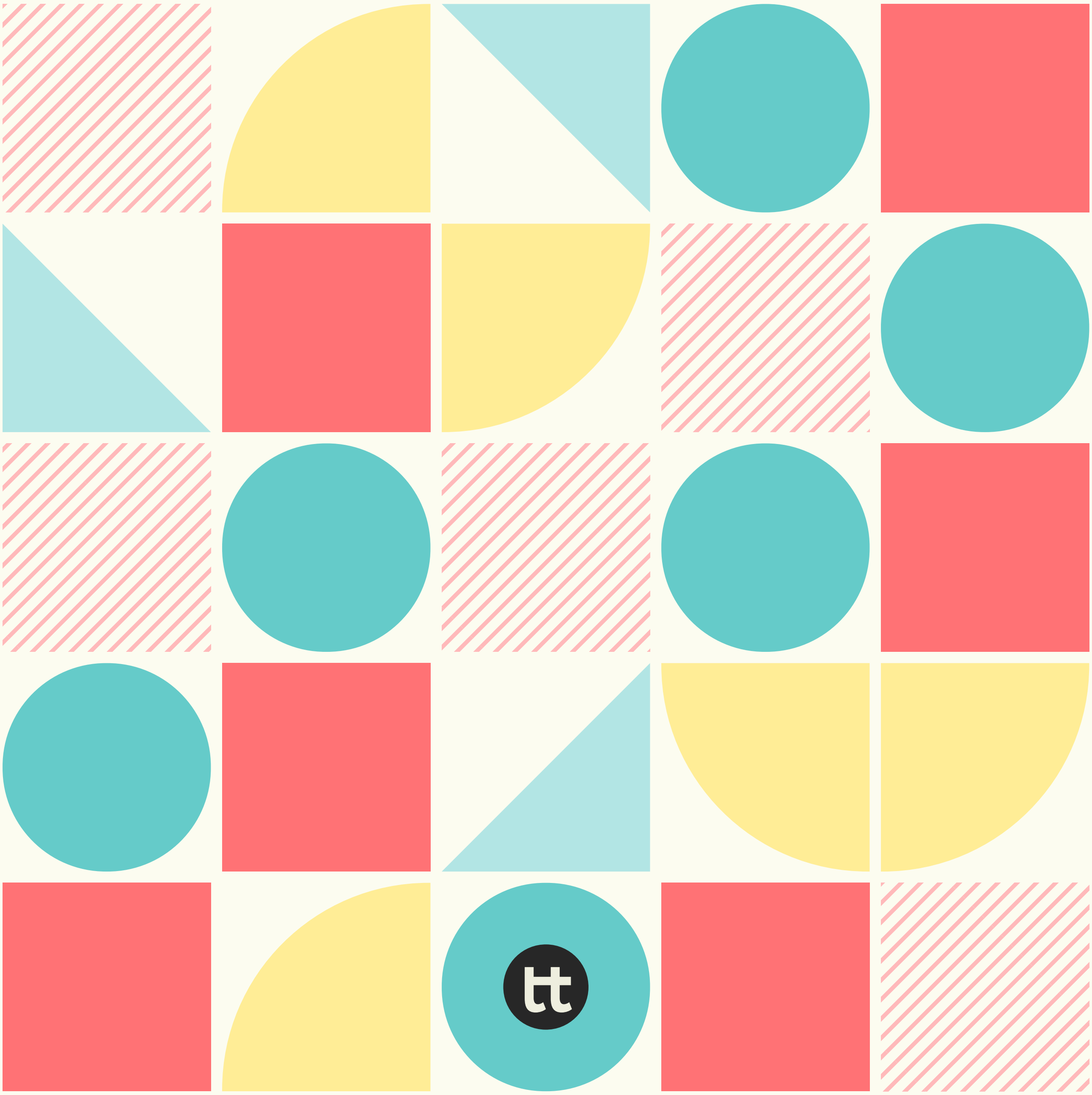
CHANGE

How do think tanks react to or foster change?



OTT Annual Review 2020–2021

‘Last year, everything changed.
Suddenly.
And then, it didn’t.
Slowly.
There is still time for change’.

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

OTT Annual Review 2020–2021

EDITORIAL

BY ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
Founder and Director I OTT

When thinking about our annual review and annual conference we were sure we had to address Covid-19 in some way or another. But we wanted to avoid familiar discussions.

Yes, organisations have had to change. They have adopted new technologies. Offices have gone virtual. Funding has been tight. There have been unprecedented demands for evidence.

Only these are not universal experiences. There are organisations that have failed to change. Some have struggled to adopt new – even old – technologies and have preferred to go back to presential work as soon as it was allowed. For a handful of organisations funding has been amply available – they have taken advantage of funders' sincere concerns for the field. And in many cases, unprecedented demand for evidence has been more than matched by a rejection of the expert classes and penchant for half-truths, pseudo-science and outright lies.

Change, as always, is more nuanced affair and it is hardly homogenous.

Instead, we settled for the broader issue of change. In 2020 we explored this in our series of online conferences and the 2019/20 Annual Review: technology. We talked about the effects of technological change on think tanks, the policy research context, their agendas, strategies and even on their staff. We discussed how the Black Lives Matter and feminist movements of 2020 changed the way diversity, equity and inclusion were talked about – and addressed – within research organisations. We heard about approaches to promoting change from the perspective of global and national organisations as well as from the point of view of grassroots and social movements.

And we had lively discussions on the changing nature of politics (and the impact that technology is having on it) and the demand this is imposing on think tanks to, among other things, show their ideological cards and take a stand.

Things can go back; change is non-linear. The growing trend of state capture across the world illustrates this perfectly.

Change also presents challenges. In our 2018/19 Annual Review we explored public engagement as an emerging challenge to think tanks and other policy research organisations. Their traditional audiences were rapidly changing and think tanks faced important questions about how best to reach them.

In late 2020 we began to consider ethical concerns involved in promoting evidence-informed change. We talked about ethical dilemmas in research, communication, and partnerships.

The pandemic has ushered unprecedented changes in think tanks' environments and their business models. It has affected individual thinktankers – derailing their professional careers in some cases and boosting them in others. The pandemic has affected think tanks' research agendas and funding prospects.

These dilemmas are further influenced by the changes that we had already been experiencing in politics, society and technology.

For instance, how can cash-strapped organisations respond to new demands made by staff with care responsibilities at home? How can think tanks facing increasingly authoritarian governments respond to those same governments' demands for their services?

Think tanks have to tackle these challenges in a context of immense political and economic uncertainty, not least about funding, and new operational challenges imposed by the pandemic.

We have noted among our colleagues in the field a growing concern for the resilience of existing business models – as well as a desire to understand what really makes organisations resilient; a recognition that formal governance and management structure matter, but are not enough!

We have also invited authors to reflect on how think tanks have responded to changes in the past. Elizabeth Sidiropoulos recounts the roles that SAIIA played before, during and after apartheid in South Africa. Her account reminded me of the roles of think tanks in Chile in the 1980s and 1990s, during and after the Pinochet dictatorship. These stories are enlightening. Faced with authoritarianism, think tanks responded with more dialogue rather than research. And then, with the turning of the tide, they changed tactic.

Keith Burnett draws similar lessons from Chatham House' centenary:

> 'First, you don't need a clear model to develop the solution to the problem you are seeking to resolve as long as your goal is solutions-focussed. Second, you need to develop your solutions via trusted collaboration and research. Third, credible research will stand the test of time even if the outputs, methods of communications and types of participants evolve and change – this is inevitable and to be welcomed.
>
> Finally, one element that is largely out of our control is the general speed of change as hastened and forced by world-changing events. This we need to roll with, accept and embrace'.

In other words, think tanks evolve, as we discussed in our 2016/17 Annual Review.

If 2020 has not triggered think tanks to think about change more systematically, then we hope our review, annual conference and work in 2021, will. As Hans Gutbrod suggests:

'Think tanks, in some ways, are all about change. Not much thinking is needed to defend the status quo. And yet, some think tanks arguably do not think enough about change, and their impact beyond research quality'.

Other institutions are facing changes too. Academia, for instance, was already undergoing significant and overdue change; the pandemic accelerated their digital transformation. And questions still remain with regards to the impact that the crisis has had on research systems as a whole. The media, too, has faced years of relentless pressure to change and adapt to new communication channels and expectations from younger audiences. Aidan Muller argues that think tanks and the media share common challenges:

- 'Both are having to come to terms with a world in which their hard currency – facts and data – no longer command unanimity.
- Both are distrusted by the populist left and the populist right, accused of being vehicles for the establishment.
- Both are having to re-examine what their commitment to principles of objectivity, impartiality, and non-partisanship means in a world where fact and truth are no longer absolutes'.

We hope funders will pay attention, too. Crises are opportunities to test their support for think tanks. Are they doing enough to support resilient organisations – capable of fulfilling their roles during the most difficult of times? Will they be able to emerge strengthened by the experience? Simon Maxwell, argues for more funding reserves for think tanks – something that few funders have yet considered.

In mid-2020, at our second online conference, a panel of funders argued for changes in how they funded and supported think tanks. Among other things they called for more flexibility, embracing themselves the values they wished their grantees to embrace, focusing on building resilient organisations, and investing in ideas that promised to rupture the foundations of power and privilege.

Priyanthi Fernando, like many of us, had high hopes when, at first, the pandemic began to rupture those foundations. 'During the pandemic, feminists and feminist economists came into their own, taking the ruptures as a point of departure and visioning a new world order'. After a year of anxiety and isolation, however, it seems unlikely that the initial responses to Covid-19 will lead to transformative change.

What then for the future?

Think tanks, like other institutions and their environment, will change. I believe that the think tank function will continue to be relevant but, to deliver it, new alternatives will emerge.

Some may go back to business as usual. Much of what has changed in 2020 has been to our facades. We have learned to communicate differently but business models have remained largely unchanged. And with what now feels like insufficient changes to the foundations of power and privilege, it is unlikely all think tanks will respond themselves.

In the longer term, though, I expect there will be greater diversity in expressions of the label. The large think tanks will continue to thrive as the world remains or continues to grow more unequal. These are the think tanks that complement the dominating policymaking institutions: the Party in China, the state in Germany, the private sector in the US. But many more, much smaller, think tanks will emerge to attempt to substitute weakened institutions: academia, civil society, the media.

The function will also be adopted by other fields: thought leadership platforms; corporations with a mission to shape narratives and agendas; consultancies with spin-off think tanks; NGOs with an increasing focus on systemic change; and even foundations whose own staff have realised that their contribution to society lies beyond the dollars they disburse.

The power that individuals have to command the functions of thinktanking and the opportunities that exist in other fields will, I imagine, prove impossible to resist for new generations of hugely influential gig-thinktankers. They may find it easier to navigate the increasingly complex world that think tanks face.

Finally, I expect a return to a time when think tanks were not bound by bricks and mortar but were instead formed and reformed by the interaction of their members. To a time when the RSA, the oldest think tank still in existence in the Open Think Tank Directory, was the Fellowship. And all it needed was a coffeehouse for its fellows to meet.

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How do think tanks react to or foster change?

‘After the fall of undemocratic regimes, thinktankers broadened the policy community by convening initial dialogues among the new political elite and civil servants, as well as other groups who were previously excluded from policy processes’.

SONJA STOJANOVIC-GAJIC

The reverse circle of change in the Western Balkans

The reverse circle of change in the Western Balkans

BY SONJA STOJANOVIC-GAJIC
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How do think tanks react to or foster change?

It is not easy to be an influential policy actor in a region that has been identified with instability. The region is famous for 'Balkanisation', the expression coined after the end of the First World War to refer to endless disputes and fragmentation in the region. As polarisation has recently become prevalent globally, Balkanisation has been used to refer to the lack of cohesion within the West or the potential for violence when basic democratic institutions are disputed. In this context, think tanks from the Western Balkans are a good example of how policy impact in times of uncertainty is facilitated not only by relevant **research but also active involvement in re-shaping political narratives and building communities**.

The emergence of think tanks in the Western Balkans in the 2000s was **a sign of the normalisation of politics** after a decade of the bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia, international isolation and authoritarian regimes. The think tanks emerged once the transitions to democracy and peace were put in motion in the states that came out of Yugoslavia through armed conflicts (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) and Albania. There are differences in strategies pursued in different countries and among the organisations, but there are also some common patterns within three generations of think tanks in the region. In interaction with external context, the thinktankers selected different combinations of narratives, relationships, and research to support desired changes.

The pioneers

The first think tanks in the Western Balkans were established by public intellectuals that stood up for democracy during the authoritarian nineties. This generation played an important role in the late stages of authoritarianism by breaking fear and the taboos around sensitive policy issues. They promoted the idea that even the most controversial policies should be discussed publicly and deliver public goods. Examples of this are the Centre for Civil-Military Relations (now called Belgrade Centre for Security Policy) in Serbia, which argued the need for democratic civilian control of the armed forces, or the Institute for Public Finance in Croatia, which examined the social consequences of a rapid transition to a market economy. The pioneers also planted seeds of future policy communities. In the authoritarian period, this meant joining up forces among the like-minded members of civil society, academia, political parties, and independent journalists and taking part in engagement with citizens.

After the fall of undemocratic regimes, the thinktankers broadened the policy community by convening initial dialogues among the new political elite and civil servants, as well as other groups who were previously excluded from policy processes (civil society, young people, the private sector, etc.). The initial research products were intended to educate the public and to introduce new norms into laws and institutions.

The professionals and peace-builders

The second generation of think tanks was initiated after few years of transition by a younger generation that was mostly educated in the West or obtained key professional experience working for international organisations in the region. They were followed up in the 2010s by the mid-career experts who wanted to pursue change in a faster and more flexible way than they could as a part of public administration. The key question during this period was not whether the countries of the region want democracy and to join the Euro-Atlantic community, but how to do it effectively and more quickly. That is why debating was gradually replaced with the provision of policy interventions based on more sophisticated research, diversification of engagement with decision-makers, and professionalisation of communications to serve different audiences. As accession to the EU became 'a main game in town', Western Balkan think tanks started developing the ability to play the double-level game – influencing policy both at home and in Brussels and EU capitals.

Some Western Balkan think tanks paved the path for improvement of inter-state relations by the creation of Track Two dialogues on bilateral and regional disputes. The first regional partnerships were initiated to coordinate the production of comparative research so as to inspire positive competition among the elites within the region and to decrease security dilemma by increasing transparency of national policies. The bonds developed within transnational networks also served in the cases of inter-state incidents to promptly collect information 'from the other side' and put out potential disinformation fires in their home countries. Last, regional partnerships were used to scale up advocacy with international actors, since the interest and resources of external actors shifted to more troubled regions.

Think tanks as democracy-defenders?

In the last few years, the Western Balkan think tanks were the first to diagnose autocratisation in the region, but they were not able to prevent it. In contrast to the nineties, when the autocratic and repressive practices were more open, this wave has been more gradual and sophisticated. The new autocrats came into power through mostly democratic elections and used legal disguise to re-purpose key policy processes and institutions to serve private interests. An example of state capture practice is tailored-made laws. Such laws are frequently adopted under the excuse of alignment with EU standards, while at the same time, diminishing checks and balances and thus creating space for impunity. Such policy choices are legitimised by polarising populist narratives that divide the public into 'us' and 'them', either by reviving animosities within the region or targeting those that criticise the government's reforms. As a result, frail peace and political competition are additionally weakened, although to a different extent within the region. Kosovo, and more recently North Macedonia and Montenegro, are more pluralistic, while the civic space, media freedoms, and political contest in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Serbia are shrinking to the extent that democracy is increasingly distrusted by citizens over quick solutions.

Civil society actors, including think tanks, that challenge official accounts are attacked in orchestrated smear campaigns in mainstream media, by government-organised nongovernmental organisations (GONGOs) and trolls in social media, or even hacked. Besides a difficult policy environment at home, a polarised international environment with no clear democracy champions among big powers is also complicating the defence of nascent democracies in the Western Balkans. All these challenges have been deepened and amplified with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Back to the future

The think tanks in the Western Balkans are currently searching for ways to address the new normal. The biggest challenge is **getting out of urgency mode of reacting to everyday news and finding mental space for reflection** and preparing scenarios to run marathons along the paths previously not walked. The new scenarios need to answer questions on how to remain influential and not feed into legitimisation of state captors, who to engage with, how to bridge over populist narratives and polarisation, how to produce and place credible research when public access to information and media is shrinking and fragmenting, and last but not the least how to secure organisational resilience in the context of pressures and threats to civil society.

Some are shifting from direct engagement with national policymakers and engaging with other civil society actors to re-build national constituency in favour of democracy. This may include assisting with research and advocacy or partnering with other national democracy defenders and grass-root movements. In most countries, civil society is avoiding partnering with political parties. The other strategy is to connect with the citizens whose interests they claim to represent through participatory research or public education. Such approaches assume spending more time in direct contact with citizens listening to their fears and frustrations and providing ways to address them. Another strategy is to keep doing what think tanks do best, and that it is to put into the wider context the evidence collected through research of state capture and advocacy against it, through leveraging the influence and support of international stakeholders. Whichever strategy is taken, the defence of fragile peace and democracy in the Western Balkans and globally will require that think tanks deploy their research and other capabilities to engage in the battles of narratives and fostering a sense of community within the nation and the region.

'The state of confusion in which the pandemic left political institutions was the perfect opportunity to shine'.

FRANCESCO OBINO

Can Covid-19 flip North–South power imbalances in research?

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Can Covid-19 flip North–South power imbalances in research?

BY FRANCESCO OBINO
Head of Programmes I Global Development Network

In all the deep despair of 2020, the hours of sleep missed to work while the quarantined family are asleep, and the odd feeling that doing so was in any case a privilege, one particular discussion felt like a breath of fresh air: fellow researchers from Bolivia, Myanmar, and Nigeria, talking on the 'Doing Research' panel at the OTT conference last May, found some positive sides to the global spread of social distancing policies. What? How? And, last but not least, why?

Connecting from Cochabamba, Sharim Ribeira, research associate at CERES, told the audience that the pandemic sparked an otherwise unlikely quest for 'evidence' in Bolivia, resetting the level playing field for research organisations in the country. Old actors found new energies to redefine their niche and public contribution, in a landscape otherwise lacking dynamism and competition.

From Yangon, Zaw Oo, executive director of CESD, described with amazement the sudden disappearance of both helicopter researchers and expat researchers in Myanmar. This 'void', compounded with an unprecedented demand for analytical research from both government and international agencies, translated into new and important opportunities for local think tanks and researchers to advise their government.

Abiodun Ekbetokun, assistant director for research at NACETEM in Ife, Nigeria, told the panel that the state of confusion in which the pandemic left political institutions was the perfect opportunity to shine: putting forward one's own intellectual leadership and specifically putting forward one's curated questions and priorities on Covid-19 impacts, for those in positions of power to reckon with. Expanding, in the process, their imagination.

Was the pandemic, suddenly, an opportunity for researchers to emerge in the public light? Was Covid-19 an opportunity to build the (otherwise inexplicably troubled) case for social research, as a critical tool to make sense of societal change and public action?

For many it was, at least potentially, and I found it inevitable to think the opportunity was as exciting as the trigger was, in fact, depressing.

Were my colleagues entrenched optimists? Did we really need a pandemic to make the case for better positioning of local research actors in their own research system, even if for the duration of a panel? What did this say about the 'business-as-usual' scenario in places as far from each other as Cochabamba, Yangon, or Ife?

One thing the pandemic brought forth is how little is known, and to a large extent how little attention is paid to, systemic dynamics of social research, among those who support it and fund it globally.

While much attention goes into discussing the work of individual researchers on specific topics, it is rarely the case that the same effort goes into understanding how those findings will be disseminated or used, or how many more research projects and what kind of institutions it took to get to *that* point, who funded *those*, what the careers and aspirations of the researchers involved look like, and what makes it easy, or difficult, to work on one's own questions, define challenging research agendas, or come up with compelling answers that could serve public and policy debates, when you are a social scientists in the global South. There is really little 'evidence' on the power struggle for funding and public credibility between disciplines, young and seasoned researchers, methods and types of questions that can be asked – particularly when it comes to Southern research systems.

North–South dynamics, as Zaw Oo's testimony shows, is an inherent part of this black box – and those supporting and funding research in the global South cannot avoid the question for too much longer. Will the end of the pandemic bring helicopter researchers back? Why does helicopter research still exist and why is it so popular? Will the pandemic-triggered crisis be 'long enough' for local think tanks to become default references 'at home'? Clearly, after the 1 Feb coup, Myanmar will be battling with different challenges throughout 2021, but I wonder about Abiodun's and Sharim's comments on Nigeria and Bolivia – and other countries too.

Looking at this issue from a global perspective, and from the perspective of the supporters, advocates and donors committed to social research in the South as a necessary ingredient of development and democracy, will mean paying more attention to research systems in 2021 (and onwards!). This implies flipping the basic construct that still defines Southern research systems as places lacking research capacity, and starting to look systematically and comparatively into how research capacity is built locally and distributed, and to what purpose – for producing, disseminating and using research. Ultimately, debates about academic quality alone lose meaning if we cannot gauge their broader significance and impact in the local research system.

A final reflection: this thought started off because of a virtual meeting. It was not a second choice, but (realistically) the *only* way we could have sat together and had this discussion in a casual way, and it would have not happened, not so casually, not then, without the pandemic. Something is glowing, after all, in all the darkness and fatigue?

‘South Africa’s re-entry into the world after 1994 and its active engagement in international affairs from the start, allowed SAIIA to build on the sound independent reputation it had established during apartheid’.

ELIZABETH SIRIDOPOULUS

Think tanks in times of political transformation

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BY ELIZABETH SIRIDOPOULUS
Chief Executive | South African Institute of International Affairs

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The national political transformation that began in earnest in 1990 impacted all organisations in South Africa. For the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) that had been established in 1934 as an independent, membership-based organisation, with the aim of furthering studies of international affairs, it meant introspection on the future role of the Institute, as international isolation disappeared and the world both at home and abroad was changing rapidly. Equally it was a significant opportunity to contribute to the shaping of South Africa's foreign policy and reflection on the implications of the 'new world order' that had been heralded by George HW Bush. One concern at the time, expressed by SAIIA's national chairman, was that as the East-West divide was ending, he feared the deepening of the North-South divide – an issue that has again been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the increasingly polarised domestic milieu of the 1970s and 1980s, SAIIA saw its role as focusing on research and conferences that tackled the critical issues facing South Africa at the time. In the late 1970s, in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto uprising, the Institute began organising small weekend conferences that brought together South Africans of all colours and of widely differing political views to discuss critical issues among themselves and with participants from overseas. Those meetings led later to a series of weekend conferences for corporate members, where SAIIA's facilitating role enabled contact across political and racial divides at a time when too little of that was happening.

Some of the topics addressed during that period included: 'Education and training for development', 'The future of South West Africa' and 'South Africa in the world: The realities'. Furthermore, while the apartheid government had only limited relations with independent African states, SAIIA engaged in its activities with scholars from across Africa where possible. In the 1980s SAIIA introduced a series of big 'international outlook' conferences, which were intended to expose South Africans to important outside opinions and thought, so as to encourage thinking inside South Africa on what needed to change in the country.

Much of the research and related activity in the early 1990s focused on understanding South Africa's new position in the world and stimulated dialogue on the future of South Africa's foreign policy.

As South Africa moved towards the first democratic elections in 1994, a Transitional Executive Council (TEC) was established in November 1993 to govern South Africa until the elections. A number of sub-councils operated under the TEC (similar to ministries). SAIIA's national director at the time, Professor John Barratt, was nominated to serve on the Sub-Council on Foreign Affairs. There he served together with, among others, the future deputy minister of foreign affairs, Aziz Pahad. While Barratt had been nominated by the Democratic Party, he himself was not a member, unlike the other members of the sub-council who had been nominated by their respective parties. He had been nominated as an expert on international affairs. By the time of the elections in April 1994, the sub-council had presented a set of proposals to the TEC for consideration aimed at helping the new government hit the ground running once it came to power.

However, from the early 1990s the Institute had to contend with significant funding challenges. Corporate membership, which had been the primary source of income for SAIIA during the apartheid years, began to decline due to cost-cutting and mergers. In some instances, corporations believed that since the country was now becoming a democracy, support for civil society organisations such as SAIIA was no longer necessary. While efforts were made to shore up domestic revenue in the ensuing decade, SAIIA's income came increasingly from research grants from abroad, a situation that remains the case today. The challenge today is how to build up a stronger domestic revenue base in a very constrained local economy.

South Africa's re-entry into the world after 1994 and its active engagement in international affairs from the start, allowed SAIIA to build on the sound independent reputation it had established during apartheid. It also enabled SAIIA to make new fruitful contacts in Africa and Asia where those had been curtailed under apartheid. With the new government's focus on reconnecting with the rest of Africa and asserting its African identity, SAIIA's mission became to understand and analyse South Africa's and Africa's relations with the world, a mission which continues to this day. While SAIIA is a South African institute, it considers itself part of a broader network of African think tanks that have grown since the 1990s, whose objectives are to contribute to a more informed and capacitated African engagement on the international stage.

‘Think tanks in Mexico not only face the inherent difficulties of the crisis but also the attacks coming directly from the government’.

DAVID GÓMEZ-ÁLVAREZ

Think tanks in Mexico: Shielding civil society organisations

Think tanks in Mexico: Shielding civil society organisations

BY DAVID GÓMEZ-ÁLVAREZ
Executive Director I Transversal Think Tank

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Despite its size and importance, Mexican civil society is among the weakest in the region. This structural fragility can be explained through a set of conditions that determine its weak relative position in comparison with other Latin American countries.

For some specialists, the appearance of organised civil society can be traced back to the 1968 student movement massacre on 2 October that year. The social outrage caused by this genocide led to the emergence of early human rights and political participation organisations. However, a big part of the social leadership was later coopted or marginalised by authoritarian rule.

It was not until the 1985 earthquake that civil society broke onto the national scene. Many social organisations, particularly in Mexico City, responded better and faster than the government. For many specialists, this episode marked a before and after in citizen participation in the country. Later, in 1988, with the presidential voting fraud, many social organisations mobilised to defend the vote. Nevertheless, the regime managed to defuse the movement and kept the activism of many social leaders under some control.

Throughout the Mexican transition to democracy, and as the opposition gained power, many civic organisations began to emerge and occupy influential spaces in the country's public affairs. With the first divided government in 1997, when the president's party lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time, many organisations became involved in the national debate. The biggest trigger for citizen participation occurred with the first alternating government in 2000, when the opposition first won the presidency of the Republic.

Since then, not without intermittency and some setbacks, Mexican civil society has occupied increasingly relevant spaces. The enactment of the Civil Society Development Act in 2004 gave civil society organisations a key impetus for their development and consolidation.

The emergence and development of think tanks in Mexico was possible because of the growing awareness of civil society organisations on the importance of strategically influencing public policies by developing technical arguments. The government also recognised the importance of incorporating independent voices into the public decision-making processes. The funding provided by the arrival of more international organisations and foundations that wanted to promote their agendas in Mexico also contributed significantly to their development.

Nevertheless, 2018 marked the beginning of the think tank crisis in Mexico. Mexico's current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, not only distrusts civil society but has attacked it through various channels. López Obrador has cut budgets and funds for social organisations, discredited independent research, and forced tax audits onto certain organisations. These actions have caused many think tanks to lose funding, third-party support, and influence over public decisions.

The pandemic crisis has posed an adverse scenario for civil society organisations. Think tanks in Mexico not only face the inherent difficulties of the crisis but also the attacks coming directly from the government. However, many of these organisations continue with their much-needed work, looking for new forms of organisation that allow them to survive. This context forecasts a profound reconfiguration of civil society in its relationship with the state in the short-term future.

Timeline: Mexican historical events (1994–2021)

	CSOS CONTEXT	NATIONAL CONTEXT
1994	• Entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) opens up a discussion about human rights protection and globalisation. • Mexican civil society organisations (CSOs) attract foreign funding and establish alliances with American counterparts. • CSOs ally with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.	• Mexico enters NAFTA. • Armed uprising of the EZLN.
1996 - 1999	• Mexican CSOs collaborate with the international legal system for the protection of human rights.	
1999–2000	• Creation of the Citizen Power (Poder Ciudadano in Spanish) coalition: More than 600 CSOs with the intention of carrying out the initiative called 'Citizen Action for Democracy and Life' sought to articulate a national agenda to present to the candidates in the upcoming elections. • After the election, international funding for CSOs decreases. • CSOs are forced to institutionalise since they no longer seek a radical change of regime but rather to perfect a democratic system.	• Vicente Fox accepts the postulates of the Citizen Power coalition. • Vicente Fox is elected president of Mexico.

2000–2005	• Organisations dedicated to the defence of human rights are recognised as tax-deductible.	• Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information is approved. • Promulgation of the Federal Law for the Promotion of Activities Performed by Civil Society Organizations provides a framework of legal certainty for CSOs.
2006	• Presidential elections of 2006 polarise public opinion and civil society.	• Felipe Calderón is elected president of Mexico.
2006–2011	• Victims of violence and relatives of disappeared persons organise in CSOs. • All CSOs are recognized as tax-deductible. • Mexico joins the Open Government Partnership and the Network for Accountability is created.	• Felipe Calderón begins the War Against Drug Trafficking.
2012		• Enrique Peña Nieto is elected president and the Institutional Revolutionary Party gets back in power.
2012–2018	• IMCO and Transparencia Mexicana launch the #3de3 initiative. • CSOs propel a reform proposal to the General Law of Administrative Responsibilities. • Creation of the #SeguridadSinGuerra initiative against the socalled Internal Security Law, approved during Peña Nieto's administration.	• Numerous corruption scandals involve the president. • Creation of the Pact for Mexico. Reform of the General Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information.
2018	• AMLO's team holds meetings with CSOs and the #SeguridadSinGuerra (Security Without War) collective.	• Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) is elected president of Mexico.
2019–2021	• AMLO issues a statement in which he forbids the transfer of budget resources to any civil society organisation. • #LoJustoEsQueSepas, an initiative propelled by CSOs to make all judicial sentences public is approved.	• The creation of the National Guard (Guardia Nacional) is approved. • AMLO begins treating civil society as a political adversary. • Covid-19 pandemic begins.

‘Digital developments from diverse social actors bring with them new demands and expectations’.

FELIPE PORTOCARRERO

Re-examining the concept of university

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How do think tanks react to or foster change?

The year 2020 will be remembered as that in which humanity was faced with the globally catastrophic events of Covid-19. Its overwhelming and destructive impact has been metaphorically likened to a 'perfect storm', an 'earthquake with devastating effects' or to a 'gigantic tsunami'. These descriptions, along with so many others, have been used to go some way towards explaining what some would class as an irreversible change to our modern age, a point of inflexion in the history of humanity, occurring on a planetary scale.

New ways of working and studying, new social habits, cultural practices and consumer patterns have taken our lives by storm, reminding us of the fragility of personal and social connections that give life to social coexistence. A megatrend being witnessed as we navigate this fourth industrial revolution is the emergence and expansion of the digital paradigm. As a consequence of such, new nascent historical references are introducing elements of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity into all areas of human and organisational activity. This is now an irreversible part of a challenging reality and it is unrelenting for those of us who must make immediate and long-term decisions to ensure the sustainability and relevance of universities.

In the current historical context, individuals and societies seek enhanced knowledge based on solid, credible evidence that is generated with the ethical and analytical rigor afforded by research protocols. Those of us leading higher education institutions are tasked with the evaluation and provision of creative and flexible solutions to the growing footprint being made by digital technologies on the educational objectives of universities and on the education of students who now make intensive use of these technological resources.

Therefore, remaining passive and resistant to organisational change, and only proposing partial, short-term solutions to long-term, in-depth educational problems is both unproductive and fruitless. Doing things as they have always been done without giving tangible recognition to the idea of innovation and change, is a route that will lead directly to failure, irrelevance and institutional obsolescence.

The unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic put a sudden halt to in-person teaching and called for the development of digital skills in higher education facilities to become a matter of great priority. Of course, embracing technology requires the development of a critical spirit and the civic values necessary to guarantee an ethos that will avoid the slide towards the darker side of social networks and the harmful effects on the mental health of our students. The promotion of digital inclusion for students from vulnerable homes and for those with difficulties accessing the internet is essential and should be considered a basic human right. Only this way can we avoid deepening social injustice and inequality across a huge contingent of the population. Such societal groups, usually marginalised and most commonly located in rural areas or in medium-sized cities across the country, have already seen huge losses in terms of educational skills but also in terms of employability and the generation of future income. Documenting the long-term socioeconomic consequences on their lives has begun, and it prefigures a worrying outlook.

If we do not incorporate this spirit of critical thinking and solidarity into our training processes, we cannot hope to enhance the training experiences of those compromised young people with just proactive and transformative leadership. It is not enough that such people are simply connected to digital learning platforms. They must also be conscious of the responsibility that befalls them as agents for change in the polarised and unequal world in which they live.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic it has become clear that the fields of university teaching and learning have seen a dizzying acceleration in their digital developments, a speed that could not have been anticipated just a few years ago. Against this disruptive backdrop, lecturers and students have found themselves having to turn their hand to remote learning in an unusually short period of time.

These digital developments from diverse social actors bring with them new demands and expectations (academic micro-credentials, data analysis, lifetime learning, inter- and multi-disciplinarity, increased civic involvement, and much more). They present urgent challenges that will need to be incorporated in a joined-up, integrative and collective manner into an ecosystem that promotes an institutional culture that is open to change and permanent adjustment.

If we understand digital transformation to mean creatively taking ownership of available technologies and not just to be the intensive use of digital tools, and we also understand that its use does not have to rule out in-person and physically present university communities, then its precise use, programmed and prioritised into long-term institutional strategies, can open new horizons and bring hybridised educational capacities to the formative objectives of universities worldwide.

'A framework for change can be like a hypothesis that you keep adjusting as you move forward'.

HANS GUTBROD

Think tanks, change, and bright spots

Think tanks, change, and bright spots

BY HANS GUTBROD
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How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Think tanks, in some ways, are all about change. Not much thinking is needed to defend the status quo. And yet, some think tanks arguably do not think enough about change, and their impact beyond research quality.

That certainly has been my experience, from working with a range of think tanks in various contexts. In a recent case, I did some consulting for a think tank that was already successful: good funding, well-known, consistently good products, an engaged board, successful leadership transitions. Amidst all that, however, only some of the most senior researchers had a clear idea on how they want to bring about policy change. This limited the impact of the institution, which probably could have had even bigger reach.

Overall, of course, a sensible approach to change is well understood. In my consulting, I repeatedly highlighted the excellent 12-step program for policy change by Lawrence McDonald and Ruth Levine. Policy researchers, for example, often forget to brand their initiatives. As far as I can tell, a well-branded initiative is more likely to be mentioned in dinner conversation, and certainly more likely to be remembered the next morning. It also offers the advantage that it can be traced more easily, making it easier to demonstrate impact to oneself and donors.

Branding is just one out of twelve sensible steps that Lawrence McDonald and Ruth Levine put forward. My own impression is that it doesn't matter so much which framework you use. Chip and Dan Heath have suggested a great framework in their high street bestseller *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, which (building on the psychological model of Jonathan Haidt) highlights ways of overcoming institutional lethargy. John Kotter, in turn, proposed an 8-step change model that lines up well with what I have seen: if there is no sense of urgency, for example, it will be very hard to get things to move.

In this regard, a framework for change can be like a hypothesis that you keep adjusting as you move forward. Your initial hypothesis almost certainly will prove wrong in some respects. Yet this is better than acting without a structured framework.

All of this matters not just in terms of outside impact: it matters for change inside the organisation as well. Engaging with a broader question of change is more about overall approach and sensitivity, not just about fixed knowledge or technique. Focusing on ‘bright spots’ is one of the excellent suggestions that comes from change literature (in more formal terms described as positive deviancy): what is already working, and could be amplified? In one institution I worked in, we realised at some point that our youngest employees brought a fizz of energy to the place. We wondered whether rather than hiring the best and the brightest graduates, heavy on theory and light on practical skills, we could maybe train our employees ourselves. We started a Junior Fellowship, which transformed the institution, as it helped us put in place a team that was trained to our specific needs. They performed beyond any expectation. This allowed us to greatly expand our work. Some of them still work with my old organisation, more than 10 years later. In that way, an emphasis on change can be a tool to reflect and improve internal practices.

These theories and approaches should of course be taught at university. In the absence of widespread familiarity, think tanks do well to model the approach to change that they would like others to have within their own institution as well.

‘The pandemic ruptured the foundations of power and privilege. It exposed the weak governance of the world’s superpowers’.

PRIYANTHI FERNANDO

The naked emperors: Reality, post-Covid-19

The naked emperors: Reality, post-Covid-19

BY PRIYANTHI FERNANDO
Executive Director I International Women's Rights Action Watch-Asia Pacific

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Around International Women's Day last year, we were anticipating a stay-at-home order and gearing up for it, though few of us could have predicted how 2020 turned out. It was a year that changed the world – and today, a year later, as Covid-19 vaccines are being rolled out, many people anxiously await the possibility of 'returning to normal'. The changes that the pandemic engendered were unprecedented, unpredictable, and unbearable for some. The impact on women everywhere was particularly severe, but many of the responses and the measures for recovery and rebuilding by states and other institutions were insensitive to women's lived realities. Everyone's worldviews were challenged, yet, for what now seems a fleeting moment, we caught a glimpse of the possibility of a different reality.

The pandemic ruptured the foundations of power and privilege. It exposed the weak governance of the world's superpowers. It challenged the foundations of the global economic system, and the received wisdom and policy prescriptions of the guardians of that system, the international financial institutions. It led us to question the values inherent in our wage structures – showing us that recovery from the pandemic was contingent on the work of those at the bottom of the wage pyramid: the health workers, the cleaners, the drivers, the women, whose labour society valued the least. It highlighted the centrality of care as the means to sustain both people and planet.

During the pandemic, feminists and feminist economists came into their own, taking the ruptures as a point of departure and visioning a new world order. They spoke alongside women's rights activists, labour activists, migrant activists, sex-workers, LGBTQ+ and indigenous peoples, and shared the possibility of a world in which the naked emperors of capitalism are deposed, where the skies are clear and there is a real likelihood that the climate crisis is averted; where digital communications are non-discriminatory and safe, where the goal of economic growth is debunked in favour of care and the wellbeing of people, and where individuality has given way to a reassertion of the importance of the commons.

Unfortunately for the planet and most of its people, it seems hard to hold on to this vision. There are many obstacles in the way: the anxiety and isolation of the traumatic Covid-19 months and intensification, subsidence and re-emergence of infections in second and third waves made many people yearn to go back to 'normal', warts and all; the machinations of privileged people and global institutions who are reasserting their dominance kicked aside our dreams of equality; a new administration in the US was quick to diminish the memory of a nightmare four years of irresponsible governance; and our own existential crisis limited our ability to reimagine what needs to be done differently.

It is unlikely then that the responses to the Covid-19 pandemic will trigger transformative change. Despite the rhetoric of their leaders[1], the multilateral institutions have frozen in time, and have not been able to respond creatively to the crisis or to recommend anything more than business as usual. The IMF and World Bank are in a pre-Covid intellectual lockdown, bolstered by their rich country dominated governance structures and the inability of their economists to think outside of the proverbial box. The IMF continues to encourage post-Covid austerity measures and the World Bank continues to promote its pre-Covid development model. Neither allow for any movement towards a feminist economy or social justice. The Covid-19 crisis seems also to have solidified the inertia of the UN bureaucracy. It crippled the functioning of the human rights system and denied access for civil society groups to international spaces that were hard fought for merely because of the inability of the bureaucracy to facilitate alternative forms of engagement.

The UN, the IMF and the World Bank were created by the rich countries post-World War II. They have long passed their sell-by-date. We are at the point where we need to reject their stewardship of global governance. The change that we want calls for a different kind of global governance and agenda setting that is generated through cross-movement interactions and activism of the Global South. If the people of the Global South want to overturn neo-liberalism, 'smash the patriarchy' and create a just and equal society and a sustainable planet we must begin by designing a post-Covid-19 multilateralism that serves our purpose and builds on those encouraging pandemic experiences that led us to envision the possibility of a different reality.

[1] See the UN Secretary-General's Nelson Mandela Lecture and Kristalina Georgieva, IMF Managing Director's blog Covid-19 Gender Gap.

‘The challenge is to see people as fully human, to take back one’s projections, to suspend judgement and remain curious about others’.

AJOY DATTA

Racism in think tanks – how and why it manifests and what we might do to address it

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Racism in think tanks – how and why it manifests and what we might do to address it

BY AJOY DATTA
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The Overseas Development Institute published a piece on racism in the international development sector and how to address it. However, there was very little on how racism manifests in the sector in practical terms. In this article, I'm going to fill that gap and suggest what we might do to address racism.

Difficult experiences

To put this piece into context, I am a brown-skinned son of a couple who made their way to British shores from South Asia and I have worked in the UK international development sector for almost 20 years. To begin, here are four short vignettes of recent situations that initially 'got under my skin':

1. An older white evaluator, who was managing a task as part of a team I was leading, responded to my questions, critique and advice by in part ignoring me and with some defensiveness. After being invited to share how they felt about the process, they said I patronised and micromanaged them.
2. A white researcher I was working with on an evaluation lost his temper (in a WhatsApp thread) when he found one half of a deck of PowerPoint slides (to be presented to a donor later that week) were not to his liking. He assumed he would be presenting all slides in the deck, 'misremembering' that we had agreed to present half the slides each (not surprising given we had been working together on the evaluation).
3. Older white managers at an international development think tank reacted strongly with aggression when I showed them how I was taking (more) seriously the complexity of human interaction in my consultancy projects. At the same time, I realised I was being paid less than less experienced colleagues in the same programme, was repeatedly told I was filling in my timesheets incorrectly and finally overlooked for promotion in favour of someone who had less experience and knowledge in the relevant field.
4. Although I had made presentations and run workshops with people from countries in Africa and Asia, I found myself getting more anxious when presenting to colleagues in my own organisation (based in London, UK, where the majority of people were racialised as white).

These situations left me uncomfortable, anxious and/or upset, which in some cases contributed to poor productivity. Organisations and groups can be traumatic places to work, where people get hurt, distressed and unhappy regardless of one's identity. But did race and racism play any role? We can never be sure. Clear expressions of racism are less frequent these days (although on the rise), with racism often communicated through non-verbal modes of being, or where people say one thing and mean another. Moreover, it is hard to isolate the impact of one aspect of one's identity (such as race) from others (such as gender, class, etc): intersectionality is a key concept here. But let's assume racism is a key factor: what might be the mechanisms through which it is playing out, and what might be done to facilitate change?

Understanding how racism functions

Firstly, it's important to acknowledge that race is not real but instead a social and political construct. However, racism is all too real.

A Tale of 'O' illustrates how discrimination (including racism) can play out, exploring the consequences of being seen as 'other' in a group. It focuses on a group of people in which some are 'the many', who are referred to as the 'X's, and some are the few, the 'O's. It illustrates and explores the personal and societal dynamics of being different, which include disproportionately experiencing acts of aggression. This illustrates the effects of racism, but not the causes.

Theory developed by Fakhry Davids who has written about race and difference from a psychoanalytical approach, suggests that people tend to split off the darker (or unwanted) aspects of their character and project them onto those they see as the 'racialised other' (in order to contain anxiety).

The racialised other will have a role assigned to them (often unconsciously) informed by certain stereotypes (for instance, in my case – being a Brit with South Asian heritage – the loyal administrator, the passive Asian, the marginalised other, or being exploitative, especially in an African context). The racialised other, depending on how vulnerable they are, can be made to fulfil the role that has been assigned to them (by, for instance, being passive, or exploitative). This comprises one's 'internal racist organisation', which protects one from the unwanted parts of the self. If/when the racialised other does not conform to certain behaviours, this unleashes anxiety, preventing one from being able to think rationally.

While Davids' approach suggests that what goes on in people's minds shapes what happens socially (an inside out approach), Farhad Dalal takes the opposite approach, suggesting that what happens socially and historically shapes what happens in people's minds (outside-in). He argues that the structures of people's psyches reflect broader structures of society where historically, for instance, in Europe the term 'white' has been associated with goodness and 'black' with evil. Dalal says this is not a natural development and has instead evolved as a result of power dynamics, where races have been differentiated to make a distinction between the 'haves' and 'must-not-haves' – which underpins our capitalist economic system.

With these in mind, returning to the opening vignettes, we might speculate that a non-white person in a leadership position can provide a serious challenge to white authority. One might argue that my advice and critical feedback were contrary to how someone who looked like me should behave, which subsequently unleashed anxiety in the evaluator. In the second vignette, despite having worked with me for a number of months, when it came to presenting findings to the client, the researcher failed to see me as an equal partner. In the third vignette, senior managers failed to engage with my critique, instead dismissing the way that it was made. Sharing a critique of the way in which senior managers operated was seen as an act of rebellion that ultimately ended in the doling out of punishment. And in the fourth vignette, on one hand, I was acting out the anxiety and fear that white colleagues had located in me, whilst on the other hand, I had to some extent, internalised racism, struggling to exert my personal authority and doubting my own skills and abilities.

But as Fred Moten highlights, racist or discriminatory actions not only take their toll on the perceived 'victims' but also the perceived 'perpetrators'.

What can we do?

The way forward (as Emma Dabiri says), is certainly not about people racialised as white being charitable or kind to people racialised as non-white.

The first step is being aware. Farhad Dalal says we are all racialised and cannot not experience ourselves and the world, to some degree, in colour coded ways. So the issue is not just about people racialised as white and non-white, but also the system that created these categories.

As such, we need to be aware of the roles that we are often unconsciously assigning to ourselves and others. Different groups tend to be assigned different roles. I know my black friends will be subject to different and arguably more inhumane stereotypes than I. However, being stereotyped at all has a corrosive effect on one's wellbeing. Ebony McGee discusses the effect that stereotypes, which both 'lift' and 'threaten', have on high achieving Asian and black students studying STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) at college in the US. Knowing that others might be assigning roles to oneself can be troubling as one can get caught up with either fitting in with people's expectations or reacting against them, making it difficult to keep hold of what one feels, thinks or wants. The challenge then is to see all people (including oneself) as fully human, multi-dimensional, with strengths and flaws, to suspend judgement (based on pre-conceptions and surface level characteristics) and remain curious about others.

At a group or organisational level, as Patricia Shaw says, life tends to unfold through communication and conversation among its members. Therefore, changes in practices of a group or organisation are likely to start with changes in the conversations they have. As people talk about what they are doing differently, they are likely to think and act differently. This suggests that people have got to start talking about racism (and discrimination more broadly).

Those racialised as non-white tend to be more experienced in talking about race and racism. Robin DiAngelo says white people in particular need to build the stamina to sustain conscious and explicit engagement with race (and not just those who interact with minorities or in diverse environments). And any notions of allyship ought to be replaced with solidarity, which acknowledges that forces of oppression have similar origins.

We know that talking about race and diversity in groups and organisations is difficult. There is the anxiety about being implicated leading to denial and defensiveness, or the fear that talking about it will lead to a re-enactment of racism, which can re-traumatising. But it can also be hard because people tend to take a politically correct tone, with racism often seen as something that is in the process of being defeated rather than something that needs to be struggled with continuously. The problem with political correctness is that it reduces complexity and freezes a group's ability to think. It especially obscures the guilt that is the foundation for reparation and change, producing a rigidity that prevents an openness and flexibility.

This reinforces the notion that race is a scary issue that many would prefer to avoid. However, if people don't talk about racism (and the history that underpins this), however clumsily, they won't be able to think about it (differently) and will forever go on thinking and acting in the same way – both individually and as organisations.

‘Solutions to global challenges require multi-stakeholder cooperation, pooling of resources and mutual learning’.

SANDRA BREKA

A new strategy towards lasting impact

A new strategy towards lasting impact

BY SANDRA BREKA
Member of the Board of Management I Robert Bosch Stiftung

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

This year the Robert Bosch Stiftung will complete the most comprehensive reorganisation – in terms of both content and structure – of its 57-year history. We are refocusing our activities on ten topics across three funding areas, from our previous 34 topics across five funding areas. We have undertaken this strategic realignment in response to social and political changes across the globe, as well as new developments in the philanthropic sector. Based on the legacy of Robert Bosch, whose aspiration to alleviate hardship and contribute to peace and stability still guides our actions today, the Robert Bosch Stiftung is active in the areas of Health, Education, and Global Issues.

Global Issues encompasses the Foundation's contributions to solving challenges in the areas of Democracy, Peace, Climate Change, Inequality, Migration, and Immigration Society. The strategies place particular emphasis on the nexus between these issues.

Through its strategic partnerships and the Robert Bosch Academy, the Foundation furthermore supports interdisciplinary exchange between experts and decision-makers at the Robert Bosch Academy, promotes the work of think tanks worldwide, and strengthens the role of science in society.

Solutions to global challenges require multi-stakeholder cooperation, pooling of resources and mutual learning. Think tanks are vital actors in these processes, and important partners in our work.

As independent research organisations, think tanks are policy-oriented, produce evidence, collect and synthesise data, and create spaces for exchange between stakeholders. They contribute to knowledge-based decision-making on challenges our societies face.

Our institutional partnerships offer think tanks the predictability of long-term support, as well as the flexibility needed to respond to changing circumstances.

‘Now is the time for think tanks to strive for effective change to the way we work’.

KEITH BURNET

The way we work

The way we work

BY KEITH BURNET
Former Director of Communications and Publishing I Chatham House

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Things are changing rapidly for think tanks and an awareness of the past can help us adapt for the future.

We are experiencing a revolution in the way organisations operate. From virtual reality headsets levelling the playing field for employees based in different locations, to fostering greater inclusivity now that homeworking is here to stay, the pandemic has accelerated change that many organisations had only just started to embrace.

For think tanks, finding different ways to communicate outputs, reach audiences and run events – as well as implementing the ongoing lessons from existing initiatives on, for example, gender, diversity and inclusion, and from taking a more open approach to the sharing of ideas and best practices via On Think Tanks and other forums – means that, generally, we have responded positively to the new ways in which we are working.

Further, the pandemic has created new opportunities for think tanks to capitalise on the general mood of change and a re-discovered appreciation of the value of expertise to review the way we fund, develop and promote our research. Now is the time for think tanks to strive for effective change to the way we work, whether this means an organisational restructure or the retention and development of global Zoom audiences in capacities other than meeting participants.

Although changes have been significant in the past year – and with more to come as we emerge from our various lockdowns – comparing the past year to a slower pace of change over a longer timeline may help alleviate any hesitation or concerns some have over some of the resulting and current uncertainty.

When Chatham House was founded in 1920, during the fallout from a pandemic, the founders' vision of an organisation to study international relations was unique. There were virtually no university courses on the topic and, politically, most nations had, prior to the end of the First World War, focused on a domestic agenda. Chatham House started from scratch with no clear model to follow, only the opportunities that derive from seeking to overcome a serious problem – in this case a near total lack of international understanding and cohesion.

From that starting point, the laborious and meticulous process of creating and maintaining records of the discussions from numerous meetings was the original purpose of Chatham House publications. The goal was to provide a detailed overview of the state of world affairs in order to make solutions-focussed recommendations to governments and others to help them learn lessons and avoid the repetition of mistakes.

Research projects were developed via study groups led by leading thinkers of the day, including John Maynard Keynes, and, effectively conceived and delivered, the outcomes of many of these projects have resonated for decades. EH Carr, a leading scholar in the 1930s, was pre-occupied by questions of international order and power and led a ground-breaking study group on nationalism, concluding that it was a major threat to peace and prosperity – a finding that echoes deeply with the great power competition we have today as China challenges US hegemony.

Those study groups and other meetings were conducted in male-dominated, smoke-filled rooms and the Chatham House Rule was devised to encourage inclusive and open dialogue in a trusted environment. Used effectively, the Rule brings people together, breaks down barriers and generates ideas and solutions – all the things that we strive to achieve today whether in person (with no smoke for sure), on Zoom, in a hybrid setting or in a simulated research environment. The means have radically changed but the purpose has not.

Today, think tanks embrace equality and inclusion. Embarrassed by manels and a lack of diversity as we should be, it was very satisfying to learn recently that 12 female members of Chatham House had written letters of complaint to the director in the 1930s when they discovered that the institute had hosted a fundraising dinner to which only men had been invited. The stark inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic should force the pace of change so none of us has to wait 90 years before the foresight of those women is fully realised.

There are therefore a number of lessons to be learned from the way Chatham House has worked over the decades. First, you don't need a clear model to develop the solution to the problem you are seeking to resolve as long as your goal is solutions-focussed. Second, you need to develop your solutions via trusted collaboration and research. Third, credible research will stand the test of time even if the outputs, methods of communications and types of participants evolve and change – this is inevitable and to be welcomed.

Finally, one element that is largely out of our control is the general speed of change as hastened and forced by world-changing events. This we need to roll with, accept and embrace.

WATCH THE CONVERSATION

Think tank communications and change

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‘Mainstream media have lost their high-category status – they are now just another voice in the marketplace of information’.

AIDAN MULLER

Why think tanks should learn from journalism in the digital era

Why think tanks should learn from journalism in the digital era

BY AIDAN MULLER
Digital Strategy Director I Cast from Clay

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Few industries have been more radically transformed by the digital revolution than journalism. We can talk about falling advertising revenue – but at a more fundamental level, this change has been characterised by a revolution in the information ecosystem.

This has implications for think tanks. The parallels between the challenges they and mainstream media face are stark:

- Both are having to come to terms with a world in which their hard currency – facts and data – no longer command unanimity.
- Both are distrusted by the populist left and the populist right, accused of being vehicles for the establishment.
- Both are having to re-examine what their commitment to principles of objectivity, impartiality, and non-partisanship means in a world where fact and truth are no longer absolutes.

Compared to think tanks, it is clear that traditional news is at the sharp end of the revolution. However, both operate within the same information ecosystem – and in time think tanks will have to address the same fundamental challenges. We must learn from the experience of mainstream media.

The Gutenberg Parenthesis

In the late 2000s, Tom Pettitt and Lars Ole Sauerberg put forward the idea that literate culture as we understand it was the anomaly rather than the rule – an anomaly that started with the invention of the printing press, and has been brought to an end by the advent of digital media.

Prior to Gutenberg, culture was mainly oral, and more fluid, less fixed. The permanence of print brought about stability. A small number of publishers, acting as information gatekeepers, provided authority and reach. This was perpetuated across radio, and then TV.

The digital era, in which everyone is a publisher, has undermined the role of the gatekeeper. Mainstream media have lost their high-category status – they are now just another voice in the marketplace of information.

In these circumstances it's very difficult for people to decide who to believe. The notion of a single, contained, objective truth had been intrinsically connected to the Gutenberg Parenthesis. Pettitt and Sauerberg argue that in the absence of God(s) – who underpinned trust in the pre-Gutenberg world – the digital revolution is suffering from a crisis of authority.

So where will this new authority come from? The jury's still out. But new hierarchies will emerge. They will rise from the new networked ecosystem. They will be more numerous, less permanent, and primarily personality-based. In a flattened ecosystem, organisations will have to *earn* our attention – and those that rise to the top will be those that have built their brand.

We're already seeing a reshuffle of the cards. Convergence in that some journalists are doubling up as social media influencers – and finding that authority comes from commentary rather than reporting. Also, divergence in that being a journalist is no longer a guarantee of influence in itself.

Post-journalism and the Overton window

Last November, media scholar Andrey Mir proposed the idea of 'post-journalism'. He argues that the shift from the classical journalism of fact to a post-journalism of opinion is the inevitable conclusion of the digitisation of news.

Post-journalism, he argues, 'mixes open ideological intentions with a hidden business necessity required for the media to survive'. The poster-boys for this shift are the *New York Times (NYT)* in response to the election of Donald Trump and *The Guardian* in response to Brexit.

The challenge facing the centrist mainstream press under Trump was the same as the challenge facing centrist mainstream think tanks: how to remain relevant when the current information ecosystem is pulling the rug from under your feet, and half the population questions the very foundations on which your business is built?

To our mind, this begs the question: does the *NYT*'s and *The Guardian*'s change in approach suggest that impartiality is only a viable approach when you're inside the tent? Is it a luxury afforded only to those who fall within the Overton window?

Those whose positioning falls outside the Overton window are by definition arguing for a paradigm shift — *de facto*, they *have* to embrace advocacy. They can't afford to be impartial.

Those on the edges of the Overton window are unashamedly advocates. This is precisely what made Rush Limbaugh so effective. This is also what empowers the Cato Institute and the Adam Smith Institute on one side of the think tank aisle, or the New Economics Foundation and (increasingly) the Institute for Public Policy Research on the other.

For decades, the Overton window has fitted squarely around an urban, socially liberal, broadly white, elite agenda. *The Guardian*'s and *NYT*'s values reflected that. So do centrist think tanks'.

Since the 2007/08 financial crash, we have witnessed a shift of the Overton window away from that centre of gravity. The mainstream political and media elite failed to recognise this before 2016, and were caught flat-footed.

A choice for think tanks

The *NYT*'s and *The Guardian*'s shift to advocacy is a recognition that the Overton window was drifting away from their positioning. They were faced with a choice:

1. Remain impartial by reflecting the new centre of gravity of the political debate; or
2. Stay true to their values but adopt a more advocacy-focused approach.

Option 1 would have meant loosening the ties with their urban, liberal values – a hard sell for their readership. Instead, they embraced Option 2 – advocacy – in a bid to remain true to their values while staying relevant. And relevance means survival.

Think tankers will draw their own conclusions about whether the *NYT* or *The Guardian* have managed to maintain their journalistic standards of impartiality, or whether they have been sacrificed at the altar of this more assertive approach.

There is perhaps a lesson here for think tanks. Where do you currently fall in relation to the Overton window? If you're squarely within it, keep calm and carry on.

If not, however, sooner or later you may be faced with the same two options.

'We have learnt that segmentation is useful and that we might need to have different personalities for different audiences'.

SONIA JALFIN

Get up, stand up, communicate and change

Get up, stand up, communicate and change

BY SONIA JALFIN
Director I Sociopúblico

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

Communications used to be like putting varnish on a wooden chair.

Someone would have designed the chair, discussed the details with colleagues, executed the design and then, two minutes before it was shown to the rest of the world, we at the communications agency would embellish it with some varnish hoping for someone to sit down in it. Some other decoration could be added to convince people that the chair was comfortable (even if it wasn't) but the chair itself would not change at this stage.

If you work at a think tank or any other knowledge production organisation, you can replace *chair* with *research*. But this is basically how advertising and marketing used to be, and sometimes still are. However, we now see communications as an integral part of the process of building something, because there's no better communications strategy than creating a really outstanding product. And to achieve that, we need an iterative process that considers the audience, the product and its communication, all together.

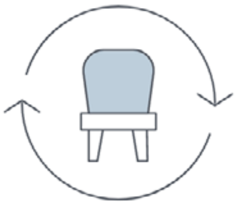
Communications also used to be all about consistency and stability. Find and sustain the unique voice of your brand. Don't alter your logo for years and, if you do, change it only minimally. Be consistent across all channels and with all your audiences. These principles still apply to the way we think about branding, especially for institutions. However, some of this is changing.

We have learnt that segmentation is useful and that we might need to have different personalities for different audiences. That being flexible about which topics we discuss can make us more relevant, particularly when a big topic emerges overnight (hello, Covid-19). That interaction is key and we cannot wait for a dozen approvals before replying to a post from a member of our community. And that if we act too quickly and make a mistake, organisations can also say sorry.

Some of these ideas connect very well with those of a book that is neither about communications, nor about think tanks: *Antifragile*, by Nassim Taleb. Taleb argues that being antifragile is even better than being resilient or robust: it is gaining from disorder. Maybe our organisations cannot go that far, but the idea makes us question whether consistency should reign, or if we should rather give the crown to flexibility, trial and error, adaptability and good use of chance.

So here we have two facts about present day communications:

1. It happens alongside the process of building something and not afterwards, when the thing is finished.
2. And it is not necessarily coherent and solid, but unstable and a bit unpredictable.



In other words, communications equals change.
We could call it *communichange*.

The process of *communichange*

At Sociopúblico we don't communicate chairs but complex ideas. Our 'chairs' are research results, databases, public awareness campaigns, and public policy recommendations. They are not always as stylish as, say, this Bertoia – a classic from modern design.

However, as contemporary furniture producers planning for a new release, we follow a process that starts with audience research to define how we are going to communicate with them, continues with iterations to refine those first ideas, and – when possible – adds some testing.

There is a design thinking methodology called 'jobs to be done' that encourages us to always ask ourselves: What job is [this product/research/piece] doing for my audience?

Answering this question leads to decisions on which formats and devices to use for the communication of a product, the tone we will adopt, the cases of consumption we will prioritise. And also sometimes leads to a reformulation of some aspects of the product itself.

Even when an organisation separates the production process from the communication process, this approach often brings them together again. We have seen it dozens of times. These are real examples:

- A think tank working on education hired us to rethink their data portal, and we ended up discovering that users were not that interested in the data but ready for action – so we launched a WhatsApp campaign.
- A startup focused on sustainability decided to go from NGO to private company after a branding exercise showed that their community valued their business model and how it made them sustainable.
- A team integrating four different areas at an international organisation started working with us to unify their message. In the process they discovered it was better to write a network of different messages for different audiences and topics, and at the same time launch a cross-teams ideation programme to build real connections among verticals.

Over time, I have found three advantages to this approach. The first and most obvious is that we can be more effective at connecting knowledge producers and their audiences, to everyone's enjoyment. The second is that, although communications products and research are increasingly solved through the use of software and algorithms, what we do through this process is an exercise of human collective thinking that cannot (yet) be automated. And finally, that an iterative and user-centred approach opens a space for reflection and ideation in researchers' and specialists' crowded agendas, which enriches us all, and lets us spend many happy moments together.

What else could we ask for?

Oh yes, a cushion would be great, please!

'Start creating content that advances the debates where you have expertise, that responds to what your audiences are talking about, where they are talking about it'.

JOHN SCHWARTZ

More content, better content

How do think tanks react to or foster change?

More content, better content

BY JOHN SCHWARTZ
CEO I Soapbox

Changes are coming to think tank digital content – video, audio, social channels, data vis, blog posts and, yes, even reports. Changes in structure and format. Changes in production processes and commissioning. Changes in timing. Changes that respond to what users are really talking about. Changes in volume and frequency.

Four years ago I published an On Think Tanks post called 'A Permanent Revolution in Think Tank Communications'.

In it, I characterised think tank comms as an ongoing journey towards greater professionalism, driven by the digital revolution. I singled out four elements as the next steps in the revolution: getting to grips with branding; understanding audiences; focussing on work that serves those audiences; and organising that work into campaigns.

But I also suggested that digital content production was a solved problem. That we knew what we needed to do and we just needed to get on and do it. Here's what I said:

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

Yeah ... the thing is … I might have been wrong about that.

Content and change

The truth is that high quality, prolific content and its production can transform an organisation.

Look around you: leading think tanks are turning into publishers of timely, relevant, evidence-based content on the issues where they have expertise. They are becoming media organisations with the in-house capability to produce knowledge and expertise.

Their influence and impact are determined less by their programme of research *per se* and more by the ways in which expertise and knowledge gained from that research can be brought to bear in debates across digital and traditional media channels and leveraged to set the political agenda.

Take a look at the social feeds of Chatham House, Brookings, the Council on Foreign Relations – you'll see what I mean. And the World Economic Forum is explicit about the change. In a 2020 article WEF's digital content head Mark Jones said this:

If you look at NGOs and international organisations … there tends to be an assumption that you can just write about yourselves, and people will want to read about it and share it … The WEF team asked themselves, why couldn't the WEF platform become the most interesting things that are going on around the topics that we all hold dearest to our hearts?

Stop creating content that is about what your think tank is doing.

Start creating content, at volume, that advances the debates where you have expertise, that responds to what your audiences are talking about, where they are talking about it. Content that is engaging and helpful. Take a risk on publishing content that does not conform to your party line but pushes the discourse forward.

More content, better content, useful content.

The means of think tank content production

The key to any good revolution is to seize control of the means of production. So what is the means of production for think tank content?

Well that would be … errm … researchers, for the most part.

Sadly, as professionals, we cannot seize control of researchers. But we can certainly have influence and we can certainly revolutionise the *modes* of production – the way we organise, distribute and present think tank content.

And we need to do this in a way that empowers researchers not restricts them. The publishing platform Medium recently changed their editorial strategy away from building magazine style publications and towards finding and supporting independent writers. They said:

'Trust is more important than ever and well-established editorial brands still have meaning. But today, credibility and affinity are primarily built by people — individual voices — rather than brands'.

Think tanks can be a platform for individual researchers to grow their personal brands. Find your 'star' people and build them up.

In addition, we can use the following five principles to shape how we work with researchers and define the tools and processes we use to create content.

1. Content should be strategic

A good brand strategy will define your positioning – your areas of expertise and those issues over which you seek to have ownership. Campaign strategy will define how that narrative unfolds across particular issues, programmes or projects.

Your content, whether it is responding to the news agenda or has been planned in advance, needs to reinforce both.

Know what the purpose and positioning of your think tank is. Know what the key messages around your issues are. Make sure you hit those points in your content until you are sick of listening to yourself.

Then do it some more.

2. Content should be ubiquitous and prolific

Every piece of content should serve a purpose and be linked to your comms objectives. Quality is key, but so is quantity – or, at least, regularity.

A drumbeat of constant content and a regular publishing schedule will build a loyal readership. Get your star researcher to write to a regular blog post each Monday. Get your director to send a personal email round-up each Friday. Publish a podcast reviewing news on your top issues every Thursday. You get the idea.

Oh, and while you're at it, do you really need a report? Could it be a series of interlinked blog posts instead?

Put your content in more channels. But tailor it for those channels. Turn your blog posts into Twitter threads. Turn your key stats into Instagram posts. Turn your report summaries into YouTube interviews. Use your content to build a community of people who keep coming back to you. Connect with those people and, if you can, connect them to each other.

Sounds tricky? It is. But a lot of this is about tools and workflows. Think of it as taking research, conversations and thoughts that are already happening in your organisation and finding tools and processes that can open them up to broader audiences via digital channels.

3. Content should be responsive

Create content that responds to the news agenda. Day two of the news cycle – when people are looking for analysis and explanation – is the sweet spot for think tanks. Post frequently on your social channels and create workflows that improve your capacity to turn around quick explainer articles and videos. Increase editorial autonomy. Prevent the comms department becoming a bottleneck.

Create content that responds to the known events in the calendar and start preparing months in advance – SEI's work for Citizen Science Month is a good example of this. Or work to create your own moment in the calendar, like the IFS Green Budget or the Legatum Prosperity Index.

Finally, try listening. What are your audiences talking about in different channels? How can you add to the conversation? There are plenty of great tools and services out there to help.

4. Content should be yours

Develop a tone of voice that reflects your brand. Develop editorial structures and templates that you can work into again and again.

Develop a comprehensive, digital-first visual identity – something that is distinctive to you. This could be a different graphic style, a different way of treating photographs or illustration, or a different style of video.

Think of your visual and verbal identity as a system with templates and options to help you brand your content wherever it is found. Evolve and develop this system when it comes into contact with new audiences and new use cases. But always keep it systematic and scalable.

5. Content should be engaging

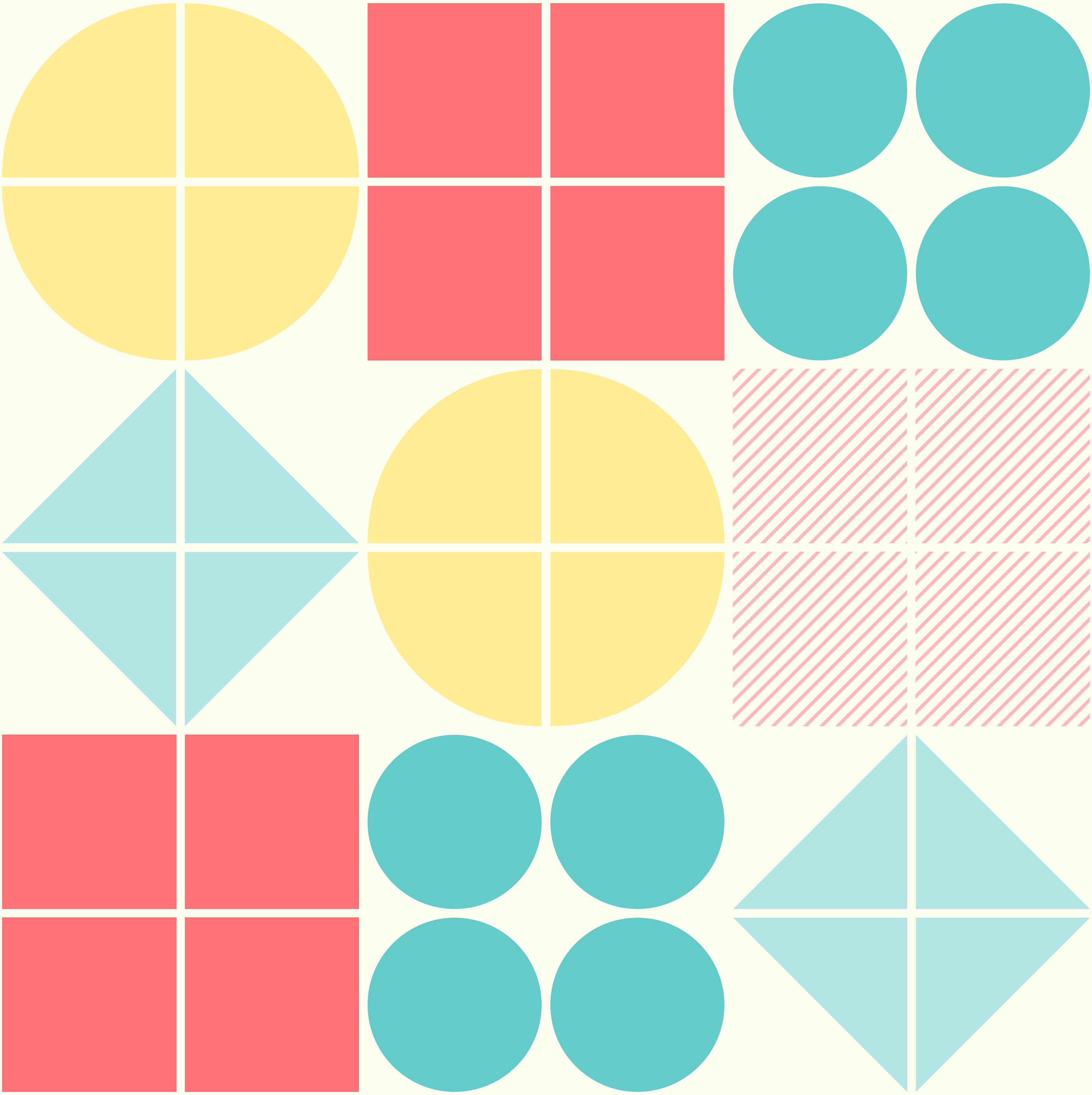
It should go without saying, but reading a lot of think tank content, it seems like the message still hasn't sunk in: please make your content readable.

Tell a story. Avoid jargon. Put the most important information first. Help Google by using titles and subtitles that real people might search for.

Go beyond that: produce video and audio content as standard every time you produce a report, hold an event or just want to explain something. Make sure the charts on your website are all interactive and the underlying data is downloadable. Talk about your work in a thread on Twitter rather than just posting a link and expecting clicks. Try out a data story, a photo story, an illustrated scrolling interactive story. Collaborate with film-makers, artists, poets.

Go on, take a risk.

About OTT



ABOUT OTT: A YEAR IN REVIEW

OTT started in 2010 as a personal blog to explore think tanks and their role in supporting evidence-informed policymaking.

Over the years, with support from the Hewlett Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, IDRC and others, the blog grew into a global platform, adding services and initiatives by and for think tanks and other actors in the evidence-informed policy ecosystem.

Our team includes individuals living and working in six continents. Visitors to our site, courses and events come from over 160 countries, making us a truly global community.

2020 SNAPSHOT

OTT CONFERENCE 2020: THE ONLINE EVENTS

The online events were a response to the need to postpone our 2020 conference in Berlin. Last year we hosted three online events and we were joined by hundreds of thinktankers from around the world.

» **Read more about the first, second and third online events.**

COVID-19 INITIATIVE

Mindful of the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on think tanks, our initiative is based on our four core pillars of work: generating knowledge, learning, convening, and sharing content and resources.

» **Read the results of the Covid-19 survey published in June 2020, including five think pieces.**

» **Read the Covid-19 series, with 20 articles from authors around the world.**

2019 THINK TANK STATE OF THE SECTOR REPORT

The first think tank state of the sector report, based on analysis of 2019 data of 2,802 active think tanks from the Open Think Tank Directory, provides an overview of the sector and uncovers underlying trends.

» **Read the report**

OTT TALKS

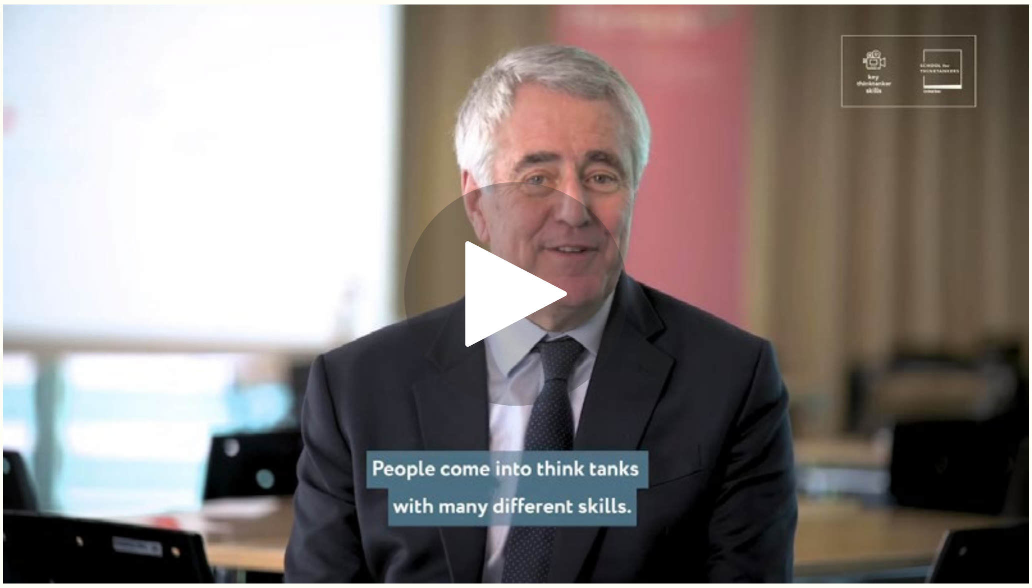
OTT Talks is a platform to share learning among think tanks, funders and other policy actors on a range of topics from think tank governance to communicating research.

» **Watch the 2020 OTT Talks**

THE SCHOOL FOR THINKTANKERS ONLINE

For the first time, we designed and delivered an online version of the School for Thinktankers. In February 2021, we welcomed over 30 thinktankers and policy entrepreneurs from around the world to our new digital learning platform.

» **Read more about the School for Thinktankers 2021 and visit the OTT School's learning platform.**



An introduction to think tanks and evidence-informed policy by Simon Maxwell.

We also delivered over 20 projects through OTT Consulting, including:

NARRATIVE POWER & COLLECTIVE ACTION: CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE WORKING TO CHANGE NARRATIVES FOR SOCIAL GOOD. DELIVERED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OXFAM NOVIB.

This publication is a collection of these conversations. It reveals fascinating insights, stories and strategies from their day-to-day work. Whether you're a narrative change specialist or a front-line activist, we believe there's a lot to learn from and be inspired by in these conversations.

» **Read part 1 and part 2 of the publication.**

EVALUATION AND RETROSPECTIVE OF THE HEWLETT FOUNDATION'S GRANTMAKING IN MEXICO

We worked with an international team to undertake an evaluation of the foundation's organisational and social impact in Mexico. The evaluation is accompanied by a critical retrospective of the foundation's work in Mexico.

» **Read the nonlinear report.**

EVALUATION AND LANDSCAPE SCAN OF THE HEWLETT FOUNDATION'S TRANSPARENCY, PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGY

OTT Consulting is working with an international team to undertake an evaluation and landscape scan of the foundation's Transparency, Participation and Accountability strategy. The project is being delivered in partnership with Southern Hemisphere.

» **Read more about the TPA strategy evaluation questions.**

ON-DEMAND RESEARCH SUPPORT TO THE DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND FINANCE TEAM AT THE GATES FOUNDATION

OTT Consulting is delivering a service for the Development Policy and Finance team at the Gates Foundation. This service offers a quick response to new commissions for research and analysis; undertakes ongoing monitoring and scanning of the issues that DPAF is interested in; draws from a pool of skills and expertise when required; and reflects on and seek improvements to the service to ensure that feedback from the foundation and lessons on the delivery model are rapidly incorporated.

SCALINGXCHANGE FOR IDRC

Design, facilitation and reporting for the IDRC scalingXchange event online. The scalingXchange event is a conference that brings together experts and practitioners involved in scaling research across the world.

EVALUATION OF IDRC'S CONTRIBUTION TO ACHIEVING RESULTS AT SCALE

The evaluation was designed to: Assess results to scale the impact of research for development; Provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of past and current programming in order to improve future IDRC corporate, program and project-level strategies; and consolidate learning from IDRC's experience to share with grantees and other research organizations who wish to strengthen the impact of their work at appropriate scales.

THINK TANKS AND IMPACT INVESTING WITH IDRC

This project undertakes an assessment of the knowledge demand of the industry in Latin America and Africa, determines the capabilities and potential interest of local think tanks to attend this demand, begins to build bridges between both communities, and develops a new initiative to facilitate greater involvement of think tanks in impact investment globally.

» **Read the concept note**

Y20 DELEGATE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR THE MISK FOUNDATION

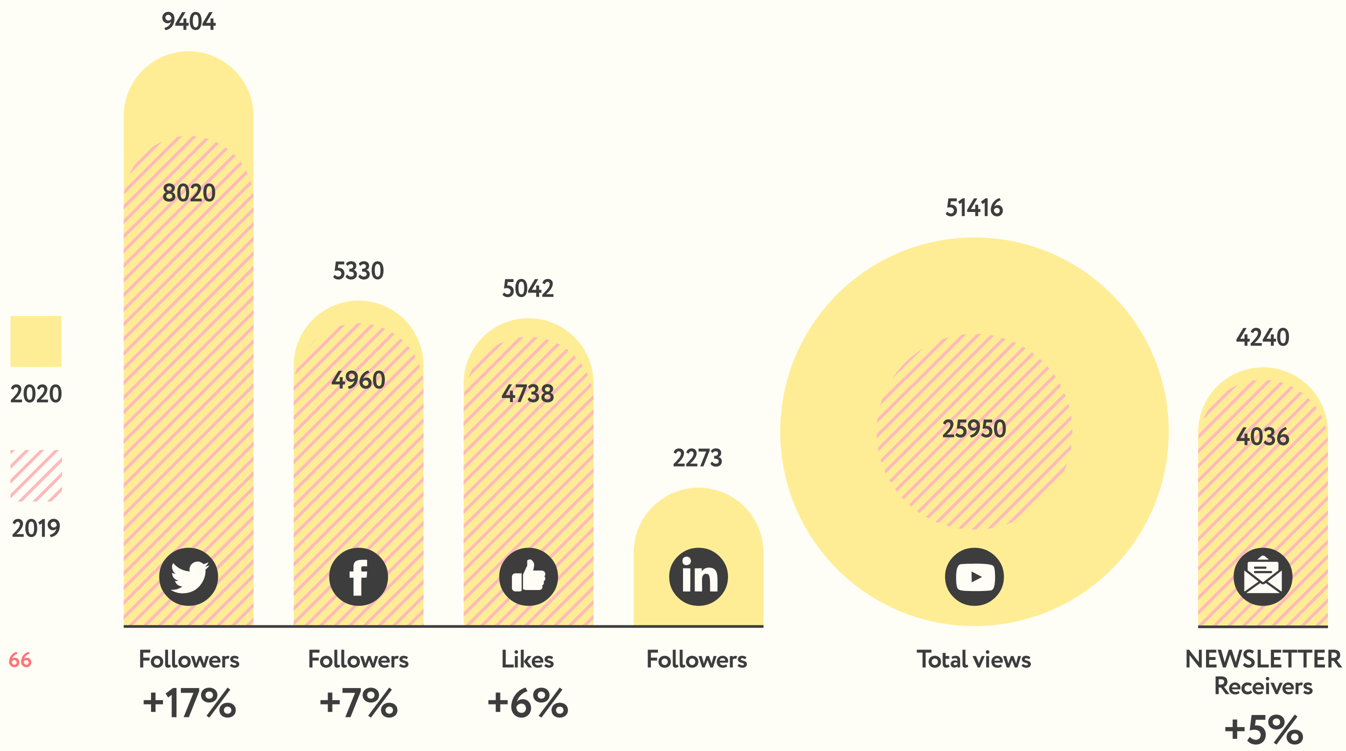
We developed and delivered a training programme for the Y20 delegates at this year's G20 summit in Saudi Arabia. The project involved: designing a programme with a focus on evidence-based policy, policy negotiation and policy communication; delivering an online programme for ~ 40 Y20 delegates; producing background materials and a toolkit for delegates; and creating a micro-site for the course and for future access to the materials.

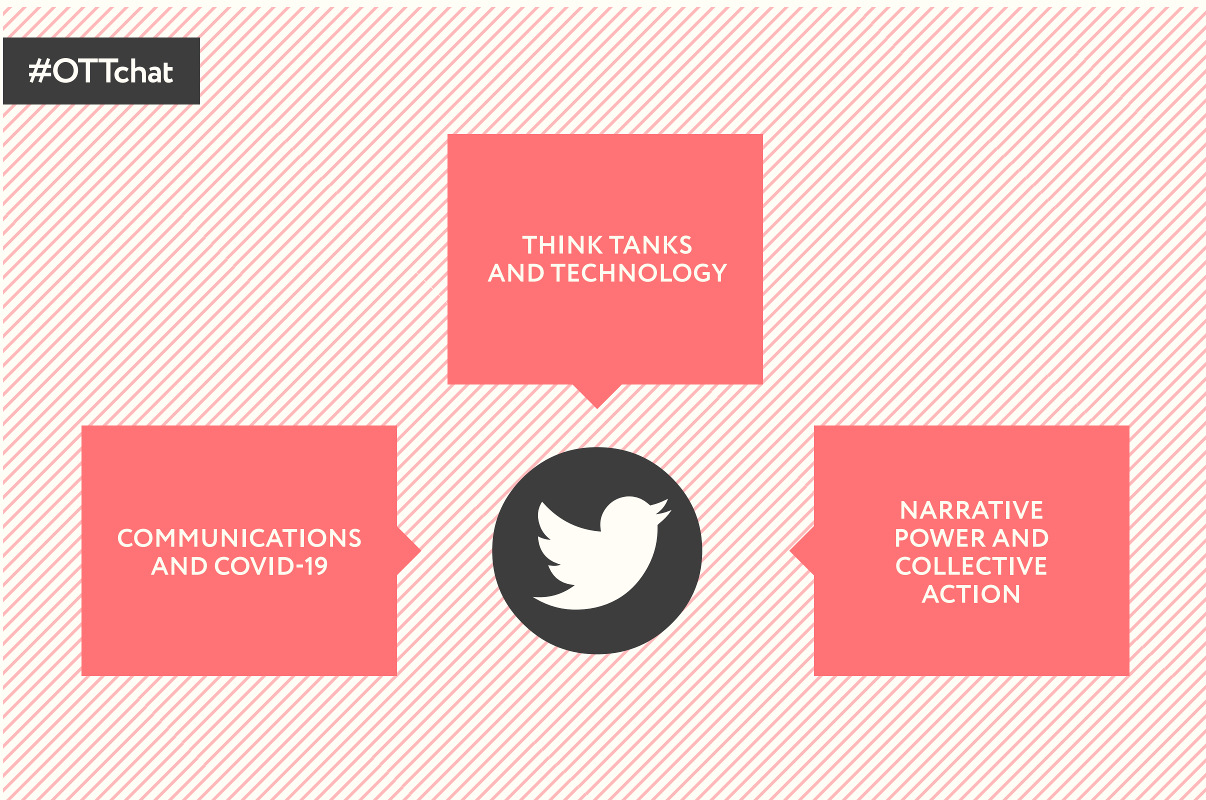
» **See all OTT Consulting projects**

2020

OTT IN NUMBERS

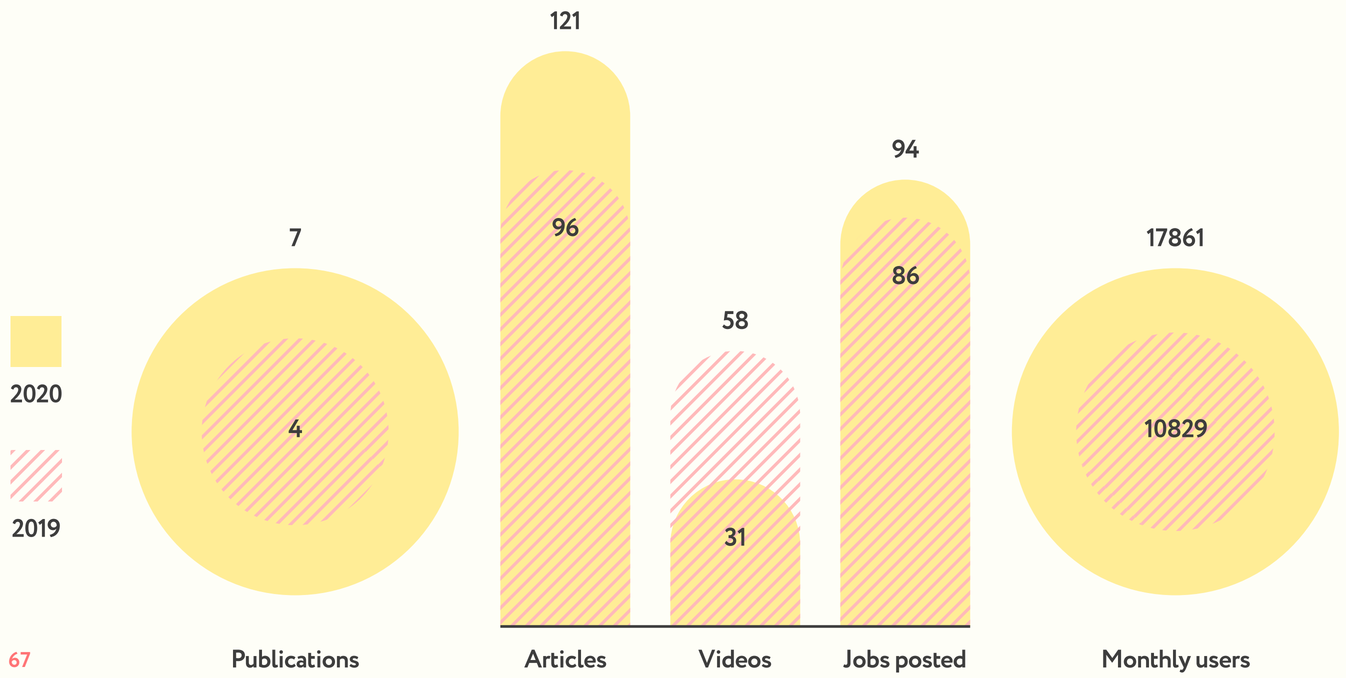
SOCIAL MEDIA



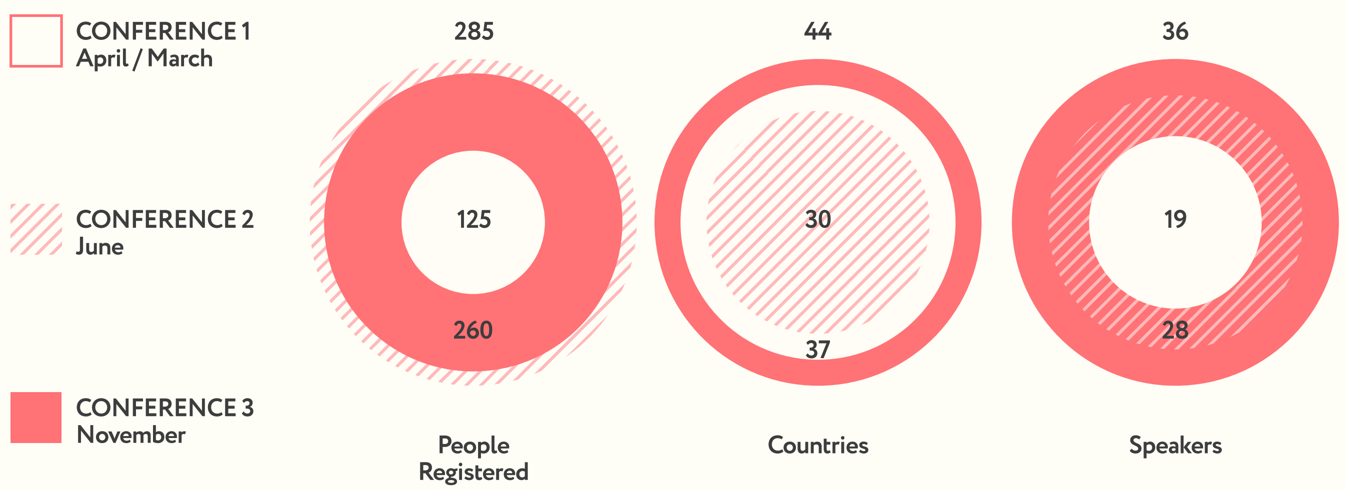


2020
OTT IN NUMBERS

OTT PLATFORM



OTT CONFERENCE 2020



OTT TEAM IN 2020

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Austria

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United Kingdom

CHLOE DUFFY
Project Coordinator
United Kingdom

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
Founder and Director
Peru

CRISTINA RAMOS
Research officer
Mexico / Spain

ERIKA PEREZ-LEON
Director of Communications and Engagement
Peru

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Tunisia

CAROLINE CASSIDY
France

CRISTINA BACALSO
Germany

DENA LOMOFSKY
South Africa

EMMA BROADBENT
Singapore

JENNY LAH
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JULIE LAFRANCE
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LOUISE BALL
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United Kingdom

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United Kingdom

MELANIE RAYMENT
Australia

NICOLÁS BRAGUINSKY CASCINI
Switzerland

ORAZIO BELLETTINI
Ecuador

PAOLA PEREZNIETO
Mexico

OTT partners include Southern Voice, Southern Hemisphere, Sociopublico, Soapbox, Grupo Faro and Universidad del Pacífico.

ADVISORY BOARD

NORMA CORREA

Professor, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Norma is an anthropologist specialising in public policy and development with over 15 years of professional experience in rural and urban research, management and senior management, technical consultancy and university teaching. She is a professor and researcher at the Academic Department of Social Sciences and the School of Government and Public Policy at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. She has won a number of academic research scholarships and awards at national and international level. Her research interests include: social innovation, economic inclusion, inequalities and gender.

SHERINE FAROUK GHONEIM

Director of Communications and Policy Outreach at the Economic Research Forum

Sherine is director of communications and policy outreach at the Economic Research Forum (ERF) and is also currently serving as the ERF acting managing director. Prior to that she was director of the Global Development Network Cairo Office and director of GDNet – a worldwide programme supporting research communications from and for the Global South. She holds a Master's degree from Boston University and a PhD degree from The Management School, Imperial College, UK. Her research interests are focused on strategic adoption of digital and disruptive technologies, e-government and development.

RUTH LEVINE

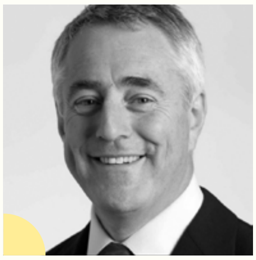
CEO and Partner of IDinsight

Ruth is an internationally recognised development economist and expert in global health, education and evaluation. From 2011 to 2019, she led the Hewlett Foundation team responsible for grant making to improve living conditions in low- and middle-income countries, and to advance reproductive health and rights in developing countries and in the US. Previously, Ruth was a deputy assistant administrator in the Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning at the US Agency for International Development, where she led the development of the agency's evaluation policy. Ruth spent nearly a decade at the Center for Global Development, as a senior fellow and vice president for programmes and operations. She helped shape the Center's approach to reduce global poverty and inequality, conducted independent research and devised new policy solutions. She also designed and evaluated health and education projects at the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Ruth is the author of scores of books and publications on global health policy, including *Millions Saved: Proven Successes in Global Health*, and co-wrote the report, *When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation*. She holds an undergraduate degree in biochemistry from Cornell University and a doctorate degree in economic demography from Johns Hopkins University.

LAWRENCE MACDONALD

Vice President, World Resources Institute (WRI)

Lawrence leads the design and implementation of strategic communications plans and activities that help to make the World Resources Institute (WRI)'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. He is responsible for strengthening communications capacity across the Institute, including in Washington and in the growing international offices. Before joining WRI in October 2014, Lawrence worked for 10 years at the Center for Global Development (CGD), a Washington DC-based think-and-do tank, where he was part of a small leadership team that earned the Center an international reputation for turning ideas into action to promote shared global prosperity. Before joining CGD Lawrence worked as a senior communications officer at the World Bank where he provided strategic communications advice to chief economists, coordinated the preparation of research publications, created the World Bank Research web site, and was founding editor of the Bank's Policy Research Report series. Before that he worked for 15 years in East and Southeast Asia as a reporter and editor for The *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *Agence France Presse* and *Asiaweek Magazine*, during which time he lived in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Beijing, Seoul, and Manila.



SIMON MAXWELL (CBE)

Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

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 10 years, in Kenya and India for UNDP, and for the UK aid programme in Bolivia, then for 15 years at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and for 12 years as director of the Overseas Development Institute 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. For further information see www.simonmaxwell.eu.

JILL RUTTER

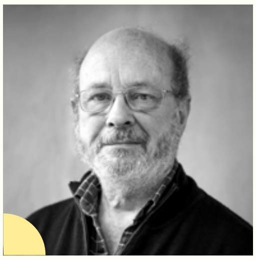
Senior fellow, Institute for Government and visiting professor, King's College London

Jill is a senior research fellow at the UK in a Changing Europe. Previously, she was programme director at the Institute for Government directing the organisation's work on better policy making and Brexit. She is an experienced former senior civil servant, having worked in HM Treasury, the Prime Minister's Office Number 10 and 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. Jill is co-author of the Institute's work on making policy better, policy success and innovation in policy processes as well as how to manage relationships with arm's length bodies.

JOHN SCHWARTZ

Founder and Managing Director, Soapbox

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



Stephen has had extensive involvement in building capacity for policy research and analysis in sub-Saharan Africa, along with experience in monitoring and evaluation, in particular of policy research networks and policy influencing projects.

STEPHEN YEO
OTT Associate

Xufeng Zhu is professor and associate dean at the School of Public Policy and Management, Tsinghua University. His research interests include policy processes, think tank and expert involvement, 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*, and has published over 20 English articles in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *Public Administration*, *The China Quarterly*, *Policy Sciences*, *Public Management Review*, *Administration & Society*, *Asian Survey* and other international journals. He serves as regional editor of the *Asian Journal of Political Sciences* and a member of the editorial board for another six international journals.

XUFENG ZHU
Professor,
Tsinghua University

OUR FUNDING

OTT pursues a range of funding streams to be sustainable. For the financial year 20/21 (1.2.20 – 31.1.21), these have included:

Grant provided to OTT and managed by Universidad del Pacifico:
Hewlett Foundation grant 2020 .... £195,800

Grants and project funding provided to OTT and managed by OTT Consulting Ltd:
OSF Europe grant – German TT meeting (online) £30,270
IDRC Impact Investment (for 2020–21) £33,784
Robert Bosch Stiftung – support for OTT £11,523

OTT Consulting Ltd project funding..................................... £975,000

OTT Consulting Ltd financial contribution to OTT £107,702

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 1 February 2020 to 31 January 2021.

‘Feelings and emotions are important data about what might be going on below the surface in the (consulting) team’.

AJOY DATTA

In charge but not in control: Lessons from leading teams in a networked world

In charge but not in control: Lessons from leading teams in a networked world

BY AJOY DATTA
Senior Associate I OTT

About OTT

In the last couple of years, I've been fortunate enough to lead teams to deliver complex assignments. The teams I've managed have ranged between five and ten people in size, some of whom I had not worked with before. Working in the international development sector has meant that most interactions with team members and the client have been virtual, with the odd in-person workshop or meeting taking place from time to time. However, with Covid-19, assignments took place entirely remotely – perhaps the epitome of Manuel Castell's networked society. In this article, I reflect on what I've learnt from my work to date, drawing on ideas I've picked up from completing a course on consulting and leadership at the Tavistock Centre in London, UK.

Enduring difficult feelings

As project lead, I had to accept that while I was in charge, I was not in control of specific tasks. Leadership was distributed throughout the team. But this had implications. My advice could be taken up by task leads, but it could also lead to various degrees of defensiveness in colleagues or be ignored altogether. Tasks were not necessarily delivered in the way I hoped, which would, in turn, provoke feelings of frustration in me.

Why might task leaders feel strongly about my advice? They might see themselves as wholly accountable for their task. Advice might have been experienced as persecutory rather than a legitimate exercise of authority by the project lead.

Collaborative work could be difficult as people were confronted with threats to their sense of self.

Conversely, when colleagues found themselves in unfamiliar situations, I might find myself being leaned on more than usual, indicating a degree of dependence that would in turn leave me in some discomfort.

Wilfred Bion, one of the pioneers of group dynamics suggests that groups tend to behave like this, which he called the 'basic assumptions', when they experience anxiety that interferes with the ability of the group to effectively function.

Leaders are often a 'container' for projected unwanted and negative feelings of others. Not surprisingly, then, as a leader, I often found myself having to endure my own difficult feelings as well as those of my colleagues.

Making sense of what's going on

When people in teams experience anxiety (and other difficult feelings) they may act this out through certain behaviours (Bion's basic assumptions). However, there is a tendency to ignore them, and if they are acknowledged, to manage them, which might mean exploiting, diffusing or sanitising them. And when we stay with them long enough to interpret them, we tend to do so at an individual level. However, feelings and emotions are important data about what might be going on below the surface in the (consulting) team, but also in the client team and perhaps even more aggregate groupings/dynamics (like across society or between different societies, depending on where team members are located). If these are understood, they can help to 'cut to the quick of situations' and transform teams and organisations.

The anxiety experienced by team members might be indicative of the emotions being felt (and perhaps denied) by those in the client team, through processes of projective identification where the consulting team pick up on the 'vibrations' of the client team through their interactions with one another.

For instance, members of the client team who are themselves stretched, overworked and feeling inadequate might project high levels of competence into consulting teams, expecting them to deliver large assignments in short timeframes. This in turn result in increased anxiety and a feeling of not being 'good enough' among the consulting team. Alternatively, high levels of competition and fragmentation within the client team might manifest in the consultant team. Or an inability to make decisions about priorities in the client team might be projected onto a consulting team, who are left with a task with too large a scope.

Recognising and making sense of the anxiety being induced in the group and bringing this to the surface through discussion among colleagues and the client can help everyone to be more comfortable with what's going on and open up possibility to do something about it, which in turn might mean clarifying the task, redefining people's roles, or managing the team's boundaries more effectively.

Creating structures to contain anxiety and think collectively

Teamwork involves in large part contesting differences. And as we've said above, they may be differences that the client team has but which the consulting team are holding. However, contesting differences with others is hard when there is little previous experience of working together, limited trust levels and little psychological safety to have difficult conversations. This is exacerbated where there is a lack of in-person communication and a reliance on communication platforms like Slack, where individuals can choose when they want to engage or not.

I found it important to set up regular structures and processes (in the form of video meetings at the task level, comprising small groups; the team level, comprising everyone; and 1-2-1s with task leads), to discuss the task as well as factors that might be enabling or constraining its delivery.

You might find it tempting to set up lots of 1-2-1 meetings at the expense of group meetings. Groups can be scary places, However, when it comes to difficult issues, they can often get stuck in a 1-2-1 with some degree of blame and defensiveness taking hold. A group, however, can take ownership of what might look like an individual issue and call on the contributions of a range of people to help to move things on.

Although labour intensive, setting up relevant structures and processes was crucial, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic where most associates were sheltered at home and feeling isolated, others with children were faced with juggling work and home schooling, and almost everyone was experiencing significant mental and emotional strain.

Discussions helped to support colleagues to acknowledge their circumstances, to 'name' how they felt, and discuss whether task delivery needed to be paused or modified, working towards deliverables that were 'good enough'. They also provided opportunities to make sense of the anxiety that the team was experiencing.

Although conversations initially tended to lurch between being overly polite and confrontational, over time, teams were more able to 'spar' with one another without falling out irreparably.

Finally, leading a team can be a lonely place. At certain times, when I found the going tough (not being immune to the feelings others in the team were experiencing), I found speaking to the firm's director helpful. He was able to provide sympathy as well as managerial support, helping me to move from an anxious state of mind to a more neutral one where I was able to think and reflect on what might be done to address problems.

‘The decrease in all-male-founded think tanks and increase in those co-founded by both speaks of the increasing equality between men and women, but the fact remains that even in the 2010– 2019 decade almost 50% of think tanks were founded by men only’.

ANDREA BAERTL

Gender in think tanks: Exploring the Open Think Tank Directory

Gender in think tanks: Exploring the Open Think Tank Directory

BY ANDREA BAERTL
Director of Research | OTT

About OTT

The Open Think Tank Directory has, since it was first launched in 2017, grown and expanded both in the number of organisations it holds information on, but also on the variables and data that it has for each. The initiative thus has now fulfilled its promise of letting us answer questions like: Which topics are more, or less, predominant by region? How many followers does the average think tank have? What is the average think tank age? What is the average by region? And so on. And in 2020 we launched the first Think Tank State of the Sector[1] analysing the data of the sector, which is something that we will continue to do yearly.

A question that the directory has enabled us to answer is: Are think tanks predominantly male? And the answer is a resounding YES. Think tanks are, and have been, mostly male. Male founded, male led, male staffed, etc. Is that really so? One might ask. Here is some data.[2]

- **Male founded:** 58% of organisations in the Open Think Tank Directory were founded only by men, 13% by both male and female co-founders, 5% by women only, and 24% were founded by other entities (e.g. governments, universities, companies, religious orders, international organisations etc.).
- **Male led:** 76 % of think tanks are led by men, 22% by women, and there is a small percentage of organisations (2%) in which leadership is shared by men and women.
- **Male staffed:** 56% of staff are male, and 66% of research staff are male.

Additionally, the gender of the leader of an organisation and the gender of its founders permeates different aspects of organisations. And think tanks who have had women as founders, and/or are led by women seem to be on the losing side.

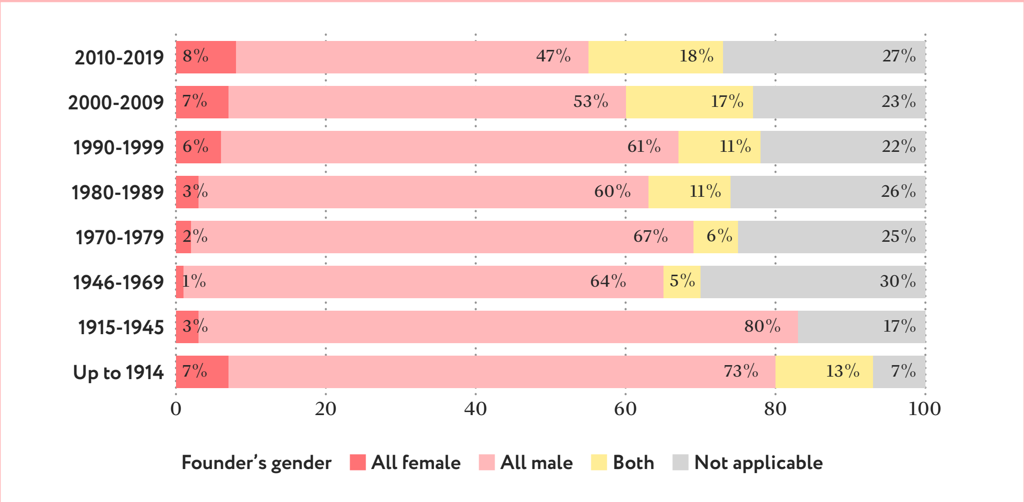
- Male-led think tanks have a higher staff average than think tanks with female leaders (151 vs 46).
- The same is true for male-founded think tanks, which a higher staff average than think tanks with female founders (28 all-female, 53 all-male, 39 both male and female co-founders).

[1] You can also read a short article here.
[2] All data presented is from the 2019 Think Tank State of the Sector

- Median turnover shows that male-led organisations more than double the turnover of female-led organisations (USD 2,063,479.50 vs. USD 1,000,000).
- And the median turnover in 2019 for organisation founded by all-male founders doubles that of those with female founders (USD 1,000,000 all-male founders, USD 513,878 for all-female founders and USD 450, 000 for both male and female co-founders).
- On the positive side organisations who have had female founders tend to have more female leaders, and those with female leaders (and/or founders) have a higher percentage of female staff (53% and 48% vs. 41%).

Things are slowly changing and for example the percentage of all-male-founded think tanks has been slowly decreasing, giving way slightly to all-female-founded think tanks, but mostly to both male and female co-founded think tanks. The decrease in all-male-founded think tanks and increase in those co-founded by both speaks of the increasing equality between men and women, but the fact remains that even in the 2010-2019 decade almost 50% of think tanks were founded by men only.

Chart 1. Founders' gender by date founded



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Notes:

In the database 65 think tanks have been founded by all-female founders, 726 by all-male, 153 by both male and female co-founders and 296 by entities or groups.

22 organisations founded up to 1914, 60 in 1915-1945, 271 in 1946-1969, 238 in 1970-1979, 341 in 1980-1989,582 in 1990-1999, 622 in 2000-2009, and 331 in 2010-2019.

These findings lead to other questions: What influence does the founder's characteristics have in relation to who works in and leads a think tank? What other demographics play a role? Why is it that think tanks with female founders (even those with both men and women co-founders) are smaller?

About OTT

We believe that the findings call us to keep pushing for more female leaders, but also founders. And for greater support from funders, committed to gender equality, in supporting female-founded and female-led think tanks to match their male-founded/-led counterparts.

In any case, we also invite you to keep exploring, using and updating the database, now featuring more than 3,600 organisations, and join us in our continuous exploration of the sector.

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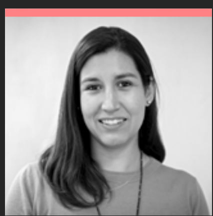


ERIKA PEREZ-LEON

Ten lessons from running online events

Ten lessons from running online events

BY ERIKA PEREZ-LEON
Director of Communications I OTT

About OTT

After our first online OTT Conference in March/April 2020, Enrique and I wrote an article on how we had adapted our plans for our annual conference, which was originally designed as a face-to-face event in Berlin.

One valuable lesson I take from last year is that, no matter how fast the context is changing and how quickly you feel you need to react and make a plan, always make time to have conversations and listen to other people's advice and experience.

We were able to react quickly and deliver a short version of the conference online, but adapting the format of the conference required creative thinking and rolling up our sleeves to get it done.

And it wasn't just about the format. It was also about adapting the intellectual content: what did people want to talk about? What experiences did they need to share or be a part of? For several months we had planned for conversations on think tanks and technology, but we could not convene people, a month into lockdowns around the world, and not talk about the crisis that was unfolding. If we couldn't shape those conversations, we could, at the very least, offer our community a space to convene and share dialogue, reactions, experiences, questions and, in many ways, fears.

In 2020 we delivered three online events in total. By the end of the year, after our third online event, we arrived at a format we are happy with and can replicate for future online events.

The lessons I take on delivering online events aren't ground-breaking, but they might've been overlooked outside of the pandemic context. So. I've made a list of my top 10 lessons from running online events (during a pandemic):

1. **Plans change, be prepared**: if you are faced with an unexpected shock, seek advice, communicate, assess, weigh out your options, make a decision and prepare for all possible outcomes.

   Get everyone on board, capitalise on their strengths, and adapt. Postponing our face-to-face event had implications at every level: operational, financial, strategic, communicational. We have always said we are an agile and flexible team, and this had to be truer now more than ever.

2. **Transparency is paramount:** in the face of uncertainty, the best approach is transparency. This can be difficult when we are trying to communicate with multiple stakeholders (including funders), but keeping them informed and engaged will help to generate support for your decisions across the board.

3. **Consider the context:** if you are adapting an event to a new format in reaction to a crisis, consider its effect on the conversation. This doesn't mean you have to switch your thematic focus entirely, but try to frame it within the context that is being experienced.

4. **Online is not the same as offline:** there are many pros to an online event, but the biggest loss is the informal or impromptu spaces to talk and meet new people. This is still something we are working on and we haven't quite found the right formula yet. The platform we use for our events has 'booths', so we encourage people to meet in these spaces during breaks.

5. **It's not less work (and it's not always less expensive):** planning, organising and delivering an online event requires a dedicated team. There is still a budget to manage, there are still logistics to have in place, there is still content to be designed, and speakers and audiences to engage with. It is a lot of effort, and tensions run high.

6. **It's OK to ask about the basics:** why is my microphone not working? Why can't I join on camera? At what time does the event start? These questions will come up, so be prepared to play IT support to someone on the other side of the world. And it's OK, because not everyone is equally digitally savvy. Be prepared to be helpful! Most online event platforms have really good FAQ pages, so have those handy.

7. **Communicate and connect:** most of us prefer to establish boundaries between our (digital) work spaces (i.e. Slack) and our personal spaces (i.e. WhatsApp). However, if you are running an online event, make sure you are available on all these platforms, especially for speakers to reach you on. They will want to know they can reach you on your phone if something is not running smoothly.

   Also, spend time with speakers before the event: this can be a quick chat before they speak to let them know you are there if they run into any technical difficulties, or to answer any questions about the audience and how engaged they are. We also make an effort to connect speakers before the event.

8. **Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships:** our annual conference has always been delivered in partnership with another organisation, and this is invaluable for us. Our online events have allowed us to expand on these collaborations: one day of the event is open for partner and friend organisations to organise their own 'fringe events'. These events allow us to reach a broader public, and also bring in diverse viewpoints to the conversation. They also allow us to stay close to our community and offer them a space to interact with each other.

9. **Social media is your ally:** we've always designed a social media plan specific to each of our conferences. For our online events, we used social media as a space to connect and encourage connections with a wider audience. Think of Twitter as an extension of the conversations going on in the event chatbox.

   Of course, you will no longer have photos or videos of your event, so be creative with Facebook and Instagram. Ask attendants for content for your blog and LinkedIn articles.

10. **Sharing is caring:** We got a lot of emails last year asking for advice about online events. Some were about the content or connections to speakers, while others were specifically about the platform (we use Hopin) and its technical offering. Document what you are learning, even if it doesn't seem important at the time. And be ready to share your learnings with your peers. It's one way we can keep building our community of think tank communicators, and learning from each other will only help us deliver better content-driven online events.

Going forward

We still have a great deal to learn. The crisis is not over and the effects on the think tank community will be felt for many more years to come. We need to be mindful of the challenges ahead and try, as much as we can, to turn them into opportunities.

When we had to switch our face-to-face event to online, it was easy to solicit and incorporate advice from our advisory board, the OTT team and our funders and partners because we were open about our concerns and the steps we were taking to address them. We would not have been able to get through this alone, and others' knowledge and experience proved to be invaluable.

'This evaluation and retrospective analysis combined a study of the historical context of the foundation alongside the socio-political context in Mexico, with a study of the organisational strengthening of civil society organisations and the pathways and processes through which they influence social change in Mexico'.

JULIE LAFRANCE

Evaluation and retrospective analysis of the Hewlett Foundation in Mexico

About OTT

Evaluation and retrospective analysis of the Hewlett Foundation in Mexico

BY JULIE LAFRANCE
Associate I OTT
International development consultant

In May 2020, OTT Consulting was selected to lead an evaluation and retrospective analysis of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's support to academic and civil society organisations in Mexico over 23 years. The Hewlett Foundation is a nonpartisan, private charitable foundation that advances ideas and supports institutions to promote a better world by supporting efforts to advance education for all, preserve the environment, improve lives and livelihoods in developing countries, promote the health and economic well-being of women, support vibrant performing arts, strengthen Bay Area communities, and make the philanthropy sector more effective.

The evaluation and retrospective analysis had two primary outputs: the retrospective analysis, which documented the story of the Hewlett Foundation's journey over 23 years supporting a broad range of initiatives in Mexico, and the evaluation, which assessed the foundation's progress towards achieving and sustaining the outcomes and effectiveness of its grantmaking in Mexico. Today's Mexico portfolio is focused on the foundation's transparency, participation and accountability strategy, and the findings from the retrospective evaluation will inform this strategy, with a strategy refresh process planned for 2021.

OTT was attracted to this opportunity for a number of reasons. This evaluation and retrospective analysis combined a study of the historical context of the foundation alongside the socio-political context in Mexico, with a study of the organisational strengthening of civil society organisations and the pathways and processes through which they influence social change in Mexico. The team assembled by OTT brought a variety of skills and experiences on understanding the interconnections between knowledge, policy and practice, evaluating evidence-informed policy, and assessing the political economy of knowledge production and use. The team had deep knowledge of the Mexico context and a nuanced understanding of the issues, particularly related to transparency, accountability, governance and service delivery. We drew on these skills to design a multi-component, mixed-method evaluation that brought together conventional approaches and innovative methods.

The design was grounded in outcome mapping to thoughtfully identify, carefully trace and critically understand the contributions made by the foundation and its grantees. Two types of outcomes were mapped and harvested: organisational strengthening outcomes and social change outcomes, which provided paths to trace and answer the evaluation questions. The evaluation consists of three distinct but interrelated components: the retrospective analysis, the organisational development evaluation, and the social change evaluation. The retrospective explored both the foundation's work in Mexico alongside the social, political, and economic context. The organisational development evaluation used a series of five organisational development case studies to explore to what extent and how the Hewlett Foundation strengthened the effectiveness and diversity of its grantee partners. Finally, the social change evaluation focused on the foundation's contributions to social change through its work with grantees and beyond in Mexico, and was showcased through a series of social change case studies.

One unique feature of the OTT offering that the Hewlett Foundation appreciated was our approach to communications and engagement throughout the evaluation process to support the co-design, co-ownership, and use of the findings. By engaging stakeholders through digital meet-ups, focus group discussions, video clips shared via social media, blogs, and so on, stakeholders learned about findings as they emerged, feeling engaged and abreast of the process.

The non-linear report provided an alternative to standard linear narrative approaches that tend to be a poor method for communicating evaluation findings. Storytelling in media that is inherently linear (e.g. print or film or serialised television) must rely on gimmicks to tell interconnected stories. The web offers a more straightforward approach to non-linear storytelling. The hyperlink makes it possible for readers to choose their own paths through interconnected storylines. Hypertext fiction has existed for nearly as long as the web itself. The recently completed evaluation and retrospective analysis of the Hewlett Foundation's work in Mexico applied this non-linear approach, which OTT plans to offer as a cornerstone to future evaluation work.

‘To ensure that findings and lessons are as useful and relevant as possible, we believe that you have to build up engagement from the beginning. So that by the time you have your final results, your audiences are already engaged and interested’.

LOUISE BALL

A new way to do evaluation communications

About OTT

A new way to do evaluation communications

BY LOUISE BALL
Associate I OTT
Communications consultant

A traditional evaluation looks like this: the evaluator (or evaluation team) is commissioned to answer a set of questions. There may be some negotiation on scope and feasibility, but once that's sorted, the evaluators deep dive into data collection and analysis, remerging to present their findings and recommendations in a report, and maybe a presentation. Richard Darlington calls this (and critiques it as) a 'submarine strategy' for research.

There's nothing wrong with this approach if it fulfils the needs of those commissioning the evaluation. And this may be the case, especially for evaluations with a strong accountability focus where it is preferable for the evaluator to be seen to be operating at a distance and where there is no desire to engage other stakeholders with the results.

However, when the client wants to learn from the evaluation findings, and where there is a commitment or desire to share that learning with others, you need a different approach. One that keeps the project 'at the surface' (to return to the submarine analogy) and that puts users at the centre.

Over the last year, OTT Consulting has been lucky to work with two clients who have embraced this new approach: Canada's International Development Centre (IDRC), with whom we have been evaluating their five-year strategic objective to scale research results; and the Hewlett Foundation, with whom we have been evaluating their five-year transparency, participation and accountability (TPA) strategy, as well an evaluation and retrospective analysis of their work in this area in Mexico over the last 23 years.

Supporting learning and use with ongoing engagement

To ensure that findings and lessons are as useful and relevant as possible, we believe that you have to build up engagement from the beginning. So by the time you have your final results, your audiences are already engaged and interested.

The first step is to work out who those end-users are and what they will want the information you're generating for. Are they just the team commissioning the evaluation? Other teams within the organisation? The board? Grantees? Partner organisations?

Not everyone will engage with the evaluation in the same way. Some internal audiences will want to – and indeed should – be deeply engaged throughout. Other internal audiences will only need to be kept informed. And external audiences will have different needs and interests and different stages.

Both the Hewlett Foundation and IDRC evaluations had a strong strategic learning agenda. For the foundation, results will directly inform a new five-year grantmaking strategy. For IDRC, they will inform implementation of their new 10-year organisational strategy.

In both our cases there was a strong emphasis on engagement with external, as well as internal, audiences. For the Hewlett Foundation, driven by their guiding principles of openness, transparency and inclusion, it was important that grantees and partners be included in the process. And IDRC had a strong commitment to share learning about scaling with their partners and the wider sector.

Here I share some examples of engagement activities and tools we've used for external audiences from these two recent OTT Consulting evaluations.

Letting people know about the evaluation and what to expect

Blogs are a flexible and informal way to let people know about your evaluation. A simple post clearly communicating the evaluation aims, scope, audiences, and how people can participate or stay up to date with progress, is a great way to start engagement with different audiences.

We coupled this with a short animation called 'What can we learn about scaling science?' for the IDRC evaluation. Animations are more dynamic than a static webpage and can be easily shared on social media so more people can learn about the evaluation.

If you're taking a more participatory approach, blogs can be used to invite feedback from evaluation stakeholders. In the Hewlett Foundation TPA evaluation, we published two blogs early on. The first invited feedback from external stakeholders on the draft evaluation questions. We received around 15 thoughtful responses from the foundation's grantees and co-funders that helped us to refine the final questions. The second blog shared back those final questions and explained how we narrowed the scope for data collection.

We worked with the Hewlett Foundation and IDRC communications teams to announce the evaluations and amplify the reach of these posts among our target audiences through their existing channels (social media, newsletters and websites).

Involving stakeholders in data collection, sensemaking and 'warming them up' for the final results

'Digital meetups' are a relatively low-cost way to open up data collection and sensemaking processes, offering more stakeholders a chance to participate in the process. Our digital meetups have two parts.

First, a virtual coffee meeting creates an informal space for an open discussion between the stakeholders and the evaluators on 2-3 guiding questions. It isn't recorded and the funder isn't invited! We did this for the Hewlett Foundation Mexico retrospective and had a really nuanced and engaging conversation with around 12 grantees.

Second, we open a digital board where the guiding questions are posted and stakeholders are invited to share written perspectives and experiences in their own time.

Blog posts, again, are great for warming audiences up for the final results, inviting feedback on emerging findings, or simply sharing some interesting data points as previews or teasers. You wouldn't release a new blockbuster film and expect it to do well without releasing some trailers first. It's a very different context, but the basic rule is the same.

Video vignettes can be a great way to record insights, return findings, and share them to keep the audience engaged. For the Mexico retrospective we published five-minute video vignettes from some of the data collection interviews.

In both evaluations, this was combined with more traditional sensemaking meetings, emerging findings workshops, and recommendations workshops with the IDRC evaluation advisory group, the Hewlett Foundation's TPA team, and with grantees who took part in interviews during data collection.

Making findings and learning useful and accessible

'Non-linear' digital reports are an alternative, or addition, to the traditional 50+ page evaluation report that, if we're honest, a lot of the time hardly gets read.

We've borrowed the term 'non-linear' from our friends at Soapbox who wrote, 'Research isn't linear, so why are reports?' and who partnered with us on the Mexico retrospective evaluation.

In a traditional 'linear' report the structure is predetermined, usually taking the reader from methodology, to findings and recommendations, with each section starting where the last left off.

The non-linear digital report involves a more networked structure that, importantly, puts the users at the centre of the report. Information is organised around different user profile needs and interests.

At the end of one piece of information, the reader can choose which related content they would like to read next. This means that they consume the content that is interesting to them or solves a problem they are facing.

The trusty blog is another good way to pull out relevant learning for different user groups, and can be cross-posted on different platforms that are read by those groups. We'll also be experimenting with short videos, animations and infographics as ways to bring learning to life and make it accessible and digestible for different audiences.

Taking this approach

Putting this approach into practice isn't hard. But it does need to be included in planning with sufficient time, expertise and resources.

You need communications and engagement specialists as part of the team from the beginning. It also requires additional time to be built into the evaluator's work plans too.

We look forward to continuing to explore this new way of doing evaluation communications with future partners and clients.

'[Philanthropic organisations'] knowledge needs are complex, ever-changing, and time-sensitive, particularly in the currently global pandemic context'.

EMMA BROADBENT

On-demand research support to the Development Policy and Finance Team at the Gates Foundation

On-demand research support to the Development Policy and Finance Team at the Gates Foundation

BY EMMA BROADBENT
Associate I OTT

About OTT

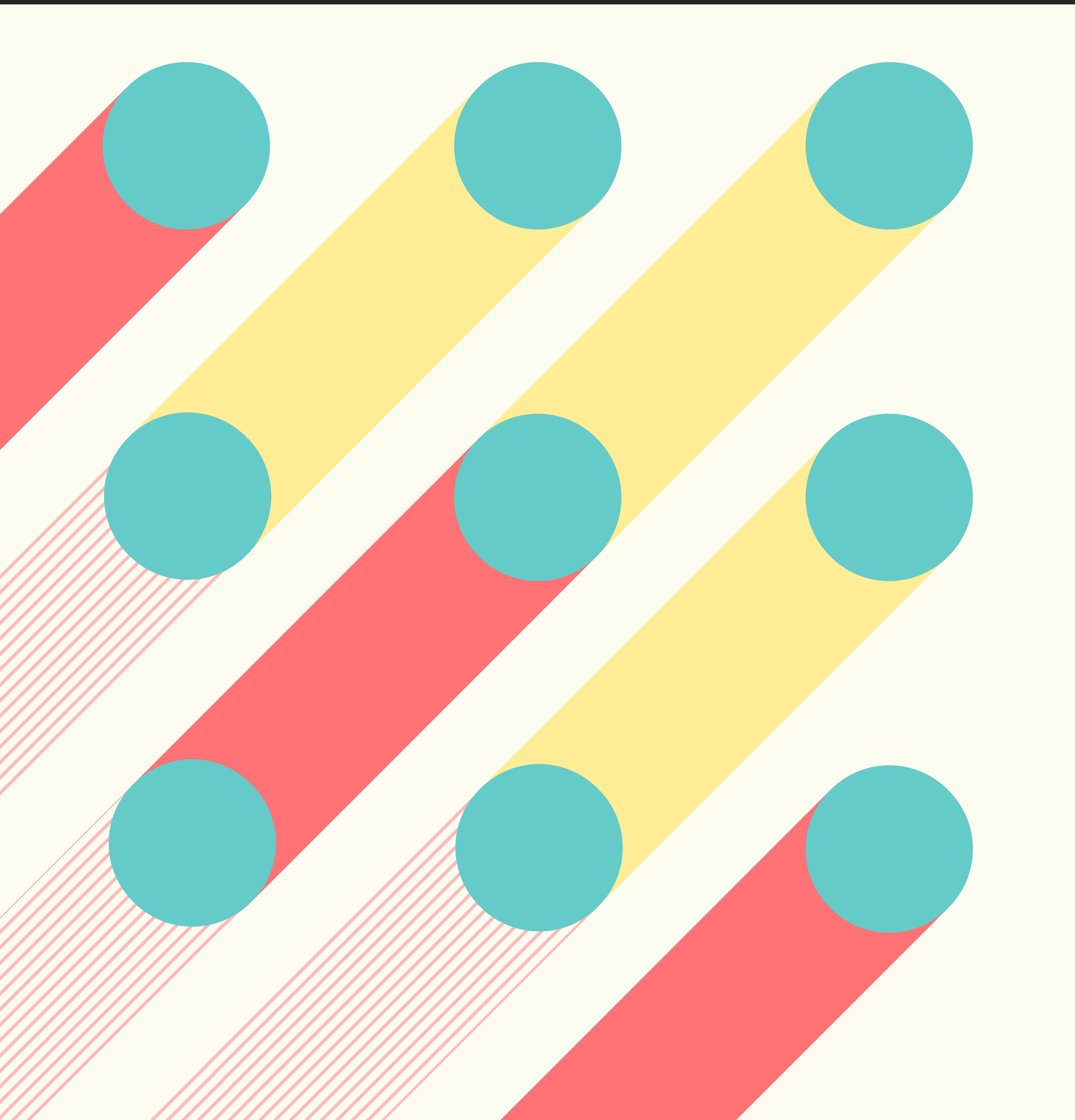
Philanthropic organisations have emerged as major players in policy discourse and development financing in the last two decades. Their knowledge needs are complex, ever-changing, and time-sensitive, particularly in the currently global pandemic context. OTT Consulting (OTT) is forging an innovative role in this dynamic area, drawing upon the experience of its associates with extensive experience working as 'rapid researchers' for organisations including Open Society Foundations, Southern Voice, and the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre.

In October, OTT began an exciting nine-month pilot to support the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Development Policy and Finance (DPAF) team navigate emerging knowledge across its key investment areas, including official development assistance (ODA), health financing, domestic resource mobilisation, and blended finance. This reflects DPAF's long-term intention to develop its capacity to understand and scope emerging policy issues on an ongoing basis to inform the overall development policy and finance agenda of the Foundation.

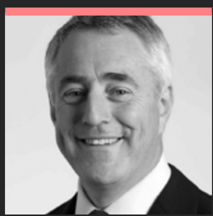
The three-member Research Support Team (RST) operates both as an 'extended workbench', providing services that DPAF staff members would ideally fulfil, and in a more consultative capacity as DPAF requires. A key activity for the team is its ongoing 'scan' function: on a monthly basis, over 150 sources are consulted and scanned for key resources. These resources are then organised in an online database that can be 'tapped' at any point. It also provides the source of regular round ups of topics requested by team members, for instance around sovereign debt, ODA, and social protection. The RST is also an on-demand service: team members are able to send requests for a variety of knowledge products – from actor landscaping, literature reviews, event coverage, and news round-ups to communications products such as data visualisations.

The project contains an important mandate to enhance DPAF's engagement with and knowledge of Global South partners, and this is reflected in the RST's research process. This has culminated in the development of a knowledge product, to which several OTT network members contributed, reviewing 13 Southern think tanks' recent activities and research priorities for 2021. The RST hopes to continue this important work and looks forward to further engagements of this kind through 2021.

Looking forward



‘The reserves policy is not an arcane topic to be left to the accountants on the finance committee, but rather a key management tool’.



SIMON MAXWELL

Resilience and relevance: The role of reserves in managing think tanks

Resilience and relevance: The role of reserves in managing think tanks

BY SIMON MAXWELL
International development specialist
Former Director of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

You know that locked coffer you keep under your bed? The one whose key hangs around your neck? The one you have sworn never to touch? The one labelled 'free reserves'? There will have been some periods when, maybe, you have squirreled away a few gold coins, and have proudly added to the pile. There are likely to be many other periods, however, when you have stared glumly at the coffer, wishing it contained more. Probably, there have been some times, too, when you have reluctantly removed the key from your neck, opened the coffer, and removed some coins to pay the bills. Has the year of Covid-19 been one of those?

No surprise if it has. A think-tank's reserves exist precisely to cover expenditure in times of unforeseen crisis, either to deal with a shortfall in revenue, or to fund unexpected demands for additional work. Covid-19 has subjected think tanks to stresses on both dimensions: putting cash flow under pressure at just the time when policymakers are crying out for new work. It is not the first crisis to have had this impact; and it will not be the last.

In this context, a think tank's reserves are crucial to both resilience and relevance. And, for this reason, the reserves policy is not an arcane topic to be left to the accountants on the finance committee, but rather a key management tool. Several issues arise, however.

First, it is really hard to accumulate reserves. Very few donors are willing to give money that will sit unused in an investment account, waiting for a rainy day. Many demand such tight accounting of project expenditures and overheads that it becomes impossible to make a surplus and build reserves. In those circumstances, one of the only solutions is for reserves to grow themselves, via interest payments or capital gains. But trustees will usually insist that reserves are held in safe securities and that they are relatively liquid, so returns are always likely to be low.

Donor policy needs to change in this respect. Think tanks need reserves, and donors should encourage them to generate the surpluses that allow them to do so.

But how big should the surpluses be, and what reserves are needed? Historically, institutions have often used a rule of thumb, based on some multiple of operating expenditure: three months, or six months, or nine months. A more analytical approach is to carry out a careful risk analysis, and calculate the size of reserves needed according to the likelihood of shocks, and the success or otherwise of mitigation measures. That is certainly worth doing as a management exercise, and is likely to lead to a number somewhere in the six-month range. It is hard to get to that point from a standing start, though, especially if the think tank is growing. A six-month margin today can easily transform into a five-month margin if revenues rise and reserves do not – then four, then three. The board will need to watch this carefully.

And, then, what happens if the risk profile changes? That is the challenge thrown up by Covid-19. It is a familiar problem for households, businesses, and even governments. The risk register is not a static document. New information and new events mean that the risks need to be re-analysed. Sometimes, the insurance premium or the amount needed in reserves will fall. Sometimes, probably quite often, it will rise. Few countries, for example, will think after Covid-19 that they need fewer intensive care beds in their hospitals, or fewer doctors and nurses, or a smaller capacity to carry out health research: greater redundancy will be needed across the system. Similarly for think tanks: Covid-19 will be an unpleasant reminder of how serious shocks can be. Re-building reserves is likely to be a priority, even as the general financial situation needs to be strengthened.

So, don't be tempted to raid the coffer for gold coins unless you really have to. Keep adding coins as you can. And, if you are leading a think tank, keep the risk register on your bedside table.

‘Casting the net widely has helped us to generate very clever and interesting ideas; but now they can and should inform a more focused and demand driven strategy’.

ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL

The next 10 at OTT

The next 10 at OTT

BY ENRIQUE MENDIZABAL
Founder and Director I OTT

Looking forward

I must confess to not having a clear plan in mind. We cast the net wide and worked hard to make sense of what we found.

It all started as a personal blog, launched after a petty argument with the communications team at ODI – over this blog post: Dumbing down the audience. On Think Tanks then turned into a collaborative blog with contributions from colleagues in the field – including the communications team at ODI! OTT then became a platform for our efforts to study and support think tanks, in particular in the Global South, as a mechanism to promote better informed policymaking. Our analysis and commentary accompanied important initiatives in the field such as the Think Tank Initiative (TTI), the Think Tank Fund (TTF) and the Knowledge Sector Initiative (KSI).

With their help we launched the On Think Tanks Exchange and published several series targeted at their efforts and grantees.

Then, in 2015, OTT received a grant from the Hewlett Foundation. We were able to begin planning and developing projects of our own. We started small with more analysis and outreach, but soon took on the challenge to translate the knowledge we had been generating into practical advice and support for thinktankers. We launched the OTT School with the evolving think tanks series of online courses (which we have now published for free access) and a fellowship programme for emerging leaders. Through trial and error we introduced webinars and OTT Talks and the School for Thinktankers, as shorter and longer options for our growing community. We recently launched ott.school to host these and future efforts.

The Hewlett Foundation grant also allowed the growing community of contributors and colleagues to come together in London in 2017, for the first time. We hence introduced our annual conference to the OTT calendar; an opportunity to meet new and catch-up with old friends and colleagues in the field from all over the world.

Over time, our annual report turned into the OTT Annual Review – a compilation of thought pieces from authors from across our community. Each review offers an insight into an emerging issue and an invitation to discuss it further at the annual conference and throughout the following year through articles, webinars and OTT Talks, and more profound research and analysis.

One of our most recent initiatives, the Open Think Tank Directory and the State of the Sector Report, emerged from a long-term collaboration with the Open Society Initiative for Europe, which created the space for new thinking about a chronic challenge in the field: lack of reliable information.

In parallel to all this we developed a consultancy arm through which we have been able to work with and on interesting and creative partners and projects. OTT Consulting has also helped to convene a truly global, culturally diverse and multidisciplinary network for associates and consultants that participate in many of OTT's core pillars of knowledge generation, learning opportunities, spaces for engagement, and communication.

Through these efforts we serve three roles:

- Reach out to and learn about think tanks and other actors in the evidence-informed-policy ecosystem;
- Make sense of what we learn; and
- Attempt to offer practical and meaningful responses to the challenges and opportunities we found.

So, maybe, we do have a strategy, after all.

Over the last 10 years we have made small but important contributions to the field. We know we have been instrumental to many think tank leaders, including in the formation of new think tanks; think tank funders, including in how they have adapted and framed funding and 'beyond the dollar' support decisions; and think tank scholars, creating spaces for engagement with others in their field and accessing invaluable data. Our work has also extended beyond the niche field of think tanks and has informed the thinking and practice of universities, NGOs, governments and foundations.

We also know we have played a role in the formation of other communities and networks at the global and national level and our constant effort to bring people together has led to new partnerships and collaborations.

We have played the role of the trusted source of ideas and advice.

And throughout all this we have learned a thing or two about think tanks, their environments, and how to promote better informed policymaking.

But I am constantly reminded of something Peter Da Costa said: **'how do you get to that point where everything we all do as actors and the system responds to what needs to be done ... as opposed to what we, who are very clever and think we know better than everyone else, think needs to be done'.**

When I look back at our annual reviews, our conferences, and the questions we obsess about, I think we have been, at times, stuck at the level of *ideas that we find clever and interesting rather than what needs to be done.*

Casting the net widely has helped us to generate very clever and interesting ideas; but now they can and should inform a more focused and demand-driven strategy.

The next 10 years: a change hub

Over the last 10 years we have been involved in a growing number of projects that have offered us invaluable insights and inspiration for what is to come. I summarised my thinking at the end of 2020 as: being global by engaging locally. It could also be: **focus our efforts and scale our impact**.

One of the earliest lessons we learned about think tanks is that they are entirely inter-dependent of their contexts. To truly understand and support them we need to study them in relation to their environments and design interventions that address the particular challenges and opportunities that they face – including providing advice to and working with others in their ecosystem: funders, the private sector, the media, political parties, policymaking bodies, social movements, and others.

We experienced this in early work we undertook in Serbia (2011) and Zambia (2011-12) and later by working directly with think tanks in Tunisia, Peru or during our long term collaboration with the KSI, TTF and TTI regional and global networks.

Therefore, we would like to engage with our community, including our funders and partners, to identify the most appropriate contexts on which to focus our efforts. This may involve targeting particular countries or sectors as well as networks or organisational partnerships.

This focus is likely to maximise our chance of making a difference on the people and organisations we work with and, through them, on their own communities. We have always believed that we must support those who have a personal stake in the outcomes.

Looking forward

This focus will also carefully contextualise our research and experiences and thus make it easier to scale our impact by accurately translating lessons to other contexts.

We can do this by pursuing forms of communication that encourage engagement and dialogue – and which we know to work best for learning: rich and nuanced stories that carefully describe not only what happened, but also how and why.

We hope you will join us in this new journey.

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