

How funder pressures can torpedo the credibility of research – the cautionary tale of Google and New America



*With policy recommendations subject to ever greater scrutiny – not only of their viability but also the credibility of their sources of expertise – many think tanks and research institutions invest considerable time and effort into building and nurturing a reputation for research quality and intellectual independence. However, this most valuable asset remains extremely precarious. **Till Bruckner** recounts the recent case of Google and New America, an example of how a single perceived vulnerability can undermine the credibility of an organisation's entire research output.*

There are no easy solutions, but the importance of transparency and a willingness to publicly address one's difficulties is clear.

The days in which most people automatically gave weight to policy recommendations if they were delivered by an “expert” with a PhD citing his “study” on TV are gone for good. Heightened popular awareness of biases in the media and [stealthy attempts by vested interests to shape political debates](#) means that both voters and decision-makers are looking more closely, and critically, at the sources of expertise. Today, in order for policy research to be policy-relevant, it must not only be plausible, but must also come from a credible source.

Many think tanks and other research institutions have invested considerable time and effort into building and nurturing a reputation for research quality and intellectual independence. However, a recent episode illustrates how credibility built up over years of hard work can be severely damaged in a matter of days, and provides insight into the tensions created by the pressures that all policy research institutions – for-profit consulting companies, governmental policy teams, international institutions, universities, and think tanks – have to navigate as they seek to provide intellectually independent policy advice against countervailing pressures from powerful patrons.

On 30 August 2017, the leadership of [New America](#), a liberal-leaning think tank based in Washington, D.C., woke up to a policy wonk's worst nightmare. Under the headline “Google Critic Ousted From Think Tank Funded by the Tech Giant,” the *New York Times* ran a [story](#) suggesting that a senior scholar and his entire team “would be exiled from New America” for displeasing Google, a big-ticket funder with strong personal ties to the ideas factory.

According to the article, the scholar, Barry Lynn, had posted a statement welcoming a record [\\$2.7 billion fine](#) against Google hours after European antitrust regulators announced their decision. According to Lynn, the newspaper reported, the executive chairman of Google's parent company soon after “communicated his displeasure with the statement” to his boss, New America's president. “The statement disappeared from New America's website, only to be reposted without explanation a few hours later,” the article continued.

The story did not end there. A couple of days later, Barry Lynn received an email from his boss telling him that “the time has come for Open Markets and New America to part ways.” Led by Mr Lynn, Open Markets is a high-profile programme that has long been highly critical of the near-monopoly powers of telecom and tech giants, including Google. The email explained that Mr Lynn's actions had been “imperilling the institution as a whole”.

Lynn apparently forwarded this and other emails to the *New York Times*, alleging that pressure from Google had led to his ousting. Google denied it had exerted such pressure. A New America spokesperson also strongly rejected the charge, stating that “New America financial supporters have no influence or control over the research design, methodology, analysis or findings of New America research projects”.

Next, New America issued a [statement](#) from its president stating that “Today's *New York Times* story implies that Google lobbied New America to expel the Open Markets program because of [this](#) press release. I want to be clear: this implication is absolutely false.” Rather, Lynn's “repeated refusal to adhere to New America's standards of openness and institutional collegiality” was what had prompted his ousting. New America also released the [full text of some emails](#) to Lynn, sparking a [backlash on Twitter](#). “Lol thanks for the transparency, these emails look real bad though,” a fairly typical [comment](#) read.

A media storm ensued. A [follow-up story](#) in the *New York Times* reported strong rumblings of discontent among the think tank's employees and associates. It also unearthed an earlier, unrelated episode of funder pressure in which the director, by her own admission, "got played"; she added: "I learned my lesson". Numerous other media outlets also covered and commented on the story, overwhelmingly in negative tones. (Think Tank Watch has curated [a useful compilation](#).)

On the same day the *New York Times* published its second story, Anne-Marie Slaughter, the New America president at the heart of the storm, published a thoughtful piece that went largely unnoticed. (Note: Slaughter's version of events is [not uncontested](#).) Under the title "[When The Truth is Messy and Hard](#)", she explained that:

"[W]e do not pay our researchers' salaries. Grants do—from foundations, individuals, and, increasingly, as the funding space gets tighter and tighter, corporations. We tell *all* of our donors that they cannot control the results of what they fund; we do not do contract research. But we also develop and maintain relationships with our donors as does any nonprofit institution.

So there's the tension. In practice, with an employee who had already surprised his colleagues unpleasantly—and many would say dishonestly—in the past, it meant that I wanted to see a press release before it went out. That is the reason that the Open Markets statement went up and then was taken down. It was posted before I had a chance to give it a final review. Indeed, I was talking to Barry about it on the phone when it went up. I have never—nor would I ever—censor anything, but I might ask questions about accuracy or tone. And, in this case, I wanted to give the funder a heads up that it was coming and send it over ourselves. That seems like a defensible minimum courtesy that an institution can offer its funders: we're about to do something you are really not going to like, but at least we are telling you about it. I recognize that the best journalists operate on a different principle—notice seems to imply interference. But we are not a newspaper, yet we try to uphold the best journalistic standards in our writing. [...]

I had to make a tough call. I still believe I made the right one consistent with our history and institutional values... [but n]othing we say is going to convince the many people who want to believe a David versus Goliath story of Barry Lynn versus big bad Google."

Her think piece ended with the sentence

"But for us, organizations like us, and the media who cover us, let's start by speaking truth, even when it's complicated and messy and hard."

What can social scientists and policy research institutions of all stripes learn from this episode?

First, a single incident – an unwise sentence in an email that gets leaked to the press, an employee whose lucrative consulting contracts raise questions about his related research outputs, or a perceived failure to adequately disclose a financial relationship – can dramatically devalue a think tank's most valuable asset: its credibility with policymakers, the media, and the general public.

Second, preserving intellectual integrity and independence is becoming ever more difficult as funders demand that think tanks deliver "visibility" and "impact". At worst, this can create pressure on grantees to promote funder agendas instead of producing the kind of in-depth research that makes a valuable contribution to policy debates. Think tanks are exceptionally vulnerable due to their reliance on securing a constant stream of income from sources that typically have vested interests of their own in the areas of research they support. However, those in the ivory tower who believe that academics are somehow immune from such pressures live in a fantasyland, as recent revelations about a university programme also funded by Google [convincingly demonstrate](#).

Third, perceptions matter. Journalists actively seek out evidence of integrity lapses, and then build their entire reporting around that single lapse. If they conclude that one project or paper is tainted, the value of the entire output of the think tank – dozens of projects, hundreds of papers – is thrown into doubt. Also, in the wake of critical media stories, think tanks can issue detailed rebuttals and clarifications (for example, see Brookings' [response](#) to an earlier *New York Times* exposé), but few people will read those. The news cycle moves on rapidly, and in reputational terms, it is the original reporting that leaves the most lasting impression.

Fourth, it could have been even worse. New America has long been [transparent about who funds its work](#), disclosing the identities of [all major donors](#). It thereby avoided the far more devastating headline “Google Critic Ousted From Think Tank [Secretly Funded by the Tech Giant](#)”. In contrast, a D.C. peer, the Middle East Institute, [reportedly accepted millions](#) from the United Arab Emirates without disclosing it, while London’s International Institute for Strategic Studies [actively misled the public](#) about huge sums it accepted from Bahrain. Both institutions have been raked over the coals as a result, and may never succeed in rebuilding their reputations and credibility.

Finally, the truth is indeed messy and hard. I challenge anyone doing policy research – including and especially academics – who think they have easy solutions to read the scenarios in Transparify’s [Think Tank Integrity Check](#) and try to come up with clear-cut answers. (Disclosure: I work with Transparify and am the lead author of the Integrity Check.) One frequently proposed solution, to reject all corporate funding, is neither realistic nor salient. For example, what exactly is the difference between money from the King of Morocco (individual), the Moroccan embassy (public body), the Moroccan state-owned phosphate company (corporation), or from the foundation tied to that company (philanthropic institution)?

Transparify has already run a workshop for think tankers in London based on the Integrity Check scenarios. (We will run others in Brussels, later this year, and Washington D.C., next year.) All workshop discussions were off the record; suffice to say that they were open, honest, and extremely constructive.

At a time when public interest in the relationships between the wealthy, the powerful, and intellectual elites is at an all-time high, institutions central to generating knowledge and shaping public debate are under scrutiny as never before. (Note that such close scrutiny of those who wield disproportionate power in society should be welcomed in a democracy). At the same time, there is a clear and present danger that if policy research institutions across the board come to be perceived as lacking integrity and intellectual independence and thus lose all credibility, we will end up in a Putinesque post-truth potpourri where every fact and every fiction carry equal weight.

So what is the solution? I don’t know. But “speaking truth, even when it’s complicated and messy and hard” is an excellent start, especially when the person speaking the truth has the courage to do so in public.

This blog post was written in a private capacity. All opinions expressed here are those of the author alone, and should not be taken to represent the position of Transparify or any other organisation.

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About the author

Till Bruckner has over a decade of experience in the field of research-driven advocacy. His professional history spans research, campaigning, policy analysis, and journalism. He has worked in a wide variety of contexts, including the UK, Afghanistan, Georgia, North Africa and the Caribbean. Till is the founder of [TranspariMED](#), an initiative that works to end evidence distortion in medicine, manages advocacy for [Transparify](#), an initiative promoting transparency and integrity in policy research. On the side, Till writes for [Foreign Policy](#) and other publications, blogs with the [Huffington Post](#), and is a [regular contributor](#) to the On Think Tanks blog. He is interested in the hidden power relationships that structure global politics and our everyday lives, and in finding new ways of using research and advocacy to make the world a better place. Till holds a PhD in Politics from the University of Bristol. His full professional history and list of publications can be found on his [LinkedIn](#) page.