

# Think tanks are neglecting cheap and easy social media, and failing to reach out to broader audiences for their work

by Blog Admin

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*Platforms such as Twitter, which offer a timely and low-cost medium to disseminate ideas are disrupting conventional approaches to public communication, but are think tanks really taking advantage of these new modes of communications? Research suggests not, write [Dr Michael Harris](#) and [Chris Sherwood](#).*



A few weeks ago we did a quick bit of research on which UK think tanks had the most Twitter followers (this was for the main corporate Twitter feed). The ‘winners’ were Chatham House (19,320 followers), The RSA (18,597) and the new economics foundation (18,214). There were also some well-known think tanks with surprisingly small Twitter presences, such as Reform (2,357), The Centre for Social Justice (1,881) and The Institute of Economic Affairs (1,383). The full list of 35 think tanks can be [found here](#).



Since then, we’ve also looked at individual think tank staff, fellows and associates for nearly 50 think tanks (comprising 1,385 people in total). We used staff and included fellows and associates because there is no consistent definition of think tank people and some think tanks effectively use this as an alternative staffing model. We didn’t include advisors or trustees. The full list has been posted in instalments on our blog, with the [top 50 here](#). Posting in instalments enabled us to check the accuracy of our work and through this we identified individuals from two think tanks that had not made it on to our original list. The list on our blog is the final list after these changes. The methodology was pretty rough and ready: we just checked whether the individuals had a Twitter account that they use as part of their think tank work (inevitably this means that we’ll have overlooked a few people who don’t identify any organisation in their Twitter bio or use the platform frequently, but then again this also means that they are unlikely to be prominent or regular tweeters).

The top 10 is perhaps unsurprising; these are well-known people after all, and many of them also inhabit other spheres (as journalists, commentators, bloggers etc), which broadens their appeal. What is more surprising is the extent to which they are outliers. The majority of think tankers make relatively limited use of Twitter, suggesting that think tanks are neglecting a cheap and easy way to communicate.

Only 38 per cent of people had a Twitter account that we could link to their think tank work. Of these, 71 per cent had less than 500 followers, while 42 per cent had less than 100 followers. No women appear in the top 10 and only seven appear in the top 50, which may also say something about a glass ceiling in think tanks. As might be expected, there’s also a generational dimension, with an emerging group of more junior think tankers who are making a name for themselves using social media. This includes James Grant (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1,448 followers), Will Tanner (Reform, 760 followers), and Rory Geoghegan (Policy Exchange, 611 followers).

More generally however, the total Twitter community around think tanks is quite small. Only nine organisations have more than 10,000 followers in total for their staff, associates and fellows, with the top five comprising Demos (50,725), IPPR (41,280), ResPublica (21,884), Chatham House (21,701) and the new economics foundation (12,257). (In the case of Demos in particular, there are quite a large number of people who are listed as staff or associates who may not be current or active representatives of the organisation, nevertheless we have included them in these numbers since we wanted to avoid making judgement on think tanks’ behalf if these individuals still appear on their websites). Some high-profile think tanks have very small individual-based followings, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies (137 followers)

and Civitas (339 followers), and this echoes their relatively small organisational social media profile (5,615 followers in the case of The Institute for Fiscal Studies, and 657 for Civitas). In contrast, in lieu of resources and established media profile, a group of newer think tanks are exploiting social media more effectively – for example the Sports Think Tank (2,412 followers with three staff) and British Futures (8,583 followers with three staff).

Moreover, it appears that most think tanks use Twitter as they would traditional media (typically, publicizing reports and events), rather than as a way to exchange ideas and provoke discussion. As a result, think tanks may be failing to reach out to broader audiences, particularly to engage the wider public in topical debates as a means of promoting their ideas and arguments – a missed opportunity for organizations most of which operate on a rather hand-to-mouth basis in terms of finances and which seek to influence public opinion as well as government policy.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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