

The Think Tank is Dead



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Abstract

Whither the brick-and-mortar think tank in an age of free information and readily accessible intellectual discourse? Very well, thank you. While virtual intellectual efforts are taking place on-line, the "virtual think tank" that is able to compete with its physical-world brethren is still in beta release. This is not, however, a situation that will remain static. Early efforts that assembled people virtually for intellectual pursuits have produced promising results, and as people become more comfortable working in virtual environments such successes are likely to grow. Virtual think tanks have distinct advantages and disadvantages over traditional think tanks that extend beyond the technical and into the political and social, and it will take more than a generational shift to bring about meaningful change. The immediate future is likely to produce a synergy between traditional houses of public policy production and the emerging "think tank 2.0" approach.

A Brief History

To support his work at the Versailles Conference in 1919, Woodrow Wilson tapped the expertise of a group of over 100 academics and policy experts that had been dubbed "The Inquiry." The apparent success of the group gave rise to future similar assemblies like FDR's [Brain Trust](#) and the [Twentieth Century Fund](#).¹ Over time these collections of smart-people-studying-hard-problems became known colloquially as "brain boxes" and "think tanks."²

It comes as no surprise that the first think tanks began in the early days of the progressive political era, with a prevailing thought of the day being that the best government was one that was administered by experts. After all, America had a fledgling empire thanks to [concessions from the Spanish](#); was undertaking [the largest engineering project of the time](#); and was flexing the muscle of the [Great White Fleet](#); government was growing too large and complex to be run by amateurs.

Still, even given the rise of the bureaucratic state, government can get only so big and it cannot employ every expert on every subject. So while government largely provides the functional experts that implement policy; think tanks are the source of the ideas and agendas that formulate policy. In fact today think tanks dominate the policymaking process in the US, addressing the gamut of policy concerns; from social and economic to defense and religion. It is not much of a stretch to say that think tanks have changed the way public policy is made in this country.

¹ Renamed "The Century Foundation," it was one of the earliest think tanks.

² Much of the background on think tanks comes from James Smith's [The Idea Brokers](#), the seminal study of think tanks in America.

There are a handful of leading think tanks – [AEI](#), [Brookings](#), [Cato](#) and [Heritage](#) – but room for growth exists as evidenced by the formation of the [Project for the New American Century](#) (1997), the [New America Foundation](#) (1999) and the [Center for New American Security](#) (2007). There is also a plethora of state-based think tanks, which address the same concerns of their national brothers, but with a more localized focus.

The Problem with Think Tanks

There is a story that explains with remarkable clarity one of the biggest problems with traditional think tanks today.

It involves a colleague of mine who is unquestionably an expert in her field. Her performance in the executive branch of government was second to none, but for several reasons she now lives a short plane ride beyond the Washington DC area. She established a connection to a think tank where she contributed to a number of important pieces of work. Over time the tank had openings but she was never considered for any of them. Seminars and lectures in her area of expertise were held but she was never invited to participate, this despite the fact that only a few days notice and a cheap plane ticket (which she would have gladly paid for herself) was all that was required for her attendance. When queried about why she was being given the short-shrift, the senior staff member she worked with at the tank said simply: "You're not in DC."

You could not have crafted a more obtuse response if you tried.

Today one can [make a living – a very good one](#) - in the virtual world. [Soldiers train for battle using video games](#); the knowledge in [far-away libraries](#) are available at your desktop; one can get (almost) [an MIT education](#) from the comfort of your own den; and disaffected young men can [prepare for martyrdom](#). Especially for purely intellectual endeavors, distance is only an obstacle if you are a modern-day flat-earther.

Think tanks are not merely data-driven engines of policy development; they are laboratories of ideological thought. No think tank is nakedly biased in favor of a given political party or candidate – it keeps the Internal Revenue Service at bay - but let's be honest: [EJ Dionne](#) has got about as much chance of working for the [American Enterprise Institute](#) as [Michael Ledeen](#) has working for the [Center for American Progress](#). Most think tanks don't simply employ experts; they employ experts of a given political or ideological persuasion: Not that there's anything wrong with that.³

Traditional think tanks, at least in recent history, are not exactly known as centers of innovation. You may now pause to mentally tally up the list of truly original ideas – not variations on an existing theme - that have sprung forth from the halls of a think tank in the last decade. It is not that innovation is beyond them but Washington doesn't recruit the

³ [Normal Ornstein](#) of AEI is an exception that comes to mind. There are no doubt others, but a comprehensive analysis of who is a centrist and who is a partisan hack is beyond the scope of this effort.

creative class; they naturally gravitate to California or New York where there are real opportunities to purvey policy-of-the-deed. They don't publish white papers on the different ways to liberate the country from dependence on foreign oil or how to support privacy in an age of surveillance; they [build the Tesla Roadster](#) or [code the Six/Four System](#).

Ultimately, the primary negative issue with think tanks is that they make a mockery out of the idea that there is anything "public" about public debate or the formulation of public policy. The average concerned citizen has their vote, but they have no effective opportunity to have their arguments – no matter how well researched, thought out, or voiced – heard at the national level outside of an election cycle. Think tanks may produce plenty of academic research, but it is their ability to market that work to Congress, the Executive and major media outlets that allows them to remain relevant if not dominant in the "public" square. Joe Citizen has no such practical capability.

A Different Model

Enter the virtual think tank: virtual in the sense that it exists and operates largely without the trappings of the physical world, not that it is "almost" a think tank. Intellectually this "Think Tank 2.0" model would be just as rigorous and stimulating as any brick-and-mortar organization and employ scholars as qualified as any to tackle the issues of the day.

In fact, such an arrangement could be more stimulating than one might expect. Compare the volume and diversity of people one might interact with in-person on a daily basis against the number of those dealt with via email, instant message or computer-based video conference. Technology-averse think tank 1.0 denizens may not appreciate just how many and how meaningful virtual contacts can be had. In fact, scholars used to an isolated, compartmentalized, publish-or-perish culture may find the more communal approach of online life just shy of disturbing. Nevertheless the acceptance of this approach to work is accelerating and becoming increasingly common in [a wide-range of fields](#).

Could such an institution exist and function well? Early experiments suggest the answer is: yes.

This winter, Cheryl Rofer of the blog [WhirledView](#) called on interested individuals to help develop a new national nuclear weapons policy. As is done inside the government, a collection of experts assembled in cyberspace to craft a practical, and perhaps more important, [readable policy](#). Here is Rofer in her own words:

My point was not merely to develop a reasonable nuclear weapons policy, one that would improve safety for Americans, our relations with other countries, and prospects for nonproliferation. I also wanted to show that people with a range of views could come to a consensus.

As someone who has participated in in-person collaborative efforts within government, I can tell you that getting 15 people with the right qualifications and experience in the same room

for any length of time is a significant feat.⁴ Given broader dissemination and more time the WhirledView effort could have attracted participants with still more expertise and outlooks. Chaotic? Perhaps, but such an approach reduced the probability of group-think, of being steamrolled by ideological bias, etc. Again, Rofer:

[the participants'] political views ranged around the center, including both Republicans and Democrats, moderately hawkish to moderately dovish.

A less ad hoc example of the think tank 2.0 approach can be found at the enterprise that is the [Small Wars Journal](#); a combination of blog, discussion group, library, and online magazine that:

. . . facilitates and supports the exchange of information among practitioners, thought leaders, and students of Small Wars, in order to advance knowledge and capabilities in the field . . . [in order to] advance the practice and effectiveness of those forces prosecuting Small Wars . . .

Participants at Small Wars Journal are almost all current or former military personnel or those with a strong connection to the defense community, but the breadth of community participants within that context is astonishing. As this paper was being drafted it was announced that no less than the [Commanding General](#) of the [U.S. Army Combined Arms Center](#) was a new member. The General joins a host of well-known military thinkers like Colonel (Retired) [T.X. Hammes](#), one of the nation's foremost authorities on [4th Generation Warfare](#); [LTC John Nagl](#), co-author of the Army and Marine Corps' new counterinsurgency manual, Dr. David Kilcullen, Senior Counterinsurgency Adviser, Multi-National Force – Iraq and Major M. W. Shervington, as well as many other participants whose names are unfamiliar but whose [significance in the present conflict cannot be denied](#).⁵

Virtual think tanks also have very practical advantages over their physical-world counterparts. Interactive events are cheaper to host and less disruptive for participants and attendees. Online conferences and symposiums are already being conducted in cyberspace (absent the finger food) by various [technical](#), [political](#), and [intellectual](#) groups. The application of advanced technology, along with academics, practitioners and policymakers who are more comfortable operating in cyberspace, could make such symposia as robust as physical-world events.

Citius, Altius, Fortius

With Think Tank 2.0, distance is a nominal issue because you can read and ruminate and write anywhere. Contrast the idea of working in your home office against the operational environment of Washington DC; the time it takes to get anywhere, the cost of living, the decaying physical infrastructure, the chaos that occurs when the mere threat of inclement

⁴ A variety of products for the National Intelligence Council and National Security Council.

⁵ Kilcullen is fairly well known, Shervington less so, but they are mentioned primarily because the former was an officer in the Australian Army and the latter a serving officer in the British Army: a nod to SWJ's international scope.

weather arises: One is a comfortable environment that affords one time to think; the other is a recipe for an ulcer.

The 2.0 approach also dramatically broadens the pool of potential participants available for a given endeavor. In fact in terms of intellectual capital, a virtual think tank can be at least an order of magnitude larger than any current think tank 1.0 in existence today. This is not a might-makes-right thing; it's an [Army of Davids](#) thing: the more minds working on a given problem the better the solution. It is unlikely that a policymaker would care one way or another if a good idea was generated by an individual or a group, but as a friend who was an early adopter of the 2.0 approach [explains](#): "None of us is as smart as all of us."⁶

Think Tank 2.0 is also ideal for spreading ideas virally; rapidly replicating through social connections of every stratum and generating the sort of interest and enthusiasm - "buzz" if you will - that catches establishment entities by surprise. This is a particularly important advantage if your goal is to bring attention to issues with a wide amount of public appeal but of little interest to those with a vested interest in the status quo.⁷

Since a virtual think tank is potentially a global think tank – the globalization of the intellectual niche - the production of any given piece of research and analysis is a non-stop process, as ideas and drafts chase the sun. Products are also likely to be deeper and have more first-person insight than the current academic-sitting-in-an-office model can offer.⁸ Analysis can be updated much faster as new information comes to light, providing policymakers with better information and a dramatically compressed decision-making cycle.

Far From Perfect

Ironically, as insignificant as distance is to the functional operation of a think tank, it is also the one factor that could impede the widespread adoption of such a model.

Think tank 1.0 has the advantage of proximity to and familiarity with those in power, which is essentially the whole point of building an institution designed to influence public policy. This level of familiarity and trust is not something that an assembly of un-connected unknowns can achieve in short order.⁹ The current generation of policymakers are unlikely to warm to the 2.0-approach if for no other reason than unlike meeting with the scholars at a 1.0 think tank, a virtual think tank cannot offer a Congressman a steak lunch while they

⁶ In response to the [Andrew Keen's](#) of the world, this is not a clarion call for mob-think. A certain level of organizational glue and adult supervision is necessary for any serious endeavor and Think Tank 2.0 is no exception. This is less about unleashing the unwashed masses upon government and more about liberating the process from elitism.

⁷ It is not that the 1.0 approach cannot spread ideas virally, but the speed and reach of a 2.0 approach is the difference between a local outbreak and a pandemic.

⁸ This is not to say that all scholars at think tanks are desk-bound bookworms; [Fredrick Kagan](#) at AEI is a notable exception, having used his first-hand observations of the situation in Iraq – among other knowledge - to help formulate what is commonly known as "the surge."

⁹ The proximity-to-power issue transcends generations. What may take many days or countless bytes to accomplish virtually, a master of interpersonal skills can accomplish in one in-person meeting. There is also a certain electricity that is generated by sitting around a table with the learned, the famous and the powerful.

talk turkey. No matter how original or profound the thought, if the impression is that it comes from a group of pajama-wearing basement-dwellers, it will take a considerable effort to gain traction in the suit-and-tie world.¹⁰

Of course collaborative intellectual endeavors are not new, the [Institute for Advanced Study](#) being one of the most notable examples, and [The Brain Trust Project](#) a more recent one. However, attempts at collaboration between individuals who would otherwise work independently are often thwarted by the inability to adapt to a virtual working environment. As much as asynchronous availability and psychological pseudo-anonymity can turbo-charge intellectual collaboration, it can also amplify petty disputes far beyond their actual significance. It is also all well and good to have "blog friends" when the relationship is peer-to-peer, but what happens when someone in the formerly-peer network becomes the boss and has to do all sorts of annoying things like hand out assignments and set expectations or sanction or discipline someone? Remember: "virtual" doesn't mean pretend. Whether performed in an office, spare bedroom or coffee shop, work is still work, and it takes a certain kind of individual to work this way.¹¹

As inclusive as a Think Tank 2.0 might be, it is not a remedy for partisanship. There are not a lot of non-partisan think tanks because in a two-party town there is no natural constituency for agenda-free research and analysis. If anything, Think Tank 2.0 is likely to increase opportunities for ideologically-synched individuals to assemble and work together over time and distance.

Finally, there is the issue of getting paid. No one gets into this business to get rich, but a level of funding that attracts top talent, fund the necessary technical infrastructure, and offer the kinds of services consumers expect from such an endeavor is not a trivial concern. Endowments, donations and contract work are all used by traditional tanks, and each has benefits and drawbacks.

- Philanthropists and foundations that fund think tanks believe in the work performed there. Whatever its ideological disposition may be, any Think Tank 2.0 would have to convince donors that they are doing something substantially different from the 1.0 crowd to merit consideration for funding.
- A number of virtual endeavors raise operating funds via advertising, but unless you generate sufficient Internet traffic that allows you to cut exclusive deals with appropriate vendors, your control over what is pitched is nominal.¹²
- Small, online donations from individuals are an option, but maintaining a consistent and sufficient amount of funding via the kindness of strangers tends to lend itself to

¹⁰ This is a situation that may change depending on the issue and personalities involved. It is worth noting that "[Rathergate](#)" was initially dismissed by elements in the establishment media as the shifty and shoddy work of those who sat in their living rooms in their pajamas.

¹¹ Virtual relationships carry very real emotional and ego investments; particularly when one takes the factor of reputation into consideration. Additionally, substantial 2.0 relationships can actually lead to more and more-meaningful interaction than one could achieve under the 1.0 model, where leading authorities are largely inaccessible to talented amateurs.

¹² At the risk of appearing elitist, how serious are people going to take an intellectual outlet that hawks wireless phone plans, t-shirts and questionable medicinal compounds?

efforts that are global in scope and universal in appeal: Niche policy groups do not fit that mold.¹³

- Sponsorships are another option, but with corporate dollars come new concerns about independence that don't hinge on ideology.

Early Think Tank 2.0 efforts are more likely to be bootstrap affairs requiring a fairly long period of lean operations and modest output. Once a sufficient body of work is assembled, a proven pool of participants marshaled,¹⁴ a discriminating factor identified - and perhaps some public [acknowledgement at a high-level](#) - the fund raising tour can begin.

The Future

I harbor no illusions that traditional think tanks will disappear any time soon but I am fairly confident that within a generation Think Tank 2.0 will become reality. Not only is the technology available to make it happen, the social, cultural and economic factors that are necessary for such a development are all in place or nearly so. "The future," as addressed by science fiction author William Gibson, "is here, it is just not evenly distributed yet."

This is not a polemic against the brick-and-mortar crowd, partisanship or a rallying cry to use the Internet to reform Washington: I'm naive not stupid. The point is that the adoption of a new approach to public policy development allows a broader range of the political spectrum to sound off at an equal volume as their 1.0 counterparts and reduces the influence of small groups of ideologues. God bless Richard Scaife¹⁵ and George Soros¹⁶ but I don't think they ought to have any more influence on the course of the nation than anyone else with a vote. With the 2.0 approach that thought is much closer to being made manifest.

To an extent, certain aspects of Think Tank 2.0 are inevitable. The concept of the "non-resident" scholar is not unknown to traditional think tanks (though their numbers are marginal when compared to those who occupy a desk in DC), but there will come a point in the near future where the best and the brightest will realize that life in Washington - with its crime, sub-standard local governance, and economically challenging environment - is a prospect with diminishing returns. In fact, it would appear that [such a shift is already underway](#).

The Think Tank 2.0 approach will supplant the 1.0 approach when those who today are not yet able to vote are finally in a position to assume political power in this country. They won't "do" paper; the number of friends, contacts and constituents they've only met online will dwarf the number of people they've ever shook hands with; they've only ever have worked

¹³ Wikimedia Foundation [Financial Report](#).

¹⁴ From Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, comes the belief - based on his observations of what works in the world's first and largest public encyclopedia - that [five people](#) mark the tipping point between a hobby and a nascent hyper-intelligence.

¹⁵ Billionaire philanthropist who funds institutions such as [GOPAC](#), [Judicial Watch](#) and [AEI](#).

¹⁶ Billionaire philanthropist who funds institutions such as the [ACLU](#), [MoveOn.org](#) and the [Center for Public Integrity](#).

in [the third space](#); and they will be wed to information technology as strongly as the current generation of policymakers eschew it.

In the interim look for virtual think tanks to partner with traditional tanks to work on proof-of-concept efforts, to serve as a sort-of minor league farm teams, and for them to act as "surge" capability when demand for research and products exceeds what the 1.0 tank's roster can muster. The most successful early 2.0 tanks will be those that focus on niche issues or those that fill an unspecified gap in what the 1.0 crowd is doing. One might consider [Company Command](#) - originally a private, peer-level information sharing forum that is now a part of the Army's knowledge management system - as a prototype.¹⁷

The age of Think Tank 2.0 will produce truly comprehensive, authoritative advice for those insightful enough to seek it and intrepid enough to use it. When you are able to draw on experts from everywhere, at any time, on every subject, you are not merely being informed; you are receiving a deep and far-reaching education that no one today can replicate in a timely or cost-effective manner.

Ultimately however, the goal of Think Tank 2.0 is not to gain efficiencies; it is to take one more step towards putting the "public" back in public policymaking. In the long term – the think-tank-after-next – imagine that this business will further evolve to the point where a wide-range of participants will be able to effectively assemble ad hoc to apply their intellectual power for policymaking purposes. The end result would be a technology-enabled [The Wisdom of Crowds](#) capability – with emotion tempered by expertise and fellowship – that allows a population to have greater influence on the decisions that impact their lives.

¹⁷ Company Command filled a very pressing need: lessons learned during wartime; and a very niche audience: Army company commanders.

About the Author

In the interest of full disclosure, [Michael Tanji](#) is attempting to make the Think Tank 2.0 concept viable through his involvement in the [Center for Threat Awareness](#), though he hopes this missive speaks for all those trying to make collaborative intellectual efforts possible. A former supervisory intelligence officer at the Defense Intelligence Agency, he is a 2007 [Claremont Institute](#) Lincoln Fellow.

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