



The four Rs to look for in think tanks

With think tanks around the world now numbering 8,000 and counting, how do you pick the best among them?

Speaking at the Asian Development Bank Institute, James McGann, senior lecturer of international studies at the Lauder Institute and director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, identified four things a think tank must master.

There are around 8,000 think tanks in the world, and hundreds in many countries. Which one do you choose? Which one can you rely on? Think tanks and policy networks at the national, regional, and global level need to master the four Rs: rigor, relevance, reliability, and reach.

Rigor is the quality of a think tank's research, ideas, and innovation.

A think tank must be relevant. McGann observes that academics tend to be arcane, and take too long to produce documents, which are often too lengthy and too hard for policy makers to digest. If a think tank isn't careful, its research may become irrelevant. He clarified that a think tank does not do academic research. Its research must be useful to policy makers.

A think tank must also be reliable and credible.

Underlying the regional and global issues is the credibility of the institution. Credibility is based in part on rigor and relevance, but also on the institution's integrity. Quality, independence, and integrity are really the core attributes every think tank must guard and maintain. When policy makers rely on a think tank for reliable information they can

promote and instead get inaccurate, low quality, or questionable information, this undermines the role of not only one think tank, but think tanks across the board.

Finally, a think tank must be able to reach not only policy makers but also the public.

How many do they reach nationally, regionally, and globally? Do they reach policy makers? Do they reach the public in terms of what they are producing? The World Bank produces thousands of studies, but a significant number of its research results are never downloaded and never read. It's an incredible indictment. And it's not that the research quality is poor. The reach, the ability to make its research accessible, to encourage utilization or what is called the policy uptake of it, is almost nonexistent.

McGann heads the team at the Lauder Institute of the University of Pennsylvania that produces the annual *Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, which ranks think tanks worldwide. To remain relevant and to have impact or to survive, he says, a think tank must engage not only policy makers but also the media and the public. And in the age of social media and other new technology, it must do so vigorously.

A think tank's principal audience will always be policy makers because they craft most laws and policies. But now policy makers are increasingly influenced by the media. And the media is increasingly influenced by the public.

McGann says think tanks have a new role: help policy makers and the public navigate the enormous amount of information and misinformation.

In this age of "information insecurity," so much information is available and there are those who consciously distort information or essentially create disinformation or misinformation and inject that into a rapidly circulating set of ideas and information. The role of a think tank has changed from being an arbiter to being a curator of all information. There are more issues, more actors, more competition, and because of competing information and increased polarization in the political context, there is more conflict.

Think tanks have focused on mid- and long-term policy issues, but now they have to be able to also comment on trends as well as significant and highly disruptive political, economic, social, and environmental events.

I don't mean being slaves to the news cycle or to every issue that arises, but it is critical that think tanks are able to explain a major policy problem or what is going on in the streets.

McGann stressed the need for think tanks to connect with the media, who may not be familiar with policy concerns or government programs, or who may have built-in bias.

But our function is to inform even when they want to take a different direction, even if it means they're not going to quote us; because it's better to provide information that counters and curbs some of what may be inaccurate or ill-informed statements.

That was James McGann, senior lecturer of international studies at the Lauder Institute and director of the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. He is also the creator and editor of the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index.

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