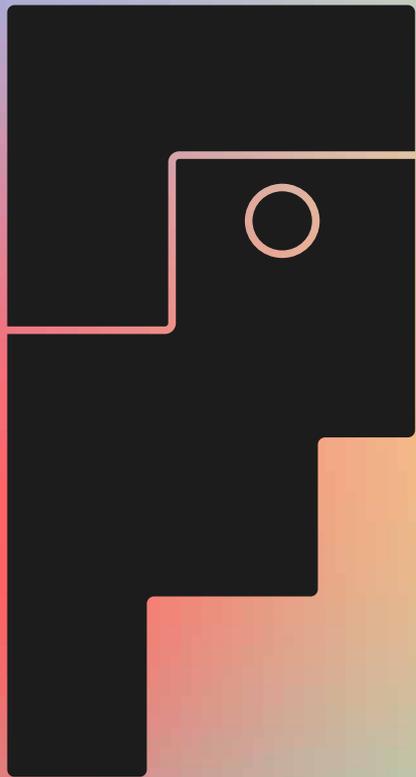
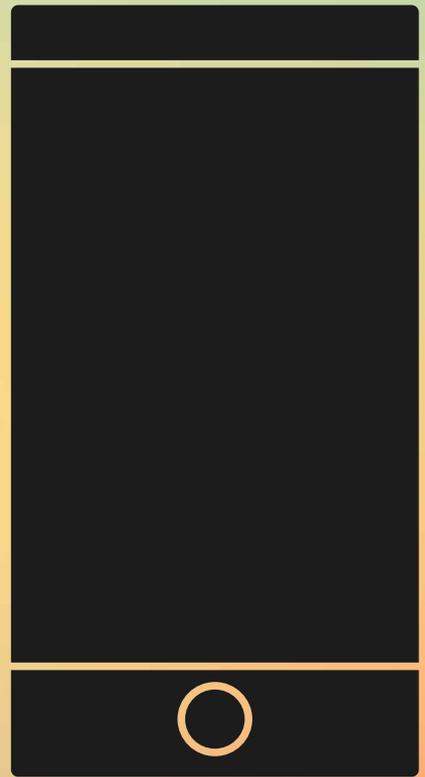


# On Think Tanks

CONFERENCE  
2020



T E  
C H  
N O  
L O  
G Y



30 MARCH - 1 APRIL 2020  
ONLINE

DGAP  
Deutscher Gesellschaft für  
Angewandte Politikwissenschaft

d.i.e  
Deutsches Institut für  
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development  
Institute

Soapbox

 UNIVERSIDAD  
DEL PACIFICO

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Foundation

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 rb  
Robert Bosch  
Stiftung

[www.onthinktanks.org](http://www.onthinktanks.org)

# OTT CONFERENCE 2020: THE ONLINE EVENT

GOOD  
AFTERNOON  
FROM NAIROBI

HELLO  
EVERYONE!  
GOOD  
AFTERNOON  
FROM SAUDI.

HI ALL -  
LONDON  
CALLING!

GREETINGS  
FROM  
BELGRADE,  
SERBIA!

GREETINGS  
FROM TBILISI

GREETINGS  
FROM BERLIN!

HI FROM  
MOSCOW

HI FROM PORTO!

GOOD MORNING  
FROM PERÚ

HI  
EVERYONE  
:)

113  
PEOPLE  
JOINED  
US ONLINE  
FROM:

ARGENTINA, AUSTRIA, BELGIUM, BOLIVIA, CANADA,  
CHINA, COLOMBIA, ECUADOR, EGYPT, FRANCE,  
GEORGIA, GERMANY, GHANA, HUNGARY, INDIA, ITALY,  
KENYA, NETHERLANDS, NIGERIA, PAKISTAN, PANAMA,  
PERU, PORTUGAL, ROMANIA, RUSSIA, SAUDI ARABIA,  
SERBIA, SOUTH AFRICA, SPAIN, SRI LANKA, SWEDEN,  
SWITZERLAND, TAIWAN, UKRAINE, UNITED KINGDOM,  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, ZAMBIA.

T T TE  
H A CH  
I N + NO  
N K LO  
K S GY



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# ABOUT THE ONLINE EVENT

The OTT Conference 2020 online was a response to the need to postpone our 2020 conference in Berlin. The COVID-19 crisis unraveled our plans for a 4th annual conference with only weeks to go but, not wanting to lose the momentum and engagement of our community, we quickly found an alternative venue: hopin.to.

We labelled the OTT Conference 2020 online a pilot with only six sessions scheduled for the three days. Each day, we met for two and a half hours in several spaces: keynotes, parallel sessions, chat rooms, 'speed-networking' and coffee rooms and booths to encourage further discussions.

The online event offered the opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones; we exchanged critical insights on issues of great relevance to the global think tank community; and we tested the platform and its capabilities.

With an overwhelmingly positive response from our community, this was the first of many to come.

# POLLS

**WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE OVERALL EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON THINK TANKS AND POLICY RESEARCH CENTRES IN YOUR COUNTRY OVER THE NEXT YEAR OR SO?**

- 0.0% Most think tanks will benefit from the crisis
- 5.6 % This is not a crisis for think tanks
- 44.4% There will be some setbacks but most centres will recover in the end**
- 38.9% Most will suffer big setbacks – only a handful will do well
- 11.1% They will suffer greatly – some may even have to close down or downsize significantly

**IF YOU HAVEN'T YET, WILL YOU FIND OUT MORE ABOUT HOW AI AND MACHINE LEARNING CAN CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR WORK?**

- 5.3% No
- 94.7% Yes**

**DO YOU THINK THAT THINK TANKS ARE INCLUSIVE?**

- 82.4% No**
- 17.6 % Yes

**DO YOU THINK THAT COVID-19 WILL LEAD TO MORE OR LESS COLLABORATION BETWEEN THINK TANKS?**

- 7.3% Less
- 36.6% The same
- 56.1% More**

**FOR THINK THANKS TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE IS MAINLY:**

- 10.3% A challenge
- 53.8% An opportunity**
- 35.9% I can't choose, it's both!

DAY 1  
30 MARCH 2020

**PANEL**  
**THINK TANKS AND TECHNOLOGY**



JONATHAN TANNER

Podcast host,  
Government vs The Robots



SONIA JALFIN

Director,  
Sociopublico



SEBASTIAN RIEGER

Member of the executive board  
& head of communication,  
Stiftung Neue Verantwortung



MAREK TUSZYŃSKI

Co-founder and director of  
programmes,  
Tactical Technology Collective

**KEY  
TAKEAWAYS**

During the opening the session, each panelist gave a short overview of some of the main challenges that new technologies pose for think tanks.

**JONATHAN TANNER** presented three main challenges. First, implementation challenges: putting technologies to use. For instance, do we have the right digital tools and resources to work on big data? Second, adaption challenges: how we use these technologies. Particularly in terms of communications, for example are we using digital tools to pay more attention to our audiences, to reach them in new ways and to rebuild and retain trust? Are we developing new partnerships? Third, political challenges: the huge issues related to the ethics and politics of artificial intelligence (AI). For think tanks it will be very important to stay true to the organisation's mission and not lose track in an increasingly politicised context.

**SONIA JALFIN** identified three further interconnected challenges: First, how we manage and share big data: think tanks will need to incorporate new technologies and resources, and hire new staff or join new partnerships. Adapting to new ways of working, like design thinking presents another challenge. To work with new resources and address political change, think tanks would do well to incorporate new forms of planning and project delivery that put users (their

audiences) at the centre. In fact, the revolution of the audience demands that think tanks place them at the centre of all they do. New technologies have ushered a big change in how audiences connect to knowledge and think tanks. Think tanks will have to work hard to understand and give audiences the engagement they are increasingly demanding.

**SEBASTIAN RIEGER** highlighted two important adaption challenges for think tanks and societies. First, knowledge about new technologies can't be found in books or traditional research sources. To develop new areas of expertise, think tanks will have to develop new partnerships. Second, the speed at which technologies change and their impacts evolve. This has implications for think tank project cycles. Long-term projects will have to give way to shorter ones – or at least to those with smaller and adaptive components.

**MAREK TUSZYNSKI** added that the choice between, and implementation of, new technologies presents a challenge in itself. Each technology comes with endless possibilities for creating (or not) a social, economic, and political future that is more exclusive and authoritarian. We must remember that technology – and even code – is not neutral. Crisis situations lead organisations to try to be efficient, transparent and accountable. But most of the time the best solutions are surveillant ones, where agencies that are supposed to be delivering aid/support/information are turning their beneficiaries/audiences into 'data subjects'. We are seeing it now in the COVID-19 pandemic. These technologies are quick and deliver information in the short term, but in the long term they are quite dangerous. The way we collect data is by empowering intermediaries (like Google or Facebook, or even large agencies, foundations or corporations), who will never truly be accountable for the vast amount of data they are collecting. And ultimately, they are the only ones with the capacity to use that data to its fullest. Finally, a significant political challenge is the proliferation of information and ways of communicating that are leading think tanks and researchers to compete, unfairly, with miss-information.

## ACTION POINTS

Practical actions for think tanks to consider include:

- Exploring and developing new partnerships – not only between think tanks but with NGOs, technology firms, experts and the media – to gain access to knowledge about new technologies and to act on it.
- Exploring new technologies (such as chatbots and translation machines) and new media (such as video) to engage with audiences that are increasingly interested in one-to-one communication and alternatives to text.
- Developing new skills within organisations to engage with new technologies in an intelligent and thoughtful manner.
- Using the technologies that are available but being aware of the trade-off they imply, for example on privacy.

## FROM THE CHATBOX

### RESOURCES (shared by session attendants)

- [Translation tool: DeepL](#)
- [Washington Post's corona simulator](#)
- [Learning Platform: NovoEd](#)
- [The first WhatsApp drama series](#)
- [Book recommendation: \*The Pale Rider\*](#)

### KEY QUESTIONS (to panelists from session attendants)

What are your ideas on how to better engage/connect with audiences in digital events?

How do organisations use technology to enhance data collection and analysis? And how have they trained their staff to maximise the potential of technology whether for research or communications?

How easy is it for think tanks to have access to government data?

How can think tank staff build their own capacity to collate data and analyse it for themselves without passing it on to intermediaries?

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Think tanks and technology



DAY 2  
31 MARCH 2020

**KEYNOTE**

**THINK TANKS, DEMOCRACY AND EPISTOCRACY:  
TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS**



DIANE STONE

University of Canberra and  
Central European University

**KEY  
TAKEAWAYS**

Diane Stone presented her updated work on transnational policy networks, introducing a new concept of ‘transnational epistocracy’.

She argues that the global public sphere is not a unitary space that stands apart, but rather a multilayered and interactive configuration of cross-border connections based on fragmentation and reconstitutions, forming spheres within spheres. In other words, it is a kaleidoscope of spaces for networking.

There are, therefore, several think tank networks at play in this space, including: GDN, the T20, ASEAN-ISIS to name just a few. They play important roles, including knowledge brokering and policy transfer.

But think tank networks are just one actor in the global public sphere made up of several translational policy networks, including: watchdog networks, advocacy networks, operational and delivery networks, governance networks, and global standards networks.

The role of think tank networks in global public governance, and the role of experts within these, is becoming increasingly important. This raises a number of concerns.

Epistocracy, according to Diane, is a little like the opposite side of the coin to populist dominated politics and policy. It is a form of governance by experts. Experts of various kinds who have greater input to policymaking and deliberation than ordinary people. Many think tanks (and experts within them) are part of these epistocracies. However, selection into them is intrinsically exclusive and dependent on the current members.

Since democratic systems are an important constraint on the development of epistocracy at the national level, experts play a greater role in transnational governance (where there is no electorate or citizenry) than everyday people in national governments through systems of democratic representation.

One possible solution to this threat to democracy is: trans-governmentalism. This is a potential counter-active force to epistocracies.

For further reading: [Making Global Policy](#)



FROM THE  
CHATBOX

## KEY QUESTIONS (from session attendants)

How strong are transnational policy communities as opinion leaders compared to rising transnational populist/right-wing groups (like, for example, the World Congress on Families) which also produce knowledge and engage in value discussion)?

Your book with Simon Maxwell in 2005 Knowledge networks and international development has an extensive discussion of epistemic communities. Could you describe how your thinking has evolved since this early work?

Do you see a trade-off between the number of participants and the level of transactions costs in networks, and how can participation, effectiveness and cost be balanced?

How do you weigh the notion of national differences in transnational networks? Experts are hardly neutral, they might offer different views on an issue but also lean toward their government's positions. How can you avoid burdening transnational networks with conflict, and help use diversity to increase knowledge and legitimacy?

How is the 'right to govern' acquired? What do I have to do or be for the prime minister to hand over the reins of power?

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Transnational networking and the ways in which think tanks seek to inform global policy debates



DAY 2  
31 MARCH 2020

PARALLEL SESSION  
GOING DIGITAL IN TIMES OF COVID-19



CLAIRE LUZIA LEIFERT

DGAP



DANIELA SCHWARZER

DGAP

KEY  
TAKEAWAYS

This session was designed to encourage participation by all – a chance to share challenges and frustrations, opportunities and practical solutions as a result of the switch to digital during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants highlighted many immediate challenges related to choosing the right digital platforms and getting teams using them. Think tanks are finding that there's a trade-off between free and paid versions of tools – if they're free then your data belongs to the platform, which can be complicated from a security standpoint. And for those in Europe, many of the user-friendly tools are located in the US and may not comply with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The number of platforms and 'traffic' can then be exhausting, confusing and inefficient. What's more, these digital spaces often struggle to recreate those informal spaces for conversation (the 'water cooler chats'), where a lot of important exchange happens.

More broadly, participants expressed concern over limited opportunities to coordinate between actors in different countries or regions, a lack of credible evidence when freedom of movement is limited, and the plethora of information on social media that is hard to verify.

However, this new way of working also brings opportunities. In terms of the work we do, the move to digital spaces has created the opportunity for events and conversations to be more inclusive, allowing participation from more locations.

In terms of how we work, thinktankers are developing new skills and connecting with people around the world, using tools that perhaps should have already been incorporated into our work a long time ago. Where there has been hesitation or resistance to digital tools in the past, the current situation presents a window of opportunity to get all team members bought into these technologies and new ways of working. We're also reducing our carbon footprint; instead of flying, we're holding meetings virtually and finding out that many of them probably always could have been done this way!

## ACTION POINTS

To produce a document for thinktankers outlining the tools available: their main features, their pros and cons, and their privacy and functionality requirements. Soapbox is in the process of putting together a framework with various pros and cons of different platforms for working online and hosting online events. It was suggested that this resource could also have guidelines for professional use of digital tools (such as backgrounds and camera positioning).

## FROM THE CHATBOX

### RESOURCES (shared by session attendants)

- [Meeting tool: Jitsi](#)
- [Online hack-a-thon: Versus virus](#)
- [HR software: charlie](#)
- [Apolitical guide to virtual events](#)
- [Sociopúblico's blog on remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

## CHALLENGES POSED BY THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Much of my work was related to mentoring CSOs dealing with oversight of security institutions in different countries and facilitation of processes, which is difficult to do at distance.

Access to credible evidence when freedom of movement is limited, and there are no people to respond to requests for freedom of information and interviews.

Getting colleagues from different parts of the organisation up to speed on digital and collaborative tools (like Zoom or Microsoft Teams).

A lot of think tanks still rely pretty heavily on physical things — events, printed material, face-to-face meetings with legislators, etc.

A lot of real policy information (I do some direct consulting with government) gets exchanged in chit-chat, and this has dialed down to very little.

Different platforms' capacities to scale up. Zoom has been around since 2011 and it seems better able to scale in the face of sharply rising demand. Newer and smaller platforms may have a bigger challenge.

The challenge we've always found has been that as we introduce new tools to the team, it takes a huge amount of effort to get people to adopt them. There's a window now to get people using tools because they must in order to stay connected with each other and continue to work in an effective way.

Recreating 'water cooler' discussions (daily informal conversations). They are really important for team bonding and information sharing.

Bringing people on board, like older colleagues who don't want to use yet another tool.

Streamlining communications on different platforms, like email, Zoom, Slack, Microsoft Teams.

Getting an established group to adopt new ways of working or technologies. If you multiply the channels through which people communicate, it can become very difficult to retrieve information and to manage.

## **OPPORTUNITIES POSED BY THE COVID-19 CRISIS**

To support strategic planning of civil society organisations working in post-conflict region, who finally have time and peace to engage in this process.

There's a real opportunity to democratise our work, bringing in people who don't happen to live near where policy work happens.

Re-establish in the US and UK the importance of expertise to a healthy society – figuratively and literally.

Reducing thinktankers' carbon footprint by having video conferences instead of flying around the world every other day to participate in meetings (that are mediocre and not really necessary in many instances).

Everyone needs to use tools that they should have used 15 years ago, including Moodle, etc.

### **KEY QUESTIONS (to panelists from session attendants)**

How do you manage the trade-off between using efficient, user friendly tools (that often are located in the US) and GDPR friendly tools that often lack features and usability? That is a huge discussion in many German organisations.

Do you have the feeling that in these days your audience has become bigger or more responsive to your communications (e.g. more visits to your website)?

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Going digital in times of COVID-19



DAY 2  
31 MARCH 2020

**PARALLEL SESSION**  
**DIVERSITY AND THINK TANKS**



ALEKSANDRA  
CHMIELEWSKA

European Institute  
of the Mediterranean



LAURA DUNKLEY

Chatham House



PAULINE CHETAIL

Bruegel



MARCOS GONZALEZ  
HERNANDO

Think tank for Action  
on Social Change



ROSE MUTISO

The Mawazo  
Institute

**KEY  
TAKEAWAYS**

Each convener addressed the issue of diversity and think tanks from a different perspective.

**PAULINE CHETAIL** from Bruegel is also a member of the Brussels Binder, an initiative that promotes a greater role of women in think tanks and public policy more generally. Pauline pointed to a 2018 Open Society Foundations report that showed that only 25% of speaking positions in European policy events are held by women. 17% of moderator positions are held by women, and only 8% of keynote speeches are made by women. And those figures are even lower for events on topics like foreign policy, security or economics. These

figures aren't changing over time, progress is really slow. Last year, only 11% of panels achieved gender balance. 99% of speaking roles in Brussels are held by white people. We must ask ourselves: what is an expert? What is expertise? What does an expert look like? Perhaps we need to rewrite what we think of as expertise.

**MARCOS GONZALEZ HERNANDO** considered the socioeconomic backgrounds of thinktankers. In his view, perhaps one of the biggest issues we face in terms of socioeconomic equality is access to education and preparation to work in a think tank. In developing countries, elite institutions are very expensive and foreign degrees prized – not everyone can afford them. This narrows the pool from which think tanks tend to employ. Think tanks also often resort to personal networks to hire staff, narrowing the selection pool further.

**ALEKSANDRA CHMIELEWSKA** talked about diversity in terms of young people – generational inclusion in think tanks. Young people (especially millennials) represent a minority in think tanks, which does not correlate with the composition of society – especially in the MENA region where young people constitute around 60% of the population. In the MENA region, most young thinktankers work in administrative roles, rather than research. The main obstacles for young people in this region is the lack of trust from senior colleagues, limited funding, difficulty in gathering and obtaining data, and limitations on ability to publish. Since the 2008 economic crisis and the Arab Spring, people are starting to realise the importance of including young people. Progress is slow, but at least the awareness is there.

**ROSE MUTISO** approached the issue from the point of view of both women and Africans in research. African expertise, she argued, is underrepresented globally. Academic institutions are weak; a good indicator of this is that less than half of academic staff in Kenya have a PhD. And this has consequences: Africa produces less than 1% of papers produced globally. Most of the globally recognised African scholars are men. To address this, we need an ecosystem approach. Interventions that arrive at the think tank level don't take into consideration the different challenges that need to be addressed to create change. However, there is a lot of opportunity. We can learn from the mistakes made elsewhere to create new structures and approaches to building an inclusive knowledge ecosystem. Training and higher-education should be required of think tanks (it's a high-skilled job), but that is also exclusive. So, we need to work on giving people the opportunity to train and develop skills.

**LAURA DUNKLEY** presented an update on work she has been doing at Chatham House to develop a new diversity strategy and toolkit. She argued that think tanks need to look at their recruitment practices and address the issues that keep on coming up in terms in diversity. Key to this is to consider if we have pre-conceived notions of what a thinktanker should be like and who we think is the ‘ideal’ thinktanker... which would then exclude certain people.

When asked about the biggest challenge for diversity and inclusivity in think tanks, participants responded: leadership, recruitment practices, identifying and retaining talent, diversity, expertise, HR practices, skills development opportunities, proper resources to diagnose and address inclusion issues (time, funding, capacity, etc.).

When asked what the one change they think would have the greatest effect on improving diversity and inclusivity in think tanks, conveners responded: diverse leadership within think tanks; more ally-ship from those who are in power; diversification of donors; greater accountability; and staff training.

## ACTION POINTS

- The group agreed that this space merits frequent interaction and exchange of experiences and ideas – in a way that goes beyond national or local spaces, individual think tanks or fields. A working group or community of practice on diversity would be highly valuable.
- More research is needed into how different aspects of diversity and inclusion come to play in think tanks and the broader policy research field.
- Finally, any intervention needs to move beyond model adjustments (such as #allmalepanels) and begin to address think tanks’ fundamental business models and the wider systems in which they exist.

## POLL RESULTS

DO YOU THINK THAT THINK TANKS ARE INCLUSIVE?

**82.4% NO**

**17.6 % YES**

## RESOURCES (shared by session attendants)

- [The Brussels Binder](#)
- [Grupo Sofia](#)
- [Centre for Intersectional Justice](#)
- [OSF report: An end to Manels](#)
- [TASC article: Inequality and the top 10% in Europe](#)
- [Dashboard of resources on diversity in think tanks](#)
- [OTT blog on the 'ideal' thinktanker](#)
- [Think Tank Initiative insights on gender equality in think tanks](#)
- [Think Tank Initiative roadmap for inclusive conferences](#)
- [Open Think Tank Directory on gender in think tanks](#)
- [Public Affairs Centre blog on an example from India on intersectionality](#)
- [Brookings Institute diversity policy and data](#)

## KEY QUESTIONS (to panelists from session attendants)

Is it also that entry-level jobs at think tanks tend to be rather low paid and that hiring is done through personal/professional networks, which means only a few candidates (from upper middle to upper classes) qualify?

Interest in women in science/policy does not take into account issues of power and privilege. Who are the women who get counted and are able to participate?

## KEY COMMENTS (from session attendants)

‘In Africa, the expert gap in academia is informed by the poor remuneration, lack of research funding and the political environment. Kenya provides a big pool of international experts to INGOs and multilateral institutions due to the remuneration and better research environment because the political environment makes it difficult for experts to influence the policy space.’

Jessica Musila

‘Diversity and inclusion are affected directly by the culture, history and leadership of the think tank ... Many think tanks I’ve worked with in Africa are led by male economists and that affects the inherent level of commitment and emphasis on diversity and inclusion. I’d love to hear more from panelists on their experiences regarding the approaches of leadership and governance bodies towards diversity and inclusion.’

Julie LaFrance

‘Regarding youth: in my experience of donors and governments commissioning research on young people, there has been a trend to see more ‘inclusion’ at the level of methodology, where participatory methodologies are highly prized, seen as more legitimate.’

Cristina Bacalso

‘In Africa representation of youth is difficult as local socioeconomic realities often mean they are not in decision-making roles. Cultural bias against the youth also ensures they are not at decision-making tables. For Africa this is especially sad since they are the bulk of the population. How can we get them involved in the policy space?’

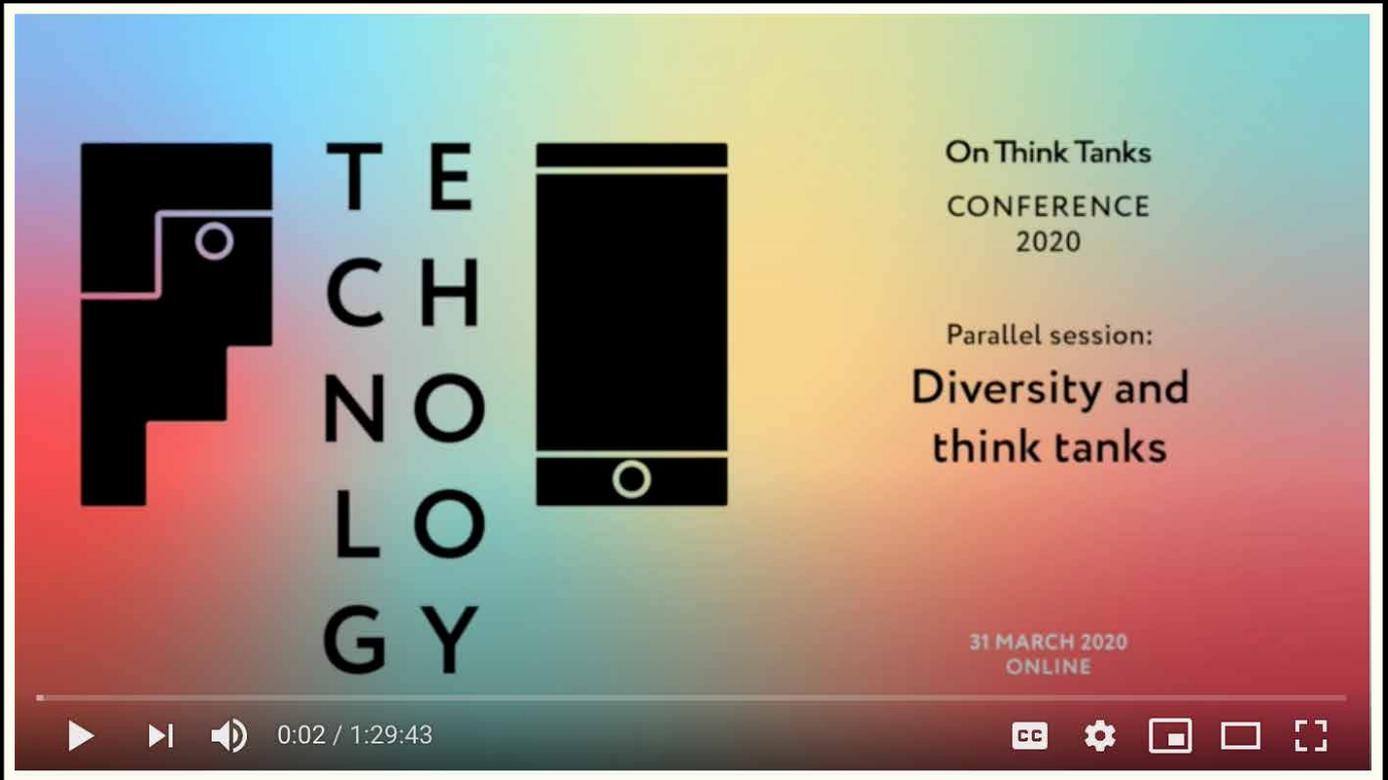
Jessica Musila

‘Think tanks are increasingly trying to reach the “public” – not just elite policymaking spaces – so they should also reflect the public. At least reduce the cultural disconnect between them and those they are supposedly trying to help.’

Enrique Mendizabal

# WATCH THE RECORDING

## Diversity and think tanks



DAY 3  
1 APRIL 2020

**KEYNOTE**  
**MACHINE LEARNING TO PREDICT POLICY PROBLEMS**



**CRR Georgia and  
Transparify**

**KEY  
TAKEAWAYS**

Dustin’s keynote set out to convince thinktankers of two things: first AI (and more specifically machine learning) are probably not as unfamiliar to them as they may think, and secondly that they can be a really useful tool for think tanks. He used CRR Georgia’s Russian Propaganda Barometer project as an illustration of how machine learning can help solve policy problems.

AI and machine learning are in the world all around us, he said. For example, the advertisements we see online are in part determined by machine learning, and in factories machine learning is widely used. And a lot of the tools in the AI and machine learning toolbox are actually very similar to those used by many quantitative social scientists – like regression.

Machine learning is particularly useful for prediction problems, rather than causal problems. Causal problems are questions like ‘If we implement programme X, will outcome Y move?’ And to answer this we can employ impact evaluation, RCTs, quasi-experiments. Prediction problems are questions like ‘Do I need an umbrella?’

Examples of where machine learning has been used for prediction problems include: The Behavioural Insights team was able to predict which schools were more likely to have problems, enabling school

inspections to move from a randomised to a targeted basis, making better use of resources. They have been used to predict problems through monitoring things like water quality, air quality, or hate speech towards different groups. Today, it's being used to track coronavirus and predict its spread.

The Russian Propaganda Barometer project had two research questions: What are the known sources of Russian propaganda saying, and how are people reacting? Who is most at risk of being influenced by Russian propaganda in Georgia? To answer the first question, they used two natural language processing tools (thematic modelling and sentiment analysis). To answer the second question, they created an algorithm to make predictions.



FROM THE  
CHATBOX

## KEY QUESTIONS (from session attendants)

Are the two machine learning tools – thematic modelling and sentiment analysis – an outgrowth of content analysis in media studies?

Can you explain more the methodology on how you did the sentiment analysis and thematic modelling?

The main criticism of AI use in solving social problems is that it frequently reproduces social biases and inequalities by targeting groups that are vulnerable? How do you make sure to have a good understanding of context and culture with the use of AI in analysis of data?

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Machine learning to predict policy problems



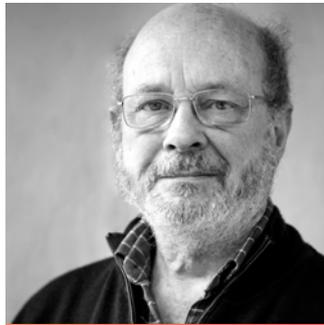
DAY 3  
1 APRIL 2020

**PARALLEL SESSION**  
**RESPONDING TO COVID-19, CONVENED BY:**



HANS GUTBROD

Transparify



STEPHEN YEO

On Think Tanks



ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

On Think Tanks

**KEY  
TAKEAWAYS**

This session was developed in response to a request from participants in the run up to the online event and on Day 1. The session was launched by Hans Gutbrod and Stephen Yeo who offered a few reflections on the challenges that think tanks face in this crisis.

The main takeaway was that this is a significant crisis, and think tanks can expect to be negatively affected –but it may not be a catastrophe!

The effects will likely be felt differently by different think tanks depending on their skills and competencies, the source of their funding, and their location. Whereas some foundations and think tank communities are better prepared to support think tanks through this crisis, others may not be so well prepared and individual think tanks will struggle to get through the crisis.

Think tank funding over the last few years has been influenced by big crises. Crises have offered think tanks an opportunity to respond and be relevant but, at the same time, they have presented important financial and operational challenges.

For instance, the 2007 financial crisis led to the Brookings Institution’s revenue ‘dropping by 20%. Today, there is going to be less government money, foundations have lost money in the financial markets and there will be a radical shift in donor priorities. Luckily,

some foundations are responding favourably. For example, the Hewlett Foundation has claimed that it is keeping its current level of funding and may even increase it. But not all will be able to do the same. And the effects may be felt in the medium to long term when foundations' budgets for the following years are affected by the loss in dividends from their endowments.

Government responses to the crisis have, so far, left out the non-profit sector, including think tanks. This means that some think tanks may not be able to deliver on their existing projects.

Other challenges relate to the ways that governments are responding to the crisis. Some have used the crisis as an opportunity to further reduce the political/civic space. Censorship, arrests of government critiques, intimidation, and so on are beginning to show in some contexts. This is a worrying trend – especially if the crisis goes on for a long time.

Addressing operational matters may help think tanks in the short term to address the sudden change in the context and the needs of their staff.

The crisis will require think tanks to bring forward core competences, to develop a much better understanding of timing and to reflect on the future.

Whatever their response, think tanks will have to collaborate and engage with each other and with other forms of organisations. This will be hard for think tanks that are not used to working with others, sharing resources or learning together. Those already part of active networks will benefit.

This collaboration may extend to collaborative and comparative research projects across countries and regions to help governments understand and respond to the crisis, but also to help think tanks and civil society navigate through it.

## ACTION POINTS

- To build a community of Practice on Covid-19 and implications for think tanks.
- To collate resources to help think tanks navigate through the crisis.
- To produce case studies on how the crisis affects different people within organisations, looking across different organisations.

## RESOURCES (shared by session attendants)

- [Hewlett Foundation update on COVID-19 response](#)
- [The New York Times article: For autocrats, and others, Coronavirus is a chance to grab even more power](#)
- [Institute for Government UK coronavirus Act explainer](#)
- [OTT article on how think tanks can support COVID-19 response through survey data](#)
- [Foraus' Policy Kitchen COVID-19 discussion group](#)
- [Centre for Economic Policy Research policy portal](#)
- [Book recommendation: \*Mitigating the COVID Economic Crisis: Act Fast and do Whatever it Takes\*](#)

## COMMENTS FROM SESSION PARTICIPANTS

Think tanks will be \*more needed\* than ever, because we are in uncharted territory -- but it will be very tricky.

We need to discuss how to make impact in a rapidly closing political space – how to get credible evidence, how to communicate it in the context of censorship, and how to cooperate and mobilise with others remotely.

Core funding may have an opportunity to demonstrate its worth as more foundations ‘free up’ their project funding.

I see many think tanks desperately trying to link their agendas to COVID-19. I know some think tanks in which the message coming from leadership to researchers is ‘link whatever is your agenda’ to this crisis. But it may be worth (for those who have a possibility/privilege) to stop the ball and take some time to think.

With angles. Some things we had been working on doesn't have a reasonable angle, but some things do. For instance, a colleague was working on migration and remittances. This becomes all the more relevant, as we expect these to drop dramatically.

In other projects we are trying to work with governments. That's also a major challenge from a think tank perspective. The extent to which

government agencies demand think tanks support varies depending on internal capacity/resources, etc.

We need to be mindful of how the crisis affects different people in an organisation.

Expertise is more valued; the relationship between politics and expertise is changing!

We're seeing a similar scenario in Serbia as in Peru regarding the dominant players. That is why we need to discuss how to be policy actors in a closing space.

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Responding to COVID-19



DAY 3  
1 APRIL 2020

PARALLEL SESSION

AUTOMATED, PERSONALISED, TARGETED: USING TECHNOLOGY  
TO DRIVE YOUR RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS



SONIA JALFIN

Sociopublico



ESA MATINVESI

Soapbox



KATHARINA NACHBAR

Global Public Policy Institute



JOHN SCHWARTZ

Soapbox

KEY  
TAKEAWAYS

Esa started by reminding us that user experience should be at the front and centre of our design work. In design, there are three main components: the user, the artifact (the tool or product) and the context (when and where the tool is accessed). This sounds simple, but bad user design is all around us! And that's usually because one or more of these factors have been forgotten. Good design isn't just about how it looks, it's about how it functions. However, while design by function not appearance is the rule, we shouldn't forget the importance of how something looks. Studies have shown that when something is aesthetically pleasing, people believe it is easier to use.

Katharina shared three reflections from her work as a think tanks communications manager, starting to think about how to leverage technology to support research communications. First, she emphasised the importance of investing in tech skills. Today, communications and technology are a cross-cutting issue. Second, prioritise strategy. Tools are just tools, you need a strategy to leverage them. Knowing your audience and how to reach them is more important than ever. Third, take a long view. There's sometimes pressure put on communications teams to hop on the latest technology bandwagon. But we have to be smart about how we employ technology. Think about the long-term potential repercussions or reputational costs of using different tools. As think tanks, our credibility is still our biggest asset.

Sonia shared insights from her work experimenting with bots as a tool to communicate complex ideas. We tend to talk about how bots learn by listening to human conversations, she said. But Sonia wants to ask, what can we learn about human conversation from looking at bots? First, humans need reassurance that someone is listening. Chat bots can reply immediately, but adding those three dots ... before responding reassures the user. It also creates suspense, which is another important part of human conversation, that keeps us engaged. Second, people can actually chat for a long time. People stayed engaged with the bots for an average of 3–4 minutes, versus 30 seconds on videos. Third, once people were engaged, they actually wanted more depth and complexity. Finally, humans like complicity, humour and connectedness, so finding ways to build in this complicity with good copy is really important.

## ACTION POINTS

- Recommendations for spaces to learn and develop new skills!
- A series of simple ‘top-tips’ webinars.

## FROM THE CHATBOX

### RESOURCES (shared by session attendants)

- [Wonkcomms diagram on communications functions in a team](#)
- Digital skills: [A Book Apart series](#)
- [A tool for doing and testing bots: Dexter](#)

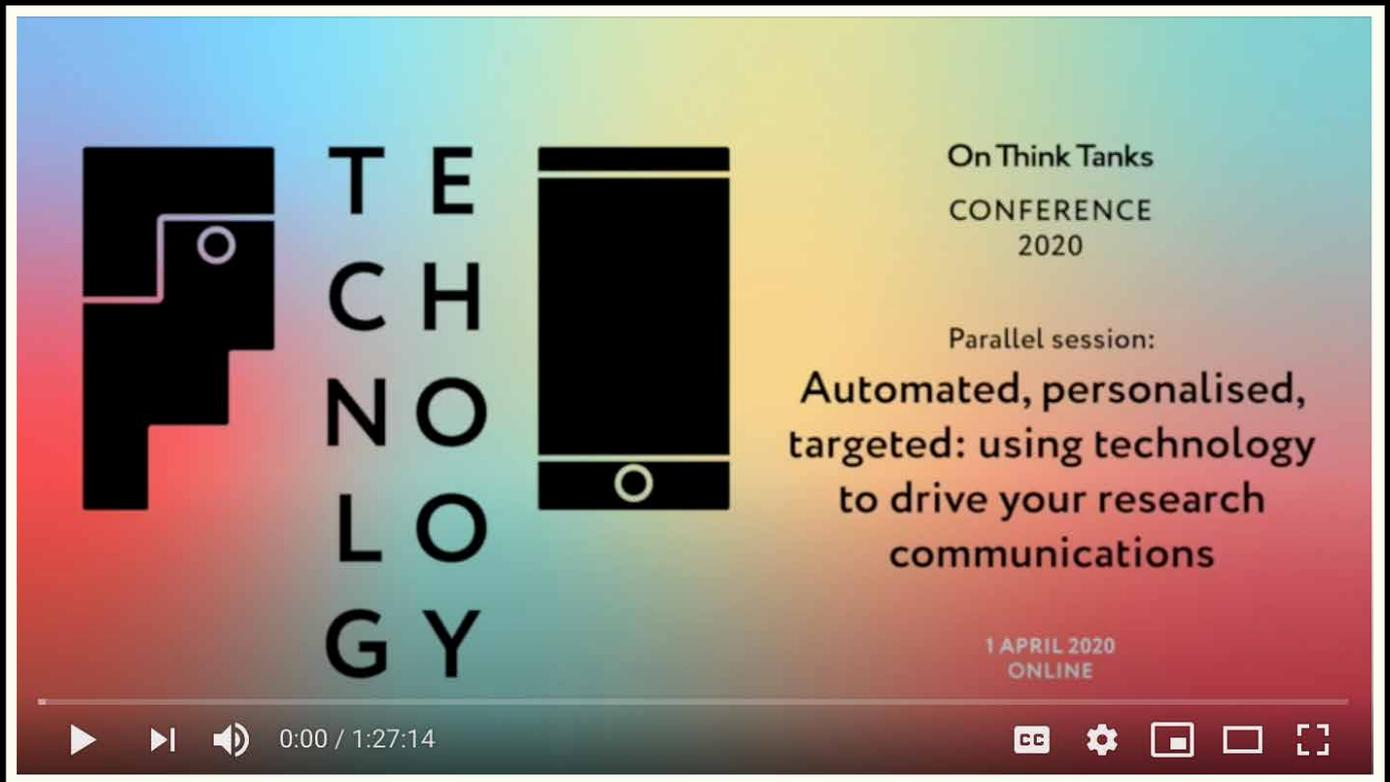
### COMMENTS FROM SESSION PARTICIPANTS

Many communications teams in think tanks have come from traditional media backgrounds (e.g. press offices) and are having to adapt to a very different digital information environment. Do you think that think tanks should be looking to recruit their communications teams from different places e.g. advertising agencies, strategic communications or design agencies? And should they be focusing on recruiting different skillsets e.g.. social media managers, community managers, data analysts, or in-house digital designers?

What do you think the balance should be between think tanks recruiting comms people with technical skills, vs people not necessarily with these skills but with curiosity about digital or technical solutions?

# WATCH THE RECORDING

Automated, personalised, targeted: using technology to drive your research communications



# THANK YOU!

THANK YOU FOR A GREAT CONFERENCE. THIS WAS MY FIRST EVENT WITH YOU ALL, AND I AGREE WITH MANY OF THE COMMENTS EVERYONE HAS MADE ABOUT THIS BEING SUCH A WARM AND UNIQUE SPACE TO HEAR FROM EVERYONE AND CONNECT. IT HAS BEEN A PLEASURE PARTICIPATING AND LOOK FORWARD TO FUTURE ONES.

BYE AND CONGRATULATIONS ON THIS CONFERENCE!

THANKS SO MUCH EVERYONE - REALLY WELL DONE!

NICE TWEETING!

WELL DONE TO YOU ALL FOR MAKING THIS HAPPEN - BIG SUCCESS IMO! AND THANKS TO THE HOSTS OF THE SESSIONS!!

THANKS FOR A VERY SUCCESSFUL CONFERENCE AND I LOOK FORWARD TO PARTICIPATING IN FUTURE VIRTUAL EVENTS.

GOOD EVENT, VIRTUALITY TAKES A BIT OF GETTING USED TO, BUT NOT AS BIG AN OBSTACLE AS WE ALL FEARED.

THANK YOU ALL!! THIS HAS BEEN A LEARNING JOURNEY FOR ME, IN EVERY SENSE. I'VE LEARNT FROM YOU AND FROM THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE OF DOING A COMPLETELY ONLINE EVENT.

THE CLOSING SESSION OFFERED AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECONVENE IN ONE SPACE AFTER THREE DAYS OF KEYNOTES, PANEL SESSIONS AND NETWORKING. THE OTT CONFERENCE 2020 ONLINE WAS A PILOT, ORGANISED TO LEARN ABOUT THE PLATFORM AND ELICIT FEEDBACK AND ADVICE FROM THE OTT COMMUNITY AS WE PLAN OUR NEXT STEPS.

WE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE EVENT TO LAUNCH OUR ANNUAL REVIEW 2019-2020 ON TECHNOLOGY AND THINK TANKS AND OUR RESPONSE TO COVID-19.

# On Think Tanks

[www.onthinktanks.org](http://www.onthinktanks.org)