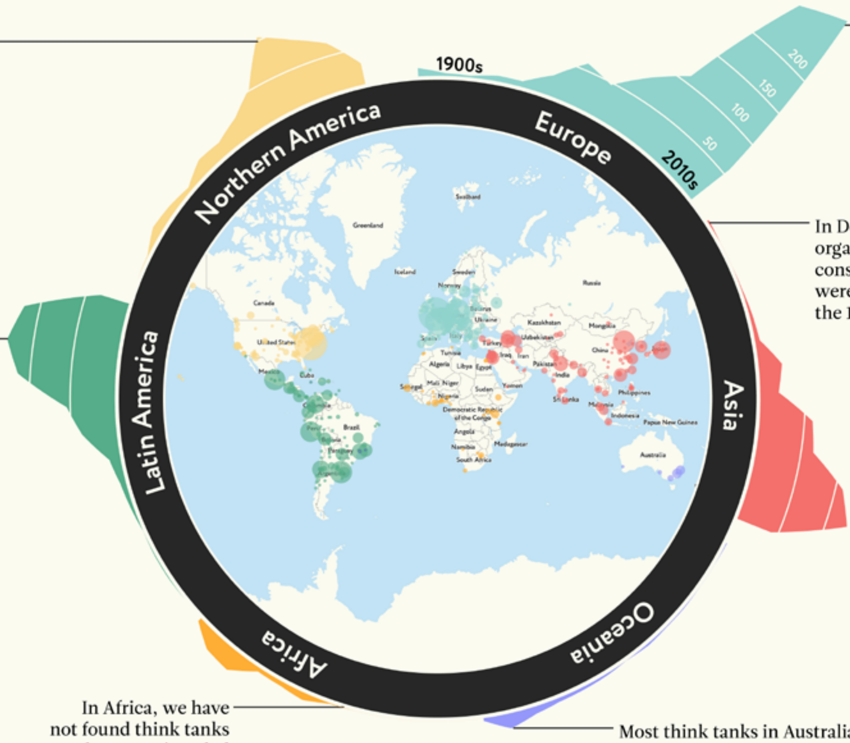
We believe that think tanks need to be critically celebrated within their own communities. At OTT, we promote awards like this one, inspired by Prospect Magazine's own, because they present an opportunity to explore the definition of a think tank in each country, understand what makes them successful, and strengthen the local think tank community through healthy competition.

2018 will be the sixth year of the award. We will focus our attention on subnational think tanks and attempt to reach out to emerging policy research communities beyond the capital city and national policy debates.

OTT INITIATIVES

The Open Think Tank Directory

THE OPEN THINK TANK DIRECTORY



In the Americas, 'peak think tank' happened earlier than in other continents – in the 1980s in Northern America and the 1990s across Latin America and the Caribbean.

In Europe in the 2000s, around 250 think tanks were founded.

In Delhi, two organisations now considered think tanks were founded before the 1900s.

In Africa, we have not found think tanks that were founded before the 1950s.

Most think tanks in Australia and New Zealand have been founded in this millennium.

The Open Think Tank Directory has the potential to unlock a wealth of knowledge about think tanks, helping to increase the quantity and improve the quality of research on these institutions. It will also make it easier for think tanks and funders to find credible partners.

THE OPEN THINK TANK DIRECTORY

BY JEFF KNEZOVICH
Editor at large (communications) and research associate, OTT

Over the last century, think tanks have been springing up all around the world. But this rapid proliferation has been difficult to track. Think tanks, by their nature, are 'boundary' organisations. They do not fit neatly into any box. They often have one foot in academia and another in policymaking. Some even fund and deliver large-scale social change projects. Think tanks also span ideologies and work across a range of topics, from peace and security to climate change and the environment. All of this makes it difficult to get a global snapshot of think tanks.

But, given the important role that these organisations play in modern policymaking processes, we have been working to gather as much information as possible about them. We have compiled this information into the Open Think Tanks Directory (https://ottd.onthinktanks.org).

We have used quite a broad and inclusive definition of think tanks, identifying them by categories such as 'business model' and 'affiliation' (e.g. to governments or political parties) because we did not want to limit the directory too much. This means that those accessing the directory can make better choices about the type of organisation they are interested in learning more about.

Beyond that, there are a few things that make this directory special.

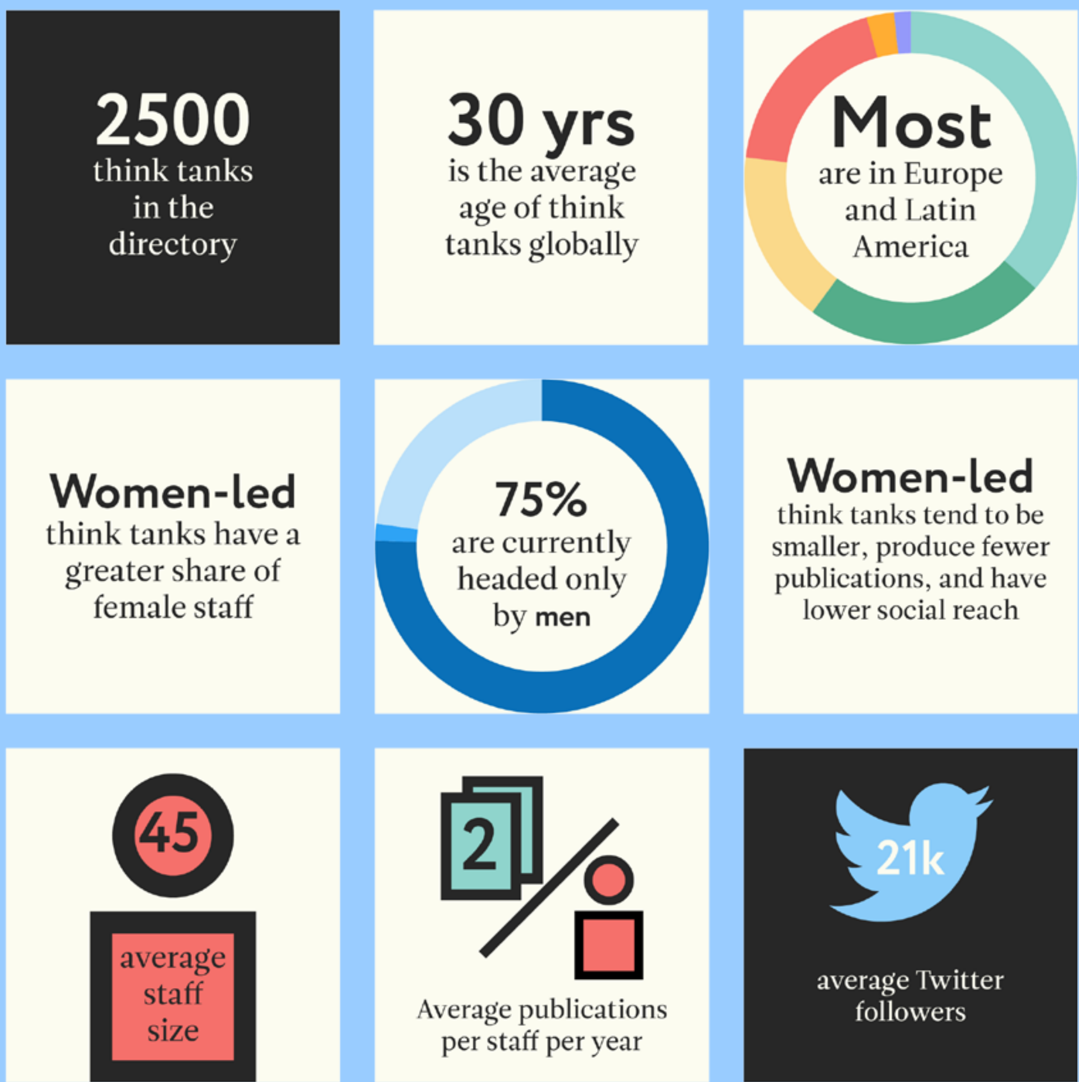
First, we go beyond just listing the names and websites of organisations. Instead, we provide as comprehensive a view of these think tanks as possible. For example, we have collected information about who founded them and who leads them. We have also recorded their topics and geographies of focus.

Secondly, we have included a number of different measures to help ascertain the credibility of these institutions. For example, we have provided the number of publications they publish each year, their social reach and, where we could find it, their annual turnover. In Latin America, we have also started adding information about the gender of the leader and the percentage of the research staff that is female.

Finally, we have been transparent about the perceived accuracy of the information listed. Each record clearly indicates whether it is simply imported from similar lists, verified by OTT or whether the organisation has provided the data directly. This is what makes it an 'open' directory – not only can others contribute information to it, but anybody can register to download the full database free of charge.

Even with incomplete data, the database is already producing a number of insights (see the directory 'by numbers'). There is still work to be done though. While we have verified the information of more than half of the think tanks in the directory, we know that there are many organisations missing, especially from Asia. We hope to continue to develop the directory and we encourage you to help by suggesting edits to existing information or by adding your organisation if it is missing!

THE OPEN THINK TANK DIRECTORY BY NUMBERS:



TRANSPARIFY

Transparify's rating criteria for the number of stars to award are defined as follows:

5	★	highly transparent: all donors listed, clearly identifying funding amounts for, and sources of, particular projects
4	★	broadly transparent: all donors above USD 5,000 listed in 4+ precise funding brackets, with anonymous donors no more than 15%
3	★	all or most donors listed in 2 or 3 broad contribution brackets [e.g. "USD 5,000 to 15,000, the following donors"]
2	★	all or many donors listed, but little or no financial information
1	★	some donors listed, but not exhaustive or systematic
0		highly opaque: no relevant or up-to-date information

OTT also supports independent efforts such as Transparify. This groundbreaking initiative encourages think tanks to open their books; and not just because transparency is a desirable principle, but also because it is a smart approach to prevent and mitigate questions about credibility.

TRANSPARIFY 2017 – HOW WE ARE MAKING THINK TANKS MORE RESILIENT AND DRIVING CHANGE IN THE HEALTH SPACE

BY HANS GUTBROD
Executive director, Transparify

Transparify continued its advocacy in 2017, focusing on Canada. We found that, when it comes to funding transparency, Canadian think tanks lag behind their counterparts in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is not good news. In a democracy, players that wield strong political influence should open their books to public scrutiny. In Canada, four think tanks we looked at – whose funding sources are highly opaque – had sought to influence the policymaking process through at least 216 appearances in front of parliamentary committees. They had also generated 59,875 mentions in the national media.

But there were also positive highlights. The Centre for International Governance Innovation, DeSmog Canada, the International Institute for Sustainable Development and Publish What You Pay – Canada achieved a five-star rating on transparency, while the Asia Pacific Foundation and the Canada West Foundation achieved four stars. We also noted significant increases in transparency through our engagement demonstrating that our advocacy strategy is working.

In 2017, we ran two workshops for think tanks on how to deal with reputational risk. These off-the-record meetings, one in London (February) and one in Brussels (November), proved popular, with several representatives saying they would run a similar exercise to their boards.

We also wrote a report for the Transparency and Accountability Initiative on how to make civil society organisations (and thus think tanks) more resilient in the face of

> In a democracy, players that wield strong political influence should open their books to public scrutiny.

increasing government pressure around the world. One feature of this pressure is that governments appear to be resorting to a rhetoric of transparency and accountability, in order to put civil society organisations on the defensive and distract public discussion. Governments are managing to successfully frame these types of organisations as foreign, self-appointed and privileged, which is dividing the civil society sector, and reducing their public support. To combat this trend, we recommend being prepared and boosting transparency so as to preempt claims about opacity.

During our reassessment of five and four-star think tanks, we found that most had maintained high standards of transparency. For the most part, transparency seems to stick. There were, however, a few cases where organisations became vastly less transparent, after reorganising their websites. This slippage suggests there is more to be done to streamline transparency. Donors have a special role in this regard. Through small tweaks to their application procedure, for example, they could ensure that the organisations they fund default to transparency. This sort of step would require less effort, time and money than another approaches, but result in massive gains.

TranspariMed is another initiative we launched in 2017 to fill a glaring vacuum in the policy landscape. For decades, meta-research has shown that the evidence-base underlying modern medicine is full of gaps and systematic distortions. As a result, $85 billion in medical research is wasted every year, and neither public health agencies nor doctors can reliably determine how safe and effective new drugs are. Medical scholars have long debated possible reforms, but the issue has never found its way into mainstream health policy debates.

TranspariMed aims to change this by developing actionable policy solutions couched in language that policy-makers can understand and action. As part of this push, TranspariMed partnered with Transparency International, Cochrane and CRIT to publish a policy paper that documents the scale of the problem and sets out clear policy benchmarks on clinical trial transparency. In 2018, we will build on this work by rating and ranking the performance of different countries against these transparency benchmarks to drive change.

"Governments are managing to successfully frame [civil society organisations] as foreign, self-appointed and privileged, which is dividing the civil society sector, and reducing their public support. To combat this trend, we recommend being prepared and boosting transparency so as to preempt claims about opacity."

HANS GUTBROD

Author, *Transparify 2017 – how we are making think tanks more resilient and driving change in the health space*

OTT CONSULTING

We bring together the principles that guide OTT with the practical experience of our team members and associates.

OTT provides independent research, ideas and advice. We do this publicly through our website and other channels. We believe that when we are open about our views we are also more accountable and more transparent.

MANAGING A GLOBAL, MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

BY EVA CARDOSO
Programme manager, OTT

OTT Consulting Ltd was set up in early 2017. It acts as OTT's consultancy arm, allowing our international team of experts to deliver advice and support to our clients across a wide range of areas including strategic communications, monitoring and evaluation, funding approaches and governance. This work combines initiatives designed and implemented by the team, such as the OTT School, as well as demand-driven projects like the MEL digital dashboard for IFAD.

OTT Consulting is quite unusual in its set up. While the formal company is registered in the United Kingdom, there are no staff based there. The director sits in Peru, supported by a group of freelancers who live across five continents and seven timezones. This can make day-to-day management and administration difficult.

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With this in mind, we have spent a reasonable amount of time testing and choosing the right systems to support what we do, and how we do it. A strong focus on maintaining good communication channels has been a key part of this process. To reduce unnecessary – and hard-to-manage – email traffic, everyone in the team uses Slack. This cloud-based collaboration tool helps us track and share information across a range of projects and themes. For urgent or time-sensitive business we rely on WhatsApp. Evernote has also been useful, as have Dropbox and Google Drive for larger, more complicated projects.

Establishing an efficient and cost-effective set of finance systems has proved a little more challenging. For example, our bank of choice no longer provides an account manager with whom we can communicate directly over email. This means all our interactions now happen over the telephone, which is both time-consuming and costly.

To pay our consultants, we have tended to use bank transfers. What is important for an international operation like ours is to have a reliable banking provider who can handle multi-currency accounts, coupled with an intuitive online banking platform to process payments quickly and easily.

But working with different currencies brings its own challenges. International transfers are expensive and banks often offer poor exchange rates. Receiving funds in different currencies (e.g. Canadian dollars into a US dollar account) also comes with exchange rate loss risks. Budgets therefore need to be constantly updated to reflect this and proposals need to factor this in as well.

A great alternative to international bank transfers is TransferWise – a peer-to-peer transfer service. In our experience, this platform has been most effective for sterling to US dollar transactions. TransferWise is also developing a borderless account, which we hope to use to make and receive international transfers via a single, multi-currency account in the future.

We have also made changes to our accounting software. Dealing with different currencies was not the strength of our previous system, so we moved to Xero, which fully supports our global set up much more effectively. The accounts migration is currently underway and we are excited to start making use of it in 2018.

To better track our cash flow and help us make planning decisions, we have established a simple tracker. This stores details of all income and expenses across currencies and accounts. This system only works if we update it frequently, which is something we need to improve.

Going forward, we will continue with our flexible approach to make sure our way of working is fit for purpose. We will maintain our focus on keeping the team close using online platforms, but we will also continue to invest in bringing the team together properly through our annual conference and core team retreats. While virtual spaces work well, we have found that creating opportunities for well-structured and strategic face-to-face interaction is much better for building team cohesion and developing new ideas.

OTT CONSULTING PROJECTS

MOOC on communicating evidence

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting USAID through a short consultancy to produce a MOOC for the National Public Administration School on communicating evidence from...

DECEMBER 13, 2017

Monitoring, evaluation and learning digital dashboard for IFAD

BY **DENA LOMOFSKY, ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL, JEFF KNEZOVICH**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to develop a digital dashboard to support monitoring, evaluation...

JUNE 20, 2017

Support to SENACYT on supporting think tank in Panama

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL**

Project brief On Think Tanks supported the design and delivery of a programme developed by the Panamanian Science and Technology Council (SENACYT) to support local think...

NOVEMBER 7, 2017

Communications strategy for the Peruvian Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS)

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL, ERIKA PEREZ-LEON**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting MIDIS through a short consultancy to develop a new strategy for the knowledge it generated through consultancy, monitoring and...

DECEMBER 13, 2017

Maghreb Economic Forum in Tunisia

Project brief On Think Tanks supported the redesign and relaunch of the Maghreb Economic Forum (MEF) in Tunisia. This new institution has rapidly become a leading feature in the region's policy research...

MARCH 23, 2017

Strengthening the financial sustainability of ILAIPP and its members

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL, LEANDRO ECHT, VANESA WEYRAUCH**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting the Latin American network of think tanks, ILAIPP, to strengthen the sustainability capacity of the network and of its...

MARCH 20, 2017

Communications training for the Ministry of Environment

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL, ERIKA PEREZ-LEON, GONZALO URBINA**

Project brief OTT Consulting delivered a communications workshop for the Peruvian Ministry of Environment and the public think tanks associated with it. The project...

NOVEMBER 7, 2017

Zambia Economic Advocacy Programme

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL**

Project brief OTT Consulting designed the Zambia Economic Advocacy Programme (ZEAP) for DFID. ZEAP was designed drawing lessons from the Think Tank Initiative and the Knowledge Sector...

APRIL 24, 2017

The On Think Tanks Exchange

Project brief OTT Consulting managed a 2 year project to promote and learn about inter-regional collaboration between think tanks. The On Think Tanks Exchange, saw 10 researchers from Latin America, Europe and...

MARCH 22, 2017

Strategic review of the Sociedad de Investigación Educativa Peruana (SIEP)

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting SIEP through a short consultancy to review its current strategy and formulate a series of recommendations. The project...

NOVEMBER 7, 2017

Public Policy Institute of Timor-Leste

BY **LEANDRO ECHT, STEPHEN YEO**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting The Asia Foundation in assessing the establishment of a new think tank in Timor-Leste. The project consists of an assessment...

MARCH 21, 2017

Electoral platforms: strengthening the capacities to influence the electoral cycle

BY **ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL, LEANDRO ECHT**

Project brief OTT Consulting is supporting the Latin American network of think tanks, ILAIPP, to develop a series of reference products on strategies to influencing...

MARCH 21, 2017

THINK TANKS AND ELECTIONS: STRATEGIES TO RAISE THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACIES

BY LEANDRO ECHT
Research associate, OTT

Elections are critical milestones for democracies. They can mobilise entire nations. For think tanks, elections are also important, and often, busy periods. Particularly, if we consider that, with some exceptions, electoral campaigns in developing countries do not generally involve serious debates over strategic policy issues, but rather revolve around vague references to universally desirable aims without any specification of how they will be achieved. Thus, elections represent a time when think tanks can really show their worth.

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Though there are numerous examples of think tank initiatives that have sought to influence the direction of electoral debate, these have not been studied in much depth, nor using a comparative approach. In 2014, OTT embarked on a project to fill this gap, which resulted in a report that brought together a range of articles called Think Tanks and Elections.

Building on this first effort, OTT recently partnered with Grupo FARO, based in Ecuador, and the Latin American Network of Think Tanks (ILAIPP) to further document think tank practices around elections, and produce practical resources to inspire and help other think tanks around the world. We reviewed 15 initiatives

THE PROJECT LOOKED AT 15 INITIATIVES IMPLEMENTED BY 16 ORGANISATIONS FROM 14 COUNTRIES IN AFRICA, EUROPE AND LATIN AMERICA.

implemented by 16 organisations from 14 countries in Africa, Europe and Latin America. Here is an overview of what we learned about think tank strategies and trends:

THINK TANKS INFLUENCE ELECTIONS AT DIFFERENT LEVELS USING A RANGE OF TACTICS

When election time comes, think tanks and civil society organisations design and implement influencing strategies at different levels and phases of the electoral cycle. Some focus on raising the quality of debate through policy analysis and proposals, while others take an active role in promoting and organising debates between the candidates. Campaigns to promote the participation of civil society in the electoral process are common, as are civic education exercises to encourage informed voting. Think tanks also play a key role in assessing campaign manifestos and the fulfillment of policy promises.

Out of all of these strategies, organising debates is the most risky. This is because they are unpredictable events. Success is very much influenced by the features of the competition between candidates and their incentives to debate. This means that organisations who try to convene debates need to remain flexible and adapt their strategies in response to the evolution of the campaign.

ELECTION PERIODS OFTEN GENERATE MORE FUNDING FOR THINK TANKS

Around elections, heightened interest in key policy issues means that think tanks are able to draw on a range of funding channels to build very comprehensive projects. Funding from multiple donors not only widens the scope of work that can be undertaken, it also helps legitimise the overall influencing initiative and strengthen advocacy efforts.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE CRUCIAL

With a few exceptions, the initiatives that think tanks implement around elections involve multiple actors so partnership-building is key. All sorts of alliances form, from institutional alliances with electoral agencies to links with media corporations, the private sector, universities and civil society organisations. This helps to mobilise citizens at the local level, which adds to the legitimacy of the work, as they gather more and diverse partners.

THINK TANKS RELY HEAVILY ON EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS TO ACHIEVE CUT THROUGH

Whether the initiatives target electoral candidates, journalists or citizens, the use of dynamic communication formats to promote messages and encourage actions is key. Infographics and videos are particularly useful in summarising complex messages and achieving cut through.

Given how rapidly things move during election campaigns, the use of social media is particularly important. Trending hashtags can, for example, help create consensus about the need for a debate between political candidates, or for an explanation around a particular policy proposal.

Digital tools and apps are also playing an increasingly vital role in informing voters about a range of election-related information, from where to vote and what documentation they need to do it, to quick-reference outlines of candidate proposals.

THINK TANKS DO NOT MAKE THE MOST OF THE POST-ELECTION PERIOD

A major challenge for think tanks is to maintain momentum around their initiatives, even after ballot boxes have been packed away. While think tanks often succeed in improving their dialogue with the elected administration, they often struggle to measure the uptake of their policy proposals. What is more, the initial enthusiasm that made it possible to align with different stakeholders under agreed objectives often dissipates, with organisations failing to effectively capitalise on partnerships or on policy windows created through collective efforts. In short: initiatives are currently quite seasonal in nature and organisations would benefit from finding incentives to make the most of the post-election period.

While each context is unique, the practices and approaches summarised under this project provide ideas and concrete actions to support think tanks to begin or improve their engagement in the lead up to elections, and beyond. The products generated as part of this work are available at: www.onthinktanks.org/initiatives/elections/

“Around elections, heightened interest in key policy issues means that think tanks are able to draw on a range of funding channels to build very comprehensive projects.”

LEANDRO ECHT

Author, *Think tanks and elections: strategies to raise the quality of democracies*

SEARCHING FOR SUSTAINABLE FUNDING MODELS: LESSONS FROM OTT SUPPORT TO LATIN AMERICAN THINK TANKS

BY LEANDRO ECHT
Research associate, OTT

Funding is a key concern for think tanks. It affects organisational sustainability, the way people work and the type of research that can be conducted. In the long-term, it even impacts on a think tank's ability have policy influence.

Think tanks in developing countries are increasingly interested in understanding how to develop or strengthen domestic support for their work, so as to create new sources of income. They recognise that they rely too heavily on international funding, or on conducting isolated projects under a consultancy model.

But think tanks are not the only ones concerned with sustainability. Donors also want policy research centres to innovate their funding models in order to be better prepared to overcome the inevitable financing challenges that will arise when their support comes to an end. This is very relevant in Latin America, where international donors are increasingly withdrawing money from the region as most countries move towards, or reach, middle income status.

In 2016, OTT began supporting the Latin American Network of Think Tanks (ILAIPP). We were keen to strengthen the sustainability capacity of the network and of its members. The project, which is still ongoing, focuses on providing direct support to the network's facilitator and executive body and enabling it to develop a sustainability strategy. We ran an online course for the network on re-thinking funding models,

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provided mentoring around selected projects being undertaken by think tanks in the network and developed learning products to share with the network and with the wider public.

After 18 months, we have started to generate lessons that may be helpful to others looking to run similar capacity building initiatives that focus heavily on mentoring. Here are our top five:

1 TIME, FUNDING AND CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS PREVENT INNOVATION

Even when sustainability is a key concern, very few think tanks are able to allocate enough time and funding to pilot new initiates that may help bring about change in the way they approach fundraising and funding management.

Linked to this, think tanks in Latin America rarely have dedicated teams in place to work on strategic fundraising activities. The responsibility usually falls on a range of staff, mostly directors or communications and monitoring staff, who lack the proper skillset or struggle to find the time to discuss, learn or implement new approaches to fundraising.

2 MENTORING INITIATES WORK BEST FACE-TO-FACE, BUT ARE PRONE TO BEING SIDELINED

Mentoring initiatives are affected by a range of organisational issues and external events, including key staff members leaving, the need to focus on a new research project or a sudden political crisis. In this context, mentoring activities slow down and work plans need to be adapted. With this in mind, both think tanks and mentors need to remain flexible, while at the same time maintaining clear objectives.

Mentoring efforts tend to be more challenging when they are done remotely. That is, when the mentor and the mentee do not have a chance to meet in person. While the advantage of face-to-face working is clear, mentoring is largely implemented as a long-distance enterprise. This makes it particularly prone to being sidelined when distractions arise.

3 A SHARED VISION IS ESSENTIAL FOR EFFECTIVE ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

When embarking on processes that aim to promote organisational change, it is important for both mentors and mentees to have a shared vision. Is the focus on modifying management structures? Is it about setting up a new strategic unit or formalising new procedures? Is it about piloting a novel approach to fundraising? If there is lack of agreement around these questions, then establishing an action plan will be difficult and implementing it will be almost impossible.

4 PRACTICAL EXAMPLES ARE FEW AND FAR BETWEEN

Think tanks demand practical examples, relevant case studies and good practice guides. They want to know how their peers faced and overcame challenges. But when it comes to the specific area of funding models, there are few documented case studies to offer. This is in part because of the sensitivity and secrecy around the topic.

In Latin America, we found it difficult to identify experienced thinktankers who could convey the key issues surrounding funding in a meaningful way. Though we turned to international organisations for support, context variations were significant enough to pose barriers to a meaningful dialogue.

5 FUNDING CANNOT BE ISOLATED FROM OTHER ORGNANISATIONAL PROCESSES

Funding models cannot be isolated from other operational processes. The linkages with financial procedures, governance approaches and communication actions are very strong. It is therefore important to take a broad approach to capacity building that recognises these linkages. For instance, when working on redefining the funding model of an institution, it is important to ensure that the mechanisms through which to channel new funds are in place.

There is no one-size-fits-all way to help think tanks transform their funding models. OTT and its members have tested several approaches, from traditional face-to-face workshops to short and long online courses. We have also worked on specific pieces of consultancy, including implementing mentoring processes. What we have found is that a mixed set of interventions have the best chance of succeeding, implemented over a sustained period.

POLICY ENGAGEMENT ONLINE TOOL FOR IFAD COUNTRY PROGRAMME

BY DENA LOMOFSKY
Managing director, Southern Hemisphere & trainer and research associate at OTT

The International Agricultural Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) – an international financial institution – is increasingly attempting to shape opportunities for inclusion and sustainable rural transformation through its country-level policy engagement efforts.

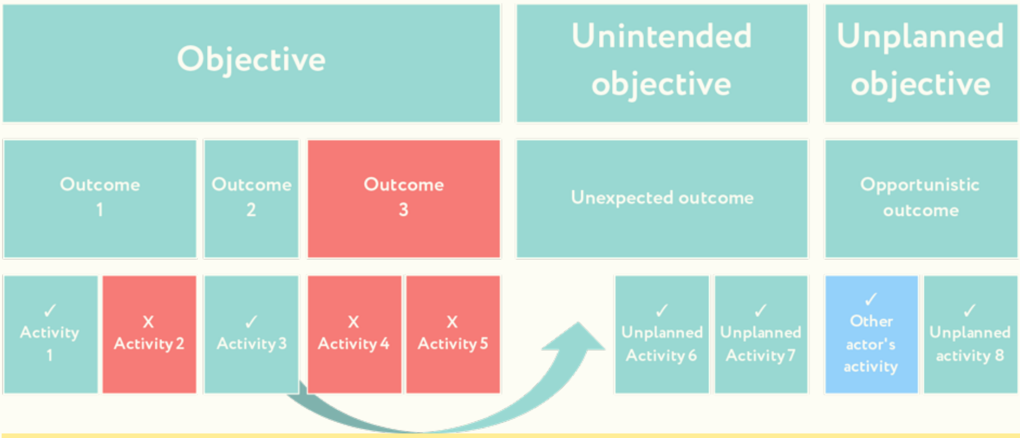
OTT Consulting is assisting IFAD to develop an online tool that allows it to collect and analyse data about these engagement efforts. The idea is to help them identify innovations and lessons that can inform their activities, thereby enhancing IFAD's status as a 'go to' organisation for policy questions around sustainable rural development. The tool will ultimately provide a better evidence base from which to draw and share its knowledge and experience.

THE CHALLENGE OF MONITORING POLICY ENGAGEMENT

While many people have tried to establish approaches for monitoring and evaluating policy engagement, as we began the project, we felt they fell short (see figure 1). Traditional approaches tend to assume that it is possible to define a clear policy objective and then to map out a pathway to achieve the objective. The pathway may be broken into intermediate steps that are measurable and well defined. It may be monitored to check whether or not the steps are achieved.

But this approach underestimates the inherent messiness in policy engagement processes. What if another organisation comes along that changes everything (for better or for worse)? What if the politics surrounding an issue change rapidly and project activities have unintended effects? Wihtout tracking all of this, evaluators will not get the full picture.

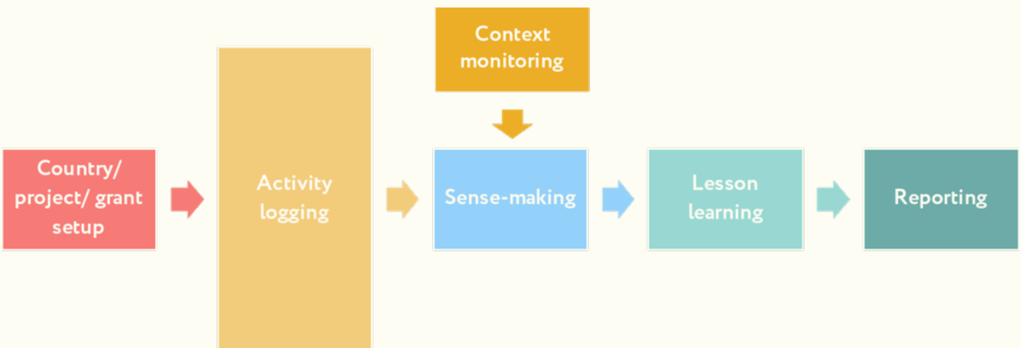
Figure 1: Challenges of traditional approaches to MEL for policy engagement



HOW OUR SYSTEM WORKS

When working with IFAD, we embraced the messiness by putting activity and context tracking at the heart of the tool. We also focused on making this information as easy to capture as possible. Users can send information for the database straight from their email, which makes it possible to use a simple smartphone to send information even when internet connectivity is limited. On a semi-regular basis, users are prompted to relate activities to policy objectives and to reflect on whether there have been changes in context. They are also encouraged to think about whether or not their strategy for achieving their objectives remains effective.

Figure 2: The elements of our system



Our goal was to empower users at the project-level, and within each of the countries, to learn from their own approaches and change tack when necessary. But we also wanted the policy engagement team back at IFAD headquarters to get a quick overview

> While many people have tried to establish approaches for monitoring and evaluating policy engagement, as we began the project, we felt they fell short. Traditional approaches tend to assume that it is possible to define a clear policy objective and then to map out a pathway to achieve the objective.

of the different activities being implemented around the world. With this in mind, our tool focused on developing relevant reports at different levels in order to answer questions like:

- How many publications have been published by IFAD projects this year?
- How many people have attended events with IFAD this month?
- What sort of lessons are people learning that could be shared more widely?

As we roll out the system in 2018, we hope to continue to improve it based on user feedback.

2018 & ON WARDS

The think tank label hides many great questions and challenges that all think tanks, large and small, face. Many remain unexplored.

There are always new and interesting questions to ask about think tanks and their ever changing environments. In 2018 OTT will continue to study new challenges and opportunities to support think tank development and evidence informed policy globally.

2018 ONWARDS

We cannot cover all there is to discuss about think tanks in a single review. Nor have we had the chance to explore several issues of interest and importance to policy research in 2017. Hence, in 2018 we commit to exploring new topics and looking at old ones through new lenses. For instance, we propose to explore the subject of women in think tanks from the perspective of gender and knowledge. We would also like to take forward Ruth Levine's call (see page 131) and look at the moral case for evidence in policymaking.

It goes without saying that the subject of credibility is still in its infancy. Our work on this topic has just started so we will continue exploring the issue through research, analysis and engagement with think tanks across the world.

We hope to learn more about cyber security threats and what think tanks can do to protect themselves from them. We will also do futher work on domestic funding for think tanks in developing countries, from which many traditional foreign funders are rapidly retreating. Design thinking have been mentioned several times in meetings of think tanks, their funders and supporters. We want to decode the jargon around this innovative approach to give think tanks something practical and immediately useful. Finally (although there are many other issues that will emerge) we are interested in the formation of new policy think tanks within government. These take many forms (policy units, policy labs, innovation teams, etc.) and little is yet known about them.

“We must consider our role as researchers when designing studies. Does the evidence truly represent the complete picture? Who does it benefit if certain actors are not countered? As researchers, we have a duty to look at the gaps in evidence and stop recycling bad data.”

JOSEPHINE TSUI

Author, *Gender, knowledge and think tanks*

GENDER, KNOWLEDGE AND THINK TANKS

BY JOSEPHINE TSUI
Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute

In 2017, we were reminded of the dangers of not being gender-sensitive when conducting research. In a message that went viral, Alice Evans, a lecturer in international development at King's College London, highlighted the fact that the international development community respects men as knowledge authorities far more than women. She went on to explain that men are rewarded through these gender stereotypes by having their work cited more frequently, or receiving more money for funded studies.

Publication volume has no statistically significant effect on the rank of female assistant professors. In the academic sector, only 1 in 5 tenure-track economics professors are women, though this number is probably similar in other fields and the mean gender pay gap in 2014/15 was 12.3%. Perhaps more worryingly, a recent piece of research suggests that men do not believe the data on gender bias in science.

This has an implication for think tanks. In 2017, OTT and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) co-hosted an open table to explore the issue of gender in think tanks. Over 30 academics, development practitioners, think tank researchers, NGOs, and academic journal editors contributed to the discussion. Two key themes emerged, which require further research. One has to do with how the organisational set up of think tanks may hinder a women's career progress. The other relates to how think tanks conduct research, which may inadvertently widen the gender gap.

Data from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) shows that while 43% of think tank staff are female, only 23% of these organisations have female executive directors. We know this is partly due to a 'leaky pipeline', which creates a decreasing proportion of women at each professional level within think tanks. Organisations such as Grupo Sofia,

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Plataforma Comadres, and AWARD are attempting to raise the profile of women in social sciences and sciences.

But we need to be more nuanced with this data. Women are not a singular profile in themselves. They vary by class, race, age and sexual orientation. Insights from the meeting we held demonstrate that gender discrepancies only show part of the picture of who ends up excelling in think tanks. What is more, just looking at pure numbers does not account for the gendered siloisation of technical topics. For example, women tend to converge in some topics (such as social development, gender-related issues, education) while other areas are underrepresented (such as applied econometrics, war and security, international relations). Interestingly, this convergence trend is different in think tanks versus academia.

There are growing efforts to explore these issues. OTT is interested in the organisational set up of think tanks and policy research centres asking questions like: how is the business model rewarding a particular type of researcher and what are the gendered implications? TTI is also working to map out organisational policies, and practices of the institutions they support, for future research. However, we cannot wait to achieve critical mass in order to change male-dominated spaces. We need to change the spaces ourselves. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to consider how think tanks perpetuate gendered stereotypes through our relationship with evidence and knowledge.

The second area we explored at our meeting focused on the gendered dynamics of knowledge organisations. Evidence is not only a technical issue, it is also a values-based political issue. If think tanks ignore normative gender expectations that privilege men and disadvantage women, they can perpetuate gender divides in how data is supplied, used, brokered and translated. Think tanks make choices in data collection, in what they measure and how and who they measure. These selections can deepen the divide and result in bad data.

For example, demographic health surveys only track births of women aged 15- 49, even though girls can get pregnant from the age of 11 and onwards. This is a flaw in how researchers are designing survey instruments. It also means governments are making policies about adolescent pregnancy without taking account of girls who are getting pregnant between the ages of 10 and 14 years. According to Plan's Counting the Invisible project, there are an estimated 70,000 girls aged between 10 and 19 years who die of birth-related complications every year. The exact number of girls under 15 is still largely undocumented.

We must consider our role as researchers when designing studies. Does the evidence truly represent the complete picture? Who does it benefit if certain actors are not countered? As researchers, we have a duty to look at the gaps in evidence and stop recycling of bad data. Think tanks have a responsibility to be critical of the evidence in the world and how it serves the underrepresented.

If think tanks are not reflective of how they may perpetuate gendered stereotypes, they are in danger of losing female scholars and their insights. With this in mind, they need to be considerate of gender dynamics in the use and production of knowledge.

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THE MORAL CASE FOR EVIDENCE IN POLICYMAKING

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

This article was originally published by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

On 28 September 2017, the United States Agency for International Development hosted 'Evidence Day,' as part of Global Innovation Week. The Hewlett Foundation was one of several sponsors of the event, which drew approximately 1,700 participants from across government, academia, policy research organisations and social enterprises. The following article is based on remarks offered at the closing session by Ruth Levine, director of Hewlett Foundation's Global Development and Population Programme.

'Morals' is an unusual topic for me to take up, since I'm neither a philosopher nor clergy person. The narrative around evidence-informed policymaking tends to ring the bells of rationality more than morality. But no field can be sustained and advance unless it confronts and articulates its moral core – and that's something not often discussed. I want to start thinking about how evidence-informed policymaking answers a call to be our best selves, individually and as a society.

What draws you to work on ensuring that the most valid and reliable information is available for public policymaking, and used by decision makers? The range of answers probably include: "I want to make sure that tax dollars are spent efficiently." Or "I want to make sure that policymakers know what problems affect citizens, and what the impact of different policies might be." Or, "my graduate advisor was a 'randomista' so I am, too."

> The narrative around evidence-informed policymaking tends to ring the bells of rationality more than morality. But no field can be sustained and advance unless it confronts and articulates its moral core.

I think if we talked a little longer, though, deeper meaning would emerge.

You might not think about it every day, with every programme you monitor or regression you run, but evidence-informed policymaking is about truth, justice, equality, creativity, and love of others.

These are deep topics, so I'm just going to touch on a few of the strong links between the topics usually discussed around evidence-informed policy and this moral core.

First, the value of truth. Across all cultures, and certainly in our own, the value of telling the truth is upheld over the sin of lying. One of the main tasks that parents have is instilling in their children a feeling of self-love when they tell the truth, even when it is difficult, and the pain of a guilty conscience when they tell a falsehood, even when – or especially when – it is self-serving.

Well, the work of data scientists, evaluators and researchers – the people who engage in generating the information and evidence for programme design and policymaking – is fundamentally about revealing truth. Often the truths are specific, not universal: This programme was supposed to improve nutritional status a lot but it only improved it a little – or maybe not at all. Or, this change in policy will leave millions of people without basic health care. They may be specific and sometimes even small, but these are intrinsically important because they are part of an aspiration that we be truthful in public affairs — that true, verifiable, reproducible information is shining a light to frighten off the purveyors of falsehoods and ignorance.

But this work is not only about truth. It's also about justice.

The easiest link to make between the work of evidence-informed policymaking and justice falls into the domain of distributive justice – that is, the just allocation of resources in a society.

Let me tell a little story.

Once, years ago, I was on a panel with Dr. Paul Farmer. What originally had been billed as a panel on global health policy rapidly became a debate about whether cost-effectiveness analysis is or is not a tool of neocolonial oppression and injustice. I was tapped to argue for cost-effectiveness analysis. Dr. Farmer took up the

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counterargument, saying that cost-effectiveness analysis was simply a convenient excuse to deny health care to poor people.

Though I was baffled then by the framing of "thinking about costs" versus "believing in justice," I now think what happened in that debate is part of a larger failing in the "evidence community." We do not state, affirmatively, clearly, and repeatedly, that what we're doing is part and parcel of a millennia-long fight for justice – distributive justice.

We do not claim the moral high ground. It is always on the moral high ground where most people want to stand, so they will stand with us if they see us there. In fact, all too often we cede the space altogether, uncomfortable or unfamiliar with arguments centered on justice and rights.

We need to claim our space.

There are a couple of distinct elements to consider. One important part is the emergence of values – what constitutes "just allocation?" As a society we are routinely asked to make trade-offs between conditions that are not intrinsically comparable: the well-being of a baby versus an elderly person, the welfare of those of us living today versus our descendants two generations hence. We have to make these choices around which there are no objective guides or guardrails, and individuals and groups draw on profound beliefs, whether from religion, historical precedent, philosophical tenets, or other sources.

In my debate with Dr. Farmer, the social choice, or value, he was promoting was that no matter where a person lives or what health conditions exist, that person should receive health care that maximizes length and quality of life. That is a truly noble aspiration and one that I imagine many of us would associate ourselves with even though there cannot be experimental findings to back it up.

But values alone are not enough to achieve distributive justice – and that's where the evidence comes in. Fairness can be achieved only if full and unbiased information is available about current conditions, and about the costs and benefits of one way of acting – one policy option – versus another. Yes, we could guess or assume. But when measurement is possible, guesses and assumptions are for the lazy and the irresponsible, not for the people most dedicated to a just outcome.

What many of those working on evidence-informed policy, and empirical analysts around the world, do every day is provide those essential ingredients that make a quest for distributive justice real, offering the necessary information that permits those who are pursuing social choices to know what they are actually doing and how to do it better.

So, for instance, if we want to pursue the goal of good health for all, regardless of geography or wealth, we need a lot of information. We need not only the facts about what drugs safely and effectively treat what health conditions, but also how each dollar spent on treating a particular ailment, or a given patient population, can be used to obtain the maximum benefit in terms of longevity and quality of life. In other words, we need cost-effectiveness analysis – as well as the work we usually produce, such as estimating the net effect of a given intervention, or testing innovative means of advancing human and environmental health and well-being – all can be used in service of this powerful aspiration around global equity.

Back again to the discussion with Dr. Farmer and others who critique cost-effectiveness analyses. I came to understand that at least some critics don't in fact object to optimizing the use of resources, and using information to do it. The objection is to the existence of arbitrarily determined cost-effectiveness thresholds. Some health economists have stated that interventions are cost-ineffective if they cost more than three times GDP per capita per disability-adjusted life year. And it's absolutely correct that establishing that threshold was not an empirical question, but a values-laden one.

This story has a simple point: Empirical analysis is not a substitute for the value judgments that inform a theory of justice in any society. But empirical analysis is an essential complement to those value judgments, helping to turn the "what we believe" into the "what we do."

Beyond the values of truth and justice, evidence-informed policymaking helps to realize the value of equality. The moral value of equality is codified in many parts of U.S. constitutional and civil law – one person, one vote; equal protection under the law; equal justice under law. Whether within a legal and regulatory framework or not, there's a widespread aspiration in the United States – if not a fully realized experience – of each person being recognized as having the same rights as each other person. Bill and Melinda Gates say that they are "guided by the belief that every life has equal value." And, of course, the human rights conventions ratified by the member states of the United Nations affirm this concept in many ways.

Your work in the field of evidence-informed policymaking has a very specific and particular role to play in advancing this ideal. And it's found in the work on data.

If it weren't for efforts to collect the same type of information from each and every individual – or at least a representative sample of each and every type of individual – what would we know? We would only know about the lives, livelihoods, and opinions

> "Good quality data doesn't replace the need to create spaces for people to speak for themselves, but it contributes to a deeper understanding of how people live."

of the people who have the greatest access to the public square.

of the people who have the greatest access to the public square. We rarely think about it this way, but the data collected through household surveys and other means are fundamental to ensuring that public policymakers hear from poor and marginalized people, and have ways to understand what they're experiencing, whether it's displacement after conflict and natural disasters or lack of access to quality education or intimate partner violence. Good quality data doesn't replace the need to create spaces for people to speak for themselves, but it contributes to a deeper understanding of how people live.

There is a tremendous opportunity before us, as we engage in today's data revolution, to make sure that our work lives up to its potential to put each person's experience on an equal footing with all other people. That means making sure we are including out-of-school children as well as children in school when learning is assessed. It means asking both married and unmarried women about their sexual and reproductive experiences. It means dedicating sufficient resources to count homeless and undocumented residents in the 2020 population census. It means asking women questions not just about their childbearing but about their work, and men questions not just about their work but about their fatherhood.

Finally, I want to talk about the contributions that evidence-informed policymaking can make in service of the value of human progress. On any given day, human beings have choices to make about whether we maintain the status quo, doing things as we have always done them, or we work to advance, perfect, optimize, and seek a better form of ourselves as individuals and our societies as collectives. Virtually all religions encourage or mandate ever-purer and more loving thoughts and behavior, whether for benefit in this life or the next one. The size of the self-help industry alone speaks to the impulse toward continuous improvement; businesses are judged on the basis of year-on-year growth; and nation-states are constantly trying to grow their economies, improve the health and well-being of their citizens, and sometimes expand their global power through military means. I think it's safe to say that, in general, human beings seek to create better lives and better societies.

It is no stretch to say that this value – the value of human progress – is amplified and served by the work of people in the evidence community. We have to answer questions like, "As a society, where are we now?" That is a question that can be answered fully only by assembling facts in an organized way. Guessing will lead us astray. We have to answer questions like, "How effective are we now in solving specific problems?"

Careful, thoughtful evaluation serves us, while wishful thinking does not. We have to answer questions like, "What are other approaches that might work better?" Innovation, based on reason but spiced with creativity, gives us the seed from which improvements grow. We've often see examples of all of this, striving for more, better, stronger, and more lasting.

What you've read here is what I hope will be a starting point for a rich conversation about the ways in which the practices and tools of evidence-informed policymaking are not separate or opposed to a moral public policy, but are essential to it. We have to lift this conversation above internecine debates about methods, or an insistence that we are hardheaded not softhearted. We have to assert, strongly, persistently that failing to use facts and evidence in decision-making about matters of consequence is not only dumb, but wrong – deeply, irretrievably wrong. In contrast, championing the use of information and analysis is responsible, even righteous.

Professionals who know what it is to measure, to monitor, to estimate, to weigh – we have the responsibility each and every day to serve the aspirations of progress, equality, justice and truth.

The full video of her talk is available here.

“Fairness can be achieved only if full and unbiased information is available about current conditions, and about the costs and benefits of one way of acting – one policy option – versus another. Yes, we could guess or assume. But when measurement is possible, guesses and assumptions are for the lazy and the irresponsible, not for the people most dedicated to a just outcome.”

RUTH LEVINE

Author, *The moral case for evidence in policymaking*

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU

Producing this review has prompted a lot of reflection. We come away, once again, with a deep sense of gratitude.

The numbers presented in this review are more than simple indicators. They confirm that OTT exists because of the people that are a part of it: our core team, our Advisory Board, our collaborators, the participants in our capacity building efforts, our readers and our followers. We published more than 100 resources in 2017 – a number we would not have achieved without the huge efforts of some 60 authors across seven continents.

We are humbled by the continued support we receive, both from contributors and from our readers and followers. This is what energises us to continue our work in support of think tanks and policy research institutes around the world.

As we plan our activities for the coming years, we ask ourselves: why do we do what we do? While we each may have our own answer, at the end of the day we all agree that we do this because we believe that what we do, matters. We believe that think tanks are, and should continue to be, key players in public policy. That they play a unique and positive role in society. OTT is our small contribution this.

We extend a huge thank you to the 208 people who have contributed to OTT over the past eight years and, especially, to our 7,099 users. We hope to continue providing research, ideas and advice with your support.

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

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