On Think Tanks

TECHNOLOGY

Annual Review 2019–2020

" As ever, we are excited about the possibilities, but with a healthy degree of scepticism. We are quite certain that new technologies are playing, and will continue to play a transformative role in the evolution of think tanks and think tank communities across the world. But we do not think that it will be all it is billed to be. And change, whatever that may be, should be informed by facts, rather than hype and expectation."

Enrique Mendizabal

On Think Tanks Annual Review 2019–2020

EDITORIAL

Enrique Mendizabal
Founder and director
On Think Tanks

WELCOME TO THIS YEAR'S ON THINK TANKS ANNUAL REVIEW ON TECHNOLOGY

We've invited authors from across different disciplines, sectors and roles to offer insights into the opportunities and challenges that new technologies present to think tanks.

As ever, we are excited about the possibilities, but with a healthy degree of scepticism. We are quite certain that new technologies are playing, and will continue to play a transformative role in the evolution of think tanks and think tank communities across the world. But we do not think that it will be all it is billed to be. And change, whatever that may be, should be informed by facts, rather than hype and expectation.

Nonetheless, the wealth of insight and experience captured here shows that technology is causing think tanks to rethink their functions, their business models, how they develop and deliver their research agendas, who they communicate with and how they do it, as well as the skills and competencies they need to recruit. Funders too, need to consider how best to support think tanks as technology continues to pose new challenges and opportunities.

THE CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF THINK TANKS

Four years ago, our first global conference was on the theme of evolving think tanks. We'd launched our On Think Tanks School two years before under the same banner, motivated by the fact that think tanks were facing increasingly complex challenges and therefore had to pay greater attention to the competencies and skills they needed to respond – business as usual was (and still is) not an option.

The first annual review drew mostly from our own experience. When we launched it at our annual conference in late January 2017, the discussions that ensued offered a more nuanced and rich understanding of think tanks' evolution so far and the ideas that would shape think tanks in the future.

Henceforth, we took a different approach: more inclusive and forward looking. Our next review, published in 2018, explored the subject of credibility. The next, published in 2019, focused on public engagement. And in this latest review we tackle the challenges and opportunities presented by new technological developments.

In each case, we have produced reviews that help us and our community to learn more about a field that we knew little about but understood to be

important for think tanks. Each review involved contributions from an increasingly large and diverse community of researchers and practitioners in the field. In doing so, we have been able to incorporate the nuance and richness of the annual conferences into the reviews themselves.

The choice of themes illustrates this evolution too. We tackled credibility in 2017 because it repeatedly came up at our first annual conference as an increasingly complex challenge for think tanks. However, credibility appeared to be one of those words that could mean just about anything, thus making it difficult to find common ground between think tanks. The annual review offered an opportunity to develop the foundations for a more nuanced discussion.

When we all met in London for our 2nd annual conference in 2018, we found that the conversation had begun to move on from understanding the factors that explained credibility to the need to find practical solutions. Public engagement emerged as a promising one. Participants at the 2018 conference agreed that it was no longer enough to target a few influential policymakers; think tanks had to consider the wider public in their work: from the way they developed their research agendas to how they delivered them and communicated their findings.

We therefore took on public engagement as the theme of our 3rd annual review. Through it we learned about new forms of engagement, new business models that embed engagement into the organisation's DNA, and about the organisational and personal skills needed to deliver it.

Its publication and the subsequent discussions on public engagement at the 2019 conference in Geneva, led to the emergence of new issues, such as the effect that greater diversity in think tanks' workforce has on the effectiveness of their public engagement efforts, or the way in which new technologies are affecting public engagement practice.

And so here we are, exploring the many dimensions in which technology developments are disrupting and innovating our lives, research and policymaking, and how think tanks are – and must – respond.

When we began planning for this annual review we thought that it would be forward looking, as the extent of the technological developments that we discuss here is yet to unfold. Equally, we are yet to fully understand their implications on think tanks and the wider evidence-informed policy community. However, in the time it has taken us to publish it the world has become engulfed in a global crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. We are witnessing, besides a resurgence of the credibility of experts and evidence, the very central role that technology is playing in both the

Think tanks and technology
Editorial

modelling of the epidemic and the solutions that people and institutions, including think tanks, are appealing to.

We are not yet in a position to fully understand the implications on think tanks and the wider evidence-informed policy community. In some cases, we may find sooner rather than later that the crisis ushers permanent changes to think tanks and the way they engage with technology. In other cases we may have to wait until the dust has settled, as the aftermath of the crisis lays bare the huge inequities, technological and otherwise, that exist in this sector.

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THINKS + TECHNOLOGY

" The claim that digital inclusion is a human right assumes an alignment between being connected and living a good life, elevating technology as the all-mighty solution. In reality, digital technologies are deeply socially embedded tools that reflect the societal values that shape our natural, economic, social, cultural and political environments in many different ways – and certainly not always for the better."

Maru Mormina and Federica Lucivero

An ethical and social justice agenda for digital inclusion

An ethical and social justice agenda for digital inclusion

BY
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The internet has transformed nearly every aspect of our lives, from the way we communicate with each other to the way we learn, work and participate in social and political life. Digital inclusion is no longer a 'nice to have', it is a human right.

In the UK, this issue gained prominence in recent elections thanks to the Labour Party's pledge to provide access to broadband, free at the point of use, for everyone. Although quickly disparaged as a 'bad policy', the proposal was underpinned by the recognition that in increasingly digital societies, the exercising of our social, political and economic rights is more than ever linked to our ability to 'be connected'.

In the UK, one in ten households still lack access to the internet. In a country where many services are offered on a digital-only basis, this means social and economic exclusion for a small but significant proportion of the population, usually the most vulnerable and marginalised. In the developing world, the situation is far worse. According to the latest statistics, only 45% of the population in developing countries has internet access, usually those living in urban areas and relatively well-off, whilst the poor continues to be digitally invisible.

Undoubtedly, lack of access to information and communications technologies (ICT) reproduces and amplifies existing inequalities, within and between countries, foreclosing opportunities for inclusive societies. Thus, bridging the digital divide should rightly be a priority for governments globally.

Yet, governments often predicate solutions based on quick technical fixes aimed at 'connecting the unconnected' – improving infrastructure, making the internet safer and more affordable, or teaching digital skills to those left behind. Framing the problem in binary terms as access vs non-access conceals the many ways in which digital technologies reflect, reproduce and exacerbate existing inequities *beyond* issues of access.

More nuanced understandings of digital inclusion are necessary to evaluate not just the outcomes for the 'unconnected' but also for those who have crossed the digital fault line. K4D's emerging issues report 'Leave No One Behind in a Digital World' and the Appropriating Technology blog 'Digital Technology Excludes' are both good introductions to a more nuanced understanding of digital exclusion.

If digital inclusion is simply understood as more people using digital devices and connecting to the internet for daily activities, policies to increase connectivity may in fact impact negatively on those (or other) vulnerable groups that were supposed to benefit.

Here, we add to the discussion by highlighting some of the environmental and social impacts of digital inclusion that may need greater policy attention.

Despite promises of digital access as an enabler of sustainable development, the internet is much less ethereal, more material and dirtier, than the 'cloud' metaphor suggests. And the environmental implications of the digital revolution are not fairly distributed.

Indeed, vulnerable populations suffer the consequences of increased digital demand. For example, demand for low-cost electronics encourages mining of minerals in areas were labour is cheap, perpetuating local conflicts in already politically instable areas, like the Republic of Congo.

Following the lifecycle of digital products, data processing and storing is enabled by data centres that use large quantities of energy, as well as land and natural resources (such as water). These centres are often located in peripheries, often disrupting local balances.

At the end of the digital cycle, ICT disposal happens in recycling centres often located in low- and middle-income countries with lower environmental controls. Recovery of valuable materials in ICT hardware (for example, copper or gold) is done through practices like incineration that result in aggravated environmental pollution. Waste disposal of toxic materials also has undocumented effects on local communities in the areas where recycling facilities are located.

And so, throughout the infrastructure lifecycle that enables digital connectivity, we witness issues of social and environmental injustice that affect the most vulnerable groups.

The images of sleek data centres with eco-architectures, under a blanket of Nordic snow, or shining plans of immersing them under water to reduce the need for environmentally and financially expensive cooling systems (and a cynic would think, hiding their physical presence from the eyes and conscience of the concerned environmentalist) are very much in contrast with the dusty pictures of tungsten and tantalum mines or waste disposal facilities in low- and middle-income countries.

This reduces costs for digital offer and demand, and in doing so increases connectivity. But this is not a zero-sum game: some (in richer countries) will benefit more than others (in poorer countries) who will suffer the costs of exploitative labour, military conflict and exposure to toxic substances, among others.

Promises of data for sustainability need to be weighed against the evidence of data against sustainability. Technical solutions to mitigate these issues are surely welcome, but they need to be accompanied by a governance approach that acknowledges and actively addresses the underlying structural injustices, rather than exacerbating them with superficial promises of inclusivity.

Yes, more people will have access to broadband, perhaps free at the point of use, but at what other cost? What aspects of inclusivity are we favouring and which ones are we sacrificing (whom and where)? How should we balance the needs of the most vulnerable in a more sustainable way? And why are some groups more included than others in geo-political decisions regarding the localisation of the digital infrastructure and the distribution of its benefits and costs?

Despite promises of inclusivity, the digital revolution creates new inequalities and can perpetuate existing ones. It is at this intersection between data justice and environmental justice (where populations that currently suffer more from ICT environmental implications are also those less likely to benefit from the 'digital gold') that more work needs to be done at the policy and regulatory levels.

Policy and regulatory promises of data *for* sustainability need to be weighed against the evidence of data *against* sustainability. Technical solutions to mitigate these issues are surely welcome, but they need to be accompanied by a governance approach that acknowledges and actively addresses the underlying structural injustices, rather than exacerbating them with superficial promises of inclusivity.

New thinking and better governance are also needed to manage the effects of the digitisation of nearly every aspect of personal and public life. The vast increase in social media use means almost endless opportunities for social participation, community strengthening, cross-cultural dialogue and collective learning and action.

Countries (including in the global South) are fast moving the provision of services to online platforms and there is evidence that this fosters social and financial inclusion. For example, the M-Pesa platform has lowered transaction costs, enabling millions of unbanked Kenyans entry to the formal financial system. Digitisation of public services and government communications (e-government) is another example, where digital technologies promote not just efficiency gains and cost savings, but increased citizen involvement and government accountability.

However, overoptimistic emphasis of these benefits can legitimise digitally enabled solutions and overlook their intricate normative dimensions.

The digitisation of personal, social, economic and political relations implies profound – and not always well understood – changes to the basic structure of our societies. For example, social networks can, and often do, foster inward-looking online echo-chambers that run counter to the pluralistic foundations of the internet. They can also exclude minorities who do not speak the mainstream languages in which most online content is written. M-Pesa and other next-gen mobile financial services providing digital credits (instant micro-loans based on credit scores created by assessing borrowers' digital footprints) can create debt traps or exclude financially sound borrowers with patterns of online activity that do not conform to algorithms' assumptions. And digitisation of public services can shift accountability from government to tech companies. Digital civic participation may amplify the already loud voices of the digitally savvy (often middle class, educated and generally well-off groups) and hinder genuine democratic decision making. It is unclear to what extent online platforms foster meaningful social and political deliberation.

These issues suggest that an agenda for digital inclusion must certainly, but not exclusively, contain technological solutions to bring those most in need into the digital mainstream. The 'tech-focused,' number-boosting dimension of digital inclusion is important, especially as increased reliance on digital signatures for public policy decisions – from public health interventions, to urban planning and aid and relief efforts – can render invisible the needs of the 'digitally unseen'. But as more people cross the technology divide, a human-focused lens must bring forward the fundamental question of what equity and justice should look like in our 21st century digital world.

The claim that digital inclusion is a human right assumes an alignment between being connected and living a good life, elevating technology as the all-mighty solution. In reality, digital technologies are deeply socially embedded tools that reflect the societal values that shape our natural, economic, social, cultural and political environments in many different ways – and certainly not always for the better. The question of digital inclusion cannot, therefore, be reduced to an issue of connectivity alone. It must intertwine with the messy process of collectively defining what constitutes the good life and what kind of societies we want. It must weigh the moral significance of the social and environmental trade-offs and then align local and global policies for digital development accordingly.

" Working in a think tank, I have often said, is like a driving a car: we need to keep an eye on the potholes in the road immediately ahead, but also look at the horizon to see where the road may lead.

As we do this, technology can be our friend."

Simon Maxwell

The questions technology poses think tanks

BY
SIMON MAXWELL

*International
development specialist*

It is easy to paint a dystopian picture of fast-approaching 'technological singularity' – the point at which artificial intelligence becomes cleverer than us, and probably decides that humans are dysfunctional and need to be eliminated. Before that happens, the robots will have taken most of the jobs, genetically-modified organisms will have destroyed the planet's biodiversity, and plastic will sit on the earth's surface a metre deep. Those humans who remain will be locked in air-filtered bubbles, filling our time playing online video games or browsing Facebook. There is a flourishing industry of fiction and nonfiction books predicting societal break-down along these lines.

On the other side of the coin, technology has transformed human possibilities and can contribute to improving health, eliminating drudgery, protecting the environment, connecting the global community, and democratising institutions. We will all be able to devote ourselves to self-improvement and self-realisation (the Californian dream). More practically, we will find solutions to the great challenges facing the world, like tackling climate change, eliminating infectious disease, and providing sustainable, healthy diets to a growing population.

If we are to rescue some kind of utopia, there is work to do. Governments play a key role in funding the research that underpins new technology, and in fostering adoption. They also have a role in regulating technology companies, for example in preventing monopoly, or in setting global tax regimes. Importantly, these tasks increasingly require collaboration and cooperation between countries. Initiatives like the International Solar Alliance illustrate the benefits of bringing countries together to tackle the so called 'grand challenges' of the 21st century.

Developing countries might easily find themselves excluded from the research, application, and governance structures that emerge from this kind of conversation. Of course, that is not necessarily the case (the International Solar Alliance is an initiative of the Indian Government for example). However, it is essential that think tanks press for genuinely global participation in what is a global endeavour. Multilateral institutions, especially the UN, need to have a voice in setting research priorities. Aid agencies, for example, need to fund universities and science centres, as well as primary schools.

More generally, think tanks need to focus both on the short-term priorities of the Sustainable Development Goals, but also on the long-term changes, beyond 2030, that technology may facilitate. Working in a think tank, I have often said, is like a driving a car: we need to keep an eye on the potholes in the road immediately ahead, but also look at the horizon to see where the road may lead.

As we do this, technology can be our friend. The internet makes (certain kinds of) research much easier. The availability of big data encourages new forms of analysis. The cost of collaboration has fallen too, as virtual conferencing has spread. Who in 2020 would want to run a think tank without bandwidth? On the demand side, policymakers are working faster, and often more informally. Think tanks need to respond. Never mind the website and regular supply of briefing papers, which think tank these days does not live-stream meetings to the desktop monitors in parliament or government? Which researchers do not have a Twitter account?

However, here there are also risks. In an age of media manipulation and fake news, the questions of 'whose voice counts?' and 'whose voice is real?' become ever more pertinent. For think tanks, their 'brand' becomes an important issue. Alone, or in alliance with others, think tanks need to guard their reputation with all the commitment they can muster. To be acknowledged as the 'go-to' source of authoritative advice is the greatest accolade think tanks can garner.

Values and philosophy matter too. Technology can encourage think tank researchers to forget the world, and the ultimate clients and causes they work for. Imagine think tank researchers sitting in darkened rooms, leafing through back copies of the *Scientific American* or *New Scientist*, pausing only to run regressions on their laptops, or tweet their findings and opinions to an outside audience. That would not do. Think tanks are driven by a social mission. That implies contact and engagement, not research and policymaking by remote control.

Governance and management issues follow. Boards need to ask for regular horizon-scanning and strategy revision. Managers need to build changing contexts and tools into institutional and programmatic work plans. Individual incentives need to be structured so as to facilitate new agendas and new ways of working. Funders also need to think outside of conventional frames.

Not every think tank will focus with laser intensity on technical change. Nor will every think tank want to turn their office into the simulacrum of a hipster start-up. Nevertheless, we don't want to be writing on vellum with quills when the world invents the printing press.

The ecosystem of think tanks is highly heterogeneous, in resources and skills to name just a couple. Not every think tank will focus with laser intensity on technical change. Nor will every think tank want to turn their office into the simulacrum of a hipster start-up. Nevertheless, we don't want to be writing on vellum with quills when the world invents the printing press.

" Policy research institutions should embark now on efforts to inform the forthcoming debate on embodied artificial intelligence technologies. While governments have begun to articulate new standards for data privacy, media integrity, and the regulation of technologies like facial recognition, few have undertaken a thorough assessment of this new direction. Think tanks can bridge this gap and prepare the groundwork for effective policy solutions."

Andrew Westbury

Embodied artificial intelligence: a new frontier for technology and policy action

Today's remarkable advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are powered in many ways by the billions of images uploaded to the Internet each day. This rich corpus of imagery and video has enabled industrial and academic researchers to develop models that excel at detecting specific objects or identifying visual themes of photos. These innovations have led to meaningful increases in human welfare. For example, AI systems will soon increase the speed of MRI scans by more than ten times, significantly expanding access to this important health diagnostic tool.

However, the potential of AI systems to benefit humankind is limited in many ways, because the world is not composed exclusively of 2D static images. On the contrary, people perceive the world through continuous streams of information captured in the first-person, or an 'egocentric' point of view. Moreover, our world consists not just of visual information, but images mixed with audio and complex signals captured via social context, body pose, or other interactions. AI technologies are currently unable to effectively build on these first-person perspectives.

The AI research community is, however, undertaking a number of bold new initiatives to develop computer vision models that can effectively advance real-world perception. Habitat AI, for example, provides a first-of-its-kind platform for training virtual robots in simulation environments, enabling a cheaper and faster advancement of units that can navigate real-world locations or enhance daily life. Similarly, EPIC Kitchens is a unique effort to advance machine perception through first-person video. It's enabling the development of AI that can understand people's interactions with objects, what they intend to do with them, and their attention span for specific tasks.

The tech industry is taking notice of these efforts and developing its own initiatives to generate data and benchmarks that enhance or augment first-person perspectives. Each of these undertakings are part of an emerging field known as 'embodied AI', which brings together researchers from robotics, vision, audio, and augmented reality. The new energy around this embodied research challenge stands as today's cutting-edge for AI research.

While daunting, progress against the challenge of embodied AI will rapidly accelerate, and it will not be long before research breakthroughs lead to significant advancements in autonomous driving, advanced robotics, or augmented reality systems that can be housed in everyday, wearable devices. These innovations are poised to provide users around the world with guidance and personalised assistance as we manage daily life, advance our ability to monitor health, enforce laws, or provide professional training to underserved populations. Vuzix is an early leader in

these efforts with a suite of augmented reality devices for manufacturing, logistics, and remote health services.

Before these technologies are deployed *en masse*, the policy research community should work now to identify mechanisms to support and manage this emerging field of embodied AI. At the moment, however, few think tanks have begun to grapple with how these innovations may change civic life.

As the speed of technology outpaces policy frameworks, this lack of attention will leave governments playing catch-up and constituencies without guidance or policy recourse. Moreover, without public action, technology innovators may miss opportunities to build embodied AI for today's most urgent development challenges, choosing instead to pursue tasks with immediately-viable business models.

Policy research institutions should embark now on efforts to inform the forthcoming debate on embodied AI technologies. While governments have begun to articulate new standards for data privacy, media integrity, and the regulation of technologies like facial recognition, few have undertaken a thorough assessment of this new direction. Think tanks can bridge this gap and prepare the groundwork for effective policy solutions.

Such an initiative should include thorough assessments of how embodied AI might impact civic life, taking into account considerations including inequality, privacy, and safety. Early efforts to educate policymakers about these emerging technologies are critical as the lack of tech expertise in the public sector has encumbered effective government action. Efforts are also needed to begin to define policy frameworks that can balance the deployment of socially-beneficial embodied AI, continued scientific advancement, and inclusive economic growth.

The development of embodied AI stands as a frontier challenge for both technologists and the think tank community. Policy research institutions in particular should work now to inform public officials and debates as this new technology emerges and begins to enhance daily life.

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Nuzi Barkatally

The journey to ethically-aligned artificial intelligence in healthcare policy

The idea of intelligent machines performing intelligent tasks seems exciting. However, it opens up a can of worms around ethics, governance, and cultural implications. Some of these concerns include privacy issues around where the data comes from to train these algorithms. Others include the potential for bias in how these algorithms are designed or trained by the people creating them. And in sectors like healthcare, the stakes are high. So, where do you start in creating ethically-aligned artificial intelligence (AI)?

Many of the big technology and consulting companies are spurting out ethical frameworks left, right and centre. These well-articulated (and sometimes beautifully designed) frameworks serve as great starting points.

However, they are often missing the next step. How, exactly, do you take these ethical principles and turn them into practical steps in the process of creating AI? How do you operationalise and implement ethical standards into technology creation?

Governments are trying to understand these questions too. In an effort to keep up with the rate at which technology is being developed, they are looking to find a governance balance that keeps people safe while still allowing for innovation.

A really interesting example of this is Singapore's Model Artificial Intelligence Governance Framework. It was released in January 2019 as a guide for organisations to create explainable, transparent, and fair AI technologies. They released their second edition in January 2020, with additional insights and learning from working closely with many of the companies.

They describe their approach as human-centric, offering four areas to consider: (1) having internal organisational governance with clear roles and responsibilities; (2) determining the right level of human involvement in AI-augmented decision making; (3) managing operations for explainability of the algorithm; and (4) communicating to stakeholders.

This offers concrete steps for companies to create supporting processes for ethically aligned technologies. It is also a huge value for the Singaporean Government to learn and iterate their governance and policy as challenges and issues arise.

In some ways it seems to be a move for policy to act more like technology itself: starting with a MVP (minimum viable product, or in this case policy), launching, testing, and iterating based on validated data.

However, some industries – like healthcare – need more scrutiny. In healthcare, the risk of a medical error potentially causing harm to a patient raises the stakes for the level of quality of technology being used. If AI systems are to help diagnose an illness or disease, they will need to be classified as a medical device which requires high rigour and potentially a clinical trial.

In the UK, many AI systems attempting to be applied in healthcare have many more rounds of clinical research to go before being utilised.

In an effort to safely speed up this process, the UK National Health Service (NHS) formed NHSX, in 2019. NHSX will lead the way in developing policy and setting standards for modern technology being supported and used by the NHS.

In the same year that it was created, NHSX published a report highlighting the many opportunities for utilising AI, but also laying out the many risks. The report also outlines a code of conduct with considerations around data sharing, privacy, transparency and efficacy of the algorithms.

Yet all of this still leaves many open questions around broader cultural implications. For example, the possibility of AI systems becoming so advanced that they eventually de-skill healthcare practitioners or other parts of the workforce. Or considerations around health inequalities or systematic racism embedded in the data being utilised for algorithms.

Many of these algorithms need more and more data, but we have to ask ourselves where does this data come from? Is it diverse enough? Does it account for things we never considered or valued before?

There may be no immediate solutions, but a way to understand the context and impact of these implications is through user research.

While the policy world may not be familiar with this type of research, the tech world uses it as their secret weapon. For companies like Amazon and IBM, user research enables them to design better services, to find opportunities of innovation, and to understand the context and impact their products and services have on people.

IBM defines the role of user research as helping to 'understand how people go about performing tasks and achieving goals that are important to us. It gives us context and perspective and puts us in a position to respond with useful, simplified, and productive design solutions.'

Connecting this to policy and the role of governance and regulation of technology itself, this could look more like ethnographic research to inform better policy decisions.

The UK Government website shares how user research can be used to design government services. And the UK Policy Lab has been using ethnographic research for many years. They describe the role of ethnographic research in policymaking as a way to 'help reframe government's understanding of its purposes and how the world in which it exists and which it shapes is changing.'

Ultimately, many of these new technologies are forcing us to ask tougher questions of ourselves. They are requiring us to look through a new lens, to have more open conversations, and to develop our emotional intelligence as we create artificial intelligence. Ethnographic research is a way to keep a pulse on the ethical and cultural implications of technology on society, and as a way to better understand the role of policy in keeping these technologies safe and fair in the midst of that.

" Applying more technology may lead to deeper inequalities or create new inequalities that in turn need new transboundary mechanisms and processes to deal with them. This is where 'thinking' on getting the balance right – in terms of how technology is used, for whose benefit, and at whose expense – becomes paramount."

Karin Fernando

The 4th Industrial Revolution and new frontiers: why think tanks should be prepared

The 4th Industrial Revolution and new frontiers: why think tanks should be prepared

BY
KARIN FERNANDO

Centre for Poverty Analysis

A couple of years back, when our research organisation in the global South started to think about the impacts of digital revolution, the topic was hardly getting any air play in our part of the world. Well, it's not that the goods and services of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) had not penetrated the market or our lives, but it had not yet entered the realm of development jargon, nor the research community. We had heard of block chains, knowledge economies and artificial intelligence, but had not really started to process what these may mean for our areas of work. But today we are much more conscious of the disruption it can cause to the job market, to education systems, and to infrastructure.

So why should think tanks care?

4IR is at the forefront of: improving economic growth and industrialisation; increasing access to social goods, such as education and health benefits; improving our efforts to combat climate change; and of course, providing us with convenience and greater leisure and entertainment options.

However, to capture the complex picture that 4IR impacts paint, and to have policy to deal with the consequences and possible disruptions, we need robust and nuanced evidence.

We are worried about the inequalities it can cause or deepen – both in terms of countries that are left behind in technology uptake, and the types of economic and social conditions that prevail, as well as in terms of technical skills among individuals.

There are also many unknowns and possible inequalities that can arise due to the lack of clear laws and guidelines on boundaries of ownership and access. For example, platforms like Uber go beyond state borders and beyond things like regular employer–employee relationships.

And while the beauty of 4IR is its algorithm, it is becoming clear that the end result doesn't 'automatically' lead to non-discrimination of certain groups (such as women or people with disabilities) when it comes to finding the most suitable candidate for a job, for example.

Applying more technology may lead to deeper inequalities or create new inequalities that in turn need new transboundary mechanisms and processes to deal with them. This is where 'thinking' on getting the balance right – in terms of how technology is used, for whose benefit, and at whose expense – becomes paramount.

Thus, think tanks, research organisations and other organisations that work on issues of inequality, sustainability, labour, education, gender and

In developing countries there is little evidence on what types of jobs will be lost, or who is at greater risk, or what may be some of the inter-related consequences. The rapidly growing body of research in the more advanced economies cannot be applied directly to the different socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of developing countries. Therefore, it is necessary to build this body of knowledge.

so on, need to factor 4IR into their work. For think tanks in particular, who seek to influence policy, it becomes necessary to build this angle into their frameworks, evidence, and analysis.

In certain contexts, dialogues on 4IR may not even exist yet, and so the first step for think tanks would be to start this conversation.

In developing countries there is little evidence on what types of jobs will be lost, or who is at greater risk, or what may be some of the inter-related consequences. The rapidly growing body of research in the more advanced economies cannot be applied directly to the different socio-economic and socio-cultural realities of developing countries. Therefore, it is necessary to build this body of knowledge.

In addition, there are efforts to build policies and tighten regulations on aspects of digitisation. However, these are being done with limited capacity, while the technology itself is changing so rapidly that it is not such an easy task with current policymaking processes. Thus, it is necessary to think about new ways to manage these processes.

Think tanks must also internalise 4IR. Think tank staff need to equip themselves with the knowledge to tackle the subject and the technology itself. This requires understanding technical aspects and merging this understanding with development or policy lenses. It can mean learning, re-skilling, and working with others. It also means making use of technology to enhance research methods. One such initiative already growing roots is big data analytics. While this type of data and analysis offers opportunities for enhanced evidence, the technology should be used with care, guidelines and ethical considerations.

Thus, there are gaps in capacity and knowledge that need to be filled. And for think tanks to stay relevant, it offers new challenges and new frontiers to explore.

" It's not enough to simply study the application of technology to improve or transform society. The leading think tanks of the 2020s will be those who are able to grasp the scope of change that new technology will bring to how they work, and then adapt accordingly."

Jonathan Tanner

Think tanks versus robots: how technology is likely to disrupt think tanks

BY
JONATHAN TANNER

*Government vs
The Robots*

'Tech' and its close cousin 'innovation' have entered buzzword territory. Debate rumbles on about whether we are headed for utopia or dystopia at the hands of ever smarter robots that threaten to eclipse or even erode humanity. It's the sort of big generational question that infiltrates popular culture, as well as public policy. As ever, when it comes to buzzwords there's useful learning to be done beneath the hype. The challenge is to separate the meaningful from the meaningless.

For think tanks this is good news. They will have a critical role to play in understanding how societies can maximise these benefits and minimise the risks across the full spectrum of public policy. At the same time, think tanks are being fundamentally challenged by the disruptive forces of technology. It's not enough to simply study the application of technology to improve or transform society. The leading think tanks of the 2020s will be those who are able to grasp the scope of change that new technology will bring to how they work, and then adapt accordingly.

Here are some ways that core think tank functions are likely to face disruption from technology in the coming years.

There is a burgeoning opportunity for new research into the implications and application of technology. In well-defined sectors, like climate change, education or health, plenty of organisations have already started looking at how technology will affect the policy space. Others like Dot Everyone, Nesta, The Alan Turing Institute and the Open Data Institute have begun to define aspects of new technology that merit greater study, such as algorithmic ethics, big data, machine learning and anticipatory regulation.

New technology will also bring new ways of conducting research. An ability to interrogate algorithms will be an essential part of understanding how the world around us is constructed. The ability to work with data will no longer just be about daunting spreadsheets and predictive modelling. It will mean spotting patterns and trends in human activity, informed by a newly minted awareness of the location, consumption and vital statistics of millions of people.

Quality of communication is integral to the impact research can have. Public discourse has been radically transformed in the age of the smartphone. The rise of post-truth politics has been well documented, but it is just one component of a new information ecosystem that will demand different skills and approaches from communicators. As personalised media consumption and pluralised media creation increase, we can expect the rise of identity politics to continue. This will require careful

Ultimately, it is the transformative potential of artificial intelligence through algorithms and machine learning that will transform society. This is likely to happen more slowly than we anticipate and in ways we are yet to imagine, but for anybody examining the future of think tanks it's an essential starting point. In the meantime, it is wise to remember that when it comes to public policy, humans – not robots – will continue to make the big calls for a while yet.

thinking about how to frame important emerging issues like equality and ethics in technology (in what is already a febrile mistrustful atmosphere).

Technology companies are already nudging us away from screens, hastening the decline of text and the ascent of audio. Furthermore, the ability of organisations to communicate directly with their audiences is growing, with livestreamed video becoming more and more prevalent on social media as internet speeds increase. If blogging was the breakout medium of the early 21st century, then podcasts and live video will claim the next decade, assisted by wearable technology like watches, glasses and in-ear headphones.

It's not just the work of think tank researchers and communicators that will change. For those concerned with think tank operations, there will be new compliance requirements as more countries adopt stricter data storage regulations. It will get much easier to create and operate think tanks with staff across different geographies using networked working and new software that eliminate administrative burdens and enhance efficiency.

In the years ahead, we can expect to hear more about all sorts of specific technologies like drones and driverless cars. Each of these poses important policy questions. But ultimately, it is the transformative potential of artificial intelligence through algorithms and machine learning that will transform society. This is likely to happen more slowly than we anticipate and in ways we are yet to imagine, but for anybody examining the future of think tanks it's an essential starting point. In the meantime, it is wise to remember that when it comes to public policy, humans – not robots – will continue to make the big calls for a while yet.

" Machines aren't going to replace think tank staff any time soon. The best algorithms can't pull meaning out of data, can't form relationships with policymakers, and can't turn research into policy recommendations. But they are way better than humans at doing the same mechanical stuff over and over."

Joe Miller and John Schwartz

On technology and monotony: automating tasks to save time, money... and your sanity

**On technology
and monotony:
automating tasks to
save time, money…
and your sanity**

BY
JOE MILLER
and
JOHN SCHWARTZ

Soapbox

At Soapbox, we pride ourselves on driving communications forward in the think tank sector. In recent years that has meant a lot of focus on digital communications – helping think tanks build better websites, leading the charge towards modular content, and helping researchers think in terms of outreach campaigns, not just research reports.

These days, we get really excited talking about things like nonlinear content, voice search, and decoupled content management systems.

It's cool stuff!

The Next Big Thing comes at us so fast, and it's so easy to get caught up in all the new things technology allows us to do, that we forget about one of the most important advantages technology offers: *the ability to do old things better.*

A recent conversation captures this sentiment nicely. While lamenting some web publishing processes, a client quipped, 'I didn't go to university to cut and paste!'

Ever since, we've been trying really hard not to think about how much of our professional careers have been spent cutting and pasting.

OVERCOMING REPETITIVE TASKS: A CASE STUDY

Our work with the International Budget Partnership (IBP) is a textbook example of using technology to produce existing products more efficiently.

Every two years, IBP produces the Open Budget Survey, 'the only independent, comparative, and fact-based assessment of government budget accountability'. This year, 117 countries were included in the survey. The new edition, which we designed and built, will be published in April 2020.

IBP analysts compile and carefully review detailed responses from almost 300 researchers worldwide, feed their analysis into some complex algorithms, and derive a set of scores for each surveyed country. IBP then produces a summary for each country, along with a longer report that explores global trends.

Summary data includes document scores, charts examining scores over time and across countries, as well as narrative descriptions and recommendations. The narrative descriptions and recommendations are nearly all data-driven – if a country scores between 0 and 40 on ranking A, then insert recommendations A and B; if it scores between 41 and 80,

then insert recommendations C and D; if it scores between 81 and 100, then insert no recommendations.

The old way of doing things

Last time round, IBP used Word templates and Excel spreadsheets to create each summary individually. The spreadsheet provided the relevant scores, and the Word template explained which text to include based on those scores. Each Word document was then pulled into Adobe InDesign to create a PDF version for print. The Word document was also pulled into the content management system to create a digital version.

You can imagine the amount of effort required. And you can also imagine the consternation if the text of a recommendation needed to change. It meant searching all the Word documents to find all instances of the recommendation, making the change, then uploading all instances of the change individually to InDesign and the website.

A better way

Phew!

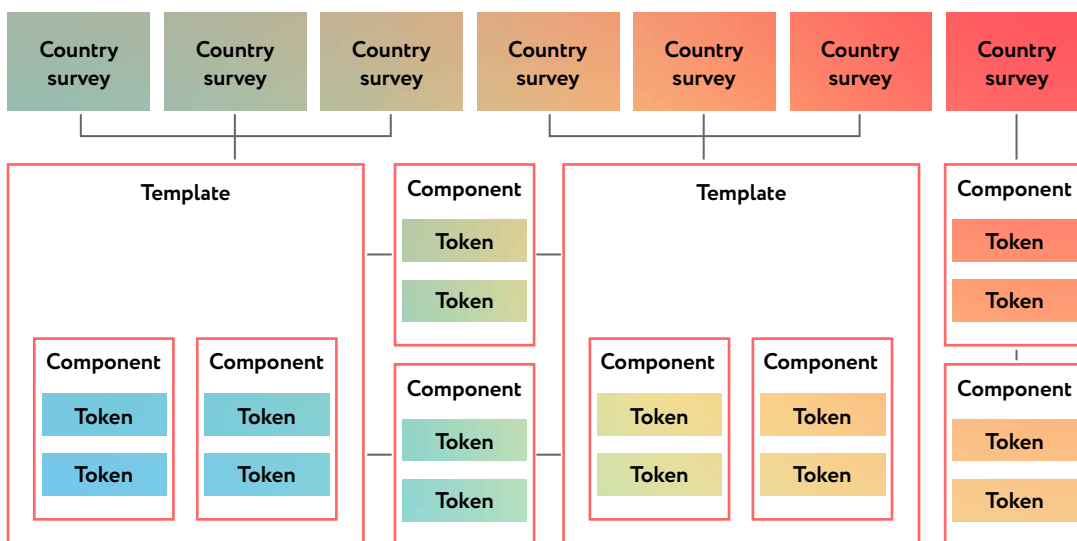We worked with IBP to automate most of the country summary process.

We began by creating a templating system inside a new content management system. It begins by importing the Excel sheet directly into IBP's content management system.

The system has several layers.

At the lowest layer is a set of 'tokens.' Tokens work much the same way as variables do in an equation. Some tokens are simple, for example the

name of a country. But tokens can also be quite complex, spitting out different pieces of text based upon meeting certain conditions.

For example, IBP can define a token that inserts the word 'inadequate' if a score is below 40, 'insufficient' if a score is between 41 and 60, 'sufficient' if a score is between 61 and 80, and 'excellent' if a score is between 81 and 100.

At the second layer are components. These can be static text or combinations of static text and tokens.

For example, a sentence reading 'Wakanda's transparency score of 57 is substantially higher than its score in 2017' would be a component consisting of static text plus two simple tokens ('Wakanda' and the number 57) plus a complex token (the words 'substantially higher', which is calculated based on the score).

At the top layer is a template. A template is a collection of components. A full template will display a complete country summary.

There are additional layers of flexibility built in. In IBP's specific case, there are some sets of countries that need significantly different components, even though they still share some common elements. So, their system allows for the use of common components that are shared across templates along with template-specific components.

Once the templates are built, IBP can upload the Excel sheet containing all the country data (the same sheet they used to use with Word documents). The content management system will then create all 117 country summaries, automatically selecting the correct text based on the specified values. If IBP needs to change a recommendation later on, they simply change it in the component and it immediately propagates to every summary that uses that component.

A page-to-PDF functionality then produces printable versions of each summary directly from the online version.

The results

The site uploads a new spreadsheet and populates all countries in a matter of seconds.

Previously, IBP staff needed an hour or more to create each summary. Staff also spent somewhere between 30 minutes to an hour uploading web versions of the country summaries. Conservatively, that's close to

4.5 weeks of staff time saved, and that's before considering the hundreds of collective hours spent editing and revising both Word and InDesign files. In addition, IBP paid an external designer to create the InDesign versions of each summary.

Now, using a third-party processing tool, the content management system generates all 117 country summary PDFs in around five minutes. The cost of those five minutes of processing time is around one US dollar.

IF A TASK IS REPETITIVE, A MACHINE PROBABLY DOES IT BETTER

It may sound a bit like a cliché, but for think tanks, your people are your best – and scarcest – resource. There's a finite number of things a team can accomplish. Every hour we spend cutting and pasting is one that is not spent conducting new analysis or meeting with a policymaker or creating a new infographic or speaking to a reporter.

Machines aren't going to replace think tank staff any time soon. The best algorithms can't pull meaning out of data, can't form relationships with policymakers, and can't turn research into policy recommendations. But they are way better than humans at doing the same mechanical stuff over and over.

Of course, building systems that automate repetitive tasks and training people to use those systems requires an investment of both time and money. But once created, these systems will remain in place, saving time and money for years to come.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR THINK TANK COMMUNICATIONS?

Do any of these sound familiar?

- We'd love to do more targeted outreach, but no one has had the time to investigate/build/learn our customer relationship management software.
- [Current event] was a perfect opportunity to write an op-ed about our latest research, but we didn't have anyone available to write it in time.
- We started a podcast/video series/event series, but [staffer] left and no one else had the capacity to keep it going.
- We rotate our Twitter account between the whole team, but most days we're too busy putting out fires to really post anything.

The Internet has opened up a thousand new ways to communicate with people. Unfortunately, the one thing it hasn't done (at least so far) is clone

staff. So, we're left with the same number of people trying to do ten times as many things.

The trouble is that we're often doing those old tasks in the same way we've always done them. We think about all the new avenues technology opens up, but don't always give much consideration to the ways that it can make the old things far more efficient.

Producing the right content for the right people at the right time requires talented, creative people. Those people are already sitting in your offices.

They shouldn't be spending their days cutting and pasting.

" You might have heard that algorithms and bots learn to chat by looking at human conversations. And that's correct. I'd like to turn that idea around and ask: what can we learn from bots about human conversation? "

Sonia Jalfin

Want to chat? What bots can teach think tanks about connecting with the public

Hey there [your name]. How are you doing?

…

Would you like to read this piece on bots and thinks tanks, or would you rather look at this <u>incredible video of a train passing through a market in Bangkok?</u>

…

Articles that 'chat' like this one are not the norm. But <u>they do already exist</u>, built with simple coding. What remains to be seen is whether our social skills have evolved at the same speed. Are we ready to present our ideas in a conversational manner?

Conversation is one of the most powerful human experiences. A great conversation can change the course of a project, a relationship, or even a life. That is why recreating the experience when we talk to our think tank audiences is so promising.

You might have heard that algorithms and bots learn to chat by looking at human conversations. And that's correct. However, I'd like to turn that idea around and ask: what can *we* learn from bots about human conversation?

AMBIGUITY, SUSPENSE AND REASSURANCE

Last year I met Emily Withrow, who was Director of <u>Quartz Bot Studio</u> at the time. She told me that while creating conversational bots to bring journalists and readers together, her team discovered what they called *ambiguous emojis.*

When bots don't know how to respond to a reader's question (sound familiar?) ambiguous emojis come to the rescue.

For example, if a user says to the bot: 'You seem quite silly', it can reply with the 'doing nails' emoji.

💅

It's a way of saying, 'I don't care if you bully me, it won't affect me'.

Now if another user says: 'Bot, you are a genius', it can reply with the same emoji.

Suspense is a central part of conversation on chat apps. The famous three dots … waiting … we know a message is in the making. When we build bots for think tanks, we always add those three dots before sending the bot's responses – even though computers can reply immediately. The three dots create the illusion of a conversation with a human being.

But in this case, it will look like, 'Yes, I'm super, and I know it!'

Ambiguity is a human tool. A fantastic narrative mechanism. Pure suspense. Sometimes we don't quite understand what someone is trying to say to us, and that keeps us wondering, it may even keep us awake at night.

Suspense is a central part of conversation on chat apps. The famous three dots … waiting … we know a message is in the making. When we build bots for think tanks, we always add those three dots before sending the bot's responses – even though computers can reply immediately. The three dots create the illusion of a conversation with a human being.

The three dots are also a reassurance that some entity – natural or artificial – is really on the other end of the line. The equivalent of looking at the other person over the table in a meeting or asking 'are you there?' over the phone when we hear that suspicious silence.

Human to human communication also badly needs those reassurances – the confirmation that we are being heard. When Google presented a prototype of its virtual assistant, it showed a conversation between the bot and the receptionist at a beauty salon. The moment the audience celebrated most was not when the bot sorted out the best slot in the agenda for a haircut appointment, or when it understood the subtle difference between pedicure and nail repair. It was when the bot said 'mmm' to indicate to the receptionist that it was listening to her.

How many think tanks know how to say *mmm* to their audience to let them know they are listening?

USING BOTS TO TALK TO THINK TANK AUDIENCES

At Sociopublico, a communications studio for complex ideas in Argentina, we have been testing bots as a tool to reach the public. We are looking for new ways to say *mmm* to people, in the hope that it can help them stay connected with our messages longer, at a time of attention scarcity.

We have built three bots: one to 'test yourself as the Economy Minister of Argentina' (only in Spanish, English speakers might use the restriction

to quickly run away); another one with Google to help users spot misinformation (English version coming soon); and a final one with Cippec, PwC and Brookings on the future of politics, to guide users in the quest to learn how politics will look like in 2050 for you.

What have we learned about humans by building these bots?

1. WE CAN CHAT FOR A LONGER TIME

Audience analytics tell us that people stayed three to five minutes talking to the bots, something very difficult to achieve with plain text or video infiltrating our audience's social media feed.

When we are chatting, we tend to stay. Conversations (with bot or human alike) keep us in the moment, encourage us to keep on participating.

2. WE WANT TO GO DEEPER

In beta testing, users asked us for more complexity and detail in the information the bot provided during the conversation, or when offering its final findings. It was like heaven for us knowledge communicators.

We tried really hard to keep the experiences short and simple, even though working with complex content. And here were users demanding more detailed and sophisticated messages.

That seems like another advantage to conversation – once people have allocated time to the experience, they find space to dig deeper.

In the project on the future of politics, that feedback led us to build an extra product: a scrollytelling to explain the fundamentals of the paper behind the bot, linked to the different results the bot offers.

3. WE LIKE WINKS OF COMPLICITY

Conversations allow us to build complicity with the audience by using a traditional communications tool: good copy.

For example, our bot on the future of politics asks users where are they from. If you say Rio de Janeiro it will reply:

Rio de Janeiro? Lovely in the summer.

But if you say London it will equally say: *London? Lovely in the summer.*

We expect users to notice that no matter their reply the bot would say the same, and to smile a little at our subtle mocking of the inflexibility of bots.

The bot on the Argentine economy lets you select an avatar. If you choose 'gatite', the whole conversation will use gender neutral language, without announcing it.

These are simple and superficial winks, but they can help connect with the intelligence and the sensibility of others.

BEFORE LEAVING THE (CHAT) ROOM

Bots seem to be helping us to share more time, detailed content and complicity with our audiences. These are features we expected from a good conversation, but bots have allowed as to corroborate them, to measure their effect and to use them beyond one-on-one conversation.

In the meantime, a final tip learned from this: the next time someone ask you for something difficult, you can just reply 💅.

" Think tanks operate in specific contexts and respond to diverse social demands. For example, think tanks in developing countries face challenges like weak political institutions, public policies that often lack a comprehensive outlook, underfunded science and technology systems, and low public support for local knowledge and technology production.

Technological change too shapes the challenges think tanks face, as well as opportunities to respond to them."

Giancarlo Roach Rivas

How think tanks in developing countries can embrace technological change

How think tanks in developing countries can embrace technological change

BY
GIANCARLO ROACH
RIVAS

*Panama's National
Secretariat of
Science, Technology
and Innovation*

Think tanks are a special kind of organisation that aim to produce knowledge to transform society. Knowledge is a public good – like health and clean air – that can be produced in science labs, classrooms, grassroots organisations or businesses. Although knowledge is perceived as abstract and intangible, it is ever present. Only with knowledge it is possible to use water streams to produce electricity or to learn about the human body to treat and prevent diseases or to understand how societies were in the past, how they work today, and how they could be in the future.

Think tanks work with society to understand these socioeconomic processes, as well as the culture, values and public policies that sustain them. And when these processes have a negative impact on development, think tanks produce new knowledge, gather the best evidence available, and work with different actors to foster change.

The role that think tanks play in fostering change is key, but is often neglected in science and technology systems: they link knowledge, policy and society. For this reason, Panama's National Secretariat of Science, Technology and Innovation (SENACYT) is supporting organisational change in local think tanks.

Nonetheless, think tanks are not alone in their endeavor. Think tanks operate in specific contexts and respond to diverse social demands. For example, think tanks in developing countries face challenges like weak political institutions, public policies that often lack a comprehensive outlook, underfunded science and technology systems, and low public support for local knowledge and technology production.

Technological change too shapes the challenges think tanks face, as well as opportunities to respond to them.

In Panama, CIEdu, a research-based education policy think tank, and CIHH, an engineering-based water policy think tank, have revamped their web presence in order to reach new audiences online. Furthermore, FUDIS, a local NGO that links community-based organisations with international best practices, and CIRN, a multidisciplinary research center that focuses on sustainable development, are creating digital platforms to link citizens and scientists. New technologies are changing how think tanks interact with their constituents, and how they produce and manage new knowledge.

Technological change is also influencing socioeconomic processes. New technologies, like artificial intelligence, 3D printing and the Internet of Things, are changing how goods and services are produced, distributed and consumed. Moreover, rapid technological change is also shaping how

students learn, citizens vote, or doctors heal. Indeed, new technologies are triggering deep cultural changes.

Accordingly, research agendas should be flexible enough to respond to short term demands but strategic enough to anticipate issues and unearth important trends. Think tanks should question if they can strike this balance.

On the other hand, funders should also question how think tanks are evaluated and funded. Knowledge producers and brokers should be evaluated on their contribution to long-term outcomes not only on their short-term outputs. And funding should be provided accordingly.

Of course, this is more easily said than done. However, these are exactly the challenges that technological change is inducing. I believe that think tanks can embrace technological change by highlighting these contradictions in current funding practices and leading the charge in thinking about the future, with a foot in the present.

BY
TEKI AKUETTEH
FALCONER

Africa Digital Rights' Hub

As a technology enthusiast, I am an ardent believer that Africa's socio-economic development is firmly linked to her technological development, growth and advancement. And the opportunity to work for the Government of Ghana under its Information and Communications Technologies for Accelerated Development Policy (ICT4AD) came with a lot of excitement. But after more than a decade working on law and policy related to information and communications technologies, I soon realised that the ideal was far from the reality.

Policy has been playing catchup to technology for a long time, limiting policymakers' ability to use or harness them for socioeconomic development. This is certainly true in Africa. With a rising consumer market, some of the fastest growing economies, the richest concentration of natural resources, a young population with a growing labor force (in an aging world) and a rapidly changing technology landscape, policy interventions that utilise technologies to accelerate growth in development is snail paced.

I began to question whether there were other impactful ways of driving the development, growth and use of technologies beyond governments.

It soon became obvious: a think tank. I set up the Africa Digital Rights' Hub to step up the research and advocacy drive for policy implementation and development around digital technologies.

Here I present five reasons why think tanks can be a strategic resource towards Africa's technological growth and advancement.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND POLICY

Policymakers and technologists are usually seen as speaking at cross-purposes. Think tanks have the ability to rally around the table both parties to discuss issues of common interest. These common issues become the central point to creating the balance needed to facilitate policy development and growth.

Think tanks have the potential to present a neutral view, usually informed by research. It has the ability to convene and promote informed dialogue, drawing from the pool of experts from across various divides as a result of its neutral inclination. Think tanks, therefore, can become a trusted voice in potential conflict between technology and policy.

For instance, the Africa Digital Rights' Hub, under its Data Protection Africa Summit Focus Group discussions, has been able to facilitate dialogue between industry, policymakers, regulators, academia and civil

society organisations around issues of data localisation/sovereignty and harmonisation of data protection laws in Africa.

PROVIDING RESOURCES AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

One of the challenges to the development and growth of technologies in Africa is that while public institutions have this mandate, little or no resources are provided to implement it. They cannot afford to hire experts and undertake the comprehensive research needed to make informed policy decisions.

A think tank, however, is in a much better position to access resources and conduct independent research to support decision making in the relevant institutions.

Africa Digital Rights' Hub, though a small think tank, is able to draw on the voluntary support of various experts for its projects and activities enabling her make informed inputs on technological issues in Africa.

MOVING QUICKLY

Government structures, procedures and processes are highly bureaucratic, meaning that policy implementation in the technology space takes an unusually long time. There are many instances where, at the time of adoption and implementation of policies, the technologies have changed.

This leads to bureaucratic institutions working with obsolete frameworks, and/or having to commence another long and expensive process to change or adopt new policies. For example, Ghana has been discussing the review of its ICT4AD policy (2003) for several years, it has clearly been overtaken by technology in that time.

Uninhibited by governmental bureaucratic constraints, think tanks can be great government partners, minimising bottlenecks, being a sounding board, and undertaking comprehensive research that keeps up with fast-paced nature of technological advancements.

NON-PARTISAN THINK TANKS

Africa's growing multi-party democracy and political ecosystem can be said to be counterintuitive to technolo¬gical growth and development. This is due to the politicisation of public institutions meant to facilitate growth and development.

Political cycles and changes in government has resulted in short term outlooks and politicisation that undermine the institutional stability, consistency and continuity necessary for technological growth and development.

The result is that instead of building on pre-existing bodies, knowledge and expertise, governments are more likely to create new units or institutions staffed by loyalists, with little or no knowledge and expertise having to play catch-up. Civil and public servants who remain in post are incapacitated due to the fear of being witch-hunted.

The non-partisan nature of a think tank, however, endears it to all sides of the political divide, giving it the opportunity to advocate for the right, *evidence-informed* policy interventions.

FACILITATING FASTER AND MORE IMPACTFUL CHANGE

Think tanks have access to the necessary resources, can harness multi-stakeholder interest, generate by-in, and drive implementation of identified technology agendas.

For instance, as a think tank working on data protection and privacy in Africa, in the last two years, the Africa Digital Rights' Hub has driven an agenda of ensuring data protection in the development and use of digital IDs. It has led discussions, got stakeholder buy-in and published a Data Protection Code of Practice for Digital IDs in Africa. In the last year, Africa has seen an increase in similar discussion from key industry, local and international platforms.

Think tanks' ability to drive policy on technology cannot be underestimated. For Africa it is a strategic part of the drive to attain socioeconomic development through technological growth and development. It is therefore critical that think tanks recognise their role in the ecosystem and intensify their drive for technological development on the continent.

Artificial intelligence
and Russian
propaganda: it's
not what it looks like

BY
DAVID SICHINAVA
and
DUSTIN GILBREATH

*Caucasus Research
Resource Center
Georgia*

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Think tanks and technology
Best practice

In the think tank world, talk about artificial intelligence (AI) is common. Using it is less common. One of the underlying causes of this may be a perceived lack of familiarity with the methods. However, AI methods – including machine learning – are probably more familiar to many thinktankers than they realise. The Russian Propaganda Barometer project, recently conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center Georgia (CRRC-Georgia), demonstrates the potential of these tools for policy insight – particularly relating to discourse analysis, and developing targeting strategies.

AI AND MACHINE LEARNING ARE MORE FAMILIAR THAN THINKTANKERS THINK

To say that AI in general, and machine learning algorithms specifically, is a dramatically changing industry would be an understatement. From optimising electricity usage in factories to deciding which advertisement to show you online, algorithms are in use all around us. In fact, algorithms have been shaping the world around us for decades.

The think tank and social science worlds are no exceptions to this. Indeed, most policy researchers will be familiar with, if not users of, algorithms like regression. Notably, this is a common tool in the machine learning world as well as social science research.

Hopefully, knowing that regression is part of the machine learning toolbox will make it clear that machine learning is less foreign than many thinktankers may think.

While regression is one method in the machine learning toolbox, there are others. Although these methods are not new, this larger toolbox has only become commonly used in recent years as big data sets have become more available.

For many products and problems, machine learning solutions might be improvements on existing think tank practices. This is particularly true when it comes to developing a targeting strategy for programming, monitoring, or anything that focuses on understanding discourses.

THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA BAROMETER PROJECT

CRRC Georgia implemented the Russian Propaganda Barometer project, funded by USAID through the East West Management Institute, in 2018–2019. The project aimed to understand and monitor sources of Russian propaganda in Georgia, and to identify who was more or less likely to be vulnerable to the propaganda.

CRRC took all the potential sources of Russian propaganda (in Georgian) on public Facebook pages. These pages had been identified by two other organisations that were also working on the issue. CRRC identified further pages that were missing from the two organisations' lists. These posts were then analysed using natural language processing tools such as sentiment analysis. Network analysis was also conducted to understand the interlinkages between different sources.

One of the key insights from the project is that most of the identified sources of propaganda were in fact from far right organisations. However, an analysis of how they talked about the West and Russia suggests that most actually have more negative attitudes towards Russia than the West.

The analysis also called attention to the sharp rise in interest in the far right in Georgia. The number of interactions with far-right pages had increased by roughly 800% since 2015. While overall increasing internet use in the country likely contributed to this, it seems unlikely to be the only cause of the rise.

The results were presented in this dashboard, as well as a more traditional report. The dashboard enables users to see what the far right is talking about on a daily basis and networks between different groups, among other metrics.

The project also aimed to inform a targeting strategy on countering anti–Western propaganda. To do so, we merged data from approximately 30 waves of CRRC and National Democratic Institute surveys that asked about a variety of preferences.

From there, a 'k-nearest neighbours' algorithm was used to identify which groups had uncertain or inchoate foreign policy preferences. The algorithm identifies how similar people are, based on the variables included. This led to an algorithm that provided accurate predictions about two thirds of the time as to whether someone would be more or less likely to be influenced by Russian propaganda. Further research showed that the algorithm was stable in predicting whether someone was at risk of being influenced, using data that did not exist at the time of the algorithm's creation.

The data analysis, while cutting edge in many respects, is not beyond the means of many quantitative researchers. Neither of us have MAs or PhDs in statistics: David is a geographer and Dustin is a political scientist.

While the Russian Propaganda Barometer addressed the research goals, we'd like to highlight that AI is no panacea. For the project's success, we combined traditional think tank analysis of the situation in Georgia with AI to generate new insights.

The Russian Propaganda Barometer project is just one type of application of machine learning to policy research. There is good reason to believe more and more policy researchers will use these methods given their ubiquity in the modern world, together with the increasing availability of the large datasets needed to study these issues. We hope that this project can serve as food for thought for others in service of this goal.

The views presented in this article do not reflect the views of East West Management Institute, USAID, or any related entity.

Technology for society: the forgotten principles

BY
ASHISH SRIVASTAVA

Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy

Think tanks and technology
Best practice

'Technology for society' is an oversimplified concept. Everything from analysis reports, dashboards, and command centres to self-service websites are put forward as the holy grails of e-governance. Governments are demanding more and more digitisation and technology companies are fulfilling this demand with matching enthusiasm. On the face of it, everything seems alright. So why am I complaining?

Well, more often than not, there is a missing link in the design of these applications: the citizen. We get so wrapped up in the governance and policy implications of a technology solution that the needs of a poor person or that of a grassroots fieldworker are ignored.

Here, think tanks can play the role of a mediator, critic and facilitator, by exploring technology beyond the designer's tunnel vision to look at the big picture.

As it happens, there are some principles that can be of immediate help to do this – although most of them are barely discussed beyond academia.

For instance, in the field of science and technology studies (STS), a fundamental concept that must be used under all circumstances is the avoidance of 'technology determinism'. Any social scientist who pursues STS will emphasise that a technology solution imposed from the top, irrespective of good intentions, is destined to fail.

Social science provides several alternative frameworks to understand the social implications of technology much better. For example, Social Construction of Technology Theory emphasises the fact that all technology is socially constructed. Actor-Network Theory allows an understanding of the agencies involved in the use of technology much better.

Sadly, these social frameworks are seldom applied before a technology-related decision is taken.

As an example, enforcing the use of a mobile app by a grassroots health provider to improve efficiency in health services is a technology-deterministic approach as it imposes technology without understanding the needs of the user. Its success is dubious. On the other hand, assuming that a mobile app can contribute to efficiency if combined with process and policy improvements, is a social approach. There have been well quoted failures of technology deterministic initiatives like the 'one laptop per child' initiative.

Social problems are complex, and more often than not, there is no simple policy or technology solution that comes close to addressing them. In the

1970s, Rittel and Weber proposed the concept of 'Wicked Problems' — complex social and policy issues typically found in health, agriculture, and gender issues. There is no good way to tackle these seemingly impossible problems, yet, the 'Wicked Problem' framework does help to understand them better.

In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on 'systems approaches' that are most suited for technology solution implementation in the context of complex problems. In systems terms, such problems are often called 'Messy Problems.' A systems thinking approach focuses on the individuals, as well as the big picture, in an effort to ensure that the solution addresses 'real' issues, ordinary citizens and the grassroots workers.

The Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP) has successfully utilised a bundle of tools like this to manage the complex problems of health and malnutrition of children and women. One example is an integrated tech platform called Solution for Nutrition and Effective Health Access (SNEHA), designed to collate data on health, nutrition and other parameters for service delivery programmes aimed at improving outcomes for mothers and children, that is being piloted in Karnataka.

The tools, concepts and frameworks mentioned in this article are just some among many that can be used. Many other frameworks like 'inclusive design' and 'design ethnography' also go a long way in ensuring that the solution has addressed issues on the ground.

Think tanks may not necessarily be the creators of the technology–based tools and solutions. But they often have a voice of influence with governments and other stakeholders. Using a structured framework to understand the problems and implications of the technology can benefit society.

BY
JENNY LAH

Independent consultant

Information, a community, and connections may have once been enough to keep network members engaged (and possibly paying dues). But now people can get these things through social media and other technology-facilitated platforms and tools. Networks face more competition. Potential members can shop around, join with minimal commitment until they see that it's worth their time (and possibly money). As a result, I'd wager that networks and informal groups have a much shorter life cycle than in the past.

To survive, it's not enough for networks – and especially those dependent on dues – to change just once to this new context. They not only must understand their members, but also develop the capacity to monitor a faster-evolving environment and adapt. And some may have to change their business models completely, including finding other ways to fund activities.

Here I present some of my top observations about how technology is impacting networks. This is based on about 20 networks that I've worked with or studied as a funder, consultant, or investigator. I'm also drawing on my experience as a member of five networks, as well as talking to many members, network staff, and observers about these issues. Some of these changes vary across geographies or sectors, but given the increase in internet access and the fast uptake of social media, any regional or global network may face these issues soon… even if not now.

First, these days anyone can start an online group network. Low-cost networks and loosely-organised groups can easily use technology to supply tailored information, build community, facilitate collaboration, and amplify shared values. Even more formal research networks can be built around a robust listserv, like the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network. Many thinktankers are likely members of multiple issue networks on Facebook, LinkedIn, email groups, and other platforms. Members may be faster to join these groups, but also to exit or go quiet than to use voice (using Albert Hirschman's term). With functions like information sharing covered by others, membership network can take a positive view and specialise more or try creative approaches (more on this below).

Second, existing networks may see other players entering their space and seeking partnerships. As networks seek relevance, some seek to

expand their geographical coverage, membership, or influence. With more overlaps, more strategic partnerships or even mergers may be warranted – and this is enabled by technology. In an OTT webinar on global think tank networks, Adanna Shallowe from the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) talked about how RSA formed a group for strategically-aligned institutions from several countries to 'have a common voice'. And in the NGO world, InsideNGO, LINGOs, and Mango merged to form Humentum, with 330 organisational members serving the operations and finance staff of nonprofits. The merger not only helped reduce costs through economies of scale but also enhanced its global reach.

Third, technology can offer new opportunities and make change easier. Many network leaders see technology as offering more options for what they can do. Networks can recruit new types of members that were harder to reach in the past, allow them to enter new types of partnership, engage with their members in more creative ways, and consider new kinds of advocacy. For example, the think tank network Southern Voice is amplifying its members' research at the global level through social media, its email newsletter, website, and online media partnerships. It is also extending the reach of its members' policy influence through global networking and events. And in 2019, Independent Sector (a US-based network of NGOs, private foundations, and corporations that meets at an annual conference) launched a new way of working called Upswell. The network rebranded itself 'as a community, not a conference', holding a series of community-based events, prototyping of solutions, and online dialogues, as well as an annual conference.

Fourth, some networks are under more pressure to change than others. Networks dependent on membership dues need to respond to these developments now, while networks with external funding, high-level policy access, or other specific advantages may not feel much pressure. In general, membership networks should pay attention to technology for communications, recruitment, partnerships, and other key functions, including ways to reduce costs. With all the competition, they should consider ending work on saturated areas and finding where they offer the most value. Technology may also lead to changes in business models: for example, some fee-for-service activities like hosting job postings may no longer be possible, while other services like training may have an expanded market.

Finally, networks need to think about how to stay relevant. Network leaders should be ready to adapt, recognising that technology is fundamentally changing how networks work, and will continue to do so. Members and potential members have less time and money than ever, with more demands from other networks. Staying relevant may mean giving

members something unique, expanding the membership base, finding a niche, or getting creative. And for those reliant on member funding, finding ways to reduce costs may be essential. On the positive side, many organisations and people still want what networks offer, such as person-to-person connections, cross-sector collaboration, and a shared identity. Understanding those and how they are changing, and providing them, will be key to network longevity and health.

ABOUT OTT CONSULTING

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

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

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

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

BY
CAROLINA KERN

On Think Tanks

Executive directors of civil society organisations deal with a whole host of strategic, operational and contextual challenges. These include fundraising, managing board dynamics, recruiting or firing staff, shrinking civic space and burnout, to name a few.

But these issues are often hard to seek advice on, be it from colleagues working within their organisation or those working for like-minded ones. The reasons for this vary but include: embarrassment or the feeling that as a leader you 'should know it all'; power and gender dynamics; and limited organisational experience with the particular issue at hand. Lack of time is another contributing factor that prevents reflection, recuperation and the seeking out of new insights.

What is more, few civil society leaders have prepared themselves for the challenges of the job. Nor are their organisations capable of providing them with the necessary support. Executive directors have often found themselves 'unexpectedly promoted' into a leadership position, with little or no relevant training. As a result, leaders of civil society organisations end up going it alone or having to 'muddle through' very tricky situations.

In recognition of this, the Open Society Foundation and the Transparency and Accountability Initiative approached OTT Consulting to help design an executive director's 'retreat' to help address the common needs of their grantees. Our brief was simple: create spaces for peers to share experiences and support each other in the pursuit of their missions. To give the event a focus, we targeted organisations working only on transparency and accountability issues, but participation was global and brought leaders from South America, Africa and Europe together.

We drew on our own experience of developing world class leadership conferences and training. What that meant in practice is that we did our homework. Instead of trying to guess what these executive directors might need, we asked them through semi-structured interviews and more formal online surveys many months before the event.

The day before the retreat, which took place away from the usual urban centre on the shores of Lake Naivasha in Kenya, we asked participants to co-create the different sessions based on their expressed challenges and needs. This was an unconventional approach because nothing could be 'fully planned' in advance.

'Everything, from recruiting and retaining staff to fundraising and managing boards, was on the table,' explained Enrique Mendizabal, who facilitated the event. 'Every single topic was suggested by participants,' he added.

Through light but strategic facilitation from the OTT team, and using a set of tried and tested session formats – from standard plenary to personal reflection sessions and focused peer-assist workshops – the retreat was very well received by the 20 participants who attended. We also put a strong focus on summarising the previous day's discussion through 'daily news' briefings.

 'This feels like a safe space. Peers more instinctively understand the nature of the challenges they face, which makes it easier to discuss common problem and come up with workable solutions,' said one of the retreat participants.

One of the main action points stemming from the retreat was to stay connected and share resources to tackle common problems. To facilitate this, participants have set up and are maintaining a resource library, with sub-folders to address specific issues. Plans are also underway for a second retreat in 2020, though its shape, location and composition remain under discussion.

We hope to use this event design with other clients going forward.

**Evaluation of IDRC's
strategy to scale
research results**

BY
SIMON HEARN

On Think Tanks

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada supports research for development. Its primary concern is to make a positive difference in people's lives. It does this through providing resources, advice and training to leading thinkers who advance knowledge and solve practical development problems.

IDRC's 2015-2020 strategy captured their commitment to research for development through the idea of scale. The first strategic objective was to 'invest in knowledge and innovation for large-scale positive change.' Over the five-year period IDRC has been on a 'scaling journey' as senior leadership, programmes and projects have grappled with notions of scale and adjusted how they plan, implement and monitor interventions.

As IDRC moves into a new ten-year strategic period this year, it remains committed to generating, identifying and testing scalable ideas and innovations. At this transition period, IDRC's leadership wants to better understand this scaling journey in order to draw lessons for future work. IDRC commissioned On Think Tanks (OTT), in partnership with Southern Hemisphere, to undertake an evaluation of IDRC's strategy to scale research results. The evaluation purpose is to assess IDRC's implementation of its strategic objective on scaling and what it achieved by those efforts.

The evaluation also aims to facilitate learning about critical factors that have helped or hindered these efforts, to improve future IDRC corporate, programme and project-level strategies, and to share and reflect with the global research community interested in this emerging field of work.
OTT was drawn to this opportunity for a number of reasons. Scaling is a challenge that many funding agencies are grappling with, and this evaluation allows us to dive deep into this fascinating topic and learn alongside some of the foremost thinkers on how to scale the impact of research for development.

The team assembled by OTT brings a substantial amount of experience on related topics such as evaluating research uptake, understanding the interfaces between knowledge, policy and practice, and assessing the political economy of knowledge production and use. We have drawn on these skills to design a multi-component, mixed-method evaluation that brings together conventional approaches and cutting-edge methods. The core of the design is a set of carefully selected case studies in which we use Outcome Harvesting to assess results at organisation, programme and project level.

Having worked with IDRC before, we appreciate the commitment they have to their mission and it's great to work with such dedicated staff who think deeply about the fields they work in and how they engage with them.

In particular, IDRC brings a fresh developmental perspective to the discussion on scaling, emphasising that bigger isn't always better, and that what matters is achieving impacts at optimal scale, not so much on scaling innovations, policies or programmes. The principles presented in their book, *Scaling Impact*, are a significant contribution to the field and it is exciting to be able to apply these principles in the evaluation and build on them.

Finally, the evaluation is rather unique in that IDRC was looking for a highly engaged evaluation team who understands how to communicate through the process of the evaluation to support greater use of the findings. This matched OTT's way of working and we're excited to integrate a communications and engagement strategy into the evaluation design–something which is often left until the end when you have a final report to promote.

The evaluation will be conducted from December 2019 to December 2020. The team involves several OTT associates and specialists from Southern Hemisphere, an evaluation consultancy based in Cape Town and a long–time OTT partner.

BY
ENRIQUE
MENDIZABAL

On Think Tanks

The American Institute of Physics (AIP) is a federation of physical science societies. Its mission is to advance, promote, and serve the physical sciences for the benefit of humanity. OTT Consulting began working with AIP in April 2019, to explore cases of its work from around the world and recommend how it could play a greater 'thought leadership' role in the field of physical sciences.

This was a truly enjoyable and insightful experience for us. Firstly, we enjoyed learning about the similarities and differences between the physical and social sciences (we as a team are far more familiar with the latter). But mostly, the project exposed us to a growing number of initiatives that are joining the 'world of ideas' commonly inhabited by think tanks and public intellectuals – everything from TED-like festivals to corporate-sponsored initiatives and individual influencers. Making use of the same resources (knowledge and ideas) that hitherto had been think tanks' best kept secret these, often better funded, initiatives are rapidly creating a new persona: the thought leader.

Now, while thought leadership may be an attractive label for the contributions that AIP wished to make, we found that the old school concept of public intellectual seemed more appropriate. Public intellectuals are concerned with the public good and promoting ideas on its behalf. Thought leaders, on the other hand, are more concerned with promoting their personal influence, interests and initiatives.

Think tanks and institutions like AIP have an essential role to play in developing the capacity of future public intellectuals to perfect their evidence-based analytical, communication and argumentative skills for public good. AIP plays several roles in this respect: it supports its federation members to serve their own individual members, it studies and champions good practice in promoting physical sciences, and it pursues long-term objectives for the benefit of the field and society.

AIP's long-term work on the study and promotion of diversity and inclusion in the physical sciences is a testament to this. An investment that sustains these initiatives in a manner that integrates multiple voices, and that addresses complex challenges through strategies that bring together several interconnected plans, doesn't just require the fancy new communications tactics of these new initiatives and influencers. It requires a thoughtful reflection on how the entire organisation can contribute to the generation, communication and use of evidence-based ideas. It requires the organisation to see itself as more than the sum of its parts.

And this is what our work with AIP turned out to be: a reflection on how an almost 90-year-old organisation had to evolve to strengthen its own relevance in the future.

ABOUT

OTT

On Think Tanks (OTT) is a platform designed to provide research, ideas and advice to think tanks around the world. Founded in 2010, OTT has dedicated itself to promoting the use of evidence in policymaking.

We do this by encouraging thinktankers from different contexts to participate in an active debate around the use of evidence in policy. We support think tanks, their funders and stakeholders, to inform policy and strengthen policy research systems. We work with all actors in the policy research system to strengthen their capacity to generate, communicate and use evidence. We undertake research and analysis, developing competencies and skills, and nurturing a global community of practice.

We believe that the decisions made by policymakers must be informed by evidence – which may be contested, but should be debated. But that, ultimately, the choices policymakers make are a matter of values, which should be publicly held. Evidence can only tell us what is (or what was) but not what to do.

Recognising that think tanks are just one of the actors in the evidence-based policy ecosystem, we also work with others including governing bodies and NGOs.

OTT INITIATIVES

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

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

School for Thinktankers: is a seven-day programme. It is designed for participants to learn about the many dimensions of think tanking, and to prepare for future leadership roles.

OTT TV: offers new insights into the world of think tanks. You'll find videos about think tanks and about their work, webinars, interviews, how to videos, and much more.
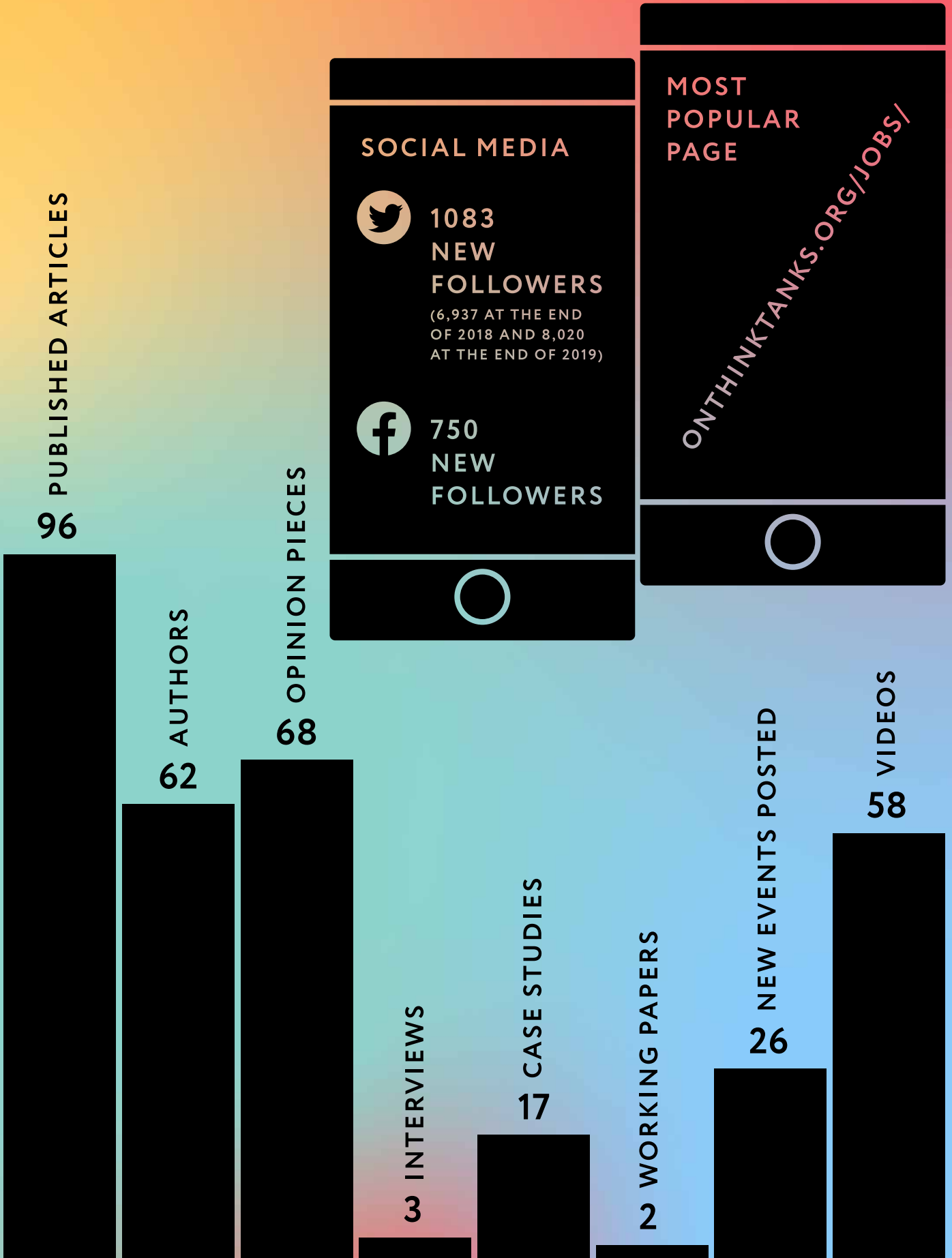
Latin American Evidence Week: Semana de la Evidencia is a festival of events in Latin America that seeks to understand, promote and celebrate the use of evidence in public policy.

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

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

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

OTT IN NUMBERS 2019

PUBLISHED ARTICLES

96

AUTHORS

62

OPINION PIECES

68

INTERVIEWS

3

CASE STUDIES

17

WORKING PAPERS

2

NEW EVENTS POSTED

26

VIDEOS

58

SOCIAL MEDIA

1083 NEW FOLLOWERS

(6,937 AT THE END OF 2018 AND 8,020 AT THE END OF 2019)

750 NEW FOLLOWERS

MOST POPULAR PAGE

ONTHINKTANKS.ORG/JOBS/

OTT IN NUMBERS 2019

46.23%
MALE
USERS

53.77%
FEMALE
USERS
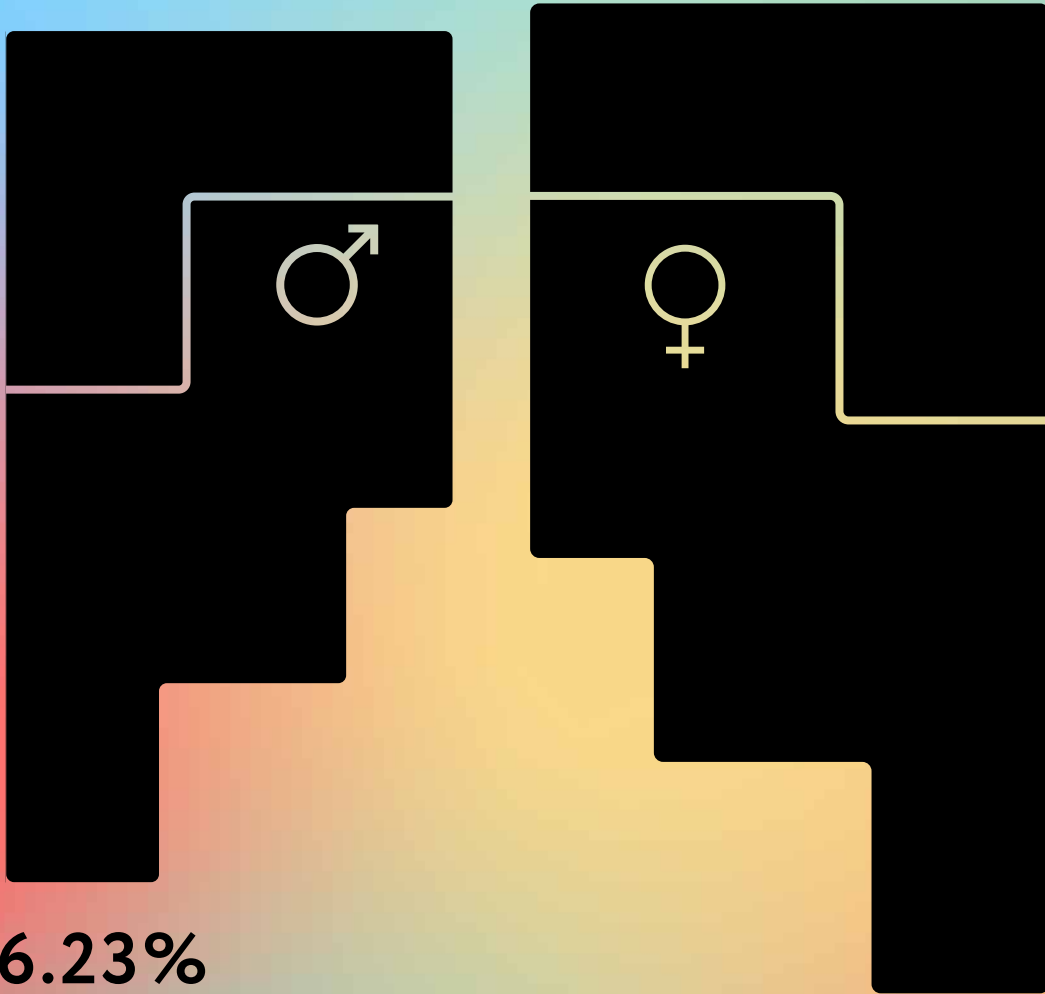
TOP 5
COUNTRIES

US
UK
INDIA
CANADA
AUSTRALIA

25–34
AVERAGE
USER AGE

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Associate

AJOY DATTA
Research associate

LEANDRO ECHT
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MARCOS GONZÁLEZ HERNANDO
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SIMON HEARN
Research associate

CAROLINA KERN
Associate

MICHAEL KLEIMAN
OTT TV

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NORMA CORREA
Professor
Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

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

RUTH LEVINE
Former programme director
Global Development and Population, Hewlett Foundation

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

LAWRENCE MACDONALD
Vice President
World Resources Institute

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

SIMON MAXWELL
Senior research associate
Overseas Development Institute

Simon Maxwell is one of the UK's leading specialists on international development. He is a development economist with a career in research, aid management and policy advice spanning 45 years. He worked overseas for ten years, in Kenya and India for UNDP, and for the UK aid programme in Bolivia, then for fifteen years at IDS in Sussex, and for a dozen years as Director of ODI in London. He was until recently Executive Chair of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network (www.cdkn.org), and a Specialist Adviser to the House of Commons International Development Select Committee. He is currently Chair of the European Think Tanks Group (www.ettg.eu) . Simon is a past President of the Development Studies Association of the UK and Ireland. In 2007, he was awarded a CBE for services to international development.

JILL RUTTER
Programme director
Institute for Government

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

JOHN SCHWARTZ
Founder and managing Director
Soapbox

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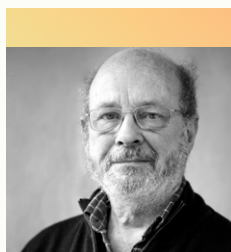
STEPHEN YEO
Independent Consultant

Adviser at large
On Think Tanks

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

XUFENG ZHU
Professor
Tsinghua University

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

OUR FUNDING

OTT pursues a range of funding streams to remain sustainable. For 2019, these have included:

Grant and project funding provided to On Think Tanks and managed by Universidad del Pacífico:

Hewlett Foundation grant . . . . £ 228,693

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

IDRC OTT–TTI Fellowship grant 2018/19 . . . . £ 86,975

TTI ACBF summit attendance african fellows . . . . £ 4,795

Open Society Initiative for Europe grant . . . . £ 7,077

OSF New York grant for social movements
study & 2019 conference support . . . . £ 12, 197

foraus mandate WISCH 2019 4,844

OTT Consulting Ltd project funding . . . .£ 483, 132

OTT Consulting Ltd financial contribution to On Think Tanks . . . £ 65,891

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

For a full list of OTT's funders see our funding page. For more information on OTT Consulting projects, visit our projects' page.

OTT Consulting's 2019 financial year runs from 1st of Februrary 2019 to 31st of January 2020.

2 ONWARDS
0
19

We asked the OTT team and friends to think back on 2019 and answer two questions for us:

What is your top pick from 2019?
This could be a groundbreaking study or publication, a new website, an effective campaign, an event, a policy change generated by a think tank, a new fund/funding initiative, a new think tank, or any relevant development in the broader field of evidence-informed policy.

What do you hope to see in 2020?
This could be a new development in research methods, a new debate, a focus on a particular issue, a fund, or a new practice.

TOP PICKS 2019

MICHAEL KLEIMAN
MediaTank Productions

Top 2019 pick:
The Urban–Brookings Tax Policy Center Tax Expenditure multimedia website. MediaTank produced the animated videos for this and I thought it was a fun way of engaging a broader audience in a dry, often overlooked policy area that has important implications for US tax policy. It's the rare occasion when 'fun' and 'tax policy' make it into the same sentence.

Hope to see in 2020:
I hope there's more of focus on the urgent threat of climate change, not only as an issue itself but how it will impact – and is already impacting – every single policy area.

AJOY DATTA
On Think Tanks

Top 2019 pick:
Open Democracy's *Psychology, meet politics* on how we need to attend to both our outer and inner crises. Also, an article from 2014, but very revealing about the complexities of 'doing development differently': Development in Practice.

Hope to see in 2020:
I'd like to see a fully funded professional development course for mid career thinktankers run by OTT (which helps individuals to do the best they can given their political and organisational constraints). I'd also like to see more ethnographic accounts of how change happens.

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
On Think Tanks

Top 2019 pick:
Ruth Levine's 6 reflections from working at that Hewlett Foundation. Funders rarely open up like Ruth did over this series of articles. They offer an insight into how a funder and the people who work there think about what they do and how they engage with their grantees.

Hope to see in 2020:
I hope think tanks will reach out to each other to weather the COVID-19 storm. Think tank communities, at the national, regional or global levels, are famous for competitiveness. This is not the time to compete. This is the time to collaborate.

LUCA BRUNNER
SwissCognitive

Top 2019 pick:
Tackling Climate Change with Machine Learning (ML), a groundbreaking study on the use of ML to fight climate change. It's a transnational project! Also, a new community-led think tank: Next100 in New York and an event, the 3rd annual conference of the Open Think Tank Network in Vienna.

Hope to see in 2020:
More transnational debates on AI for good.

JENNY LAH

Top 2019 pick:
Media and network sites sharing relevant economics papers and op-eds are always on the top of my list, including Project Syndicate and The Conversation. In 2019, Economists for Inclusive Prosperity started its site, and it is now sharing relevant briefs on COVID-19 in addition to other issues like labor policy. It's a great go-to for evidence-based policy recommendations in the United States.

Hope to see in 2020:
Alarms about sovereign debt are already being sounded as many countries will need to borrow even more to handle the COVID-19 crisis. Public debt as an issue was already climbing on the agenda. For example, before the crisis, South Africa was planning to cut its health budget partially due to debt considerations. Now it is even more relevant with implications not only for economies but lives saved. This time, the debt situation is more complicated--from lending from China to debt held off-books by state-owned enterprises and public-private partnerships. Not all of this debt is transparent or even agreed to by legislatures. This is a perfect topic for think tanks, both in the short term and the longer term and at the national and local levels.

DENA LOMOFSKY
Southern Hemisphere

Top 2019 pick:
IDRC's book *Scaling Impact: Innovation for the public good*.

Hope to see in 2020:
More thoughtful and principle based approaches to scaling of development interventions and policy.

SULAMBA SHABAN STIPRO

Top 2019 pick:

Our top pick for 2019 was successfully hosting the Fourth AfricaLics Conference on Innovation and Transformative capacities for growth and sustainable development in Africa. It brought together 200 leading scholars working on innovation and development from across Africa and some representatives from outside Africa, policymakers and business community. The conference was hosted in collaboration with University of Dar es Salaam and Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology.

Hope to see in 2020:

In 2020 we are organising a big fundraising dinner which will bring together private sector, government and politicians. Our focus is advocating the role of think tanks for the development of our nation and so how domestic funding is the only source that can make us work on our interests.

SIMON MAXWELL

Top 2019 pick:

This has to be the way climate change has catapulted to the top of the political agenda – driven by a combination of good research (especially via the IPCC), civil society activism (of course led by Greta Thunberg and the school strike movement, but also movements like Extinction Rebellion), and political leadership (for example, the UN Secretary General). There are lessons for all think tanks on how to engage with and drive reform.

Hope to see in 2020:

The climate talks in November, in Glasgow, absolutely have to deliver more ambitious climate pledges, backed up by plans which take account of the economic and social disruption associated with transition to a zero carbon world. Think tanks need urgently to engage with proposals for a Just Transition and a Global Green New Deal.

ERIKA PEREZ-LEON
On Think Tanks

Top 2019 pick:

Back in November Oxfam invited OTT to participate in their Narratives x Civic Space Convening in New York City. The event brought together a creative, diverse and wide-ranging group of organisations, networks and movements, experimenting with the idea of using narratives to open civic space. It's been one of my favourite events so far: a perfect balance of panel discussions, speakers, and lots of opportunities to engage, share experiences and come up with new ideas. We'll also be working with Oxfam on a publication on narrative change, so stay tuned!

Hope to see in 2020:

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our way of working presently. Most (if not all) our meetings are going to be held online for months to come. This is an opportunity to re-think our face-to-face events for the future: whilst many events will (and should) be held online, there is still a human connection value to face-to-face events. However, I'd like to see more purposeful (perhaps smaller) events, where participants really have the space to interact and build relationships. We'll also have to evaluate carefully which events to attend (especially if they involve travel), and choose only those that really contribute to our professional growth. Less is more!

THANK YOU

2019 was another year of growth for On Think Tanks: we published more than one hundred articles and resources on the OTT platform, we produced over 50 videos featuring thinktankers and think tank scholars, we hosted 20 think tank experts in our webinar series, we welcomed 23 young thinktankers from 19 different countries for the WinterSchool for Thinktankers, and we were joined by 100 members of the evidence-based policy community for our annual conference.

2020 marks 10 years of On Think Tanks. As we look back at this decade, we see how we've grown into a robust and thriving global collaboration of researchers, practitioners, policy entrepreneurs, and partners. We couldn't have done any of this without the continued support of our contributors, partners and, especially, the eleven thousand monthly visitors to our platform. It is your support that keeps us going.

We are excited for what 2020 will bring us as we generate new knowledge and resources, contribute to strengthening the capacity of thinktankers around the world and, above all, continue to do our part in fostering this wonderful community.

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On Think Tanks

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