

Chapter 19

Digital Disruptions and the Emergence of Virtual Think Tanks

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Abstract This chapter focuses on policy-relevant research organizations or think tanks as important institutions in open, democratic, innovative, and adaptable political systems. Think tanks deal with data, facts, ideas, and narratives as most fleeting commodities and should be highly vulnerable to digital disruption. The evidence shows, however, that think tanks manage to incorporate digital innovations into their operations, both internally and how they related to their various audiences. Digital innovations provide as many opportunities to think tanks as they present threats. This is true for old, pre-digital think tanks that adapted by developing additional layers of management and communication as well as for digitally native think tanks that were created with digital opportunities in mind. Recently, an evidence base documenting good and best practice of using digital opportunities in think tanks has begun to build up, and there are first good case studies on the development of digital strategies. Although there are warnings but no signs yet of widespread digital disruption of think tanks, there are examples of emerging virtual think tanks that might only cost 10 % to establish and operate compared to traditional think tank organizations with similar access to expertise and producing output at similar levels of quality, quantity, breadth, and depth. Although a ratio of 1:10 would indicate disruptive potential, there is no evidence of disruption yet. It appears that the early examples are not sufficiently matured and understood to be replicated, which would involve think tank sponsors accepting the new format of virtual think tanks and provide them with long-term funding.

Keywords Think tanks • Innovation • Social media • Globalization • Governance

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19.1 Introduction: Whispers, Tomes, Tweets, and Google

Truth, ideas, arguments, metaphors, narratives, and lies: Think tanks deal in the most intangible of commodities.

Sometimes called “policy institutes” and defying easy definition, think tanks bridge gaps between science, society, and policy, usually with a focus on public interest but some also on the basis of narrow ideologies or with partisan motives. “I know one when I see one,” says McGann (1995, 9 ff), following US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart’s definition, with clerk Alan Novak, of pornography in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964 (Lattmann, 2007).

The best think tanks have a strong science base and provide excellent scholarship—documenting findings in articles in scientific journals and series of books that form lines of tomes on shelves—as well as an eye on the future and the will to help solve societal problems by working with practitioners (or “stakeholders”) in public administration, business, and society organizations to develop good ideas for the improvement of public policy. Some are “clean factories” (Dickson, 1971, p. 3), “honest brokers of policy alternatives” (Pielke, 2007, pp. 17–18), or “laboratories for reform” (Smith, 1991, p. 24), many are “second-hand dealers in ideas” (Stone, 1996, p. 136), and some are modern-day court jesters (Perthes, 2007); the worst are institutionalized demagoguery. At the margins are shadowy areas of overlap with corporate communication and advertising agencies, political spin doctors, and government propaganda.

The variety of think tanks is a function of their proximity to academia, advocacy, business, and education; their political orientation or even affiliation with a political party; their size, disciplinary orientation, policy focus or breadth, or geographic focus or reach; the political and governance system they operate in; and their legal form and governance structure, their regulatory environment, and the origin and structure of their funding or revenue streams.

Their variety creates difficulties in defining think tanks and making general observations about them, especially the inflections or “forced adaptations” and disruptions to think tank “business models” caused by the digital revolution. Most think tanks are not “businesses” but part of government-funded research institutions and nonprofit organizations supported by foundations, donors and sponsors, government (research) grants, or contract research. A small part of think tanks overall is a “business,” either as a commercial, as a for-profit enterprise or as a front organization for business interests. In the case of most think tanks, “funding model” is more appropriate than “business model.”

Think tanks produce very special packets of information. Ideas may be whispers in the wind but are meant to be heard by those whispered to; they are the most private and directed means of delivery of “truth to power” or ideas seeking to influence an important decision. Ideas need to be shared, not owned, if they are to have consequences. And nothing is easier than sharing on social media platforms.

To be effective, relevant insights must be delivered on time and in context to those who need it in a form they can digest and act upon. At first sight, think tanks should take to the digital age like fish to water, now that there are many more ways

to package and deliver information, as long as they master the language of the Internet and the new media (Manfredi, 2014). From tomes to tweets, think tanks are developing outreach and communication strategies to suit all needs from sound analysis building credibility to brevity for impact. The mobile screen in the palm of the user's hand is a direct-to-target dissemination channel; the challenge is to condense research into infographics and deliver visuals to the tablet. That is the perspective of the think tank; but what is the user's?

Every year, the University of Pennsylvania publishes a Global Ranking of Think Tanks by region, policy area, and special achievements. In 2015, Google attained rank 52 among the Top Science and Technology Think Tanks (McGann, 2016, p. 99). Think of it: from the perspective of many clients or information users, the Google search box in their browser window is now performing the function of a think tank. Google enables anyone with access to the web to get information when needed, pre-screened by Google with clever algorithms that are fine-tuned to the user's needs through the analysis of past searches and clicks. Today, Google may know the users better than think tank experts in the past ever knew their counterparts in power. Google obviates the need to commission reports and pay think tanks. It should be noted that Google has an affiliated think tank known as "Google Ideas" before being renamed "Jigsaw." Google Ideas is listed separately among "Best For-Profit Think Tanks" (McGann, 2016, p. 107).

Whispering in the ear of those with power or influence can change the course of policy, but for whispers to be effective, the whisperer must have credibility and access to the deciders, be sufficiently embedded simultaneously in science and policy communities, and understand the issue and economics interests at stake as well as the dynamics of political play. Whispered information may be intangible and fleeting, but it is the product of a long value chain that needs to be maintained and financed.

19.2 Logic Models and Functions of Think Tanks

The art of "speaking truth to power" has come a long way since Diogenes dispensed his wine-imbued wisdom to passersby in ancient Greece. In modern times, think tanks are—or try to be—venerable institutions with a reputation for competence, relevance, influence, and independence.

The core function of think tanks is evidence-based, systematic, one-off problem-solving in partnership with the intended beneficiaries and for the betterment of mankind. They tend to work, develop ideas, and argue on the basis of data and facts, using scientific methods and reason. Their work follows established patterns from problem analysis to the formulation of solutions that ensure success is not a product of chance but follows from a planned and purposeful application of a problem-solving strategy.

There are a number of "logic models" to plan for or explain the impact of a think tank on public discourse, policy debates or policy, and law. The most common form is for think tanks to seek direct access to the policy-making process, by engaging directly with policy-makers or legislators or indirectly with their staff or advisors, to whom the dissemination strategies are directed. This model is close to (public interest)

advocacy or lobbying (for particular, usually economic interests), but it relies on the conviction that policy-makers listen to truthful voices of reason.

Another logic model is to seek to change the framing and the narratives in public discourse, for example, through the media, in the expectation that such “education of the public” will lead policy-makers to change. Communication of think tanks following this model will be directed at mass media and the general public or to like-minded supporters that can be reached by direct mailing, on paper or electronically. This model relies on the conviction that policy-makers listen to polls, votes, and opinion leaders as precursors of views in the electorate and don’t much care about facts, truth, or reason (other than interests). All think tanks need to measure or otherwise evaluate their impact on public discourse, policy, and law, for operational reasons or for justifying the deployment of resources.

Sources of funding and (perceived) dependencies or conflicts of interest are very important to consider in the context of national political cultures and structures, and the assessment will depend on the logic model of impact pursued by a think tank. Some think tanks define their independence and integrity by having stable core funding or institutional support from government, while in the eyes of others, financial dependence on government breeds political dependence that is detrimental to the integrity of think tanks and their ability to contest policy ideas. In their view, independence is best served by relying on philanthropic foundations or “crowd-sourced” donations from the public, plus perhaps corporate sponsorship. Other regard corporate sponsorship as detrimental to the public interest orientation of a think tank and the independence of its advice.

Within these (very general) logic models, think tanks serve a number of discrete functions. Google and similar businesses may be reducing the space of think tanks at the information interface between science, society, and policy and perhaps even replacing them in some cases. But think tanks provide a number of functions other than just brokering ideas, and not all are affected in the same way. Assessing the digital disruption experienced by think tanks requires a systematic analysis of their functions and modes of interaction with the communities around them.

Experience shows that not all the functions must be fulfilled for a think tank to be effective, but there must be a critical mass in their number of strength. They can be described as:

- General functions that are independent of specific policy domains or governmental systems
- Functions in the (usually domestic) policy-making process
- Functions in international affairs, diplomacy, and international policy coordination

19.2.1 General Functions: Science, Society, and Practice

Sometimes considered a part of the science system, think tanks provide meaning from data (seeking the signals in the noise) and order information for various purposes, and they generate knowledge and understanding. For many individuals and

institutions, they are information gatekeepers and provide curating and filtering of information in specialized areas in a way that is similar to that of media organizations. In this way, they educate the public, policy-makers, and practitioners, directly or through media, and help manage the complexity of addressing “wicked problems” and their elusive solutions.

They can provide a pathway from data and evidence via analysis to policy options and political strategies. This includes the identification, articulation, and evaluation of current and emerging issues, problems, and proposals, from the exploration of ideas and floating of “trial policy balloons” to transforming ideas into policy (McGann & Sabatini, 2011, p. 4).

An important function in that context is contestation, the validation and improvement of viable (good) ideas, helping them spread by repetition and replication (with adaptation to different circumstances), as well as the identification and weeding out of bad ideas, by helping to avoid the repetition of mistakes and providing warnings. Contestation is usually evidence-based and designed as a process of policy learning to provide alternative theories, policies, instruments, designs, management rules, etc. It also involves exploring possible futures and pathways toward their realization, often in the form scenarios and other methods of future studies, determining what may be desirable or to be avoided. In doing so, think tanks can provide long-term plans for the evolution or purposeful development of policies and societies.

Within and for the science system, think tanks play a pivotal role in providing connectivity among scientific disciplines (inter- and multidisciplinary methods) and between the sciences and practice (transdisciplinary methods), in ways that other parts of the science system, such as universities or (usually narrowly disciplinary) research institutes, cannot. In this respect, think tanks also serve in recruitment, in the identification, training, and development of talent for work at the interfaces between science, society, policy, and practice (McGann & Sabatini, 2011, p. 4).

19.2.2 Functions in Policy-Making: Policy, Politics, Polity, and Statecraft

The central functions of think tanks are related to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of policy; the making of public policy; the management of the polity as a community, often a nation or linguistic or ethnic community, that shares a past, an identity, and a destiny; and maintaining and improving the institutions, procedures, processes, and underlying norms that ensure good government or statecraft (Ferguson & Mansbach, 1996).

Central for the success or otherwise of policies are the instruments employed and their combinations. These need to be evaluated based on past and current experience and assessed with a view to future impacts, including of new ideas or proposed policies. Connecting the experience of the past with the potential for the future can be done by other types of policy-relevant institutions, but think tanks are comparatively

good, because they are not constrained like academic research nor conditioned to think only in election cycles as many other political actors and institutions are.

Part of this think tank service to the policy-making process is the closing of the policy cycle, the linking of policy and law to implementation and practice, the evidence-based evaluation of practice, and the intended and unintended consequences of policies to feed into policy learning and revision (where appropriate). Apart from filtering and processing information and ideas, think tanks also facilitate the engagement of practitioners from local authorities, business, and civil society in the various stages around the policy cycle.

In parallel to, for instance, political parties, associations representing members' economic interests, and civil society organizations promoting public interests, but in different ways, think tanks help structure the polity. With their convening and bridge-building power, they create, shape, and enlarge (public) spaces and constructive forums to facilitate shared understanding of the past and present as well as future options, and they help to develop the metaphors and narratives that help form policies. Part of that process is the identification and isolation of sources and areas of controversy as a stem in building consensus or majority decisions that respect minority interests.

Think tanks help order an otherwise often chaotic political process and compensate for insufficiencies of political parties and bureaucracies. They build networks, with think tanks often serving as network nodes, and thus provide connectivity in various ways:

- Policy community connectivity across policy communities serving policy domains represented by government departments, ministries, and agencies, as well as parliamentary committees
- Connectivity across the ages, by providing a space for living memory and oral history telling and training “from master to apprentice” and maintaining a “reservoir” of ideas and (past and future) political leaders
- Geographic connectivity by linking multiple levels of government, facilitating interregional relations, and maintaining stable channels for cross-cultural and multilingual policy learning and policy coordination

By improving political institutions, rules and procedures for policy-making, implementation, and enforcement and therefore providing the foundations for good government, think tanks are a nongovernmental source of good statecraft.

19.2.3 Functions in Diplomacy and International Policy Coordination

In an economically and politically increasingly interconnected world, think tanks also serve important functions in providing trans-boundary connectivity between domestic and international levels, by bringing ideas from other countries into

domestic debates and explaining the background to domestic policy choices to international audiences. Some think tanks engage in the facilitation of (formal) diplomacy, not only in science diplomacy and the establishment and management of international networks for science but also in (informal) diplomacy, including aspects of public diplomacy, track-two diplomacy, parallel negotiations, and back-channel communication (cf. Hocking & Melissen, 2015).

In a similar way, think tanks provide intellectual support and public spaces for international policy discourse around the workings of international or global institutions, from the United Nations to specialized, regional programs. Think tanks are often the only organizations that shadow such institutions and provide expertise, constructive criticism, and ideas for solving policy coordination or management problems. In such cases, they fulfill the role of an international civil society, often by connecting nation-based civil society organization, and thus provide not only contestation as a service to improve international policies but also legitimacy that would otherwise not exist.

19.2.4 Functions of Think Tanks and Their Vulnerability to Disruption

This overview of the functions of think tanks shows how they are different from consultancies, because they do not repeatedly apply standardized methods but rather focus on novel, complex, or wicked problems that defy such methods or for which suitable methods need to be developed. They do this not in an ivory tower but in the midst of those who “own” a problem, need to be part of the solutions, or are the (intended) beneficiaries. And they work in the public interest and often seek to influence public policy, which explains why most of the funding for think tanks does not come from “commercial” revenue, such as fees or service, but from public (research) grants, sponsors (corporate), support from philanthropic foundation, and private donors.

The “business model” or rather “logic model” of many think tanks is to engage simultaneously with communities of experts and policy communities, business, media, and the general public and act as brokers of ideas among them. As is true for intermediaries in many areas, new information and communication technologies are reducing the space and the margins for brokerage to the point that think tanks may need to reinvent themselves.

The substance of the thinking, from the raw material of data; the processing for analysis, discussion, and evaluation; and the development of options, with assessments of likely impact and side effects of choices, to the development of the narratives and explanations that are targeted, timely, relevant, digestible, and actionable: The total value chain of think tanks is fragile and costly to maintain. As brokers of information, their “business models” are uniquely vulnerable to digital disruption.

19.3 Digital Disruptions to and Around Think Tanks

Digital disruptions affect think tanks in their internal operations, where they provide more opportunities than they present threats, especially in the area of dissemination and communication.

Perhaps more important than the digital disruptions within think tanks are changes in the environment around think tanks (Bennett, 2015). The most relevant is economic and political globalization, both as driver and consequence of ICT innovation. Globalization has profound impacts on domestic or national policy-making: There is a trend toward centralization of a growing number of issues in policy-making, promoted by the need to improve coordination across government departments and between domestic and international policy. As a consequence, the role of the heads of state and government is undergoing changes, as more sectorial domestic policies need to be coordinated to address challenges that cut across departmental lines, or among nations in fora, such as the G7 or the G20, where heads of state and government are present, and sectorial ministers relegated to supporting roles.

In view of the scarce time leaders have in such meetings, this process of centralization serves to crowd out “micro-policies” and “low-politics issues,” if only because they are complex, difficult to communicate through media, or evolve too slowly to attract the political attention they would objectively deserve: Some issues are ignored because they are never urgent until it is too late. These trends reduce the number of access points think tanks can use for influence, and it reduces the public space for issues to be processed before global leaders’ meetings.

On the one hand, the increasing interconnectedness and complexity of policies and processes disrupt traditional channels of influence that think tanks use and reduce their operating space. On the other hand, the same trends often overwhelm the national bureaucratic systems that should coordinate across policy domains, nationally and internationally, and that create new opportunities for think tanks. The opportunities can, however, only be exploited by larger think tanks able to cover the range of policy domains involved, covering a much larger thematic and geographic range.

Digital disruption can also be observed in the erosion of politics and the emergence of “social media bubbles” (Nikolov, Oliveira, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015) or “echo chambers” which aggravate trends toward polarization in societies and political systems all the way to one-issue initiatives or political parties with very narrow agendas. A similar process, with less sinister implications, can also be observed in the growing importance of civil society and democratization driven by easier access to information and more channels to express opinions or “voice.” New technologies and the channels and platforms they provide also allow for smaller regional units to express themselves, reach others, build communities, and coordinate political activities. This can lead to the emergence of new, specialized think tanks, sometimes established to support a specific region, community, or agenda, but it can also lead to more information and “noise” in the political system.

This “noise” creates a need, in the minds of many policy practitioners, for effective “information gatekeeping,” a role traditionally fulfilled by the dominant media of the time, from newspapers to radio and then television, and now trending toward the media organizations with the strongest brands on the worldwide web and social media. Think tanks now compete with media organizations, and only a few think tanks with global brands can keep up. Examples are Brookings or Carnegie as originally US based but now enjoying increasingly global recognition, followed by think tanks with strong national brands and international reputation, especially those established in important countries, such as the G20. The annual global think tank ranking established by the University of Pennsylvania (McGann, 2015, 2016) serves to keep the score in an international competition that favors the large and well-known think tanks, which may come to absorb more funding from donors seeking impact for their cause and visibility for themselves, denying support for small, geographically or thematically focused think tanks.

Digital disruptions affect the political or societal institutions, conventions, and social habits that provide the framework for think tanks and their communications with various audiences. Such communication can originate from think tanks as institutions in the form of analysis and recommendations formally adopted as institutional positions on an issue or branded as such by the prominence, for instance, of the institutional logo over authors’ names. Alternatively, communication can come from think tankers—experts as individual—who may be affiliated with more than one think tank. The disruptions they face are similar to those in other organizations, such as the media, in that there are effectively no more gatekeepers, quality controllers, aggregators, etc., of information and opinion, and many parallel and competing channels.

By corollary, there are also similar opportunities and emerging good and best practice at think tanks in the use of digital media, some on the basis of coincidence and some as a result of new strategic approaches. The development of “digital strategy” for think tanks has been a standard part of discourse among think tank and nonprofit professionals and scholars (see, e.g., Scott, 2011, 2012, 2013; Mendizabal, 2012a, 2012b; Connell, 2015a, 2015b; Connery, 2015; Harris, 2015; McGann, 2015, pp. 33–34). A good up-to-date overall source is the topic page on *On Think Tanks* maintained by Garzón de la Roza and Boyco (n.d.). A selection is illustrated in the following section.

19.4 Responses: Adapting to the Digital Age

The mid-1990s were pivotal for think tanks, when they were forced to respond to the worldwide web taking off and providing new opportunities but also imposing a need to develop internal capacities for taking advantage of those opportunities, often before their financial viability was clear.

The International Crisis Group (ICG), for example, was founded in 1995 with offices in several locations and a mission to address international violent conflict by bringing together the best thinking wherever it was available; its staff and fellows are distributed over five continents, and yet it remains a small think tank by international standards. McGann and Sabatini (2011, p. 122) note that the ICG (and other global think tanks) “simply could not exist without the current communication infrastructure that allows for the real-time transfer of ideas and knowledge. This technology has allowed for increased ease in international collaboration and dissemination of information [...]; without it, they would not be able to fulfill their many agendas or influence the policy-making process as decisively.” The digital revolution enabled small think tanks to have global reach instantly and far beyond what was possible before.

Also founded in 1995 was Ecologic Institute, a private initiative or “grass-roots” think tank in Germany, focusing on environmental and sustainable development challenges with a global vocation (Kraemer, 2014). Its global reach developed more slowly than was the case at the ICG but keeps growing through experimentation and innovation using the web and social media channels and platforms. Some examples are explained below. ICG and Ecologic Institute are examples of “digital natives” among think tanks, where the historical and technological context of their foundation inserted digital thinking into their institutional DNA. An example of recent digital native think tanks that used digital technologies and social media from the beginning and is now recognized as a leader in the field is the Center for American Progress (CAP), also known as “Obama’s favorite think tank.”

Older think tanks, many of which were “universities without students,” focused on research resulting in scholarly articles and books, with paper-based dissemination of their ideas. One of the most remarkable strategy developments occurred at the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) in Canada. Established in Winnipeg, Manitoba, with harsh winters and far away from policy-making hubs, it faced challenges in attracting staff and maintaining contact, especially direct personal contact, with policy-makers. It opened offices in Ottawa and Geneva, Switzerland, to ensure presence where it mattered, but more importantly, it developed new work flow routines and staff policies to accommodate dispersed staff not located in Winnipeg or one of the offices.

IISD also developed strategic approaches, including real-time sharing of information with its dispersed staff, and built an infrastructure of email list-serves, many of which were opened and are relied upon today by think tankers, researchers, policy-makers, and their staffers all over the world. IISD also established the Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB), a reporting and archival mechanism for international negotiators in the field of environment and development that makes the outcomes of negotiations available within hours. The highly fragmented international sustainable governance regime with a few 100 separate and specialized agreements and institutions could simply not function without the ENB as an enabling infrastructure. IISD is not a digital native think tank but clearly an early adopter that continues to demonstrate good and best practice.

Most other old or pre-digital think tanks have developed digital strategies by now, with the Urban Institute in the USA, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in the UK, or the Ethos Laboratorio in the Mexico providing good examples. While these strategies are ambitious and transformative for the think tanks and how they relate to their various audiences, these think tanks retain a significant pre-digital character in much of what they do; they are traditional organizations with digital outreach.

19.5 Experimental Creatures: Virtual Think Tanks

Rather than focusing on the “digital disruption” as a threat, Ecologic Institute experimented to find ways of using new technology to strengthen its impact. It focused on a cluster of think tank functions: the identification, recruitment, and development of young talents and emerging leaders to work at the interfaces among science, society, business, and policy-making. This can be illustrated by two examples:

- The virtual Arctic Summer College and the sustaining network of Arctic think tanks
- Emerging Leaders in Environmental and Energy Policy (ELEEP), a virtual think tank

These two examples build on the EcoScholars network as an earlier successful innovation. EcoScholars is an “in the flesh” but transient community, of about 30–50 visiting fellows and scholars working on environment, climate, energy, resources, or sustainable development that pass through Berlin, Germany, each year. Members are recruited via a “snowball” system, using the web and social media for visibility and as magnets. The community has to be reestablished every fall, when new cohorts of fellows and scholars arrive, and is then encouraged, through electronic communication to self-organize “real” activities and provide mutual support for members in their scholarship and everyday matters. Started as an experiment, EcoScholars has gone through several iterations, achieved continuity, and is building a multi-cohort community that shares ideas and resources across the years. Increased retention of talent in Berlin and an increase in applications and in the attractiveness of the issue areas covered by EcoScholars have been additional benefits.

19.5.1 *The Virtual Arctic Summer College*

Every year for the last 5 years, from June to the end of August, about 20 select, mainly young researchers or early career professionals join the virtual Arctic Summer College. The fellows hail from all Arctic nations—they cover the circum-polar space—as well as other, non-Arctic countries with an interest in the area. As a

rule, fellows are appointed for 1 year and are invited as observers or sometimes as speakers in later years.

Through the (academic) summer, they participate in eight to ten webinars on various topics relevant to the Arctic, each with presentations by two eminent experts in their Arctic field. The idea is to hold interactive sessions, ideally involving everyone in the group, in discussions that benefit from a variety of backgrounds in different policy fields, scientific disciplines, and national perspectives.

The approach and the technicalities of webinars with moderators, presenters, discussants, and participants from very different time zones required the development and fine-tuning of a range of skills, from giving instructions and assistance to (usually inexperienced) presenters to moderation techniques that create tolerance for time lapses.

In addition to participating in the webinars, at least once as appointed discussants, the fellows research and provide background material, write summaries of discussions and policy briefs, and sometimes agree to coauthor scientific papers. In such cases, the Arctic Summer College may have been an important stimulation and contribution, but that is rarely attributed to it.

In between webinars and throughout the year, the Arctic Summer College maintains presences on the Arctic Summer College web site and Twitter and encourages ongoing exchanges among fellows through (closed) groups on LinkedIn and Facebook.

Initially, the Arctic Summer College was an experiment designed to provide cohesion and continuity of Arctic-related work within Ecologic Institute, which involved staff, visiting scholars, and alumni from Alaska to Finland. Even in its first year, word got out and outsiders wanted to participate. In the second year, the Arctic Summer College was established as a joint initiative with partners and sponsors.

Each year from then on, additional features were added to the Arctic Summer College experience, and more sponsors were attracted. Since 2015, the Arctic Summer College concludes its course with a breakout session at the Arctic Circle Assembly, usually in October in Reykjavik, Iceland.

19.5.2 A Virtual Think Tank: The ELEEP Community

The (closed) Facebook group of the network of Emerging Leaders in Environmental and Energy Policy (ELEEP) is literally off the charts. It produces a much higher frequency and intensity of interaction than any other group of around 100 members. In fact, it has more comments and replies among its members than groups 20 times its size (“likes” do not count in this context).

The ELEEP network is a joint project of the Ecologic Institute US and the Atlantic Council of the USA, launched in fall 2011. It is a dynamic, membership-only forum for the exchange of ideas, policy solutions, best practices, and professional development for early and mid-career North American and European leaders working on environmental and energy issues. ELEEP currently has over 100 members, split about evenly between North America and Europe.

Members debate topics of the day online, meet regularly for study tours and other face-to-face activities, and collaborate on transatlantic impact projects. Although the main activity of ELEEP is invisible to outsiders—it takes place in the closed group on Facebook—the network has growing visibility and attracts sponsors. The ELEEP fellows, supporting one another, form regional and thematic groups; organize meetings, events, visits, and study tours in various places; and raise funds for such ancillary activities on their own initiative, thus leveraging the ELEEP framework and backing.

In 2014, ELEEP fellows succeeded in raising funds to replicate ELEEP with a focus on the Arctic. The result was the Arctic Climate Change Emerging Leaders Fellowship (ACCEL), incubated by ELEEP. This shows the dynamisms in a group that may also be at its maximum size for efficiency, seeking to divide itself like a growing cell, with some differentiation of focus. However, ACCEL fellows did not succeed in raising funds that would allow the network to continue, and the initiative ended in 2016.

With low visibility and an annual budget of less than \$500K, ELEEP produces output in very respectable quantity and quality, over a range of issues and on par with think tanks employing staff in similar numbers to the ELEEP membership, and benefits its members through significant career enhancement. The work program is self-directed by members, and there is no central programming except for voluntary bottom-up coordination. That is very different from most established think tanks with central control over program development and fund-raising.

19.6 Conclusions: The Emergence of Virtual Think Tanks

These two cases show that the Internet, the web, social media, and other manifestations of the digital age do not just cause disruptions or threaten think tanks. They show how new media can be used to build and nourish geographically and professionally dispersed expert communities, so that they can share information, analysis, insights, and judgment and achieve new forms and higher levels of cooperation.

Depending on starting points, preexisting management and communication systems, resources, and global relevance and ambition, different strategies for coping with, adapting to, and specializing and thriving in the digital age are open to think tanks. There are no disruptive new logic models of think tanks yet that would endanger the existence of think tanks as such or force a process of “adapt or die” on them.

Theoretically, the ELEEP model of virtual think tanks has the potential to disrupt: It is cheaper to establish and maintain by a factor of between 10 and 20 compared to think tanks of similar size, breadth, and depth, a factor of 10 being more likely for a virtual think tank that is legally independent rather than being incubated by traditional think tanks. However, it is not proven yet that the model can grow beyond the current number of members or be replicated with similar success. Thus far, therefore, the disruptive potential is theoretical only.

Acknowledgments My colleagues at Ecologic Institute shared practical experience with innovations in think tanks, digital or otherwise, over many years, and I acknowledge their encouragement and stimulation. Credit is due also to IASS Potsdam, notably Mark Lawrence, for giving time and space for reflection on the theory and practice of think tank work. James G. McGann of the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program at the University of Pennsylvania gave guidance, encouragement, and an introduction to the international community of think tank practitioners and scholars, including the participants of the 2015 Think Tank Innovations Summit in Philadelphia, PA, an inspiring event that left traces in this chapter.

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