

Ways and Means: How Think Tanks Use Social Media to Influence Public Policy

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RUNNING HEAD: THINK TANKS

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Abstract

Think tanks organize at the nexus of business, government, and academia to influence public policy. These organizations take three distinct working forms that utilize different research and communication styles to target different audiences as routes to influence. Traditionally they targeted elite actors such as legislators and executive branch agencies with lengthy scholarly treatises. But with the advent of social media, they can readily extend their reach directly to the voting public. In this chapter, we compare data on the research output and social media footprint of the prototypical organizations that inspired mimesis for each form – the Brookings Institution (a “university without students”), the RAND Corporation (a “contract organization”), and the Heritage Foundation (an “advocacy organization”). We examine their distributions of research output as well as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter activity. Heritage attracts large numbers of followers for postings across platforms. RAND lagged in timing and frequency of platform use. All three increasingly utilize these media with rapidly expanding reach. Content analysis of tweets using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) reveals different routes to persuasion. The results are consistent with our hypothesis that the newer forms of advocacy organization rely more on peripheral routes to influence while the two traditional forms stress central routes to persuasion grounded in a logical argument. Systematic differences in social media use indicate the need for additional research directed at fully understanding the impact of emotion-driven communications in facilitating the rapid formation of highly energized social movements (e.g. COVID-19 anti-shutdown protests and Black Lives Matter).

Introduction

Intellectual elites have long sought to influence public policy. To inspire modification of the destructive terms of the Treaty of Versailles, John Maynard Keynes (1919, 1923) published books explaining negotiation mistakes, economic consequences, and necessary reforms. Setting out to roll back and the regulatory state, Friedrich Hayek (1944) and Milton Friedman (1961) likewise published lengthy treatises. Friedman (1970) later used the expansive and timely reach afforded by newspaper editorials and television programs. Using those platforms, he persuaded large segments of the public to favor candidates advocating neoliberal ideology (Burgin, 2013).

The advent of social media greatly expanded opportunities to influence the voting public about policy issues. Messages quickly reach a global audience providing wide-ranging conversation about topics such as taxes, education, health care, and social justice. In this chapter, we examine how think tanks, non-profit public policy organizations that employ social science, utilize these new media to shape debate over issues while considering implications of their vastly extended reach. We examine both think tank research output as well as the quantity and quality of social media posting to observe differences in how three distinct types of organization fuel conflict on pressing social issues, including the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement during the course of 2020.

Social media altered the landscape for influence around public policy debate. Think tanks continue to engage with traditional media, such as newspapers and broadcast news (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005) to convey ideas, evidence, and arguments. But messaging through such channels requires considerable resources. The ability to publish books, op-eds in mass-circulation periodicals, and to program television continues to be reserved for elite actors with financial backing and some credential of expertise (or at least notoriety). For

mass-media companies to invest, develop, and deploy their considerable resources to reach audiences, the actor needs to emerge as a viable candidate through a competitive process or have achieved notable status sufficient to assure return on investment (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Social media platforms disrupted this dynamic, as there is little up-front cost nor vetting process to engage on these platforms. Social media grants actors a potentially vast audience. Sources report that Facebook has 2.74 billion active users per month, with Instagram reaching 1 billion and Twitter with 330 million active users (“List of Social Platforms with at Least 100 Million Active Users,” 2020). The absence of gatekeepers on these platforms opens competition for the attention of the public on any conceivable topic, including government policy.

Social engineers designed early think tanks to use empirical social science methodology to aid the government in making important decisions (Dennison, 1932; Lyons, 1969). Inside the US government, the growing amount of data in the 1920s led to the formation of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics to coordinate research needed to meet the economic needs of farmers (Lyons, 1969). The resulting work legitimized social science as a government function. That decade saw parallel development of non-profit public policy organizations, such as the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Brookings Institution, and the Social Science Research Council, organizations funded by wealthy philanthropic donors to engage in social science research. Think tanks provide a context in which elite actors legitimate favored philosophies (Barros & Taylor, 2020). They also generate ideologies, disseminate agendas, and form coalitions of constituents (Kallick, 2002). A notable recent example is the creation of the ‘Green New Deal’ by the think tank *New Consensus*, which has sparked numerous policy debates (Meyer, 2019).

Working from archival data and interviews with think tank analysts, Medvetz (2012) noted their ‘interstitial’ positioning situated between the longer standing fields of business,

politics, and the media. He identified academia as a source of personnel, methodology, and legitimacy that enabled think tanks to “become the primary instruments for linking political and intellectual practice in American life” (p. 7). Similarly, think tanks and the government enjoy a symbiotic relationship, becoming a reciprocal source of personnel and resources in a process described as a ‘revolving door’ (U.S. Department of State, 2002). After beginning her career as an investment banker Elaine Chao, for example, has moved back and forth from leading government agencies like the Department of Transportation and the Peace Corps to work for think tanks like the Hudson Institute and the Heritage Foundation. Because of its unique positioning, changes in the field of think tanks reflect but also cause corresponding changes in the adjoining fields.

Selected examples of the impact of these organizations highlight their influence on the public policy process. Heritage Foundation devised the individual mandate instrumental (Butler, 1990) to the eventual passage of the Affordable Care Act (Jones et al., 2014). More recently, the same organization prepared the list of judges that Donald Trump used for his prolific and lifetime judicial appointments (Restuccia & Bravin, 2020).

Distinct forms of think tanks have emerged at different points in time. They exhibit distinct patterns of research intensity and advocacy activity. Weaver (1989) identified the Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, and Heritage Foundation as prototypes of think tanks that represent a template that other organizations in the field emulate. The Brookings Institution represents the earliest form - the *University without Students*¹. These organizations employ scholarly academic researchers using funds from philanthropic foundations and private donors to generate rigorous long-form studies of social problems. Founded by dry

¹ Perhaps reflecting this nature, the website of the Brookings Institution uses a .edu domain, usually reserved for educational institutions (<https://www.brookings.edu>).

goods wholesaler Robert S. Brookings in 1927, Brookings targets elite opinion to shape policy decisions.

RAND Corporation represents the *Contract Research* organization. They conduct scientific research but work to specific contract terms with an agency of government to solve a defined problem. The client-agency formulates the research purpose and agenda. A RAND-type think tank generates technical reports, often proprietary, tailored expressly for the client. RAND itself spun off in 1948 from a division of the Douglas Aircraft Corporation sponsored by the Air Force's project RAND (standing for Research and Development). Originally led by Douglas executive Franklin Collbohm, RAND pioneered in the formulation of systems analysis, game theory, organization theory, and military strategy (Augier & March, 2011). RAND published over 500 technical reports under contract with the Defense Department during the Vietnam War. Developing solutions to specific problems on behalf of the government represented a novel extension of the research techniques deployed by the older universities without students.

The Heritage Foundation provided the widely emulated template for *Advocacy* think tanks, which comprise privately funded organizations combining strong ideological positions with aggressive communication strategies. They seek to impact current policy debate in a timely manner. Eschewing original scholarly research, they utilize sophisticated marketing techniques to communicate existing ideas to the broader public in a persuasive manner. Heritage was co-founded in 1973 by political press secretary Paul Weyerich and Edwin Feulner, a Wharton MBA who later completed a Ph.D. in economic history at Edinburgh. They were adamant that: "*Heritage would operate like a business that expected progress from its analysts and results from their policy studies. Heritage would achieve these results by creating timely, concise studies and aggressively marketing them to Congress,*

policymakers, and the media. This 'briefcase test' concept became a model for other think tanks to follow." (<http://www.heritage.org/about/staff/f/edwin-feulner>)

The differences between these prototypes and their likely research and social media output create potential for highly asymmetric conflict. The technocratic and empirically focused prototypes of Universities without Students and Contract Research organizations clash with the ideological bent of Advocacy Organizations around pressing social issues. We argue that the advent of social media not only increases the potential reach of these organizations in messaging a larger segment of the public, but also decreases conformity pressures, as activities on social media do not receive screening from gatekeepers such as newspaper or television editorial staff. The context represents a new frontier for conflict over public policy direction.

Social media imposes fewer constraints than traditional media, which should facilitate advocacy think tanks in aggressively pursuing their mission. Representation on traditional media requires adhering to norms of professionalism requiring greater commitment to truth and transparency (Singer, 2007). Arguments and evidence presented in traditional media are ostensibly founded on expertise or empirical data. They may be fact-checked for accuracy either within or outside the reporting organization (Mena, 2019). Social media posts differ qualitatively. They typically carry shorter messages, videos, or images, designed for rapid consumption and sharing with contacts. They are far less subject to screening for rigor. Moreover, the focus on brevity precludes complex or systematic reasoning about issues. With its original focus on producing short, ideologically driven position papers, Heritage would appear ideally placed to capitalize on the properties of the social media context.

Organizations that rely on empirical research cannot easily reduce it to short form communication. While they may produce issue relevant research, they may not communicate it via social media even if there are no gatekeeping forces to limit the volume of messaging.

The distinct modes of operation should result in divergent patterns of research output and media impact. Because of its mission to conduct research, RAND Corporation should produce greater volume of research output, with less messaging through social media outlets. Advocating predetermined positions, the Heritage Foundation should have the greater tendency to communicate through social media platforms. Brookings likely generates an intermediate level of research and social media output compared to the others. But due to its quasi-academic status, it is likely to be more similar to RAND than Heritage.

Shared ties at the analyst (Medvetz, 2012), board (Burriss, 2008; Bechara, Jang, & Bottom, 2021), and funder (Bottom, Jang, & Bechara, 2021) levels facilitate such coordinated action. The pattern of research and messaging we observe from these three prototypes is likely to be reflected across the interconnected network comprising the field. For much of the first decade of this century, John Porter, a long-serving member of congress, worked simultaneously as a director for both RAND and Brookings. Even after Porter retired, the two organizations were not very distant at the board level. Currently, Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates serves as a director for both Brookings and the Aspen Institute. At Aspen Gates works alongside RAND board member Donald Rice and RAND CEO Michael Rich. Corporate board interlocks provide “a mechanism for the rapid diffusion of information and practices and promoting elite cohesion” (Chu & Davis, 2016). In the think tank space, they “enable both information flow in the network, and the establishment of bonding structures that facilitate higher-stakes coordination” (Furnas, 2020).

Heritage formally constructed the State Policy Network, a group of 167 think tanks advocating for neoliberal initiatives (*About State Policy Network*, n.d.). Brookings has been a member of the Policy Action Network, a group of 90 think tanks engaged in policy collaboration and dialogue (*Policy Action Network*, 2002). The research and social media patterns of RAND, Heritage, and Brookings likely align with other closely tied organizations

generating the capacity to amplify influence by communicating in a coordinated and systematic way.

In the following sections, we observe the research and social media messaging output of these three prototypical think tanks. Our aim is not only to show differences in operation but also to assess the potential for political polarization that may result. Ideas serve as the basis for social action (Bernini, 2020). In the case of social media, messaging by think tanks can represent a legitimate source of information and thus, form the intellectual capital the public relies upon when engaged in discourse. We first focus on the general research and social media output of the three prototype think tanks. We then narrow the focus on two pressing social issues presenting in 2020, namely the global pandemic caused by COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Research and social media output

To examine organizational output, we investigated a number of social media platforms. Research output was tracked using the Altmetrics database, which includes impact metrics. To gauge social media utilization, we examined the number of posts on Facebook, between 2017 and 2019, with data from sproutsocial.com. We downloaded all tweets from the official Twitter account of each think tank and examined the Instagram accounts for activity from each organization. We analyze output generated through the end of 2019. Table x.1 provides statistics summarizing results from these sources.

RAND generated a high volume of research output but little social media activity. Committed to maintaining a significant research presence, the organization produces a highly respected peer-reviewed journal, *The RAND Journal of Economics*. Neither Brookings nor Heritage do so. Research work generated by RAND authors were cited 4,816 times in 1,387 journals, indicating considerable scholarly impact. This research serves as a topic of public

discourse, mentioned 72,246 times on Twitter, 2,701 times on Facebook, 1,574 times on blog posts, and 427 times on Wikipedia. The trend of referencing has been increasing over time.

But RAND evinced a low level of social media output and fewer followers than the other organizations.

Table x.1. Research and Social Media Output

	Research works produced	Instagram posts (From account inception)	Tweets (From account inception)	Facebook posts (2017-2019)	Instagram followers in Oct 2020 (000s)	Twitter followers in Oct 2020 (000s)	Facebook followers in Oct 2020 (000s)
RAND Corporation	6,310	51	47,118	574	3	209	56
Brookings Institution	656	536	75,889	5,024	24	412	415
Heritage Foundation	27	999	69,542	9,395	108	678	2,107

By comparison, Brookings produced much less research output but a far greater presence on social media. Altmetrics revealed Brookings generated about a tenth of the research work that RAND did. This work was cited 507 times across 250 academic journals. But it was mentioned quite a bit in social media with 8,413 references on Twitter, 329 on Facebook, 393 on blog posts, and 60 on Wikipedia. The trend increases over time. Brookings posted far more on social media than RAND. They also had many more followers across all platforms.

Heritage generated the least research but considerably more social media posting and presence. Heritage research was cited just 11 times in 11 academic journals. This work was mentioned 263 times on Twitter, 5 times on Facebook, 7 times on blog posts, but not at all on Wikipedia. The scant research output accompanied by far the greatest amount of social media output and visibility. They post often across all platforms. They have many more followers. This pattern aligns with the logic of an *Advocacy* organization reflecting relatively low research output, but with considerable social media presence in pursuit of fixed policy positions.

Analysis of tweet content

Having access to the entire corpus of tweets generated by each prototype allowed us to examine the content of the messages these think tanks convey. For this analysis, we examined all tweets from the official accounts of each prototype from account inception to the end of 2019. Figure 1 shows the number of tweets from each account over time. Heritage joined Twitter the earliest and was most prolific in tweeting until 2014. Brookings began a bit later though they accelerated quickly.

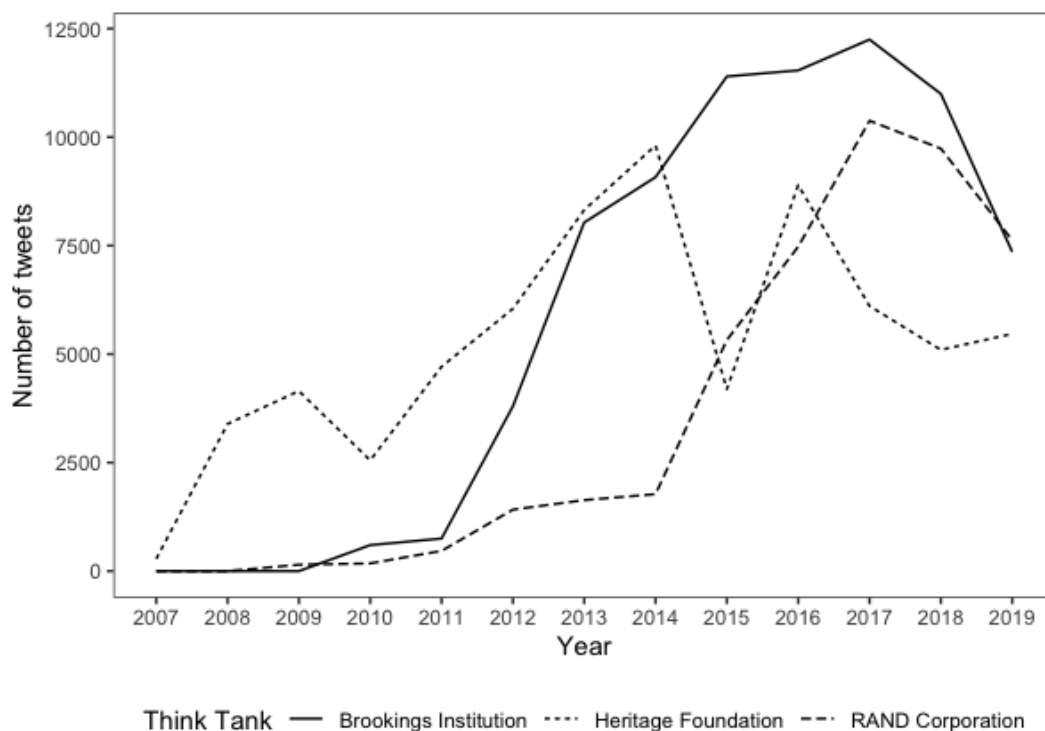


Figure 1. Tweets generated by think tanks across time

We analyzed tweet content using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2007), which counts words that map onto particular psychological concepts. The assumption behind the program is that greater use of words that represent a psychological concept indicates its importance to the actor.

Differences in organizational mission should be reflected in word choice. The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) outlines two paths to persuasion that should rely on different types of language. The central route to persuasion requires elaborated thinking about the informational content of a message intended to influence through reasoning and logical argumentation. In contrast, the peripheral route relies on rapid, superficial, heuristic processing of a message. Mood, feelings, liking, and other affective reactions persuade without elaboration or requiring extensive reasoning. The peripheral route demands fewer cognitive resources. It tends to be used when the message recipient has little or no interest in the subject, limited need for cognition, and/or less ability to process the

message (Petty & Wegener, 1999). The empirical research focus of RAND and Brookings Institution should necessitate greater use of the central route by providing empirical evidence to analyze problems and potential remedies.

The advocacy mission of the Heritage Foundation may be better met through the peripheral route with messages that appeal to strong emotions rather than complex logic. “Waging and winning the war of ideas” (Feulner, 1986) likely entails greater use of terminology reflecting negative emotions in particular fear and anger. The latter emotion also requires communication of greater certainty (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988).

To test for this pattern, we examined specific categories of word use tracked by LIWC. The LIWC was created through extensive text analysis and aims to define a list of words that reflect social and psychological states (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). For evidence of central routes to persuasion, we examined words in the LIWC categories of insight (e.g., think, know), authenticity (derived from differences between honest vs. deceptive speech), and causality (e.g., because, effect). To find evidence of peripheral routes we examined words in the LIWC categories of affect words (e.g., happy, cried), exclamation marks, and certainty words. Table x.2 shows the percentage of words used in these categories, aggregated over all tweets.

Table x.2. Percent use of central and peripheral route word use in think tank tweets

	Central route word use			Peripheral route word use		
	Insight	Authentic	Cause	Affect	Exclamation marks	Certainty
RAND Corporation	2.18%	17.83%	2.35%	5.59%	.01%	.59%

Brookings Institution	2.14%	25.75%	2.20%	3.98%	.06%	.49%
Heritage Foundation	1.86%	19.84%	1.86%	6.02%	.80%	1.00%

We then conducted a series of panel regressions to test for differences between the three prototypes, with percentage word use per year as the dependent variable, and dummy variables representing think tanks as the independent variables.

RAND and Brookings used more insight, authentic, and causal words than Heritage Foundation. There were no significant differences between the prototypes on insight-related words. But Brookings used more authentic communication than RAND ($t = 2.13, p = .045$), or Heritage ($t = 1.97, p = .06$). RAND Corporation used causal words to a greater extent than Heritage Foundation ($t = 3.91, p < .001$). Brookings used causal words marginally more than Heritage ($t = 1.79, p = .09$).

Heritage Foundation consistently used more affective terminology, exclamation marks, and certainty. They used affect more often than RAND ($t = 2.16, p = .04$) and Brookings ($t = 10.17, p < .001$). They also tweeted more exclamation marks than RAND Corporation ($t = 3.36, p = .003$) or Brookings ($t = 3.22, p = .004$). Heritage expressed words conveying certainty more often than RAND ($t = 7.72, p < .001$) or Brookings ($t = 9.50, p < .001$).

Overall, these patterns are consistent with the use of central route persuasion by RAND Corporation and Brookings Institution. Their empirical focus is reflected in a recent RAND tweet that links to a longer report: “Where do Americans get their news? What sources do they view as reliable? And how are choices about news consumption linked to

demographics or political affiliation? Results from our new national survey provide insights into these questions and more. <https://t.co/xmzvVHlgYT>” (29 Dec 2019).

A recent tweet from Brookings illustrates a similar focus on empirical analysis to cope with uncertainty: “Young people, less educated workers, men, and Hispanic and black workers will likely be most exposed to disruption from automation <https://brook.gs/2HodtAv>” (26 Jan 2019). The peripheral route of persuasion taken by Heritage reflects the war of ideas they are attempting to win. A recent tweet illustrates this advocacy pattern: “Who is behind the push for graphic, ‘comprehensive’ sex education in public schools? Parents? Teachers? Nope! Planned Parenthood. Join us this week to find out how you can fight back and #protectkids” (8 Oct, 2019).

Two organizations use tweets to guide readers to primary research undertaken by the organization. The other tweets emphatic opposition to sex education while imploring the audience to “fight”.

This divergent use of routes, coupled with differing bases for argumentation facilitates an asymmetric conflict between research and emotion. We explore this possibility further by examining social media usage about two pressing issues in 2020: the global pandemic caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the BLM movement.

Analysis of COVID-19 related output

We examined research output and social media output related to COVID-19 of the prototype think tanks through October 2020. We examined research output in the Altmetrics database and posts on Instagram and Twitter because those platforms allowed examination of the entirety of the posts made by a particular account. We summarize the output from each organization below; statistics appear in Table x.3.

Both RAND Corporation and Brookings Institution published research papers on the topic, signalling capability to generate in-house expertise and the capacity to disseminate evidence based knowledge on the topic. In searching for “COVID” or “Coronavirus”, and “pandemic” in article titles, we examined the number and content of the articles. In line with Weaver’s (1989) expectations, there were differences across prototypes. RAND affiliated authors produced 14 journal articles, mainly in health, medical, and gerontology journals.

Specific topics related to public health, including the pandemic response in Taiwan, resource allocation, emergency risk communication, preparedness in nursing homes, preparedness in home healthcare agencies, testing policy, healthcare design, virtual training, and rationing of healthcare resources. Other topics involved investigations of the impact of COVID on specific populations, including the impact of the virus on users of opioids, adults experiencing homelessness, elderly loneliness, infrastructure, as well as psychological symptoms among frontline healthcare workers. The output speaks to a broad range of topics related to the crisis and reflects a depth of expertise. Brookings Institution affiliated authors had five papers with some in high impact journals (*JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, Science*). Specific topics covered included the transparency of COVID epidemiological models, readiness of self-service diagnosis, and changing healthcare models to accommodate pandemics. In contrast to the other organizations, the Heritage Foundation had not published any research work on the topic in peer reviewed journals as of October 2020.

Table x.3. Research and Social Media Output on COVID-19

	Research work produced (until October 2020)	Tweets (until October 2020)	Instagram posts (until October 2020)
RAND Corporation	14	6 (27 likes)	12 (668 likes)

Brookings Institution	5	14 (111 likes)	19 (6716 likes)
Heritage Foundation	0	19 (795 likes)	104 (129,684 likes)

We examined messaging on Twitter, narrowing our focus to tweets or hashtags that contained the word ‘lockdown’ in 2020. Opinion about efforts to contain transmission of the virus through the closure of non-essential businesses and stay at home orders, commonly described as ‘lockdown’ policies, have been greatly polarized, with voting patterns predicting state pandemic response policies (Makridis & Rothwell, 2020). Such policies have also resulted in protests, with President Trump tweeting in support of protesters against restrictions on activity (“Coronavirus,” 2020). We examined the impact the prototype think tanks have had in social media on this topic.

RAND Corporation tweeted six times using the word ‘lockdown’. Three tweets outlined how lockdown could lead to unemployed and underemployed people facing homelessness, and three tweets that reported on a trend of increasing domestic violence in Europe due to the lockdown. All tweets were accompanied by links to more extensive research reports. Brookings Institution tweeted 14 times using the word ‘lockdown’. These tweets referred to health infrastructure, domestic violence, criminal gangs building social capital, regulatory changes to deal with the pandemic, lockdown protest and gun sales, the rights of presidents or governors to enforce lockdowns, the economy in Nigeria, metrics for ending lockdown, and pandemic response in Africa, US, and in France. These tweets are linked to briefs that cite data or the constitution.

The Heritage Foundation tweeted 19 times using the word ‘lockdown’. These tweets cast doubt on the processes and the effectiveness of the restrictions, with doubts expressed about the benefits of scientific analysis (“the failures behind the Imperial College Model that spurred unnecessary, widespread #COVID19 lockdowns”, 17 June 2020), questioned the

value, excessiveness, and effectiveness of lockdowns (“Recent studies, including one by a former Obama administration economic adviser, call into question widely held views on the value of government lockdowns”, 3 Oct 2020), and included a positive evaluation of Sweden’s comparatively lax response to the crisis (“it has fewer deaths per million population than many Western countries that imposed lockdowns”, 22 Oct 2020). The tweets also highlight the harm caused by lockdowns, including the economic effects of lockdown on healthcare providers, the need to revise lockdown strategy, how lockdown affects religious liberty, deaths caused by police enforcement of lockdowns in Africa, and the need to exercise discretion in enforcing lockdown.

We also examined the entirety of Instagram posts from the beginning of the pandemic to the end of October 2020. On this platform, there were vast differences between organizations in their communication. The 12 posts by RAND covered content related to state responses to COVID-19, supporting well-being, alcoholism, secure voting in a pandemic, unemployment, blood donation supplies, as well as remote learning. The 19 posts by Brookings discussed reopening businesses in the context of other international efforts, as well as the economic effects of COVID-19 on rural areas, on Black Americans, essential workers, food insecurity, online learning, voting issues, gun sales, and healthcare. Posts from these think tanks represent a wide array of social concerns about the negative effects of the global pandemic, and attempts to address or call attention to multiple aspects of the crisis.

In contrast, the 104 posts on COVID-19 related topics by the Heritage Foundation expressed skepticism and economic impacts of the pandemic. Posts included encouragement to practice social distancing (“Are you practicing social distancing? Social distancing is one of the primary ways to slow the trajectory of the spread of the coronavirus, reducing the number of active cases at any given time.”) early in the crisis (15 March). But as the pandemic progressed, skepticism about public health measures increased. On the 5th of May,

Heritage posted a quote from Jordan Peterson, (“It is better to live bravely than cowardly, everyone knows that”). Later posts downplayed the severity of the crisis (“ICYMI: Nearly every state has significant levels of available hospital beds. Visit [Heritage.org/Coronavirus](https://www.heritage.org/coronavirus) to learn more.”, 11 June; “These results demonstrate how much more deadly the Spanish flu was than COVID-19 has been so far...” 25 July). Posts also encouraged reopening of business and schools (“A growing list of experts agree: YES, it’s safe to send kids back to school...” 27 July), and greater participation in-person activities (“The left’s national vote-by-mail effort is a really bad idea.” 31 August).

The organizations’ communication diverged more and more as the pandemic progressed. With the sizable social media following that Heritage commands, differing viewpoints on the efficacy of public health measures, such as the closure of businesses and schools could serve to fuel conflict across many domains of public and private life. Depending on the appropriate course of public health policy, it could influence how sustained the pandemic is across multiple communities.

Analysis of BLM related output

The BLM movement seeks to combat violence and discrimination against Black communities. The movement is one of the largest in US history, with 4,700 protests between late May and early July 2020, with an estimated 15 ~ 26 million protesters participating (Buchanan et al., 2020). The movement has been consequential, with one form of impact being the recent removal of public monuments dedicated to the Confederacy (“List of Monuments and Memorials Removed during the George Floyd Protests,” 2021). The movement inspired popular countermovements, including the All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter movements, and has become a focal point of discussion online, with nearly 47.8 million tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter sent between late May and early June

2020 (Anderson et al., 2020). We examined research output and social media output related to the Black Lives Matter movement. We also examined research output in the Altmetrics database. We also examined Instagram and Twitter posts for 2020. Statistics appear in Table x.4.

Both RAND Corporation and Brookings Institution published peer-reviewed research papers on the topic. We searched for the following keywords in article titles: black, African, ethnic, race, equality, police, violence, and law enforcement, between the period of 2014 and 2020 (the inception of the movement to current day). Studies that examined racial equality/disparity and Black people in that period were also included.

Table x.4. Research and Social Media Output on Black Lives Matter

	Research works produced (2014 to October 2020)	Tweets (to October 2020)	Instagram posts (to October 2020)
RAND Corporation	120	18 (183 likes)	1 (140 likes)
Brookings Institution	3	19 (456 likes)	9 (1,922 likes)
Heritage Foundation	0	46 (5,179 likes)	48 (165,252 likes)

The RAND Corporation published 120 papers on the topic, with the vast majority of the focus on health and medical studies, and others on psychology, economics, as well as on criminology. Brookings Institution published three papers on the topic, on the topics of income inequality and closing the racial IQ gap. By comparison, the Heritage Foundation produced no research on the topic.

Examining Instagram posts in 2020, there were differences between the prototypes. RAND Corporation's solitary post on the topic on the 4th of June comprised a statement by the president (Michael D. Rich) on the need to recognize the legacy of the passing of George

Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, Breonna Taylor, among others. Brookings Institution president (Gen. John R. Allen) also called for efforts to further the cause of racial equity.

Heritage Foundation posted three times in support of racial justice, but also 48 posts justifying stricter law enforcement and patriotism. They also posted questions about the intentions of the Black Lives Matter movement (“Many good intentioned Americans are showing support for #BlackLivesMatter—but do they know the radical goals of the official organization?” 1 July).

Twitter posts echoed the pattern observed in Instagram. We examined tweets with hashtags relating to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. The RAND Corporation posted 18 tweets with the hashtag #defundthepolice, covering topics on reconsidering the role of law enforcement, as well as community support for the strategy. Brookings Institution, using the hashtags #howwerise and #juneteenth tweeted 19 times, suggesting policy solutions to ameliorate systemic racism, and addressing racial justice in the domains of finance, employment, health, and education.

Heritage posted 46 tweets with the hashtags #antifa, #blm, #blacklivesmatter, #defendthepolice, and #fightforamerica. They expressed skepticism about the movement (“Why is a pro-communist China organization with ties to the Chinese Communist Party financially supporting elements of the #BlackLivesMatter movement? @Gundisalvus joined @glennbeck with a story you won't find the mainstream media covering: <https://t.co/dkpCiL24nd>”, 18 September), as well as support for law enforcement (“Why are we in a #FightForAmerica? @DHS_Wolf lays out the unprecedented challenges law enforcement are up against every single day—and why they deserve our support: <https://t.co/Hyc5czID4x>”, 14 August).

As with messaging on COVID-19, stark differences appeared in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. Diverging approaches to addressing the topic, via research and via

the content of the messaging signals potential for polarization between those seeking an empirical foundation and those responding emotionally to a pressing social issue.

Conclusions

Through a prescient critique of diplomatic negotiations at the conclusion of the First World War, Keynes (1919) persuasively demonstrated the merits of social scientific influence over public policy-making (Bottom, 2003). Other intellectuals, such as Milton Friedman, relied on lengthy scientific texts to influence elite thinking, working through the organization of public policy think tanks to do so. The advent of social media provides a new model for public policy debate, with dramatically lower barriers to communication allowing virtually any actor to engage. Replacing public intellectuals, think tanks have become prominent players in the U.S. public policy arena. While their emergence was in part due to the U.S. government's need for research to buttress and legitimize its work, their role progressively increased over the years.

For example, in the late 1940s, the Marshall Plan—devised by the Committee for Economic Development—completely reconstructed a war-torn Europe (Djelic, 1998; Mizruchi, 2013). In the late 1990s, Project for the New American Century created the blueprint for the disastrous invasion of Iraq. More recently, the Heritage Foundation provided a list of conservative judges which President Trump used to pick nominees who would decisively change the ideological composition of the judiciary. While think tanks continue to wield tremendous influence over governmental policy and public opinion, they work and communicate in very different ways.

We set out to understand how three think tank prototypes communicate by revealing differences in their channel choice: *scholarly*, based on research output and *network*, based on social media output. Our results reveal an important and interesting way in which the

Brookings Institution (“university without students” form), the RAND Corporation (“contract organization” form), and the Heritage Foundation (“advocacy” form) communicate and conflict with each other over important issues (e.g., COVID-19 and BLM). When it comes to research, RAND produces by far the most scientific work. As the only think tank with its own scholarly journal, RAND advances its goal of developing and applying research to solve specific government problems. In contrast, the Heritage Foundation produced the fewest scholarly articles electing to focus on direct advocacy channels to communicate ideas, fulfilling its conservative mission. Brookings blended some scientific output with greater use of social media platforms striking a position intermediate between RAND Corporation and Heritage Foundation.

Boasting the most Facebook and Instagram followers, the Heritage Foundation relied on peripheral routes to persuasion using more affect-related words expressing greater certainty than the other organizations. They often punctuated the message with exclamation points to drive home the message. RAND attracted the least number of followers across all three social media platforms. They relied on a central route to persuasion using the information content of messages to send viewers to lengthier reports that elaborate logical arguments and empirical evidence supporting claims. Brookings also utilized the central route to persuasion with links to longer explanations of research. After initially lagging Heritage in joining the platform, Brookings eventually became the most active in tweeting of the three. While these findings reveal differences across think tanks, a deeper examination of the COVID-19 and BLM debates reveal conflict among those think tanks. In the case of COVID-19, the RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution stood in stark contrast to the Heritage Foundation when it came to addressing the spread of the virus. While the former think tanks supported mitigating measures to reduce the spread including social distancing,

school and business closures, the latter simply cast doubt on the effectiveness of those measures and downplayed the impact of the disease.

A similar conflictual pattern appeared in the case of BLM. RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution supported the BLM movement and highlighted the importance of reducing racial inequality by reducing systemic racism. In contrast, the Heritage Foundation questioned the role of the BLM movement and was more concerned with justifying stricter law enforcement measures. Engagement in such issues also highlights the changing nature of the audiences think tanks now engage with, and the kind of influence they seek to exert. Instead of targeting elite influence, advocacy think tank may also expand their reach into influencing the public. Casting doubt on the election process, the Heritage Foundation questioned the integrity of the process (“Absentee ballots are the only ballots voted outside the supervision of election officials ... making them particularly susceptible to fraud, forgery, theft, and other problems we’ve seen in the latest election.” 8 December). Such messaging may have fuelled members of the public storming the Capitol building in January 2021.

Overall, our chapter represents an initial step toward understanding the role and influence of think tanks across two channels of communication—*scholarly* based on their research output and *network* based on their social media output. Future research could broaden the scope of think tanks by analyzing the entire field—not just the three prototypes. Broadening the scope of think tanks will provide a much richer understanding of the ways in which other think tanks use similar or different approaches in those channels of communication, and the extent to which they might have not simply adapted those approaches but also enlarged the repertoire of approaches. This will also provide a better understanding of the network of think tanks (e.g. Progressive vs. Conservative networks of think tanks) that operate in concert to shape policy debates (see Jacques et al., 2008 for the

role of conservative think tanks in casting doubt on climate change; and see Ness & Gándara (2014) for the role of both networks in higher education policy).

Future research should also examine other communication channels including talk radio, print media, cable television, and congressional testimony. Our preliminary examination of the transcripts from the Rush Limbaugh radio program widely syndicated by Clear Channel Communication (<https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/category/transcripts/>) revealed 431 references to the Heritage Foundation between 2002 and 2012. By comparison Limbaugh mentioned Brookings 55 times and RAND just four times over that decade. Limbaugh's daily program reaches an audience of more than 15 million listeners (Wheeler, 2012) providing a powerful means for transmitting ideas or talking points generated by conservative think tanks like Heritage to many prospective voters. Further work analyzing this supply chain of influence will be needed.

This increase in scope will provide a much better understanding of the approaches think tanks use to shape the views of two important audiences: civic society and the legislative branch of the government. This will also provide a better understanding how think tanks use more established media channels which require more resources and have gatekeepers mediating their access and visibility, versus social media which require very little resources and provide direct unfettered access to their audiences.

Finally, future research could explore the characteristics of think tanks that contribute to their visibility and influence across various channels of communication. For example, think tanks' political ideologies, positions in the board interlock social structure, or their funding sources, could contribute not simply to the content of their messaging but also their choice of communication channels.

In sum, think tanks shape our views about public policy whether we are aware of it or not. Experts housed in such institutions have long played a role in shaping not only our

capacity to think about public policy questions and debates but also our policy responses and the choices available to us in those debates. Whether it is debates about the COVID-19 pandemic, or debates about social justice, understanding the influence of the think tank industry and their channels of communication and influence becomes crucial to understanding our views of the contemporary world.

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