

health-care system, education, transportation, and foreign policy are as plentiful as hot dogs on Opening Day. It is in this environment – an environment in which countless ideas and policy recommendations are being discussed and debated – that policy-makers are expected to make public policy.

While it is often tempting to focus on the normative questions surrounding policy decisions, this chapter has concentrated primarily on the study of foreign policy-making in the United States and some of the many models, theories, and approaches that have been employed to examine and assess America's behaviour in world affairs. More specifically, it has sought to explain why scholars have, for the most part, overlooked the involvement of think tanks in the policy-making process. Is it because those who study public policy are so concerned about differentiating between the public and private uses of power that they miss the significance of think tanks? Or is it more likely that think tanks have attracted little attention in the literature on decision-making because their role is not properly understood? Regardless of which explanation is more plausible, the result is the same – the efforts of think tanks to generate and transmit ideas to decision-makers have been largely neglected. But as indicated in our discussion about how to pry open the black box of decision-making, contemporary models and theories of foreign policy-making need not be supplanted to account for the increasingly active involvement of think tanks in the policy-making process. Rather, the parameters of these models simply need to be expanded or redefined to take into consideration how think tanks contribute to policy-making.

Think tanks, as noted, do not fit neatly into any one conceptual or methodological framework. That is why, as we will discuss in the case studies later in the book, it is difficult to generalize about their behaviour. Yet despite the methodological issues that need to be addressed in studying think tanks, we can no longer afford to ignore how they have become entrenched in the policy-making process. In the following chapter, our attention will shift to the many public and private channels think tanks rely on to shape public opinion and public policy. We must do so if we are to make any headway in evaluating the nature and extent of think tank influence.

CHAPTER SIX

Finding Their Way: In Search of Policy Influence

Think tanks are in the business of developing and promoting ideas, and like corporations in the private sector, they devote considerable attention to marketing their products. Unlike corporations, however, they do not measure success by profit margins but by how much influence they have in shaping public opinion and the policy preferences and choices of leaders. Unfortunately, for think tank directors and those who study these institutions, it is far simpler to read quarterly reports than to measure the performance of these organizations. In this chapter we lay the foundation for assessing the impact of think tanks by exploring the many channels that policy research institutes use to market their ideas. It is important to keep in mind that while think tanks in the United States have different areas of expertise, resources, and priorities, they tend to rely on similar strategies to exercise policy influence. However, not all think tanks are willing or able to rely on these strategies to the same degree. In other words, while generating media exposure is a preferred tactic for many think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation, AEI, the Cato Institute, and the Brookings Institution, it is not considered a priority for many smaller institutes, which are more committed to strengthening their ties to key policy-makers than to making the six o'clock news.

The chapter 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 they rely on to exercise policy influence – gaining access to the media. Finally, as a segue to chapter 7, we will discuss briefly what steps

need to be taken to provide more-informed insights about the nature and extent of think tank influence.

PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Though often portrayed as elite organizations where scholars pursue research in relative isolation, think tanks have become increasingly visible in the public arena. Indeed, as active participants in the marketplace of ideas, they understand the importance of competing for the attention of policy-makers and the public, not to mention the financial support of government agencies, individuals, and corporate and philanthropic donors.¹ While some of the strategies they rely on to exercise influence are concealed from the public, many can be easily identified. In fact, to varying degrees, think tanks in North America adopt some or all of the following strategies to influence policy-makers and the public:

- holding public forums, seminars, 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 or Parliament
- publishing books, opinion magazines, newsletters, policy briefs, and journals that have wide distribution
- selling audio tapes to the public which summarize key policy issues
- creating Web pages on the Internet which, among other things, allow visitors to download institute publications
- targeting the public during annual fundraising campaigns
- attracting media exposure

Holding public forums, seminars, and conferences is among the most common strategies think tanks employ to increase awareness about a particular domestic or foreign policy issue. Policy-makers, 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 attended event on an important topic such as homeland security, terrorism, or the future of Iraq can benefit think tanks in many ways. In addition to taking credit for encouraging opinion-makers to discuss issues they have helped to identify, think tanks take advantage of these opportunities to educate those in attendance about the

role of their institute and the work in which they are engaged. At times, think tanks may elect to co-sponsor conferences in order to attract even more attention. For instance, in May 2004 several think tanks, including the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, and the Progressive Policy Institute, participated in a one-day conference on "Restoring Fiscal Sanity," organized by the Virginia-based Concord Coalition. Representatives from these and other think tanks exchanged ideas with policy-makers, academics, and other policy professionals. In addressing the issue of fiscal sanity, keynote speakers Republican senator John McCain and Democratic senator Joe Lieberman acknowledged the importance of encouraging think tanks at both ends of the political spectrum to work together. Commenting on the diverse group of think tanks that had assembled for the conference, Lieberman said half jokingly, "To quote from the prophet Isaiah, it is like watching the lambs lying down with the lions."²

Lieberman may have been genuinely surprised to observe think tanks with such diverse points of view assembled in the same room, but there have been other occasions where think tanks have been invited to cooperate. According to Leslie Gelb, former president of the Council on Foreign Relations, between 1996 and 1997 an attempt was made to bring together the nation's best foreign policy think tanks to share information about their research plans. The intention was to avoid duplication in research and to ensure that think tanks could meet the needs of their various stakeholders. Chaired by former career ambassador Frank Wisner, who in 1997 joined the American International Group as its vice-chairman for external affairs, representatives from the Council on Foreign Relations, RAND, CSIS, Brookings, Carnegie, Heritage, and the United States Institute for Peace met twice a year for two years. Unfortunately, as Gelb noted with regret, "this undertaking was a flop because people didn't want to share material."³ Indeed, rather than pooling their resources, think tanks have for the most part continued to pursue their own research plans.

As the table A3.1 in appendix 3 illustrates, since the tragic events of 9/11, several of America's premier foreign policy and defense think tanks have organized conferences, roundtable discussions, policy briefings, and seminars on issues of profound importance to Americans. For example, in 2004 AEI sponsored over a dozen events on issues ranging from the genocide in Sudan and the ongoing conflict in Iraq to the need for serious reform in the intelligence community. The Heritage Foundation, AEI's conservative ally in the war of ideas, was equally committed to addressing these issues. Among the topics discussed in Heritage symposia were the USA Patriot Act, screening for terrorists on passenger planes, and grading the 9/11 Commission report.

In that same year, the Brookings Institution devoted considerable attention to the many issues related to the war on terror, including the growing rift between the United States and Europe and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, a topic discussed by New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Next door at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, scholars and policy-makers were involved in timely seminars on such themes as democracy promotion in the Middle East and reducing Russian-American nuclear tensions. Discussions about these and other foreign policy issues were also taking place beyond Dupont Circle. At its Washington office and in its main office at the Harold Pratt House in Manhattan, the Council on Foreign Relations held several meetings to examine threats posed by nuclear terrorism and instability in Iraq. One of the highlights of the year at the CFR was a presentation by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on the global war on terror. Think tanks on the West Coast were also preoccupied with confronting this new threat. For example, the Hoover Institution at Stanford University held a two-day conference in May 2002 on how technology could be used to prevent terrorism. In short, in the aftermath of 9/11, policy experts at think tanks were only too willing to share their ideas with policy-makers. As indicated by the number and scope of the conferences that took place, there were few issues that think tanks did not consider.

To reach even larger audiences, think tanks 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 think tanks also recognize the importance of conveying ideas to policy-makers and to the public in a more formal manner. Some do so by testifying before various legislative committees or in hearings organized by the House and/or the Senate (see table A3.2 in appendix 3). Providing testimony, particularly to a prominent committee, can attract considerable attention. The oral presentations and written briefs that policy experts provide are included as part of the official record and are often cited by journalists and academics. Agreeing to appear before legislative committees can also promote the credibility of think tanks in the eyes of some policy-makers and help think tank directors to convince potential donors of the widespread influence of their institutes. This consequence may explain why several think tanks prominently display the testimonies given by staff on their Web sites.

There are several other strategies think tanks can draw on to market their message. Many, particularly those with well-established research programs,

such as Brookings, Carnegie, Heritage, and AEI, rely on opinion magazines, journals, newsletters, and books to reach their various target audiences. For example, the Heritage Foundation publishes *Policy Review*, an opinion magazine that contains brief articles by many leading conservatives on current policy issues. The *Brookings Review*, published by the Brookings Institution; *The American Enterprise*, produced by AEI; and *American Outlook*, from the Hudson Institute are other examples of opinion magazines distributed by US think tanks. 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 policy-makers with insights into current policy problems. And even more important for policy-makers and their busy staff, they can be read and summarized in a matter of minutes, not hours or days. Often organized around a particular theme, these publications, think tanks hope, will help to frame the parameters of important and relevant policy debates.

Think tanks produce publications for other target groups as well. Several, for example, publish refereed scholarly journals that are intended to be read by university students and faculty members. Among these are *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship journal of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations; *Foreign Policy*, produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; the *Washington Quarterly*, a publication of the Center for Strategic and International Studies; and the *Cato Journal*, published by the libertarian Cato Institute. 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.

Think tanks reach potential stakeholders through other forms of communication. For example, the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation produce *Cato Audio* and the *Monthly Briefing Tapes* respectively, which include interviews with some of their policy experts as well as lectures given by prominent (mostly conservative) opinion-makers. Among those who have helped Heritage to sell its monthly briefing tapes is former speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. In his endorsement, which appeared in various Heritage publications, Gingrich referred to the tapes as a “monthly dose of conservative common sense. You’ll wonder how you ever got along without it.”

Those who can get along without listening to audio tapes but still want to be kept apprised of what certain think tanks are doing can access their Web sites. Virtually every think tank in the United States uses a Web site to publicize its work. Although they vary enormously in terms of content and

sophistication, most sites provide a wealth of information ranging from an institute's most current publications and staff directory to upcoming conferences and seminars. Several, including the one managed by the Heritage Foundation, allow subscribers to receive e-mail updates on every conceivable policy issue. Through PolicyWire, Heritage can ensure that its analyses and recommendations on a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues are sent to thousands of policy-makers, journalists, and other opinion leaders as soon as they become available. Heritage and countless other think tanks also allow visitors to download many of their publications, including annual reports, congressional testimony, articles, lectures, and book chapters. This service is extremely useful for consumers, but it also helps think tanks to identify the areas and issues that seem to be attracting the most attention. By keeping track of how often certain publications are downloaded, think tanks can determine if they should devote more resources to examining particular issues. At the very least, sustained interest in specific policy areas may convince think tanks to direct visitors to other sources of information. In fact, many sites provide links to important databases. For instance, the Center for Security Policy provides an extensive national security link to every major organization and agency involved in the defense and security of the United States. Similarly, the Carnegie Endowment has established a link to other valuable resources, including US embassies, international organizations, and think tanks.

Fundraising is yet another way that think tanks attempt to market themselves to the public and to policy-makers, and some have enlisted the support of high-profile policy-makers to attract money. For example, as discussed in chapter 2, in 1982, at the request of Heritage president Edwin Feulner, Edwin Meese III, a special adviser to President Reagan and later US attorney general, wrote a letter to potential Heritage donors encouraging them to join the President's Club, which he suggested would serve as a "vital communications link [between the White House and those who support President Reagan and] this administration will fully cooperate with your efforts."⁴

But of all the public uses of think tank influence, none is more visible than their efforts to secure access to the media. As will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, 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 of leading American newspapers, media exposure does not necessarily translate into policy influence. Generating media attention may enable some think tanks to plant seeds in the minds of policy-makers and the public, but it does not necessarily guarantee success in the policy-making process.

PRIVATE INFLUENCE

The many channels that think tanks rely on to exercise public influence are relatively easy to observe and document, but it can at times be difficult to monitor how they seek to influence policy-makers privately. The following list provides examples of how think tanks and the scholars affiliated with them seek to exercise private influence. Among the many private forms of influence are the following:

- accepting cabinet, sub-cabinet, or bureaucratic positions in administrations
- serving on policy task forces and transition teams during presidential elections and on presidential advisory boards
- maintaining liaison offices with the House of Representatives and the Senate
- inviting selected policy-makers to participate in closed conferences, seminars, and workshops
- allowing bureaucrats to work at think tanks on a limited-term basis
- offering former policy-makers positions at think tanks
- preparing studies and policy briefs for policy-makers

There are few ways experts from think tanks can get closer to the policy-making process than by becoming policy-makers themselves. As discussed in chapter 1, in several presidential administrations, dozens of personnel from think tanks have been recruited into senior-level positions. Many, including Jeanne Kirkpatrick (AEI) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (CSIS), have served in the president's cabinet, while many others have been appointed to important positions in the bureaucracy (see appendix 2). For think tanks, there are several potential benefits in having staff members appointed to an incoming administration, not the least of which is the publicity surrounding the appointment itself. By assembling a talent pool of scholars for administrations to draw on, think tanks not only enhance their prestige but can foster even stronger ties to those making critical policy decisions. This outcome may explain why some think tanks such as Heritage closely monitor vacan-

cies in the bureaucracy in the hope of placing like-minded colleagues in important positions.

Think tanks can establish and strengthen ties to key decision-makers through other channels. Presidential elections, for example, provide institutes, particularly those that are ideologically in tune with certain candidates, with a tremendous opportunity to help shape the political platform and agenda of aspiring office-holders. As we have examined in some detail earlier, several presidential candidates have turned to experts from think tanks for information and advice on how to address a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues. In the process, hundreds of policy experts have been invited to serve on policy task forces and/or on transition teams to assist presidential candidates and those elected to office to assume power. Furthermore, during some administrations, think tank scholars have been appointed to important presidential advisory boards, including the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, the President's Intelligence Oversight Board, and the President's Economic Policy Advisory Board.⁵

Moreover, as discussed in chapter 4, since political power in the United States, unlike in Canada, is not concentrated in the Executive but is largely shared with the legislative branch, American think tanks also develop strategies to strengthen their ties to members of Congress. Several, including Heritage, do so by establishing liaison offices with the House of Representatives and the Senate. Maintaining close contact with the legislature enables think tanks to meet with members regularly to discuss their concerns and policy needs. It also allows think tanks to monitor and track the most important issues on the floor of the House and the Senate, which, in turn, helps them to prepare the type of research policy-makers require to make critical choices. To discuss certain policy issues in more detail, some think tanks regularly invite members of Congress to attend *private* seminars, conferences, and workshops. Once again, this strategy enables policy experts at think tanks to share their insights with those who are in a position to influence legislation. Think tanks such as the Hoover Institution also realize that many newly elected members of Congress, as well as some seasoned policy-makers, could benefit from acquiring additional insight into particular policy issues. As well, they realize the importance of establishing good communications with congressional staff and legislative assistants who frequently advise members of Congress.

Established in 1980, the Hoover Institution's two-day Washington Seminars at its institute in Palo Alto have played an important role in facilitating the exchange of ideas between Hoover scholars and policy-makers. Limited to twelve to fifteen participants, the seminars have been attended by Demo-

cratic and Republican members of Congress and congressional staff members from the House and Senate Committees on International Relations/Foreign Relations, Appropriations, Budget, Armed Services, Finance, Ways and Means, and Intelligence and the offices of the Senate majority leader and the House speaker, minority leader, and majority whip. The seminars are usually followed by meetings in Washington to bring together individuals who have participated in the program, Hoover scholars, and other government officials. According to the Hoover Institution, "these meetings and seminars are now playing a critical role in the ongoing dialogue between scholars and policy-makers, which is so important to the effective development and implementation of legislative and executive department policies and programs."⁶

Think tanks can also maintain close contact with bureaucratic departments and agencies through a number of different channels. For instance, through the State Department's Diplomat in Residence program, diplomats can, between assignments, take up residence at think tanks to write, conduct research, and deliver lectures. They have been sent to several think tanks, including the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, RAND, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and the Heritage Foundation.

Some policy-makers are so impressed with think tanks that they decide to make them their permanent home after completing public service. However, it is important to point out that many former high-profile policy-makers are not recruited to think tanks because of their potential as researchers but because of their ability to attract funding; this is likely why think tanks often approach former presidents and cabinet secretaries to join their ranks.

Finally, as a matter of course, think tanks hold informal meetings with key policy-makers to discuss studies that their institutes have produced or to simply outline a range of policy options elected officials have at their disposal. Most of these meetings are rarely publicized or talked about, but they nonetheless can have an impact in shaping public policy. Indeed, for many think tanks, working quietly behind closed doors is the most effective channel they have to influence policy-making.

The strategies that think tanks select and the priority they assign to each are influenced not only by the political environment they inhabit but by their mandate and resources. In other words, for advocacy-oriented think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and AEI, producing opinion magazines, securing access to the media, and holding public forums are profoundly important. On the other hand, for many smaller institutes, including the Project for the New American Century and the Center for

Security Policy, exchanging ideas with policy-makers in meeting rooms instead of with journalists on the air may result in a higher payoff. In short, think tanks develop strategies that allow them to most effectively reach their specific target audiences.

MARKETING THE MESSAGE: THINK TANKS AND THE MEDIA

Testifying before a high-profile congressional committee or publishing a study on a controversial domestic or foreign policy issue may attract attention in some policy-making circles, but it is unlikely to generate the exposure an appearance on *Fox News* or CNN or an op-ed article in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* would. The importance of such exposure may explain why some think tanks devote considerable time and resources to gaining access to the print and broadcast media. It may also explain why the competition between think tanks for media exposure is so intense. As Patricia Linden 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.”⁷

Securing access to the media on a regular basis provides think tanks with a valuable opportunity to shape the parameters of public policy debates. As we will discuss in the case studies on missile defense and the war on terror, although think tanks may not be able to claim responsibility for influencing a particular policy decision, they can take credit for injecting important ideas into the public debate. More important, think tanks understand that media exposure creates the illusion of policy influence, a currency they have a vested interest in accumulating. Few think tanks have devoted more time and resources to targeting the media than the Heritage Foundation. In 2003 it spent over \$6.6 million, or 19.3 per cent of its budget, on media and government relations.⁸ Heritage’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.” 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.”⁹ The Heritage Foundation has clearly accomplished its goal:

the mainstream media in the United States rely heavily on Heritage and a handful of other conservative think tanks inside the Beltway for their expertise and political commentary.¹⁰

While this may be so, we should not lose sight of the considerable media exposure generated from more liberal or centrist think tanks such as the Brookings Institution. In 2003 Brookings allocated approximately \$1 million, or 3 per cent of its \$32 million budget, to communications,¹¹ an investment that appeared to pay handsome dividends. According to its 2003 annual report, Brookings ranks *first* (italics added) among Washington think tanks for press citations; averages 846 mentions a month in various print, television, radio, wire, and Web outlets; averages 69 mentions each month in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*; had 187 op-ed articles by Brookings scholars appear in print in 2003, including 45 in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*; and conducted 845 television and radio interviews in its on-site studio.¹² These data must have stunned the media relations team at AEI, who stated in their 2003 annual report that “AEI’s standing in the national media is unmatched by that of any other policy research institute. The work of AEI scholars is cited more frequently and is published more often in the leading U.S. newspapers and public affairs magazines than the work of scholars at other national think tanks. AEI scholars are interviewed more often on television and radio than their peers at rival research institutes.”¹³ AEI did not provide any figures to support its claims of unmatched media exposure, but colleagues at Heritage did. In its 2003 annual report, Heritage reported that its scholars recorded 1,100 television appearances and 1,418 radio appearances and had their commentaries appear in print and online news outlets 907 times.¹⁴

Although there is considerable discrepancy among think tanks over which generates the lion’s share of media exposure, a problem that we will discuss in the following chapter, they agree that establishing close ties to media outlets is critical. In fact, according to Brian Lee Crowley, president of the Halifax-based Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, securing access to the media might be as important, if not more important, than the ideas being promoted: “[H]aving 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, knowing

that if they are told something by these people, they can put a great deal of weight on it without running the risk of looking stupid and foolish.”¹⁵ Those in charge of marketing Heritage’s message agree that forging arrangements with national media companies, including the *New York Post*, Talk Radio Network, Salem Communications, National Religious Broadcasters, PBS, FOXNews.com, and WND.com, is profoundly important. That is why its Editorial Services department

concentrates on selling Heritage solutions to the nation’s editorial and opinion editors – especially the “op-ed” pages where readers can get the “unfiltered” Heritage message. This kind of selling requires face-to-face meetings as well as constant phone calls, letters and notes. Editorial Services staffers visited more than 20 major media markets in 2003, meeting with opinion editors, editorial writers and columnists. Their itineraries included seven of the nation’s 10 largest papers and more than half of the top 30. They also searched for new opportunities to secure regular “platforms” for Heritage commentary. The effort paid off handsomely. At year’s end, the number of “op-eds” appearing in major print and online news media increased by 35 percent.¹⁶

The potential benefits of being a guest commentator on a national newscast or radio program or 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 the scholars represent. As William J. Taylor Jr of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 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.”¹⁷ Yet as Howard Kurtz, a staff writer 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 labor communities and the media.’”¹⁸

It is not difficult to understand why think tanks covet media attention. After all, as Heritage, AEI, Brookings, 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? This topic will be examined more fully in the next chapter, but a few factors are worth noting here. 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, AEI, Heritage, and Brookings 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 contact the Heritage Foundation, well known for its commitment to free market principles, they can be assured that any proposal by the president or Congress that will lead to more government intervention 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. Sam Donaldson, co-anchor of ABC’s *Prime Time Live* and a regular panellist on *This Week*, agrees:

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. Let’s beat the bushes and launch a search of the city or the country for them.” 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. You can’t come to me and say, “Sam, I know you’re on a deadline, you need to comment on such and such, go out and take a chance on Mr. X. No, I’m sorry folks, I don’t have the time to take a chance with Mr. X ... I know Mr. Y ... is going to deliver the goods.”¹⁹

As Donaldson suggests, how effective pundits are at communicating their ideas to the public in a straightforward and meaningful way is also important. Tammy Haddad, formerly 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’re talking about.”²⁰ During newscasts, it becomes even more crucial for guests to be brief because they are not given the time to offer long exposés on the state of the world. For those scholars who appreciate what the broadcast media require, their names will continue to find their way on to newsroom Rolodexes.

ACHIEVING POLICY INFLUENCE: WHAT THE
NUMBERS DO NOT TELL US

Though often portrayed as institutes comprised of experts engaged in quiet reflection, think tanks are a hub of activity. On any given day, scholars may be called upon to provide several interviews to the media, participate in seminars, meet with policy-makers, help to launch a new study, or begin working on the next research project. In short, they are expected to pursue multiple channels to market their ideas and the work of their institute. And although some scholars may remain humble despite achieving national prominence, their employers cannot afford to downplay their contribution to policy debates. On the contrary, as if it were considered part of their job description, directors of think tanks often exaggerate or inflate the impact of their organization. For example, a few months after Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office, Heritage president Edwin Feulner claimed that over 60 per cent 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. To Feulner's delight, his comments appeared in several newspapers throughout the United States. What most journalists failed to point out, however, was that many of the recommendations he was taking credit for had been proposed by other individuals and institutes years before. The illusion of Heritage's newly acquired policy influence, fostered in part by the media, had become reality.²¹ Similarly, in flipping through Brookings's *2003 Annual Report*, readers can glance at "Brookings by the Numbers," which as the title suggests, tallies its impressive list of achievements.²² In this one-page summary, we are told that in 2003 the Brookings Institution Press published fifty books and eight scholarly journals. We are also informed that Brookings scholars testified thirty-one times at congressional hearings and that sixty-three public briefings were held at the institute. And that is not all. As noted, several more statistics detail how often Brookings scholars were quoted in the press.

Think tanks are often preoccupied with numbers, and for good reason. In the minds of think tank directors, who are accountable to boards of trustees and directors, numbers translate into policy influence, and policy influence translates into more funding. Although some trustees and donors may want to know more about the nature of the research, they are concerned primarily with the range and volume of products think tanks produce. They are even more interested in how much exposure think tanks generate. After all, think tanks for all intents and purposes are businesses competing in the marketplace of ideas. And as long as numbers relating to books published, testi-

monies given, and media hits recorded continue to increase, they can claim that their influence is on the rise. Unfortunately, it is what these and other numbers do not tell us that is critical to understanding the complexity of the policy-making process.

Compiling data on media visibility or on how often policy experts testify before congressional committees may tell us how active think tanks are in particular policy debates, but such information provides little insight into how much influence they have had in shaping public policy. To a large extent, evaluating think tank influence is inherently difficult because think tanks, not to mention those who study them, have different perceptions of what constitutes influence and how it can best be measured. As already discussed, for some think tanks, the amount of media exposure their institute attracts or the number of publications they produce is indicative of how much influence they wield. Others rely on different performance indicators, such as how many staff members 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 policy-makers, academics, and journalists who subscribe to think tank publications or attend the conferences and workshops they sponsor invariably have different impressions of the relevance and usefulness of their work. As a result, scholars cannot assume that think tanks measure influence in the same way; nor can they assume that policy-makers and other target groups use similar criteria to evaluate their performance.

Even if think tanks adopted the same performance indicators and assigned the same priority to becoming involved at each stage of the policy-making process, numerous methodological obstacles would still have to be overcome to accurately measure their influence in public policy. Since dozens of individuals and organizations seek to influence policy debates, tracing the origin of a policy idea can be 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 no longer resemble the think tank's initial proposal.

As demonstrated, think tanks often provide little more than anecdotal evidence to show how much influence they wield. Unfortunately, claiming to have influence is far simpler than documenting how it was achieved. In the following chapter, we will consider how scholars can use quantitative and qualitative approaches to make more informed judgments about the

relevance of think tanks at different stages of policy-making. We will also discuss why it is necessary to re-examine how policy influence is achieved. Rather than assuming that think tanks can be influential only if they produce desirable policy outcomes, we must understand how their influence can be felt at some or all stages of the policy-making process. In short, failure to convince policy-makers to pursue a recommended course of action does not necessarily mean that think tanks lack influence. Indeed, as we will see, there are many ways think tanks can and do leave an indelible mark on the body politic.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Is Anybody Listening? Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks

In the previous chapter, we examined how think tanks rely on various means to influence public opinion and public policy. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how scholars can better assess the influence or impact of think tanks at different stages of the policy-making process. As I noted in the previous chapter, although the behaviour of think tanks has been subjected to increased scrutiny in recent years, little progress has been made in evaluating the nature and extent of their contribution to public policy. Indeed, rather than discussing how different methodological approaches can be used to assess think tank influence, journalists and scholars have for the most part preferred to make sweeping and often unfounded observations about think tank policy impact. Needless to say, these have done little to advance our knowledge of how think tanks engage with the public and with policy-makers to influence the political agenda.

To address what is clearly a significant shortcoming in the literature, this chapter will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of relying on quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluating think tank performance. In so doing, we can begin to think more critically about how to overcome some of the many methodological obstacles that limit our ability to make informed observations about the influence of think tanks. Although the concept of think tank influence is ambiguous and difficult to grasp, it is central to any discussion about politics and policy-making. It is also central to any discussion about think tanks and their efforts to become entrenched in the policy-making process. As students in introductory political science courses are reminded time and time again, politics is about the struggle for power and the ability of various individuals