

Think tanks must think more about issues of national interest, not self-interest

by Blog Admin

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*US think tanks have grown into a species primarily concerned with illustrating their influence on policy-makers. **Professor Donald Abelson** writes that it is time for these institutions to focus on their original intention: to bring bright minds together to promote solutions to the nation's ills.*



A colleague at a prominent Washington, DC-based think tank was asked recently by his employer to consider the major foreign policy challenges confronting the United States over the next decade. He replied half-jokingly, "I work at a think tank. I don't have time to think."

My colleague's frustration with the lack of time he has to think critically and methodically about key issues facing the United States has been echoed by countless policy experts residing at some of the nation's leading research institutions.

Hired ostensibly to conduct research in specific policy areas, scholars at think tanks are now conditioned to do far more than write books and articles. They are expected to pen op-ed articles for newspapers, appear as talking heads on major television networks, testify before congressional committees, provide advice (both solicited and unsolicited) to presidential candidates and even court potential donors. If time permits, they can think about their research, but increasingly, this is seen as a luxury.

As think tanks have joined the growing population of non-governmental organizations intent on shaping public opinion and public policy, their commitment to scholarly research has been called into question and justifiably so. Scholars who study think tanks may not be able to agree on how to define these complex organizations, but few question the extent to which think tanks have willingly abandoned policy research in favour of political advocacy.

When Robert Brookings, Andrew Carnegie, Herbert Hoover and other philanthropists created think tanks during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, their goal was to bring the best and brightest minds in the country together to develop new and innovative ways to address America's social and economic ills. They believed that the national interest could be advanced by encouraging social scientists to apply their expertise to important issues of the day.

In many respects, they were right. For example, scholars at the Brookings Institution helped create a national budget system, a significant achievement at the time. Moreover, at the New-York-based Council on Foreign Relations, critical work was undertaken as part of the War and Peace Studies project to assist policy-makers chart a more effective strategy for America to pursue in the international community.

But the days when think tanks could legitimately claim that their research helped advance the national interest are long over. By their very nature, advocacy think tanks – institutions that combine policy research with aggressive marketing- are not hard-wired to think in terms of the national interest. Rather, their primary motivation is to shape the policy preferences and goals of decision makers in ways that both satisfy and advance their ideological interests and those of their generous benefactors.

In what has become an increasingly competitive marketplace of ideas, think tanks are looking to leave an indelible mark on key policy discussions. Put simply, many think tanks that populate America's political landscape, including the Heritage Foundation and the Center for American Progress should be seen more as policy entrepreneurs than as generators of ideas. They are committed to providing policy makers and other stakeholders with information that can be easily digested. Ensuring that their research adheres to rigorous scientific standards is rarely a consideration. For these and other like-minded think tanks, ideas are simply commodities that can be traded on the open market.

Ironically, while some think tanks lose little sleep over whether their work meets the highest scholarly standards, they do pay close attention to how they are perceived by policy-makers and potential donors. As a result, in recent years, think tanks, often under pressure from their board of directors, have relied on various metrics such as media exposure to foster the illusion of policy influence. What matters most to think tanks is convincing their target audiences that they wield enormous influence in the political arena. If they can use data on how often their experts are quoted by the media or testify before congressional committees so be it. But scholars who study these institutions must avoid the temptation of buying the story line that advocacy think tanks often advance.

Contrary to Edwin Feulner, the long-serving president of the Heritage Foundation, the most talked about and written about think tanks are not always the ones that exercise the most policy influence. It is incumbent on scholars tracking these institutions to identify how and to what extent think tanks participate in the policy-making process. Think tanks can and often do make a difference in shaping the way the public and policy-makers think about critical issues. Far more work, however, has to be done to evaluate whether these institutions are helping or hindering the efforts of the nation to rehabilitate its image at home and abroad. So long as think tanks think more about their self-interest than the national interest, it is difficult to imagine that the results from this research will be promising.

Professor Abelson will speak tonight on 'The Changing Role of Think Tanks in American Politics' at 5.30pm at Senate House, University of London. For more information on the event, click [here](#).

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