

## 4 Marketing, public relations, and public engagement

The principal task of the large United States' think tanks is to generate policy-relevant knowledge and provide information for political and business elites as well as the public at large. Over the last 20 years think tanks have placed increased emphasis on disseminating their research, appearing in the media, and conducting public outreach programs. Think tanks often employ professionals with experience in marketing and public relations in order to facilitate the dissemination of information. For instance, the President of The Heritage Foundation, Ed Feulner, has an MBA in marketing, while Burton Yale Pines, the Foundation's former Director of Research, was a journalist. Think tanks employ a wide range of methods to propagate information, including:

### Seminars, conferences, and briefings

Think tanks make a conscious effort to target their audiences with a range of lectures, seminars, conferences, expert meetings, and individual or group briefings. These seminars, conferences, and briefings may be on the record and open to the public or invited guests or off-the-record and closed to the public. For example, CSIS reports that it stages around 700 events of this kind every year; the newly established CAP reports that it organized 150 on-the-record events in 2005; and AEI produced over 200 of these meetings in 2005.<sup>1</sup> These events are often used to examine key policy issues, float policy proposals for members of Congress, the executive branch, and the media, and provide an important forum for policymakers and the public to offer feedback.

### Publications

As a rule, the large United States think tanks also operate as highly productive publishing houses, generating both traditional and multimedia

publications. Brookings Press publishes about 50 new titles each year on important public policy issues in business, economics, government, and international affairs; The Urban Institute (UI) publishes 10 new books a year, half of which are written by UI scholars; and The Woodrow Wilson Center Press publishes an average of 12 new titles annually that "are exclusively written" by scholars affiliated with the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The American Enterprise Institute, The Brookings Institution, The Urban Institute, and The Wilson Center actively promote their authors (i.e., all of these institutions conduct press conferences and seminars to launch new publications). Each think tank also publishes its own journal or magazine several times a year (i.e., CSIS produces the *Washington Quarterly*, Wilson Center has the *Wilson Quarterly*, and The American Enterprise Institute and The Brookings Institution both publish several journals). Such publications also carry work by external analysts and academics (i.e., *Foreign Policy* from The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, or *Foreign Affairs* from the Council on Foreign Relations). Institutions also quickly and easily produce newsletters and information brochures as well as policy briefs on individual topics. Finally, some think tanks provide special information services via fax or e-mail, which comment on the day's political and economic developments. Such daily analyses are often sent free of charge to members of Congress, government representatives, and top business executives.

One of the most important tools for any think tank is its website. Almost every think tank publishes an extensive range of information online, where it reaches the public at large. Most think tanks' websites also carry speeches, commentaries by their fellows, conference reports and programs, synoptic analyses, book abstracts, biographies of their experts, information on events, and increasingly, video and audio clips, all of which can be downloaded free of charge. Additionally, a website will publish information on research topics, research programs, and the think tank's organizational structure. These websites are followed closely and consulted frequently by the media, policymakers, and the public. While the methods for collecting data on website visits varies by institution, the following figures provide a good sense of the number of people who are going to institutions' websites for information on policy issues. The Heritage Foundation had 5,272,120 visits to its website during the year ending 31 December 2005 of which 3,907,750 were categorized as unique visits to its site.<sup>2</sup> The Urban Institute had approximately 48 to 72 million web hits during the same period, six million of which were unique visits.<sup>3</sup>

**The media**

Journalists seeking to fill column inches or program slots profit from the expertise of think tank employees. In turn, the think tank and the expert gain a wide forum for the opinion expressed – and sometimes even a certain renown as a result of the direct media exposure. Think tank analysts are quoted as experts in the print media and appear on television and radio news programs as well as on talk shows. Numerous think tank experts regularly publish their work, sometimes in their own newspaper columns, but mostly in the form of op-ed pieces. The large number of online political magazines also represents an increasingly important forum for publication of such contributions. Similarly, other forms of electronic media also play an increasingly important role in presenting both the think tank itself and its employees. The Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, for example, has a regular radio program called “Dialogue,” which is broadcasted by more than 160 commercial and public radio stations in the United States and has over 350,000 listeners. “Dialogue” also produces a weekly television program that is broadcasted in a primetime slot in the greater Washington, D.C. viewing area. The Brookings Institution has its own television studio, and two think tank experts from the AEI each have their own weekly show broadcasted by the American public television station PBS. Many of their think tank colleagues appear several times a week as regular political commentators on CNN and other cable channels.

In an effort to assess the impact of think tanks, recent studies conducted by Andrew Rich and Kent Weaver (1997), Donald Abelson (2002), and Michael Dolny (2005) have collected and analyzed data on the number of think tank citations in major newspapers and television and radio transcripts that appear in the Lexis-Nexis database. According to Dolny, who conducts an annual survey of think tank citations in the media for Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) in order to gauge these organizations’ influence, has determined that conservative think tanks have come to dominate the electronic and print media in the last 10 years.<sup>4</sup> The most recent survey found that conservative and centrist think tanks captured 50 and 33 percent of all the citations respectively in 2005, while progressive or liberal think tanks garner only 16 percent of the citations.<sup>5</sup> The Brookings Institution, The Heritage Foundation, CFR, AEI, and CSIS are some of the most frequently cited organizations in the print and electronic media. CAP reports that in 2005, its second year of operation, it conducted 30 television interviews and recorded 150 press mentions per month. The waxing

and waning of a think tank’s influence can also be identified by these numbers. In order to illustrate this point Dolny cites the cases of Cato and The Institute for Policy Studies. As in the case of Douglas Bandow, a Senior Fellow from Cato, who wrote 24 op-ed articles favorable to clients of lobbyist Jack Abramoff and admitted to accepting money from him, negative publicity is bound to impact an institution’s relationship with the media.<sup>6</sup>

**Relations with government agencies**

American think tanks are particularly concerned with maintaining lines of communication to members of Congress and their staff, administration officials, federal judges, and representatives from state and local bodies. Think tank experts regularly testify at Congressional hearings and also hold individual briefings for members of Congress and the administration, as well as their staff. In turn, government officials and members of Congress are invited to speak at think tank events, which provide them with opportunities to test out political ideas or initiatives on “neutral ground” in front of audiences of experts. A number of the major think tanks also stage regular meetings and discussion forums in an effort to develop formal networks with government representatives. For example, CFR has a Congress and US Foreign Policy Program that brings together Congressional staff members from both major parties. Additionally, members of Congress also serve on the board of directors of numerous United States think tanks, and three think tanks now have former members of Congress as their presidents. Some American think tanks purposely cultivate close links to political circles, since many of them – most notably RAND Corporation and The Urban Institute – obtain a significant portion of their budget from contract work (research projects, producing studies, preparatory work for legislation) for various government agencies.

Clearly, the logical question that flows from a recitation of the money contributed to think tanks and the scope of activities generated by them, is what impact do these organizations have on public policy? We will now turn to that very important question.