

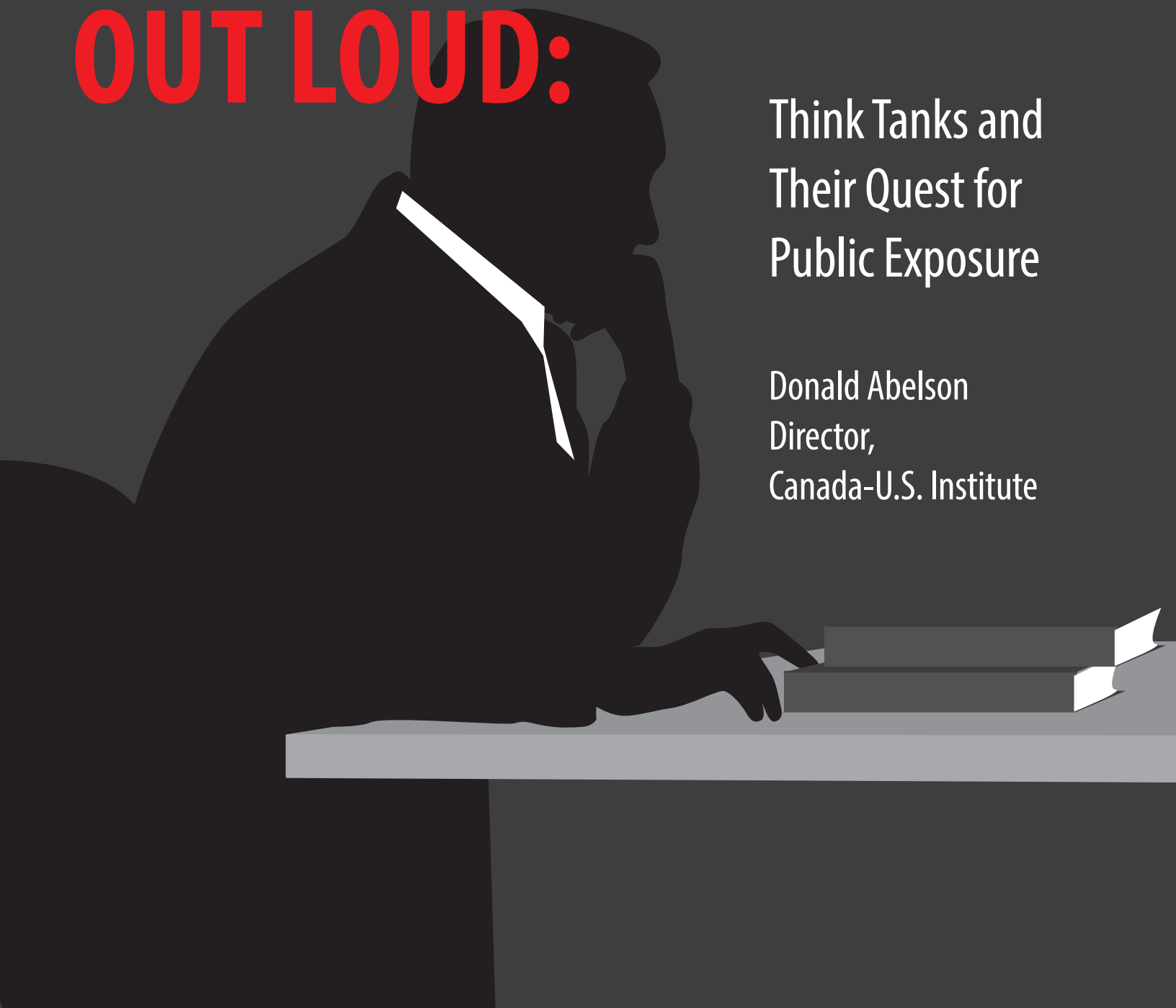
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# THINKING OUT LOUD:

Think Tanks and  
Their Quest for  
Public Exposure

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As organizations committed to influencing public opinion and public policy, think tanks devote considerable resources to developing, packaging, and promoting ideas. Indeed, like corporations in the private sector, much of their time is spent creating a range of products that will satisfy the needs of various target audiences. Among the many stakeholders to whom they disseminate their research are policymakers and their staff, academics, business leaders, philanthropists, and journalists. In a highly competitive marketplace where thousands of non-governmental organizations struggle to be heard, think tanks have not only learned to market their ideas; they have become very adept at marketing themselves.

Think tanks are a diverse and eclectic group of organizations that have emerged in significant numbers since the early 1970s. Once regarded as an American phenomenon, think tanks can be found in virtually every country in the world. According to James McGann (1995, 2008), a long-time think tank observer who tracks their proliferation, over 6,000 think tanks exist worldwide, close to half of which are located in the United States. Although there are several detailed studies about the behaviour of think tanks and their efforts to influence public policy, scholars have been unable to reach a consensus on how to define these institutions. While the term think tank was coined in the United States during the Second World War to describe a secure room or environment where military planners could meet to discuss wartime strategy, in contemporary discourse, a think tank generally refers to a non-profit institution composed of scholars who study and comment on various domestic and/or foreign policy issues.

Since scholars have been unable to agree on how to define a think tank, several classifications or typologies have been developed to account for the many types of think tanks located in the industrialized and developing world (McGann and Weaver 2000). The most popular type of think tank that has emerged in recent years is the so-called advocacy think tank, known for its ability to combine policy research with aggressive marketing techniques. The Washington-based Heritage Foundation, whose activities will be explored in more detail in this paper, is undoubtedly the best-known advocacy think tank in the world.

Think tanks vary enormously in terms of size, financial resources, areas of specialization, and commitment to scholarly research. However, what they share in common is a profound desire to influence how policymakers and the public think about critical policy issues. To ensure that their ideas leave a lasting impression on the electorate and on those entrusted to govern, directors and presidents of think tanks must think strategically about how their institutions can build a strong public profile. The importance of enhancing their institute's exposure is not lost on resident scholars who understand that their true value does not rest solely on the quality of their work, but is more often determined by the amount of exposure they generate for their employer. This largely explains why policy experts at leading think tanks in Canada and the United States are strongly encouraged to submit op-ed articles to prominent newspapers, engage in conversations with the media, maintain blogs on their institute's website, testify before legislative committees, participate on government task forces, and provide

advice to presidential candidates and administrations. The quest to gain and maintain strong public exposure also explains why several elite think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation, set aside millions of dollars each year for media relations. It also accounts for why several think tanks have television studios on site to facilitate the media's access to their scholars.

Think tanks would not invest the kind of resources necessary to build a public profile unless there were significant rewards for doing so. What is at stake is not simply bragging rights about which think tanks generate the most media exposure; what is also at stake are opportunities to influence the way the public and policymakers think about key domestic and foreign policy issues, not to mention the opportunity to shape the political climate in a country for a long period of time. What is also at stake is millions of dollars that corporations, private donors, and leading philanthropic foundations are prepared to invest in organizations that are capable of helping governments think in ways that are compatible with their institutional and ideological interests. But, unlike corporations that are driven by profit margins, think tanks measure success not by quarterly gains and losses, but by how much influence, real or perceived, they have in shaping public policy. Unfortunately, for boards of directors and trustees appointed to oversee think tanks and for those who study these institutions, it is far simpler to read spreadsheets than to measure think tank performance. Recognizing this, scholars who study think tanks and their efforts to influence policymaking at various levels and in various branches of government, have begun to think more critically about how effective think tanks are in reaching their target audiences.

For a select group of think tank directors who oversee multi-million dollar budgets and manage dozens of researchers, the amount of media exposure their institutes generate provides a useful measurement of how much influence think tanks wield. After all, they claim, why would we generate so much media attention if our ideas were considered irrelevant? Yet, despite their efforts to convince board members, philanthropic foundations, and other potential donors that media exposure translates into policy influence, how and to what extent think tanks are able to shape the political climate warrants closer scrutiny. Think tanks go to great lengths to foster the illusion of having influence—scholars must go to even greater lengths to ascertain what, if any, influence they actually wield.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight how think tanks seek to build a public profile and to dispel the myth cultivated and nurtured by many of them that media exposure should be equated with policy influence. As this paper will demonstrate, keeping track of how often think tanks are quoted by the print, broadcast, and electronic media may help scholars to identify those organizations most actively engaged in specific policy debates, but it does little to confirm how much or little influence think tanks enjoy in the policymaking process. Think tanks, not unlike other non-governmental organizations, must do far more than catch the eye of journalists to influence the formulation and implementation of public policy. In the pages that follow, I lay the foundation for assessing the impact of think tanks by exploring the many channels

on which think tanks rely to market their ideas. It is important to keep in mind that while think tanks in Canada and in the United States have very different missions and resources, they tend to rely on similar strategies to influence public policy. Where they differ is with respect to the priority they assign to policy research and political advocacy. In other words, while generating media exposure is a preferred tactic for more advocacy-oriented think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation in the U.S. and the Fraser Institute in Canada, to name a few, it is not considered a priority for some institutes like the Public Policy Forum and the Caledon Institute that pay little attention to the amount of media exposure they generate, preferring instead to commit their limited resources to strengthening ties to key policymakers.

The paper begins by highlighting the strategies think tanks generally employ to generate attention in the public arena and in important policy circles. Particular emphasis is placed on what has become the most visible method think tanks pursue to attract exposure: gaining access to the media. Finally, some of the many methodological problems that arise in assessing think tank influence and what steps can be taken to provide more informed judgments about the impact of think tanks will be discussed. This paper draws heavily on how think tanks in Canada and in the United States seek to enrich their public profile. This comparative analysis is unavoidable given the extent to which the think tank experience in the United States has influenced the growth and evolution of think tanks in Canada. Although the think tank community in the United States is far more extensive than it is in Canada and for that matter, in most other advanced industrialized countries, Canadian think tanks have followed a similar path of development to their American counterparts, albeit at a more staggered pace. Significant differences and similarities between how think tanks in both countries attempt to become more visible on the political landscape will be duly noted.

## ***BUILDING A PUBLIC PROFILE***

Think tanks achieve notoriety for many reasons. Some, including the world renowned Brookings Institution, an organization whose roots date back to the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, has cultivated a well deserved reputation as a research intensive policy institute which has produced leading studies in foreign policy, economics, and governance. Although it has become more advocacy-oriented in recent years, it continues to be revered for its sound academic research. Other think tanks, such as the Heritage Foundation (HF) and the Vancouver-based Fraser Institute (FI), which also has a number of smaller regional offices, are known more for their aggressive marketing techniques. Combining policy research with political advocacy, these types of organizations have played a critical role in changing the way think tanks participate in the policymaking process. Founded in the early 1970s, advocacy think tanks have revolutionized the think tank industry in North America by emphasizing the importance of providing policymakers with timely and relevant policy expertise. But unlike many of their predecessors who were reluctant to interfere in the policymaking process, the HF, the FI and countless other think tanks have built their research programs, not to mention their reputations, around providing policymakers and journalists with

information they can easily digest and share with their target audiences. And there are many think tanks, including the U.S.-based American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution and the Center for American Progress that have been propelled into the national spotlight because of the close ties that several of their scholars have enjoyed with various presidential administrations. Yet, regardless of how different types and generations of think tanks promote themselves, they understand all too well the importance of building a public profile, a profile that will help them to attract the attention of policymakers, journalists, and donors.

To varying degrees, think tanks in the United States and Canada employ some or all of the following strategies to raise their public profile:

- holding public forums and conferences to discuss various domestic and foreign policy issues,
- encouraging scholars to give public lectures and addresses,
- testifying before committees and subcommittees of Congress (in the U.S.) and Parliament,
- publishing books, opinion magazines, newsletters, policy briefs, and journals that have wide distribution,
- creating email distribution lists to facilitate the transmission of new publications, and posting key information about the work of their institute on their Internet website,
- targeting the public during annual fund raising campaigns,
- enhancing their media exposure.

Holding public forums or conferences is among the most common strategies think tanks employ to increase awareness about a particular domestic or foreign policy issue. Policymakers, journalists, academics, and representatives from the private and non-profit sectors are regularly invited to discuss timely and often controversial issues before public audiences. At times conferences are also arranged to generate exposure for a newly released study. A well-publicized and well-attended conference on important topics such as stabilizing world markets, enhancing border security, and promoting a greener economy, several of which have been organized by Canadian and American think tanks, or a conference on the impact of the Obama administration on domestic and foreign policy, which several Washington-based think tanks have sponsored, can benefit these organizations in many ways. In addition to taking credit for encouraging opinion makers to discuss issues they have helped identify, think tanks use conferences to educate those in attendance about the role of their institute and the work in which they are engaged.

To reach even more individuals who might be interested in the type of research they conduct, think tanks in both countries encourage their resident scholars to give lectures at universities, Rotary associations, and other organizations interested in contemporary political affairs. Once again, high-profile speakers from think tanks can serve as ambassadors for their institutes as they travel across the country, sharing their thoughts on a host of policy issues. Several scholars at think tanks regularly perform this role and, in the process, remind their audience of the efforts

their organizations are undertaking to convince policymakers to follow the right path.

Several think tanks also recognize the importance of conveying ideas to policymakers and the public in a more formal manner. Some policy institutes in Canada and the United States accomplish this by testifying before legislative committees—although some, including the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation in the U.S., and the Canadian Council on Social Development and the Conference Board of Canada, clearly assign a higher priority to performing this function than others. Providing testimony, particularly to a prominent committee, can attract considerable attention. The oral presentations and written briefs policy experts provide are included as part of the official record and are often cited by journalists and academics. These presentations are now available online thus making it far easier for journalists and others to access. By virtue of contributing remarks during committee hearings, think tank scholars can often benefit from the added weight and credibility that are associated with the aura surrounding “the official record.” Agreeing to appear before legislative committees can also promote the credibility of think tanks in the eyes of some policymakers and help think tank directors convince potential donors of the widespread influence of their institutes. This may explain why several think tanks in the United States and Canada prominently display the testimonies given by staff on their website.

There are several other strategies think tanks employ to market their message. Many, particularly those with well-established research programs, such as the Montreal-based Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), rely on opinion magazines, journals, newsletters, and books to reach their various target audiences. Several think tanks also publish opinion magazines, including *Policy Options* and *The Fraser Forum*, published by the IRPP and the FI respectively. For many think tanks, these types of publications are their most effective product, because unlike books, which are often outdated by the time they are released, opinion magazines provide policymakers with insights into current policy problems. Often on a particular theme, these publications help to frame the parameters of important and relevant policy debates, and more importantly for policymakers, who have hectic schedules, they can be read in a matter of minutes, not hours or days.

Think tanks produce publications for other consumers as well. Several, for example, publish refereed scholarly journals that are intended to be read by university students and academics. One such publication is the *International Journal*, published by the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. In addition to scholarly journals and opinion magazines, dozens of think tanks produce books and monthly newsletters that are intended to keep readers informed about the most important developments at their institutes.

A number of think tanks also reach potential consumers through other forms of communication. In the past, the HF, for instance, produced *Monthly Briefing Tapes*, which included interviews with some of its policy experts, as well as speeches given by prominent (mostly conservative) opinion makers. To market this product, the

HF often sought the endorsement of high-profile policymakers. Among those who helped ‘sell’ the monthly briefing tapes was former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. In his endorsement, Gingrich referred to the tapes as “[a] monthly dose of conservative common sense. You’ll wonder how you ever got along without it” (Abelson 2006, 151).

As new technologies were developed, audio tapes were replaced with video clips, podcasts, chat rooms, live interviews, and other forms of communication made available on websites maintained by think tanks. Virtually every think tank in the United States and Canada relies extensively on the Internet to publicize its work. The websites provide a wealth of information, ranging from an institute’s most current publications and staff directory to upcoming conferences and seminars. Some sites also provide links to important databases. In the U.S., the Urban Institute provides a link to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, a repository of data on the non-profit sector, while others such as the HF have gone so far as to use their sophisticated website to advise young conservatives on how to find policy jobs in Washington. Think tanks also regularly update their e-mail distribution lists to ensure that academics, policymakers, journalists, and others interested in their work are kept informed about key issues and events. Many think tanks also track the number of website hits they generate as well as the number and kinds of documents that are downloaded from their sites. For instance, in its 2007 Annual Report, the FI notes that in the preceding twelve-month period, over 1.3 million visits were made to its website (Fraser Institute 2007). These and other figures may help think tanks make a stronger case to potential donors that their work is attracting larger audiences.

Fundraising is yet another way think tanks in both countries can market themselves to the public and to policymakers. Again, some think tanks, particularly in the United States, have enlisted the support of high-profile policymakers to convince the American public to make donations. For instance, in 1982, at the request of Heritage Foundation President Edwin Feulner, Edwin Meese III, a special adviser to President Ronald Reagan and later U.S. attorney-general, wrote a letter to potential Heritage donors telling them that in exchange for a tax-deductible donation of \$1,000, they would be allowed to join the President’s Club. The club, according to Meese, who for several years has held a fellowship at the HF, would entitle them to “a series of meetings with the most senior members of the administration and Congress.” In an accompanying fundraising letter, Feulner added, “you will be provided with an access to Washington policymakers which cannot be had at any price. I have no doubt that you will find your membership fee returned to you many times over” (Abelson 1996, 57). Dismissing claims that he was directly asking people to give money to the Heritage Foundation, Meese remarked, “I am enthusiastic about the establishment of the Heritage Foundation President’s Club ... [It is] a vital communications link [between the White House and those who support President Reagan and] this administration will fully cooperate with your efforts” (57).

Of all the public uses of think tank influence, none is more visible than the efforts of think tanks to secure access to the media. As will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, since several



directors of think tanks often equate media exposure with policy influence, many devote considerable resources to enhancing their public profile. By ensuring that they are regularly quoted in the print and broadcast media, think tanks seek to create the perception that they play a critical role in shaping public policy. However, as we will discover, while it is important for think tanks to communicate their views to the public on television broadcasts or on the op-ed pages (opposite the editorial page) of Canadian and American newspapers, media exposure does not necessarily translate into policy influence. Generating media attention may enable some think tanks to influence public opinion, but it does not necessarily guarantee access to other critical stages of the policymaking process.

## **MARKETING THE MESSAGE: THINK TANKS AND THE MEDIA**

Testifying before a high-profile congressional or parliamentary committee or publishing a study on a controversial domestic or foreign policy issue may attract attention in some policymaking circles. However, it is unlikely to generate the exposure that an appearance on the CBS or CBC evening news or an op-ed article in the *New York Times* or the *Globe and Mail* would generate. This may explain why some think tanks devote considerable time and resources to gaining access to the print and broadcast media. It might also explain why the competition between think tanks for media exposure is so intense. As Patricia Linden (1987) explains, for think tanks to compete,

their ideas must be communicated; otherwise the oracles of tankdom wind up talking to themselves. The upshot is an endless forest of communiqués, reports, journals, newsletters, op-ed articles, press releases, books, and educational materials. The rivalry for attention is fierce; so much so that the analysts have come out of their think tanks to express opinions on lecture and TV circuits, at seminars and conferences, press briefings and Congressional hearings (100).

Securing access to the media on a regular basis provides think tanks with a valuable opportunity to shape public opinion and public policy. At the very least, media exposure allows think tanks to plant seeds in the mind of the electorate that may develop into a full-scale public policy debate. In addition to contributing to the public dialogue, think tanks understand, as previously noted, that media exposure helps foster the illusion of policy influence, a currency they have a vested interest in accumulating. The more exposure think tanks generate, the more influential their directors claim they are. The Fraser Institute is just one of many think tanks that equates media exposure with policy influence. Although FI Chair Alan F. Campney acknowledged in a cover quote on the Institute's 1976 Annual Report that it "is almost as difficult to measure the effects of the Institute's work as it is to ascertain what Canada's economic problems are," the FI has consistently relied on media coverage to assess its impact. According to its twenty-five-year retrospective in 1999, "[o]ne of the indicators the institute has used from its inception [to measure performance] is media coverage. How many mentions does an institute book receive in daily newspapers? How many minutes of airtime do institute

authors and researchers receive during interviews?" (Fraser Institute 1999, 12). Such data may tell us which think tanks attract the most attention, but it provides little insight into how much impact institutes have in the policymaking process.

Few think tanks have devoted more time and resources to securing access to the media than the Heritage Foundation. In 2007, the HF spent close to \$8.3 million, or 17 percent of its \$48 million budget, on media and government relations (Heritage Foundation 2007). The HF's public relations program is based on a simple premise: "provide journalists, opinion leaders and the general public with the positive message of responsible conservatism and conservatism will remain competitive, and even triumph, in the marketplace of ideas" (Ibid.). Its goal is even simpler: "Make sure journalists never have a reason for not quoting at least one conservative expert—or for not giving the conservative 'spin' in their stories" (Ibid.). The HF has clearly accomplished its goal: the mainstream media in the United States rely disproportionately on the HF and a handful of other conservative think tanks in the Washington area for their expertise and political commentary. In Canada, the media appear to rely heavily on a handful of conservative think tanks as well

To make sure journalists do not overlook the views of their scholars, the HF and several other think tanks, including the Hoover Institution and the American Enterprise Institute have developed programs designed to flood the mainstream print media with hundreds of op-ed articles each year. For example, between 1998 and 2008, well over 1,000 articles written by Heritage scholars appeared in some of America's leading newspapers (Ibid.).

Several think tanks have also given considerable thought to how to increase their exposure on the air. While some American institutes have created their own television programs or have had documentaries or conferences broadcast on cable TV, most viewers recognize think tank scholars from their regular appearances on network newscasts (CBS, ABC, NBC, and CNN), *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, or a host of political talk shows including *Meet the Press* and *This Week* (with George Stephanopoulos, former communications director to President Bill Clinton). Scholars from Canadian think tanks regularly appear on the CBC and CTV evening news.

Establishing personal relationships with journalists is also critical for think tanks trying to enhance their media profile. As Brian Lee Crowley, founding president of the Halifax-based Atlantic Institute for Market Studies observed, to secure access to the media, think tanks should ensure that their institutional interests coincide with those of journalists. According to Crowley (1999),

having sound ideas and doing the research to back them up are only one-half of your job. The other half is putting a lot of energy into strategic communications, and putting that strategy into effect. The place to start is not with ideas, but with personal relationships. Journalists are moved much more by personal contact than by the best ideas in the world. One way that they economize on scarce time is by having a stable of people, experts in their field, in whom they can have confidence (2-3).

The potential benefits of being a guest commentator on a national newscast or radio program, or of publishing op-ed articles on a regular basis are great. Not only do these activities bode well for think tank scholars looking for a broader audience to which to convey their ideas, but they can also promote the goals of the institutions they represent. As William J. Taylor, Jr., a senior adviser in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, freely admits, he takes advantage of every opportunity to appear on television, not so much for personal reasons, “but for the glory of CSIS and its mission of informing the public. When we’re on television, we’re up there as individuals, but it says CSIS under our name” (Abelson 1996, 88). Yet, as Howard Kurtz, a reporter with the *Washington Post* and a regular guest on various CNN talk shows points out, what the viewer fails to learn from the title flashing under Taylor’s name—“CSIS Military Analyst”—is that “CSIS is a markedly conservative organization that forms a sort of interlocking directorate with the Washington establishment, . . . that it has received \$50,000 to \$250,000 from such defense contractors as Boeing, General Dynamics, Rockwell, Honeywell and Westinghouse, [and] that its annual report boasts: ‘we network in Washington with the Congress, the executive branch, the scholarly community, the corporate and labour communities and the media’” (Ibid.).

It is not difficult to understand why think tanks covet media attention. After all, as the Heritage Foundation, the AEI, the Brookings Institution, the Fraser Institute, the C.D. Howe Institute, and others have discovered, media coverage can and does play a critical role in allowing institutes to effectively market their message. But what makes some think tanks more media-friendly than others? A few factors are worth noting. First, think tanks that have large and diverse research programs supported by dozens of staff are likely better positioned to attract more media exposure than institutes offering only a narrow range of expertise. Think tanks such as many of those mentioned above appeal to journalists because they can comment on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues. In a sense, the AEI, the Heritage Foundation, and the Brookings Institution function as one-stop policy shops. They also appeal to journalists who are consciously looking for a particular political perspective on an issue. When reporters call the HF or the FI, which are well known for their commitment to free-market principles, they can be assured that any proposal by the president or Congress, or by the prime minister to increase taxes will be criticized. Knowing what positions think tanks will generally take may also account for the media’s reliance on the same group of think-tank scholars. The reliability of policy experts is also a consideration, particularly when journalists are under tight deadlines. As Sam Donaldson of ABC News observes:

Clearly there are problems with going to the same people ... [But] to sit down while you’re facing a deadline and say, ‘Gee, there must be some other experts we haven’t thought of.’ Well, that takes a lot of time and energy because for TV it involves a lot more than flipping a card on the Rolodex. A second reason is that we know [some guys] provide a succinct response... I don’t have the time to take a chance with Mr. X... I know Mr. Y. . . . is going to deliver the goods (in Abelson 1995, 86).

As Donaldson implies, how effective pundits are at communicating their ideas to the public in a straightforward and meaningful way is also important. Tammy Haddad, Vice President, Washington, for MSNBC, and a former executive producer of *Larry King Live* agrees, observing that “there are so many people out there who know so much, but they’re lousy guests. They have to be able to explain [issues] in such a way that my mother in Pittsburgh understands what they are talking about” (Ibid.).

During newscasts it becomes even more crucial for guests to be succinct – they do not have the time to offer long *exposés* on the state of the world. Those scholars who realize what the broadcast media require will continue to find their names on Blackberry and other hand held devices.

## ***A LOOK AT THE NUMBERS: WHAT DO THEY MEAN?***

According to an earlier study that examined the media exposure of a select group of think tanks in Canada and the United States between 1985 and 1999 (Abelson 1999, 2002), I concluded that a handful of organizations enjoyed a disproportionate amount of media attention. In addition, according to a more recent study (Abelson 2009), the patterns that were identified with respect to think-tank visibility in Canada prior to 2000 have, with few exceptions, remained intact over the past several years. As discussed below, although more think tanks have entered the marketplace of ideas, for the most part the same institutions continue to attract the lion’s share of media attention and are most frequently called upon to testify before legislative committees. Also important to note is that think tanks are privately funded and almost all of the 19 in the study are at the conservative end of the political spectrum (see budget column in Table 3). While the data sets can be subjected to various statistical tests, the findings with respect to which think tanks attract the most media and Parliamentary attention are clear.

In Canada, the FI, the Conference Board of Canada, and the C.D. Howe Institute continue to generate the most visibility. Between 2000 and 2008, their scholars and publications were cited more often on national radio (CBC), on television (CBC and CTV), and in newspapers than most of their competitors (see Table 1). Indeed, with the exception of the Canada West Foundation, the Pembina Institute (another Calgary-based think tank), the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (one of the rare Left/liberal-leaning think tanks), and IRPP, the remaining think tanks included in this study have very modest public profiles. As indicated in Table 1, the Fraser Institute (23 percent), the Conference Board of Canada (21 percent), and C.D. Howe (12 percent) account for over half the media exposure (56 percent) paid to think tanks in the country. Interestingly, the Pembina Institute, which attracted 8 percent of total media exposure, surpassed C.D. Howe in combined television exposure (CBC and CTV) and shared top spot with the FI in the number of references made to it on selected CBC national radio programs.

In addition, as Table 2 clearly indicates, most media exposure for think tanks is through print media. In the 10 Canadian

newspapers for which data on think tank references were obtained, the FI ranked first with 5,454 references, followed closely by the Conference Board (5,139), C.D. Howe (3,026), Canada West (1,994), and Pembina (1,885).

However, results are very different when the annual budgets of think tanks are taken into consideration (see Table 3). Ranked first in total media exposure, the FI's \$15 million budget amounts to half the money available to the Conference Board (\$30 million), but is three times more than the operating budgets of C.D. Howe, Canada West, and Pembina and 7.5 times the budget of the Left/liberal think tank with the highest budget, CCPA, at \$2 million. In other words, compared to the Conference Board of Canada, the amount of media exposure the FI enjoys is staggering, but its public profile is less impressive when compared to C.D. Howe, Canada West, and Pembina, which have access to far fewer funds.

In the same period, a select group of Canadian think tanks also made its presence felt before several Parliamentary committees and in various policy debates in the House of Commons and Senate. In the absence of the Economic Council of Canada and other government-funded think tanks—casualties of the 1992 federal budget—it is conceivable that the privately funded Conference Board is being looked to to provide expertise once offered by others. Between 1999 and 2008, experts from the Conference Board have testified 143 times, followed by C.D. Howe (98), the FI (73), the Canadian Council on Social Development (47), the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (46), and the Caledon Institute (35) (see Table 4). However, particularly in minority governments, while opposition parties may have more openings to ensure that a more diverse group of witnesses testifies in committees, it is difficult to identify which political party requested the presence of which think tanks. Although think tanks are also mentioned in the House of Commons and the Senate, with the top three think tanks the same as those that attended the most Parliamentary committees, it is similarly difficult to identify if the government or an opposition party requested the presence of which think tank, other than that many of the references made to think tanks in House and Senate debates refer to remarks they made to parliamentary committees.

The size of a think tank's budget can also make a significant difference with respect to the number of appearances made by think tanks before parliamentary committees. Given the amount of time and resources that are invested in lobbying for inclusion, helping their experts prepare testimony, and publicizing their appearance, it is not entirely surprising that think tanks with the largest budgets and thus the most potential to engage in policy promotion are also those that testify most often.

While these and other data sets are useful in helping scholars to identify which think tanks appear to be most engaged in various policy debates, references to how often think tanks are quoted in the press or in various government publications cannot by itself confirm how much or little policy influence think tanks wield. In the final section, I discuss why measuring the influence of think tanks on shaping public policy is inherently problematic and what steps scholars can take to overcome some difficult methodological hurdles.

**TABLE 1**

References to Select Canadian Think Tanks in National Media, 2000-2008

INSTITUTE	RADIO	TELEVISION	NEWSPAPERS	TOTAL	% OF TOTAL
Fraser Institute	49	44	5454	5547	23%
Conference Board of Canada	32	60	5139	5231	21%
C.D. Howe Institute	15	14	3026	3055	12%
Canada West Foundation	22	29	1994	2045	8%
Pembina Institute	49	38	1885	1972	8%
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	36	19	1331	1386	6%
Institute for Research on Public Policy	3	7	1117	1127	5%
Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies	3	37	492	532	2%
Mackenzie Institute	14	35	478	527	2%
Canadian Policy Research Networks	10	7	469	486	2%
Public Policy Forum	3	3	447	453	2%
Montreal Economic Institute	0	2	449	451	2%
Parkland Institute	9	2	406	417	2%
Canadian Council on Social Development	1	6	368	375	2%
Canadian Tax Foundation	2	2	356	360	1%
Canadian Urban Institute	0	5	258	263	1%
Canadian Institute for Advanced Research	0	1	223	224	1%
Frontier Centre for Public Policy	4	1	187	192	<1%
Canadian Institute of International Affairs	2	2	183	187	<1%
Caledon Institute of Social Policy	1	0	163	164	<1%
North-South Institute	2	1	148	151	<1%
Economic Council of Canada	0	0	121	121	<1%
Parliamentary Centre	0	0	71	71	<1%
National Council on Welfare	4	0	50	54	<1%
Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs	0	1	33	34	<1%
Science Council of Canada	0	0	29	29	<1%
Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy	0	0	28	28	<1%
Canadian Institute for Int'l Peace and Security	0	0	15	15	<1%
Pearson-Shoyana Institute	0	0	13	13	<1%
Canadian Council for Int'l Peace and Security	1	0	1	2	<1%
Quebec Institute of Advanced Int'l Studies	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>25,512</b>	<b>100%</b>



**TABLE 2**

References to selected Canadian think tanks in national newspapers, 2000-2008

INSTITUTE	G&M	TST	TSU**	MG	VS	EJ	CH	HDN	OC	NP	TOTAL
Fraser Institute	423	366	330	335	881	326	999	130	488	1176	5454
Conference Board of Canada	830	559	176	365	499	447	623	178	559	903	5139
C.D. Howe Institute	500	259	53	185	223	198	234	56	264	1054	3026
Canada West Foundation	211	63	14	39	109	415	839	16	102	186	1994
Pembina Institute	238	172	29	52	78	572	515	26	97	106	1885
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	166	212	39	71	293	82	90	80	161	137	1331
Institute for Research on Public Policy	133	120	13	111	71	57	70	28	150	364	117
Canadian Institute on Strategic Studies	67	32	16	34	24	46	33	15	124	101	492
Mackenzie Institute	43	27	43	21	37	26	43	14	108	116	478
Canadian Policy Research Networks	91	70	18	22	29	46	34	14	96	49	469
Montreal Economic Institute	33	11	9	208	7	11	10	2	31	127	449
Public Policy Forum	55	73	6	22	9	36	17	2	144	83	447
Parkland Institute	18	9	3	7	9	240	92	1	5	22	406
Canadian Council on Social Development	46	76	13	29	20	29	30	23	58	44	368
Canadian Tax Foundation	59	37	11	24	30	26	32	15	54	68	356
Canadian Urban Institute	83	112	12	4	4	3	4	2	5	29	258
Canadian Institute for Advanced Research	40	36	5	13	28	16	7	2	17	59	223
Frontier Centre for Public Policy	5	1	4	11	8	18	45	1	11	83	187
Canadian Institute of International Affairs	38	17	3	17	8	10	11	1	33	45	183
Caledon Institute of Social Policy	42	41	1	4	8	10	7	5	24	21	163
North-South Institute	62	24	2	9	2	11	2	1	30	5	148
Economic Council of Canada	47	10	0	6	6	5	10	5	4	28	121
Parliamentary Centre	13	4	4	0	2	2	1	0	24	21	71
National Council on Welfare	5	14	2	3	5	5	6	5	1	4	50
Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs	7	11	2	3	0	1	0	0	5	4	33
Science Council of Canada	6	5	0	1	2	4	1	0	5	5	29
Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy	10	1	0	3	2	4	2	1	2	3	28
Canadian Institute for Int'l Peace and Security	3	3	0	1	1	2	1	0	3	1	15
Pearson-Shoyana Institute	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2	7	2	13
Canadian Council for Int'l Peace and Security	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Quebec Institute of Advanced Int'l Studies	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3275</b>	<b>2365</b>	<b>808</b>	<b>1601</b>	<b>2396</b>	<b>2648</b>	<b>3758</b>	<b>625</b>	<b>2612</b>	<b>4846</b>	<b>24934</b>

Source: ProQuest, \*\* Source LexisNexis. The ten newspapers are: *The Globe and Mail* (G&M), *The Toronto Star* (TSt), *Toronto Sun* (TSu), *Montreal Gazette* (MG), *Vancouver Sun* (VS), *Edmonton Journal* (EJ), *Charlottetown Herald* (CH), *Halifax Daily News* (HDN), *Ottawa Citizen* (OC), *National Post* (NP)  
 Sear parameters: January 1, 2000 - July 4, 2008

**TABLE 3**

Comparison of Annual Budget to Number of Media Appearances for Selected Canadian Think Tanks

INSTITUTE	ANNUAL BUDGET (MILLIONS OF DOLLARS)	NUMBER OF TELEVISION, NEWSPAPER AND RADIO REFERENCES
Fraser Institute	15	5547
Conference Board of Canada	30	5231
C.D. Howe Institute	5	3055
Canada West Foundation	5	2045
Pembina Institute	5	1972
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	2	1386
Institute for Research on Public Policy	5	1117
Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies	0	532
Mackenzie Institute	0	527
Canadian Policy Research Networks	5	486
Public Policy Forum	2	453
Montreal Economic Institute	2	451
Parkland Institute	0	417
Canadian Council on Social Development	2	375
Canadian Tax Foundation	5	360
Canadian Urban Institute	0	263
Canadian Institute for Advanced Research	15	224
Frontier Centre for Public Policy	0	192
Canadian Institute of International Affairs	2	187
Caledon Institute of Social Policy	2	164
North-South Institute	5	151
Parliamentary Centre	9	71
National Council on Welfare	0	54
Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs	0	34
Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy	0	28
Canadian Centre for Philanthropy	5	0
Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development	5	0
Atlantic Provinces Economic Council	2	0
Institute of Governance	2	0
Atlantic Institute for Market Studies	2	0

**TABLE 4**

Appearances of Selected Canadian Think Tanks before Parliamentary Committees, 1999-2008

INSTITUTE	NUMBER OF APPEARANCES
Conference Board of Canada	143 (22.0%)
C.D. Howe Institute	98 (15.1%)
Fraser Institute	73 (11.2%)
Canadian Council on Social Development	47 (7.2%)
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	46 (7.1%)
Caledon Institute of Social Policy	35 (5.4%)
North-South Institute	33 (5.1%)
National Council on Welfare	31 (4.8%)
Public Policy Forum	28 (4.3%)
Parliamentary Centre	26 (4.0%)
Canada West Foundation	26 (4.0%)
Canadian Policy Research Networks	22 (3.4%)
Institute for Research on Public Policy	17 (2.6%)
Canadian Institute for Strategic Studies	11 (1.7%)
Canadian Institute for International Affairs	8 (1.2%)
Mackenzie Institute	4 (0.6%)
Canadian Tax Foundation	2 (0.3%)
Canadian Council for International Peace and Study	1 (0.2%)
Pearson-Shoyama Institute	0 (0.0%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>651 (100.2%)</b>

Source: Canadian Library of Parliament. Accessed at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Library.asp>

**TABLE 5**

References to Canadian Think Tanks in the House of Commons and Senate, 1994-2008

INSTITUTE	35TH PARLIA- MENT 01/94- 04-97 LIBERAL	36TH PARLIA- MENT 09/97- 10-00 LIBERAL	37TH PARLIA- MENT 01/01- 05-04 LIBERAL	38TH PARLIA- MENT 01/04- 11-05 LIBERAL	39TH PARLIA- MENT 04/06- 09-08 CONSER- VATIVE	TOTAL
Conference Board of Canada	41	84	54	40	47	266
Fraser Institute	115	54	41	21	28	259
C.D. Howe Institute	37	40	18	11	30	136
National Council on Welfare	25	35	14	5	13	92
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives	4	5	11	15	30	65
Canadian Council on Social Development	12	15	17	6	5	55
Public Policy Forum	11	10	8	5	3	37
Canada West Foundation	14	4	7	0	4	29
Canadian Tax Foundation	6	6	1	1	9	23
Caledon Institute of Social Policy	6	7	2	0	7	22
Mackenzie Institute	13	0	7	0	0	20
Institute for Research on Public Policy	3	2	5	0	4	14
Canadian Institute for Strategic Studies	1	0	4	0	2	7
North-South Institute	2	0	3	0	0	5
Canadian Policy Research Networks	0	0	2	2	1	5
Parliamentary Centre	1	0	1	1	0	3
Canadian Council for International Peace and Security	0	0	0	0	0	0
Canadian Institute for International Affairs	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pearson-Shoyama Institute	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>291</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>1038</b>

Source: Library of Parliament. Accessed at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/common/Library.asp>**CONCLUSION:****STUDYING THINK TANK INFLUENCE**

Think tanks frequently boast about their influence in the policymaking community. For example, a few months after Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office in January 1981, Heritage Foundation President Edwin Feulner claimed that over 60 percent of the policy recommendations included in his institute's mammoth study, *Mandate for Leadership*, had been or were in the process of being implemented by the Reagan administration. Feulner's remarks, to his delight, appeared in several newspapers throughout the United States. What most journalists failed to point out, however, was that many of the recommendations Feulner was taking credit for had been proposed by other individuals and institutes years before. The illusion of the Heritage Foundation's newly acquired policy influence, fostered in part by the media, had become reality. Similarly, when asked to consider what federal government programs or policies his institute had helped shape in the previous ten years, Michael Walker of the FI remarked, in part, "the Fraser Institute has played a central role in most policy developments during the last decade and it is simply too onerous a task to specify" (Abelson 2002, 86).

Equally onerous is determining the extent to which think tanks have influenced public opinion and public policy. Although the Fraser Institute would like potential donors to believe the late conservative economist Milton Friedman, who stated that "the Fraser Institute has become a remarkably influential think tank: one of the most influential in the world," or former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who acknowledged that "the great work [Fraser has done] has had a tremendous influence," it is notoriously difficult to assess the influence of think tanks (Abelson 1996, 86).

To a large extent, evaluating think tank influence is inherently difficult because directors of policy institutes, not to mention those who study them, have different perceptions of what constitutes influence and how it can best be obtained. For some think tank directors, the amount of media exposure their institute generates or the number of publications they produce is indicative of how much influence they wield. Conversely, some think tank directors rely on other performance indicators, such as how many staff have been appointed to senior government positions or the size of their budget, to assess their impact. What makes evaluating their influence even more difficult is that the policymakers, academics, and journalists who subscribe to think tank publications or attend conferences they sponsor invariably have different impressions of how useful or relevant their work is. In short, scholars cannot assume that think tanks measure influence in the same way, nor can they assume that policymakers and other consumers of their products use similar criteria to evaluate their work.

Even if think tanks used the same performance indicators and assigned the same priority to becoming involved at each stage of the policymaking process, numerous methodological obstacles would still have to be overcome to accurately measure their influence on public policy. Since dozens of individuals and organizations seek to influence policy debates through various channels, tracing the

origin of a policy idea becomes problematic. In an increasingly crowded political arena, it is often difficult to isolate the voice or voices that made a difference. Moreover, it can take months, if not years, before an idea proposed by a think tank or any other non-governmental organization for that matter, has any discernible impact. Indeed, by the time a policy initiative is introduced, it may not resemble a think tank's initial proposal at all.

Directors of think tanks can, and often do, provide anecdotal evidence to flaunt how much influence their institutes wield, but such pronouncements offer little insight into the relevance of think tanks in the policymaking process; claiming to have influence is far simpler than documenting how it was achieved. The reality facing think tank directors and those who study their institutions is that there is no single performance indicator that will provide an accurate assessment of what they have achieved relative to other institutes in the policymaking community, an observation consistent with the findings in this chapter. Under ideal conditions we could assume that all think tanks agree on the same set of indicators and allocate a roughly equal percentage of their budgets to enhancing their performance in each category. After adjusting for differences in revenues and expenditures, scholars could then provide an annual ranking of institutes which could in turn be passed on to think tanks. The job of think tank directors would then be done. Or would it? What directors of think tanks would be left with is some indication of where they ranked relative to other institutes—for instance, in media citations generated or in testimonies given. Unfortunately, while some think tanks might find comfort in these numbers, others would still be left with the lingering question of how much of a difference their institutes really made. And scholars would be left with a ranking scheme that, for various methodological reasons, would be inherently problematic.

There is little doubt that think tanks are effective at helping to frame the parameters of important policy debates through their various publications, testimonies and media appearances. There is also little doubt that without access to the print, broadcast, and electronic media, many think tanks would languish in obscurity. As discussed, think tanks and the media have entered a perfect union. Having said this, scholars are less certain about the extent to which these and other organizations competing in the marketplace of ideas are able to shape what the government and electorate think about a wide range of issues. This is a methodological hurdle that remains difficult to overcome.

A potential solution to this nagging question would be for think tanks not to compare themselves to other policy institutes, although there might be external and internal pressures to do so, but to set out their own measurements of success. By reviewing their mission statements, think tanks could begin the process of identifying what policy issues they believed were important to study and the various channels they needed to rely on to convey their insights to selected target audiences. Once they had done this, they could then set out the performance indicators that would provide them with some insight into whether they were making progress toward achieving their specific objectives. Of course, this assumes that think tanks

were being honest and candid about what their real goals were and what in the end they hoped to achieve. There is little doubt that this would be an internal discussion and one that scholars studying think tanks would likely have little knowledge of.

In examining the internal workings of think tanks, future researchers in this field will undoubtedly discover that policy institutes will rely on very different benchmarks for success. Some will continue to emphasize the importance of enhancing their media exposure and will closely monitor the number of media citations they receive. Others, however, will likely focus on less visible but potentially more influential channels, such as meetings and conferences with key policymakers. What will be interesting to discover is how think tanks seek to implement their goals while constantly confronting the financial pressures of staying afloat.

Scholars should also pay more attention to what policymakers think about the contribution think tanks have made at different stages of the policymaking process. They could do so either through interviews with or through surveys distributed to policymakers throughout government. A comprehensive survey of the attitudes of policymakers and journalists toward American think tanks was conducted by Andrew Rich (1997), but a similar survey has yet to be released in Canada.

As the marketplace of ideas becomes increasingly congested and as the competition for financial resources becomes more intense, the quest for public exposure among think tanks will undoubtedly intensify. Indeed, as they have done in the past, think tanks in Canada, the United States, and in other advanced and developing countries will continue to develop a range of strategies that will allow them to generate as much media exposure as possible. After all, media exposure is something tangible that think tanks can use to extract additional resources from potential donors. It is also a tool that think tanks can use to shape and mold public opinion. Under ideal conditions, a provocative op-ed piece on a controversial topic might also help to influence the way some policymakers think about a particular issue. What is clear is that think tanks will not question whether media attention translates into policy influence. In their minds, it always does. But for scholars who are more critical of how policy decisions in government are made and the role that non-governmental organizations play in the policymaking process, it would be foolhardy to buy into the public relations campaigns waged by think tanks. While there is little doubt that think tanks can and often do make a difference in shaping the parameters of key policy debates, the amount of media exposure think tanks generate is in no way a reflection of how much or little influence they exercise. This may be disappointing news to think tank directors who try to paint a very different picture of how much influence they enjoy, but in their efforts to speak truth to power, think tanks must at times face the truth. They represent but one set of actors in the political arena competing for influence. The most talked about and written about think tanks might find comfort in media rankings, but these measurements only tell part of the story. It is up to scholars who study these institutions to fill in the gaps.

By furthering our understanding of think tanks and their quest to gain and retain public exposure, scholars can also help the electorate to make more informed decisions about the credibility of opinions being cultivated and promoted by these institutions. Citizens need to be aware of the ideological underpinnings of much of the research and commentary being circulated by various think tanks so that they are in a better position to evaluate their findings.

Think tanks may claim to serve the public interest through the dissemination of knowledge, but often that knowledge is tainted by less than admirable political interests. In the end, only the electorate can decide what is in a country's national interest. Think tanks may speak with loud voices, but this does not necessarily mean that their message will or should resonate with policymakers and the public.



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