

## Surprisingly, UK think tanks don't often communicate with elected officials

By Democratic Audit

*The UK has an established and influential think tank sector, with research organisations across the political spectrum providing a constant stream of political and policy ideas, setting the agenda, and influencing the media's reporting of events. Here, **Hartwig Pautz** looks at exactly who these organisations communicate with most frequently, and shows that the sector is surprisingly reticent in communicating with elected politicians, with the partial exception of Members of Parliament.*



*Think tanks such as CentreForum and Policy Exchange help to set the political agenda in the UK (Credit: Department for Communities and Local Government, CC BY SA NC 2.0)*

British politicians, journalists and everybody else interested in policy have little reason to complain about a lack of available policy expertise. In particular, they find the UK's political world populated by over 200 think-tanks. These organisations – most of them small in terms of staff and with relatively moderate financial resources – analyse current and anticipated policy problems by producing new research and using existing work, they provide stories for the media and advise politicians in government or in opposition, they are present at party conferences and corporate events. The central aim of all this is to influence the policy debate.

In order to perform all these activities think-tanks communicate and cooperate with actors from politics, media, academia, labour and capital. From these fields, who are the most important communication and cooperation partners? This is the question that the remainder of this contribution tackles by presenting excerpts from a recent study. A full discussion can be found in my recent article in *Politics*. The data presented was generated in an e-survey with sixteen domestic policy focussed think-tanks based in Britain – a very small sample so that all conclusions must be drawn with caution.

The think-tanks that participated in the survey were either of the 'advocacy' or 'academic' think-tank type, according to McGann and Weaver's oft-used typology. The latter type is characterised by heavy reliance on academics as researchers and a stress on objectivity and non-partisanship. Advocacy think-tanks combine a strong ideological bent with explicit efforts to influence current policy debates. Their output is less academic and often consists of repackaged and synthesised existing material.

The first question put to survey respondents concerned whom they, at their think-tanks, wished to influence most. Respondents at both think-tank types were nearly equally interested in influencing politicians with governmental responsibilities. However, opposition politicians are far less important for academic think-tanks. The numbers demonstrate the difference between the two types: only 54% – as opposed to 94% at advocacy think-tanks – of respondents at academic think-tanks agree ‘strongly’ or ‘very strongly’ to the notion that influencing opposition policy is important. Not surprisingly, academic think-tanks are also markedly less interested in influencing public opinion than advocacy think-tanks.

The next survey question sought answers as to who respondents communicate with to achieve their influence. Respondents at advocacy think-tanks indicated that they talk mostly to, first, academics, second, to journalists, and, third, to other think-tanks in Britain. Members of Parliament ranked fourth. Respondents at academic think-tanks display different priorities. While their most important communication partners are also academics, civil servants come second, followed by other think-tanks and journalists. A substantial difference between academic think-tanks and advocacy think-tanks therefore exists regarding the importance of civil servants and MPs.

For academic think-tanks MPs are almost irrelevant for the communication of their work: only 7% of respondents at academic think-tanks said they communicate ‘very frequently’ or ‘frequently’ with MPs; this contrasts with 56% at advocacy think-tanks. Elected representatives on ‘lower’ tiers of government are even less significant for both think-tank types. Business is a communication partner of which just under 50% of respondents at both think-tank types say they communicate with frequently or very frequently. Trade unions are only marginal communication partners. Only 7% of respondents at academic think-tanks communicate ‘very frequently’ or ‘frequently’ with unions and 22% at advocacy think-tanks.

The intensity and interest in cooperation shows similar patterns as does communication. Analysts at advocacy think-tanks mostly cooperate with universities, political parties, other think-tanks, charities and government departments. Trade unions and businesses, but also consultancies, have little importance for them. How about academic think-tanks? There is a difference between the two types: for academic think-tanks, other think-tanks, government departments and universities are the most important cooperation partners. Political parties, trade unions and consultancies hardly play a role for the academic think-tanks in the sample.

Sometimes think-tanks are referred to, in the literature, as policy transfer agents. For this reason, survey respondents were asked about their transnational communicative and collaborative networks. Overall, British think-tanks appear rather reluctant when it comes to working with organisations outside the UK. Other think-tanks, the EU Commission and universities are among the more frequent cooperation partners for advocacy think-tanks but even then only between 33% and 12% of respondents say that they cooperate very frequently or frequently with these actors.

For academic think-tanks universities, EU Commission, government departments and other think-tanks are slightly more significant cooperation partners. Political parties outside the UK have no significance for the respondents from academic think-tanks, while advocacy think-tanks have more contact to these actors. A big difference exists regarding the cooperation with governments outside the UK. They matter very little to advocacy think-tanks, while a quarter of respondents at academic think-tanks indicated that they cooperate moderately frequent with governments outside the UK.

Does this reluctance stem from a lack of interest in ideas from outside the UK? Here, a self-description of think-tank researchers was elicited. When asked ‘How would you characterise the interest of your organisation for ideas and inspiration coming from outside the UK?’ just under 75% of respondents at advocacy think-tanks and 83% of respondents at academic think-tanks said they had ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ interest in policy developments in other countries. Among the countries which are most interesting for British think-tanks to observe are the US, Germany, Sweden, Norway, France and also China and India, as respondents indicated. What exists in terms of cooperation with think-tanks in these and other countries is mainly inspired by, for advocacy think-tanks, ‘exchange of ideas’, ‘learning from others’ and ‘promotion of an idea’. A slightly different picture emerges from the data for academic think-tanks. While ‘exchange of ideas’ and ‘learning from others’ are also the two most important reasons to seek cooperation with think-tanks outside the UK, ‘influencing others’ and ‘acquiring funding’ are more important.

What can we make of these findings? Certainly, questions for further enquiry arise from the observation that there

is often little interaction between think-tanks and elected politicians. Could these representatives be better-informed about policy developments and be better connected to other actors? Are elected representatives in Britain able to draw from a sufficient pool of expertise to do their job, in particular when faced with crises of the magnitude of the 'Great Recession'? Why was devolution not followed by the emergence of a devolved think-tanks landscape to help with sub-state building? Do other types of experts full think-tank functions in the devolved nations?

Research on think-tanks and their role in a democratic society certainly has still a lot of important and exciting insights to offer.

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***This piece is based on the author's recent article in the 'Politics' journal***

*Note: this piece represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1iGO8tV>*

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**Hartwig Pautz** is a lecturer at the University of the West of Scotland.

