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### Think tanks and policy-making

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## **Summary**

The study of think tanks brings together a range of academic disciplines and allows for multi-faceted analyses, encompassing the concepts of ideas, institutions, influence, interests, and power. The literature on think tanks addresses a ubiquitous policy actor. Think tanks have been around for a long time, especially in advanced liberal democracies but have also established in authoritarian regimes and in the developing world. Nowhere is their influence on policy-making or the public debate easy to pinpoint.

Definitions of think tank have been contested ever since the study of think tanks took off in the 1980s and 1990s. Some scholars have devised typologies around organisational form and output with a focus on whether think tanks are openly partisan or rather emphasise their political and ideological neutrality; others propose that the think tank is not so much a clearly discernible organisational entity but rather a set of activities which can be conducted by a broad range of organisations; others again see think tanks as hybrid boundary organisations operating at the interstices of different societal fields. What most scholars will agree on is that policy expertise is think tanks' main output, that they seek to influence policy-makers and the wider public, and that they try to do so via informal and formal channels and by making use of their well-connected position in often transnational policy networks encompassing political parties, interest groups, corporations, international organisations, civil society organisations, and civil service bureaucracies.

Such policy expertise – in the form of concrete proposals or 'blue-skies thinking' – is underpinned by claims that it is 'evidence-based'. The positivist notion of 'evidence-based policy-making' has been of benefit to think tanks as organisations which claim to 'speak truth

to power' and produce easily digestible outputs aimed policy-makers who profess to want evidence to make policy 'that works'.

Think tanks are active at different 'moments' in the policy-making process John Kingdon's agenda-setting theory of the multiple streams framework helps understand think tanks as 'policy entrepreneurs' who are most likely to have influence during the moments of problem framing, the search for policy solutions, and the promotion of specific solutions to policy-makers and public.

Think tank studies should take into account the relationship between media and think tanks, and how this relationship impacts on whether think tanks succeed in agenda-setting and, thereby, influence policy-making. The relationship is symbiotic: journalists use think tanks to inform their work or welcome their contribution in the form of an opinion piece, while think tanks use the media to air their ideas . This relationship is not one without problems, as some think tanks are in privileged positions with regards to media access while others barely ever cross the media threshold.

Think tanks are, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, challenged by an 'epistemic crisis'. This crisis consists of a loss of faith in experts and of information pollution and information overload. This development is both risk and opportunity for think tanks. Concerning the latter, policy-makers increasingly need curators, arbiters or filters to help them decide which information, data, and policy expertise to use in their decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** Think tanks; policy-making; ideas; expertise; epistemic crisis; evidence-based policy-making

## **Introduction**

Think tanks have become, in many polities, ubiquitous organisations – through their presence in the print and electronic media, but also through their contributions to governmental commissions, parliamentary committees or public deliberations. Their ubiquity has not made it easier for the analyst to pin them down with definitions or typologies which capture precisely their role and relevance in the policy process. Sometimes it is easy to identify an organisation as a think tank not so much because it calls itself a ‘think tank’ or because it takes an easily recognisable organisational form, but because of what it does and how. In other cases, the think tank label is used as a cachet suggesting impartiality and objectivity of expertise to cover up what really amounts to lobbying activities on behalf of party political or corporate interest (e.g. Hawkins 2014; Carter 2014).

What the ubiquity – and, as will be discussed later, the growing number globally – of think tanks suggests is that think tanks and their products are in demand. In the forms of ‘blue skies thinking’ or concrete policy proposals, policy expertise is, followed by strategic and tactical advice and public advocacy, the core product of the think tank. The relationship between policy expertise and policy-making is complex and has, over the past decades, undergone several transformations which have also impacted on think tanks and their standing amongst the many actors involved in policy-making processes. There is, for example, the changing nature and increasing diversity of the sources of expertise from which governments can draw. Besides the traditional source of policy advice, the civil service, the 21<sup>st</sup> century sees a competitive and fragmented mixed economy of think tanks, for-profit consultancies, research institutes, and lobby firms. Concurrent with these trends, many governments have, over decades, lost ‘in-house’ experts and have come to increasingly rely on knowledge production by this diverse and multi-logic cosmos of outside stakeholders, many of them operating also on the transnational level. These and further developments, some of which are discussed later, have expedited the emergence of fluid, fragmented and transnational constellations of relationships

between policy-making and expertise. No doubt, these new constellations have had implications for how policy is made vis-à-vis e.g. the inclusion and exclusion of certain actors and their views; the quality, content and outcomes of policy; and the likelihood of policy change. This 'bigger picture' is important to bear on mind when the think tank is discussed and when empirical research is conducted on think tanks' roles in specific policy processes.

The analysis of the roles of think tanks in the policy process raises many questions, but those on power and influence are perhaps most salient: Are think tanks potentially most influential as agenda-setters? Or are they at their best when it comes to policy analysis and policy formulation? Do think tanks also influence policy implementation and policy evaluation? The difficulties – methodological, empirical and theoretical – associated with attempts to answer these questions are not unique to think tanks. However, fully grasping the role of think tanks in the policy process could be more complex and more riddled with obstacles than understanding the roles of other policy actors such as lobbying firms, political parties, businesses, civil service, media, academia, and campaigning organisations. Certainly, none of these difficulties have meant that think tanks have escaped academic scrutiny – and, indeed, the scrutiny of investigative journalists, 'fact checkers' or 'spin watchers' interested in the wheeling and dealing of politics and how think tanks may be intertwined with elected politicians, civil servants, representatives of labour and capital, philanthropic donors, and the many civil society organisations in plural societies. Nor should they, given that think tanks are a growing global phenomenon, are credited with power and influence and sometimes criticised over the democratic legitimacy of their activities specifically in the light of think tanks' relationships to so many societal actors

It is also important to note that the study of think tanks and their roles usefully brings together a number of academic disciplines. Public policy studies, political sciences, sociology, and media studies can be named. For this reason, the study of think tanks is a potentially very

rewarding field for the multi-disciplinary social scientist. This is even more so because, given the position of think tanks vis-à-vis the media, business, politics, and academia, the study of think tanks allows the analyst to conduct multi-faceted work that encompasses the study of ideas, institutions, influence, interests, and power.

Those interested in think tanks have a significant body of literature to choose from, covering not only the anglophone world – where think tank studies started – but also other parts of the developing and developed world. The first studies of think tanks were mainly single country case studies (e.g. Abelson and Carberry 1997; Beloff, 1977; Blackstone & Plowden, 1988; Cockett, 1995; Desai, 1994; Goodwin & Nacht, 1995; Quigley, 1997; Stone, 1996; Struyk, 1999; Weiss, 1992). Later literature has addressed the think tank through comparative perspectives with an interest in, for example, whether parliamentary or presidential democracies spur different think tank landscapes and how differing ‘access points’ for think tanks to formal decision-making processes may impact on think tank influence (e.g. Pautz 2012; Braml 2006). In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the think tank and its role in the policy process has come to be looked at from a transnational vantage point, with the literature taking into account that ideas travel, and making the point that think tank networks span nation state borders (e.g. Plehwe 2018; Stone 2013; Fischer & Plehwe 2017). Supporting the point that the think tank is a global phenomenon is James McGann’s GoTo Global Think Tank Index. While one may argue with its methodology of evaluating and ranking think tank influence and quality of their output (e.g. Köllner 2013), the indexes have shown, since 2008, that the think tank exists nearly everywhere – in 2017/18, just under 8000 organisations were listed (McGann 2018). A good part of the think tank growth has occurred in BRIC countries. That means that even under authoritarian regimes the think tank has prospered – according to McGann (McGann 2018), China boasts the second most populous think tank landscape (e.g. Tanner 2002; Zhu 2013, Köllner et al 2018) – and that policy-makers, publics and funders in

developing countries see a need and have a purpose for policy expertise as it is produced, in its specific form, by think tanks (e.g. Ladi et al 2018; Young 2005).

The chapter is structured as follows. First, an account of different definitions of the think tank will be given. Second, the notion of ‘evidence-based policy-making’ and how think tanks engage with it will be critically discussed. Third, a specific conceptual framework borrowed from agenda-setting studies to help locate think tanks in the policy process will be proposed. Fourth, the importance of the news media for think tanks is discussed. Fifth, a discussion of several crises, in particular an ‘epistemic crisis’, and how they have affected the think tank will conclude the main part of the chapter. A short conclusion will round off the chapter which, in toto, should give the reader an overview of the role of think tanks in the policy process, what of this involvement should be seen critically, and also how academic research has approached the think tank methodologically. Some sections of this chapter are quite country-specific, others speak more generally about the phenomenon. All of them build on the rich existing academic literature.

### **Defining the Think Tank is a Complex Task**

This section discusses three main ways of defining the think tank – each of which considers, in one way or the other, forms, functions and activities of think tanks and the relationships between think tank and other policy actors.

Amongst the earliest and most influential definitions of the think tank is that proposed by Kent Weaver and James McGann. They understand think tanks as ‘non-governmental, not-for-profit research organisations with substantial organisational autonomy from government and from societal interests such as firms, interest groups, and political parties’ (Weaver & McGann, 2000, 4). Beyond this definition with its focus on organisational form and relationship to other



policy actors, they have also provided the think tank scholar with a threefold typology outlined later in this section. A more recent definition of the think tank has proposed an understanding through the lens of ‘function’ rather than through that of ‘form’. The argument is that think tanks may not have distinct organisational features but are characterised by a certain range of activities specific to think tanks (Pautz, 2011). In this sense, that ‘what passes under the heading “think tank” is best understood as a device for gathering and assembling forms of authority’ (Shaw et al 2015, 59). The emphasis on activities rather than organisational form takes into account two factors. First, the boundaries between organisations such as university institutes, think tanks and consultancies and their forms of knowledge production and dissemination have become increasingly blurred (Kipping & Engwall, 2002; Weingart, 2005). Second, the ‘export’ of think tanks to beyond the Western liberal democratic world has led to the emergence of hybrid forms which resist the traditional conflation of function with a specific organisational format (Stone, 2013). This alternative view of the think tanks as a set of activities rather than as a specific organisational ‘thing’ has emerged alongside a third view on what think tanks are. Seeing them as *sui generis* organisations, it is proposed that they operate in an ‘institutional subspace located at the crossroads of the academic, political, economic, and media spheres’. As boundary organisations think tanks work across and with players from these other spheres and, importantly, draw their own legitimacy from these other spheres. Importantly, from their position in the ‘space of think tanks’ they regulate ‘the circulation of knowledge and personnel’ among the other spheres (Medvetz, 2012, 7) and thereby exert influence.

The academic debate about think tank definitions is as old as the field of think tank studies, and new or refined ways of defining them may still emerge. But these debates should consider that too rigid understandings of whether an organisation is a think tank or not may not be helpful vis-à-vis understanding the functioning of complex and dynamic ‘policy advisory systems’ (Halligan 1995) of which think tanks are part. This is demonstrated by empirical

research on the role of think tanks during and after the Global Financial Crisis of 2007/2008. Carola Westermeier, for example, has discussed the Bank of International Settlement as a think tank because of its activities and functions in the making of a new macroprudential regulation regime after the crisis. In order to facilitate a push for policy solutions which would set the standards for banking supervision worldwide, the ‘Bank of Banks’ undertook the activities considered to be those of the think tank – it produced ideas and policy proposals and brought different policy actors together to form a consensus view on the basis of the authority of its expertise (Westermeier, 2018). This raises the issue of typologies and how they risk limiting our understanding of think tanks and their role in the policy process. To this day, one of the most influential typologies of think tanks is that developed by Kent Weaver (e.g. Weaver 1989). This typology has been adapted, over the years, to other country-specific contexts (see Císař & Hrubeš, 2016; Gellner, 1995; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2016) and remains popular so that it deserves a more detailed outline. For Weaver, the first type, labelled ‘universities without students’ or ‘academic think-tank’, is characterized by a stress on objectivity and non-partisanship. Secondly, there is the ‘contract research organisation’ which is mostly commissioned by government departments. These organisations portray themselves as technocratic and non-partisan. Thirdly, the ‘advocacy think-tank’ has a strong ideological bent and actively seeks to influence policy debates.

While this typology has been widely used, its consequences on think tank research have not been necessarily only positive. It has contributed to a view that policy expertise can be either ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ or ‘partisan’ and ‘ideological’. This is problematic because such an understanding of knowledge overlooks that it cannot be ‘disinterested, that policy is constructed in an environment of shared language and practice and that policy analysis is a moral activity’ (Shaw et al 2015, 61). This point will be scrutinised in more depth in the next

section, when the discussion will turn to the topic of how think tanks have prospered in an age of ‘evidence-based policy-making’.

### **Think Tanks and ‘Evidence-Based Policy-Making’**

Evidence-based policy-making became a buzzword in the late 1990s (Packwood, 2002). In the United Kingdom, the ‘modernisers’ of the incoming ‘New Labour’ government (Sanderson, 2003; Pawson, 2006) pronounced that policy-making should no longer be steered by ideology or partisan interests, but simply and plainly by high-quality evidence showing ‘what works’ (Cairney, 2017). This arguably boosted the role of non-governmental expert organisations tasked with the design and evaluation of policy. However, evidence-based policy-making has become something of a mantra, and questions have been raised about whether governments have really become more interested in expertise or whether the emphasis on expertise is not rather part of the ‘performance’ of government to ‘demonstrate that action has been taken’ rather than being ‘the determinant of action’ (Colebatch, 2018, 370). An analysis of think tank involvement in German labour market reform debates in the late 1990s and early 2000s could be instructive here. A specific think tank, the Bertelsmann Foundation, was implanted by government into the tripartite discussions between trade unions, employers and government on how to deal with high unemployment. The aim was to ‘sober up’ the debate, as one think tank staffer described their government-prescribed task in the process (Pautz 2012, 123; Pautz, 2008). This was meant to be achieved via ‘benchmarking’, the results of which can be put ‘forward as politically neutral truths’ (Robertson, 1991, 55), with the aim to present what were quintessentially neoliberal labour market reforms as the ‘only game in town’ and refutable only, according to the defenders of evidence-based policy-making, on the basis of dogmatic ideology or pure self-interest. In other words, evidence-based policy-making was used to neutralise in particular the trade unions and a think tank helped doing so.

What is also problematic about the notion of evidence-based policy-making is that the idea of establishing ‘what works’ on the basis of ‘evidence’ is underpinned by positivist and rationalist assumptions about the world (e.g. Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009; Sanderson, 2003; Fischer, 2002). Greenhalgh and Russel refer to these assumptions as ‘naïve’ because they misconstrue how policy is made by ignoring the fact that values and ethics – for example, those of the researcher or the funding agency – are always implicated in the phenomenon studied (Greenhalgh & Russel, 2009, 306). The positivism that underlies the idea of evidence-based policy-making is problematic also because it suggests that a phenomenon can be fully and objectively understood if only enough research is conducted. However, there ‘is no such thing as “the body of evidence”’. There are simply (more or less) competing (re)constructions of evidence to support almost any position’ (Wood et al 1998, 1735). Such assumptions, as demonstrated in the example of German labour market reform, also result in the de-politicisation of policy-making as enough evidence is assumed to determine unproblematic ‘correct’ courses of action for which ethical or moral questions are hardly relevant and for which public democratic debate about society’s preferences is no longer necessary.

While the reality of the policy process is messier than the discourse on evidence-based policy-making suggests – and interpretivist and critical research on policy-making has shown that the ‘romantic stories of “evidence-based policymaking” in which we expect policymakers to produce “rational” decisions in a policy cycle with predictable, linear stages’ (Cairney 2018, 200) are a fallacy – its attractiveness to policy-makers and politicians has played into the hands of think tanks. Positivist rationalism may be ‘naïve’, but think tanks are not. Presenting themselves as ‘above the political fray’ and as organisations with ‘a view from nowhere’ (Shaw et al 2015), many think tanks have happily subscribed to the understanding of ‘policymaking as getting [research] evidence into practice’ (Greenhalgh & Russell 2009, 310), and claim that their policy proposals are not tarred by the ideological preconceptions of elected politicians or

by lobby groups' narrow interests as they are based on evidence and nothing else. However, whether think tanks always succeed to be perceived as objective and neutral agents is another question. Doberstein has shown, in experimental research, that even those policy-makers who profess a belief in evidence-based policy-making may not hold think tank output in the highest regard as they consider it substantially less credible and more ideological than, for example, academic output (Doberstein, 2018). In this context it is of note that some research suggests that while think tanks employ a language of objectivity and impartiality when they face the public, they use a more value-intensive language when dealing with decision-makers 'behind the scenes' (Shaw et al, 2015, 73). It is also of relevance to recognise how critical academic research offers insights into this problem when it finds think tanks taking part in 'policy-based evidence-making'. The most publicised instances revolve around cases where think tanks have been able to speak as authoritative voices, on the basis of their 'knowledge' and expertise, on matters such as alcohol minimum pricing (Hawkins & McCambridge, 2014), tobacco use and advertisement (Miller & Harkins, 2010; Smith et al 2016), and climate change. The latter will be discussed in some more detail later. In all cases think tanks have been found to act as 'merchants of doubt' (Cann & Raymond, 2018; Miller & Dinan, 2015) by producing reports in which they misrepresent existing research or in which they omit crucial findings when they go contrary to the expectations and interests of their funders.

Less obviously related to 'policy-based evidence-making' but of relevance in this context nonetheless is critical scrutiny of how think tanks engage in the stabilisation of wider policy agendas or even world views against severe criticism from other corners of society. Neo-liberalism and its corollary 'austerity' are an example here and one that is pertinent to many countries in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Research has shown (e.g. Plehwe et al, 2018) how a transnational network of think tanks, in Europe after the Global Financial Crisis and during the ensuing economic crisis after 2008, has uncompromisingly defended the 'dangerous

idea' (Blyth, 2013) of austerity. The researchers used social network analysis to show how think tank networks such as the Mont Pelerin Society, the Atlas Network or the Stockholm Network have successfully contributed to the stabilisation and strengthening of neo-liberalism and austerity, for example in Germany – a country at the forefront of austerity in Europe, and a country in which anti-austerity ideas have been particularly unsuccessful, for example in terms of passing the media threshold, not just since the crisis. This helped to reduce any likelihood of 'paradigmatic change', away from austerity and neo-liberalism, despite the existing and widespread criticism, before and since the crises, of austerity, neoliberal trickle-down economics, and lax financial regulations. Research on how think tanks built a discursive 'firewall' to support the British Conservative Party's evolving austerity agenda after 2009 shows how think tanks' far-reaching and even radical proposals on how public spending should be reduced helped the Conservative Party – soon to be in government after the 2010 elections – to present its own austerity plans not only as comparatively moderate but also as unideological (Pautz, 2018). Such analysis constitutes be one important element in the analysis of the 'strange non-death of neo-liberalism' (Crouch, 2011; Hay & Smith, 2013; Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013).

This critique, however, is not supposed to dismiss think tanks as mere agents of an interested elite wielding illegitimate influence over public policy, or to say that think tanks are manipulating policy-makers, media and citizens. It certainly is not a call for policy-making without research evidence. However, those who want to conduct research on think tanks – and, even more importantly, the users of think tanks' research outputs – must bear on mind that not only is the production of evidence influenced by the existing belief systems of those involved in its making, but also that the ways policy-makers accept evidence, knowledge and information into policy design is strongly pre-conditioned by their 'ideological preferences' (Packwood, 2002) or 'ideational prisms' (Fischer, 2003, 22). Furthermore, it is important to

highlight that success and failure of policy ideas or broader world views depend – to some degree, at least – on the material foundations that limit or facilitate their production and dissemination. In other words, well-resourced, well-staffed and well-networked think tanks are more likely to succeed in influencing the policy process than, for example, a disparate set of civil society organisations using knowledge claims based on ‘lived experience’ rather than on ‘research evidence’. Subsequently, claims made in some early think tank literature, from a pluralist perspective, on the competition of ideas on a ‘market place’ where the best ideas win should be treated carefully and concerns about the legitimacy of think tank influence be taken seriously.

The next section will look at how, where, and when think tanks get involved in policy-making and at which point in the policy process they may be at their most influential.

### **Think Tanks in the Policy Process**

Research which seeks to establish whether think tanks have influenced a government’s policy agenda starts from the apriori assumption that ideas matter, both in ‘everyday politics’ and in moments of crisis (Blyth, 2010). The growing and diversifying think tank landscape across the world is itself testament to this belief – shared by funders and others involved in think tanks – that ideas have a role to play in politics. In this sense the literature on think tanks, but also think tanks and their funders themselves, have accepted the propositions of the ‘ideational turn’ (Blyth, 1997) and its rejection of purely rationalistic or materialistic approaches to explaining policy change and continuity.

The theme of ‘influence’ is, understandably, a dominant feature in the literature on think tanks. After all, think tanks claim to be about influencing policy and some indeed make grand claims in this regard, while others are reluctant to talk about their relationships to elites from

government, civil service, political parties, business or the trade unions and are guarded when it comes to their own power in these relationships and networks. Think tank researchers often investigate into this complex problem through questions on how far any influence exists and whether it is democratically legitimate, whether it is likely to be stronger at certain moments in the policy process and whether it can be measured. Beyond empirical case studies of think tank influence on specific policies, some research has attempted to make broader points about if, how, and when think tanks have influence. For example, some see think tanks as relatively passive political actors which, rather than influencing concrete policy or public opinion, mostly engage in ‘constructing ideological fellowship’ (Denham & Garnett, 1998) to assure elites of the validity of their views and to provide legitimising discourses for political elites’ already existing policy preferences. Others propose that think tanks are influential mostly at certain junctures, in particular crisis moments. The example of think tank activity during the crisis of neo-liberalism was already discussed in the previous section. Another example is that think tanks have been found influential when political parties have suffered repeated electoral setbacks and choose new leaders who seek to radically overhaul party structure and ideology. Here, research on Britain and Germany has shown how think tanks helped political leaders to circumvent internal opponents or institutional barriers by providing a modernising discourse from outside the party (Pautz, 2012). The broader institutionalist literature (e.g. Schmidt, 2008; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) has informed such a take on think tanks and their influence in its consideration of the role of crisis in policy change and of the role of ideas and discourse.

Much of the think tank literature suggests that think tanks are relevant ‘upstream’ in the policy process, i.e. not so much when it comes to policy implementation or evaluation but rather when it comes to problem framing and promoting certain policy solutions or broader policy discourses over others. This is where agenda-setting frameworks may help to understand the role of think tanks in the policy-making process. One example for such a framework is John



Kingdon's multiple streams framework. The framework was originally developed for a US-American context and to address the question 'why some subjects become prominent on the policy agenda and others do not, and why some alternatives for choice are seriously considered while others are neglected' (Kingdon, 1984, 3). Kingdon proposed that the agenda-setting process consists of three conceptually separate 'streams' of 'problems', 'policies' and 'politics'. These three streams must be 'coupled' to allow for a policy idea to have impact on the governmental agenda. This coupling occurs during fleeting moments of opportunity, called 'policy windows' (Kingdon, 1984, 21). Ideas play a core role in this framework, but also the realisation that ideas require actors which develop them into policy solutions and promote them as such. Therefore, think tanks can be usefully placed into the multiple streams framework as what Kingdon calls 'policy entrepreneurs'. As such, think tanks frame certain issues as problems in the problem stream and, in the policy stream, selectively use the available research to present, to time-pressed decision-makers, comparatively easily digestible advice for 'fixes' of policy problems. Think tanks are also well-placed in the politics stream as they are integrated in policy networks which allow them to communicate with decision-makers and because they have the skills to sense whether what Kingdon refers to as the 'national mood' is right to further push a policy idea onto the governmental agenda. In short, think tanks are amongst those policy actors who recognise a 'policy window' as an opportunity for policy change. This is even more so the case when think tanks and decision-makers already share wider beliefs and persuasions, as the attention that government dedicates to problems 'relates more to the beliefs of policymakers, and persuasion strategies of influencers, than the size of the problem or evidence base for its solution' (Cairney, 2018, 203). While the framework was developed for a US-context, Herweg et al (2015) propose that it is suitable also for agenda-setting analysis in parliamentary systems for as long as party leaders, party 'in-house' experts, and interest groups are considered as central policy entrepreneurs.

However, there is one possible caveat to be considered here. Given that policy change often takes a long time as existing policies and policy preferences among key policy field stakeholders have to be ‘softened up’, it is worth considering whether think tanks are adept at pursuing the required long-term approach. After all, think tanks may not have the resources to undertake agenda-setting activities for extended periods. But then there is an increasing need amongst decision-makers for ‘fast policy’ as in ‘an increasingly connected, globalised and temporally compressed social world, policymaking has become “speeded up”’ (Lewis & Hogan, 2019, 1). Think tanks should be well-placed to benefit from this trend and therefore be able to contribute to agenda-setting.

### **Think Tanks and the Media**

The connections between think tanks and the news media are also important to understand think tanks’ role as agenda-setters . Arguing that ‘the practice of think tankery is above all about the mediation of ideas’, Schlesinger proposes to see think tank staffers as ‘media intellectuals’ and adds that they often have a news media background (Schlesinger, 2009, 3). Unfortunately, there is so still too little systematic analysis of the relationship between think tanks and the media and of its role for policy-making. Existing research, however, seems to indicate that it is one of symbiosis: think tanks are useful sources for journalists wanting to source information or simply an opinion piece, while think tanks use the media in the hope of influencing the ‘climate of opinion’ (Denham & Garnett, 1998). This symbiosis thrives on think tanks’ crucial reputational capital of autonomy and independence. Whereas, for example, professional organisations, trade unions or business umbrella groups are viewed to have a vested self-interest in certain policy issues, think tanks are generally not, as discussed earlier (Rich, 2005). This is important for the authority of their representatives when they come on radio or TV or contribute to a blog or a newspaper article. Whether or not they are introduced

with regards to their political orientation or financial dependencies – and often they are not – think tanks are usually presented to their audience as objective and impartial organisations seeking to improve an irrational and partisan political debate with evidence and expertise (Heins & Pautz, 2016). The same is true when think tank staff write opinion pieces for newspaper and news magazines. In Denmark, research has shown liberal newspapers to give more coverage to think tanks close to their own mindset, while centre-left newspapers allocate more space to think tanks with a social democratic bend. In newspapers of both political tendencies think tanks were presented as independent expert organisations – think tanks were, therefore, ‘successful in casting themselves in the news media as expert sources rather than being affiliated with specific political interests’ (Blach-Ørsten & Nørgaard Kristensen, 2016, 40). In his study of the Heritage Foundation, a high-profile conservative US-American think tank, Haas found that the news media uncritically presented the think tank’s output as if it were scientific even though scholarly research had not been conducted to underpin it (Haas, 2004). Similarly, in an extensive study of the media representation of seven think tanks, Haas found that think tanks, regardless of whether they were advocacy-oriented or not, were presented by the media as credible sources in almost all cases. This occurred whether or not professional norms of academic research were followed (Haas, 2007). A further problem seems to be that the frequency of appearances of think tanks in the news media is related to their financial resources. As Rich and Weaver (2000) established, for the US and nearly 20 years ago, disparities in the budgets of think tanks account for substantial variation in their media visibility. Lauren McDonald (2013) found that it was conservative think tanks – better staffed than their centrist or leftist counterparts – which have gained a position within the US-American media landscape from which they could dominate media discourse on education policy. Related to the stronger presence of conservative think tanks in the news media, McKnight found that in Britain no think tank from the left or the political centre has any kind

of relationship to either Rupert Murdoch or his global news media empire – a very different situations compared to think tanks identified as belonging to the right of the political spectrum (McKnight 2010).

While think tanks generally are said to seek media presence as an important ingredient of their ability to influence policy and public debate (Dahl Kelstrup, 2015), only empirical case studies can show whether think tanks have had significant influence on media reporting on specific issues. For example, Lalueza and Girona found no impact of Spanish think tanks on how the mass media spoke about the economic crisis during 2013 and 2014 (Lalueza & Girona, 2016).

Here, at least briefly, the issue of ‘false balance’ in media reporting should be mentioned. In attempts by public broadcasters to produce balanced news reporting, journalists have been criticised for giving all expert views the same amount of ‘airspace’ - irrespective of whether some of these views are considered to be false or unacceptable by the majority of experts (e.g. Nuccitelli, 2014). Some think tanks have benefitted from this as, despite clear affiliations to, and dependencies on, special interests, they have been allowed to speak as authoritative voices on matters such as alcohol minimum pricing, tobacco use and advertisement, and climate change, thus acting as ‘merchants of doubt’ (Cann & Raymond, 2018; Miller & Dinan, 2015). The discussion about the nature and causes of climate change is a particularly well-documented example. Over the years, the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC) has frequently invited Nigel Lawson, former Member of Parliament and co-founder of the UK-based think tank ‘Global Warming Policy Foundation’, to broadcasts about climate change. Being interviewed besides climate change experts from established and recognised research organisations, the non-scientist Lawson was able to promote views about anthropogenic climate change which are deemed scientifically false by the climate change ‘epistemic community’ (Haas, 1989). This meant that the think tank has successfully conducted ‘boundary work’ as it moved the line demarcating who can speak as an ‘expert’ and whose statements are perceived as credible

knowledge. Some claim, still with regards to climate change but in a US-American context, that the ways in which media treat think tanks as credible sources of objective information means that they have achieved the status of an ‘alternate academia’ while falling short of academic standards of rigour, transparency and impartiality (Dunlap & Jacques 2013, 701). This throws a spotlight on the problematic role of think tank experts in the policy process.

### **Epistemic Crisis and Other Challenges**

Hernando et al have suggested (2018) that think tanks have had to face three major challenges since the late 2000s: financial constraints in a world characterised by austerity; increased competition both among think tanks and with other policy research organisations; and a growing questioning of, and popular dissatisfaction with, the role of the ‘expert’ itself. These challenges are likely to persist and will influence if and how think tanks remain meaningful policy actors, so that it is worth looking at them in turn.

First, as the policy analysis and advice industry has expanded, funding sources have not necessarily grown in tandem. Anecdotal accounts from think tank insiders suggest that a decade of austerity has brought about ‘leaner times for think tanks’ (Hernando et al, 2018, 136) as government agencies have less funding available to support external research and as private funding has decreased. Furthermore, even at the best of times, think tank funding is often for short-term projects and therefore think tanks need to invest significant resources into institutional survival through a diverse set of fundraising activities. Second, there is strong competition in the world of policy expertise as many universities, NGOs, business umbrella groups, or large banks have established their own applied policy research centres. Sometimes these also work closely with think tanks for reasons of legitimacy and for demonstrating objectivity. The third major challenge is that of an ‘epistemic crisis’. With advanced

information and communication technology, 'Big Data', and citizen science has come 'information overload' (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). While policy-makers generally consider 'more and 'better' information to lead to 'better' policy, information overload has led to selection and prioritisation problems. In this context, the 'problem of extension' could be discussed, too. It describes the dissolution of the 'boundary between experts and the public' (Collins & Evans, 2002, 235) which has seen the rise of 'experience-based experts' (Collins & Evans, 2002, 238) and also renewed discussions over the legitimacy of including or excluding people from decision-making processes on the basis of 'possessing' the relevant authoritative expertise. Furthermore, 'information pollution' (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) in the form of low-quality information and deliberately disseminated misinformation has also contributed to the complexity of policy-makers' and decision-makers' task. Its most recent expression may lie in the rise of so-called 'post-truth politics' (e.g. Harsin, 2015) and should be seen in conjunction with the rise in 'suspicion among citizens of key institutions of information generation' (Doberstein, 2018, 364).

It is easy to see how the consequences of these challenges can be highly problematic for all policy actors. In such an environment, policy-makers may be forced to develop policy ideas, make decisions and implement policy on the basis of an unprecedented abundance of conflicting, contested and contaminated information whilst being subjected to a 'post-truth discourse' which denies the legitimacy of established policy-makers and their institutions and therefore also rejects their policy agendas, analyses and solutions. Worryingly, in a context in which experts are discredited, policy-makers might not feel the need to seek external counsel or validation. This is a concern pronounced in the US-American context of Donald Trump's 'post-factual' presidency and one which led the Heritage Foundation think tank, in 2018, to ponder the possible 'death' of the think tank. This was prompted by the realisation comparatively few that think tank staffers were moved into government advisory position by a

president who has challenged the very idea of truth and facts (Heritage Foundation, 2018). Post-truth politics are not a monopoly held by the US. During the 2016 campaign over the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, a senior government minister and key proponent of 'Brexit' claimed that 'people had enough of experts' (Gove, 2016) – a claim perceived by many as representative of a wider epistemic crisis in Britain.

While the epistemic crisis has made the relationship between expertise and policy-making more complicated, think tanks may still profit from it. Potentially, think tanks could transform into significant standard-setters, filters or arbiters of quality in policy analysis, as with information overload and pollution comes a need for editors and curators who can help discern the reliability and usefulness of analytic products (Hernando et al 2018). However, as other research has shown, there could be a problem as to think tanks' credibility and also with regards to the (perception of the) quality – or, rather, the lack of it - of their output on the side of government policy analysts (e.g. Ceccarelli, 2011; Jacques, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The think tank, as discussed, is one contributor among many to the policy-making process. Its specific contribution to policy-making is that of policy expertise tailored to the needs of time-pressed decision-makers. Despite of what appears as the increasing devaluation of expertise in public discourse, policy-making is hardly possible and certainly not desirable without it. However, think tanks are not necessarily contributing to 'better policy', as was discussed with regards to some think tanks' dubious role in highly contentious policy areas. Also, despite protestations of objectivity and a focus on 'evidence', it is clear that think tank output and activity are necessarily and inevitably influenced by the ideational prisms of those who work for the think tank and who fund it. This is, of course, the case for any research. In that sense,

the chapter tried to cast a critical spotlight on the think tank, not to dismiss it as an illegitimate or problematic actor in the policy process but rather to assure that those interested in the relationship between ideas, expertise and policy-making and how it is manifest in the think tank can use this chapter as a starting point for their own critical enquiry.

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