

Student Feature – Advice on Writing for a Think Tank

Written by Riccardo Pelizzo

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RICCARDO PELIZZO, JUL 28 2019

Editors of think tank publications in the Social Sciences often encourage students and professionals to develop and share original analyses and opinions on contemporary issues around the world. However, deciding which think tank to publish an op-ed or short essay with can be daunting even for the most experienced Social Science scholars. It is important to understand what a think-tank ought to do before deciding which think tank to publish with.

What should a think tank do?

Every year the University of Pennsylvania publishes a global think tank ranking which sparks a massive debate. Successful NGOs see in the ranking a validation of their good work, others use it for promotional purposes, critics regard it as a cheat sheet, while media and commentators critically assess the limits and the merits of such rankings.

However, little attention is paid to the fact that not all think tanks are alike. Some are affiliated with universities, others are independent research organizations, others still are the research arm of government institutions and ruling parties.

The fact that not all think tanks are alike has a basic implication, namely that they have different purposes, play different roles and perform different tasks.

A government-affiliated think tank may be expected to provide the government with information it requires to engage in evidence-based policy making or to assess whether and to what extent policies are successfully implemented, or to legitimize the government and its choices. By contrast, a university-based think tank may be expected to produce cutting-edge research on topics of interest. As a result, the output of one type of think tank may not be comparable with the output of a different type of think tank. Publishing methodologically sophisticated journal articles may not be the single most important priority for a government-affiliated think tank, but it may be vital for a university-affiliated think tank.

This point has two implications. First, it explains why the ranking of a think tank is not exclusively a function of its research output. The Brookings Institute tops the 2018 Global Think Tank Ranking, but in terms of publications it is only, according to IDEAS-REPEC, the sixth. Bruegel is the fourth best think tank according to the 2018 Global Think Tank Ranking, but according to the rankings generated by IDEAS-REPEC, it is only the 21st in terms of research output. Second, it reminds us that the most appropriate way to assess the performance of a think tank consists in evaluating whether and to what extent it is able to achieve the objectives and produce the deliverables which it was designed to deliver to its stakeholders.

Think tanks in the developing world

Scholars working on think tanks underline the beneficial impact that such entities can have on their respective polities, from providing governments with the information required to engage in evidence-based policy making to creating a space for civil society to grow and thrive

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The usually long list of what a think tank should do, especially in the developing world, tend to neglect what one could regard as the single most important task that a Think Tank could perform in the Global South, namely to identify and develop local solutions for local problems and policy challenges.

The International Community, in recent years, has realized that the *One Size Fits All* approach does not work. Local problems need local solutions. Different countries have different needs and the contextual conditions (language, form of government, form of state, structure of the economy, culture etc.) that one may encounter in one jurisdiction may not exist elsewhere. Think tanks should use their knowledge and understanding of the jurisdictions in which they operate to develop the local solutions required to address and possibly fix local problems. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), for instance, aims to build an inclusive South Africa, post-apartheid, by contributing to conflict resolution and better governance. Through its work in shaping education on post-apartheid history was awarded the UNESCO International Price for Peace Education.

However, IJR is an exception to the rule, as several think tanks in the developing world often refrain from performing this type of analytical work. Numerous think tanks engage in extensive data collection, amass and store large amounts of data and information, and create rich databases but do not use such data as much or as well as they should. At times only a few descriptive statistics are produced using massive databases. Think tanks in the developing world often seem to act as data gatherers, not as data analysts, hence fail to develop the local research capacity; to provide stakeholders with an interpretation of what the data actually mean, and to use such evidence to develop local solutions for local problems.

By engaging in rigorous analytical work, think tanks in the developing world can provide donors and policy makers alike with the kind of evidence that they need to design proper policies, to implement them and to evaluate them. Think tanks need to produce more analytical work and by doing so, they will be able to make a more meaningful contribution to the development of the countries in which they operate, they will make themselves relevant, and they will be able to thrive. Achieving these results and objectives is more important than climbing a few positions in the international rankings.

Final words

A think tank must fulfill its mission and the mission may not be the same across jurisdictions. Therefore, it is important for authors to know the audience being addressed, have vivid knowledge of the think tank publishing the article or op-ed and ensure that the material about to be published is relevant and fits with the core values of the think tank under consideration. Think tanks in the developing world are set up for the most diverse reasons. Those, that are set up to perform policy analyses at the government's request, should be assessed on whether and how well they are able to influence the policy process in their respective countries. Those, that are instead to be pure research institutes, should be assessed based on how much and how well they publish. Finally, those think tanks that are expected to exercise some policy influence and conduct pure research, should be assessed not only based on their research publications but also on how they disseminate the knowledge that they generate. The last two types of think tanks are those with which scholars should try to collaborate and publish.

About the author:

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