The phrase ‘think tank’ has become ubiquitous – overworked and underspecified – in the political lexicon. It is entrenched in scholarly discussions of public policy as well as in the ‘policy wonk’ of journalists, lobbyists and spin-doctors. This does not mean that there is an agreed definition of think tank or consensual understanding of their roles and functions. Nevertheless, the majority of organizations with this label undertake policy research of some kind. The idea of think tanks as a research communication ‘bridge’ presupposes that there are discernible boundaries between (social) science and policy. This paper will investigate some of these boundaries. The frontiers are not only organizational and legal; they also exist in how the ‘public interest’ is conceived by these bodies and their financiers. Moreover, the social interactions and exchanges involved in ‘bridging’, themselves muddy the conception of ‘boundary’, allowing for analysis to go beyond the dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other, to address the complex relations between experts and public policy.

**INTRODUCTION**

Think tanks: organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies. (UNDP 2003, p. 6)

The UNDP definition, above, captures the sense in which think tanks are an intermediary or interlocutor between knowledge and power, science and the state. UNDP’s choice of metaphor is not unique. As a simple Google search
will demonstrate, the discourse ‘bridging’, ‘linking’ or ‘connecting’ the policy and research worlds reverberates throughout the web sites, mission statements and publications of think tanks.

The idea of think tanks as a ‘bridge’ presupposes that there are discernible boundaries between (social) science and policy (Halfmann and Hoppe 2004). This paper will investigate some of these boundaries. The frontiers are not only organizational and legal. The boundaries also exist in how the ‘public interest’ is conceived and enacted by these bodies and their financiers. Moreover, as has been said, the social interactions and exchanges involved in ‘bridging’, themselves muddy the conception of ‘boundary’, allowing for analysis to go beyond the dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other, to address the complex relations between experts and public policy.

More prosaically referred to as policy ‘institute’ or ‘centre’, it is Anglo American definitions of think tanks that have prevailed in the literature. Such definitions are reflective of the socio-political context in which think tanks were first constituted. That is, in advanced liberal democracies that allowed ‘thinking space’ for independent policy research. As think tanks proliferated around the world, traditional definitions have been stretched beyond their original meaning and US-inspired taxonomies have lost their relevance. Nevertheless, the persistence of such definitions, in the face of comprehensive change in the think tank modality over time, has contributed to outdated assumptions and myth making about their role in society and politics.

Three sets of assumptions about think tanks structure this paper. These conventional beliefs of the roles and activities of think tanks will be referred to as ‘three myths’. They are:

1. Think tanks are bridges;
2. Think tanks serve the public interest;
3. Think tanks think.

Firstly, this paper will cast doubts over perspectives that there is something organizationally specific about think tank research that sets them apart from universities, consulting firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Where it was once possible to conflate research brokerage function with organization, this is now less apparent – convergence is occurring. The international spread of the think tank model alongside the forces of democratization in Latin America, the industrial surge of Asia, the transition of the former Soviet Union (fSU), central and eastern Europe (CEE), and the professionalization of African elites, has lead to many hybrid forms of think tank.

Secondly, think tanks are usually portrayed as acting in the public interest, stimulating public debate, educating the citizenry, undertaking research for the rational improvement of policy making, contributing to more effective governance through policy analysis, as well as being a conduit for public
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participation and force for democratic consolidation. Thirdly, think tanks present themselves, and are represented by the media, as scientific establishments, composed of experts and scholars engaged in the task of thinking, writing and publishing.

These three discourses are broadcast by think tanks (via annual reports, mission statements and web-sites), and serve at the same time to legitimate their activities. These discourses are also repeated by the various interests that fund think tanks and who often need to legitimate their funding decisions on the grounds that think tanks ‘bridge research and policy’, ‘serve the public interest’ or ‘build knowledge’. However, think tanks engage in many activities that substantially diminish the validity of these discourses. Nevertheless, the ‘myths’ persist, due to the social and political utility of such metaphors (Smith 1991, p. 14).

MYTH ONE: THINK TANKS ARE BRIDGES BETWEEN STATE, SOCIETY AND SCIENCE

Five decades ago, there used to be a straightforward response to the question what is a ‘think tank’. They were independent, non-profit research institutes with a policy orientation. When think tanks were first established – for the most part after World War One – they were concentrated in the USA, as well as in the UK and its dominions, notably Canada and Australia. Of this era, the sister institutes of international affairs in the British dominions deserve mention. In the US, bodies such as the Brookings Institution, the Russell Sage Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) are among the most notable (Smith 1991).

The term ‘think tank’ itself originated later, during World War Two. It was used to describe secure and ‘sealed environments’ for expert strategists pre-occupied with military planning such as the RAND Corporation. By the 1960s, the term was entrenched in the Anglo-American lexicon of policy analysis and was being applied to independent research institutes throughout the English-speaking world. Consequently, the social science characterization of think tanks has been shaped by Anglo-American experience (see Weaver 1989; Smith 1991; Stone 1996). The dominance of Anglo-American perspectives of what constitutes a think tank clouds the very great diversity and hybrid forms of think tank that emerged by the end of the second millennium.

In any particular country, it is the type of constitutional architecture, the historical circumstances of war or stability, the political culture and legal traditions, alongside the character of the regime in power, that determine the shape and extent of think tank development. Consequently, the term ‘think tank’ defies exact definition. They vary considerably in size, legal form, policy ambit, longevity, organizational structure, standard of inquiry and political significance. Scholarly difference exists over how to identify these organizations; this is symptomatic in the competing typologies (Boucher 2004; Abelson 2006; Ladi 2005) that often do not keep pace with
the think tank form as it evolves. Moreover, the directors of these organiza-
tions – the Aspen Institute is one example – often make fine distinctions
between ‘research institute’ and ‘think tank’. Such distinctions usually re-
volve around the role of advocacy (think tanks) and organizational capacity
for quality policy research (institutes).

Some organizations claim to adopt a scientific or technical approach to
social and economic problems. Others are overtly partisan or ideologically
motivated. While some institutes are routinely engaged in intellectual bro-
kerage and the marketing of ideas, whether in simplified policy relevant
form or in sound bites for the media, others are more academic. Many insti-
tutes are disciplinary based – economic policy think tanks, foreign policy
institutes, social policy units, and so on. Specialization is a relatively con-
temporary phenomenon. Environmental think tanks, regionally focused op-
erations and those that reflect the communal interests of ethnic groups all
exist. While most display a high level of social scientific expertise or familiar-
ity with governmental structures and policy processes, there is considerable
diversity in the style and output of think tanks. Thus the so-called scholarly
‘ink tank’ can be poised against the activist ‘think-and-do tank’. In other
words, there are differences between think tanks that are analytical and
grounded towards publication of books and reports and those think tanks that
are more activist. Accordingly, the styles and methods of ‘bridging’ knowl-
edge and power are many.

The term ‘think tank’ is an elastic one. Furthermore, there are quite
dramatic differences in the use of the term internationally. The term has
been applied to NGOs that have a research arm – for instance, Oxfam or
Transparency International. The term has also been applied regularly to the
OECD, as well as to government research bureaux and units attached to
political parties. Organizations that once would not have been thought of
themselves as think tanks now seem all too ready to adopt the label.

Ostensibly, the think tank label has cachet. That so many groups around
the world wish to cast themselves as ‘think tanks’ is symbolic of the effective-
ness of the label and its use as a designation for approaching international
donors and philanthropic foundations. The brand name has been so widely
used that its meaning is becoming opaque.

**Competition and convergence**

Part of the confusion that arises over the term ‘think tank’ results from
the increasingly diverse sources of policy analytic competition to think
tanks. Much of the literature on think tanks has suggested that they have
organizational features that set them apart from universities and NGOs
(Weaver 1989; Smith 1991; McGann and Weaver 2000). However, where it
was once possible to conflate the science-state bridging function with the
think tank form, convergence with other organizations makes this a matter
of contention.
• **Interest groups:** these groups are usually portrayed as promoting, in an advocacy-oriented manner, an interest that is sectional or promotional. By contrast, think tanks have been portrayed as engaged in independent research. They attempt to either influence or inform policy through intellectual argument and analysis rather than direct lobbying. They are engaged in the intellectual analysis of policy issues and are concerned with the ideas and concepts that underpin policy. However, bodies such as Greenpeace, Transparency International and Oxfam have created their own sophisticated research centres. The policy analysis conducted by bodies such as these is not greatly different from what might be done in a think tank like the Brookings Institution. There is a long-term trend of professionalization in NGOs, one aspect of which is building policy research capacity.

• **Professional associations:** these bodies can draw upon the skills and expertise of their membership. For example, both the Public Management and Policy Association (PMPA) in the UK and the association of Public Policy and Management (APPAM) in the USA draw together managers and policy-makers from different disciplines across the public services. The associations provide forums in which they can discuss public policy and management issues. PMPA addresses the ‘big issues that affect the public services as a whole’ (http://www.cipfa.org.uk/aims) with services, workshops and publications.

• **Consultants and commercial firms:** increasingly, accounting firms, investment banks, law firms, bond rating agencies and stock analysts perform a powerful independent role, monitoring firms and enforcing regulatory standards. Acting as ‘reputational intermediaries’ the big accounting firms undertake independent audit and provide objective advice to shareholders (Shinn and Gourevitch 2002, p. 27). Similarly, in training and dialogue activities, think tanks face competition from commercial consultants, from multinational corporations, and especially from the financial sector. With the advent of the ‘new public management’ (NPM), consultancy companies have acquired a high profile in the transport of policy ideas, management principles and social reforms from one context to another (Bakvis 1997). Privatization, downsizing and outsourcing, as well as the move towards market economies in the former Soviet states, gave large consulting firms – such as Coopers & Lybrand, KPMG Peat Marwick or Accensure – several reasons to establish ‘government consulting divisions’ in their organizations. They produce policy relevant analysis, liaise with public servants and advocate the adoption of ‘a more managerial approach in government’ (Saint-Martin 2000).

• **University institutes:** some think tanks have been described as ‘universities without students’ (Weaver 1989, p. 564). While the relationship between think tanks and universities has been close in many political systems, important differences can usually be observed. Think tanks are
not normally degree granting institutions. There are a few exceptions, notably RAND in the USA and FLACSO in Latin America. However, the increasing growth of policy focused university institutes represent a real source of competition to think tanks. The social sciences in particular have adapted. University research centres such as the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex, the Constitution Unit at UCL, the Centre for Economic Performance and the Social Exclusion Unit at LSE in order to do academic work. However, these institutions also carry out think tank activities: policy briefings, networking, consultancy, government advising, and so on, thus bridging the academic and policy realms.

The blurring of boundaries and the overlap of objectives and activities means that traditional ‘think tanks’ are losing some of their organizational distinctiveness (Boucher 2004, p. 97). Think tanks are competing for staff as well as for official patronage and funding from new actors in their field. The presence of both the media and the World Wide Web mean that the general public as well as the politician can find policy analysis more readily. However, the dual dynamic of competition and convergence is not the only set of developments that is destabilizing contemporary understandings of the term ‘think tank’. It is necessary to understand how think tanks spread internationally, thus conceptually stretching the term.

The international spread and stretching of think tanks
In the last two decades of the twentieth century, think tanks proliferated dramatically. Countries where think tanks were already present, such as the USA, Britain, Sweden, Canada, Japan, Austria and Germany, witnessed further organizational growth. In these countries, increased competition in the think tank industry often encouraged policy advocacy and the politicization of institutes, most particularly in the USA. The Heritage Foundation is usually cited as the exemplar but so-called New Right think tanks can be found in many countries (Denham and Garnett 2004). The Nordic and Austrian accession to the EU, as well as the growth of the legislative power of the Commission, prompted a spurt of new think tank development throughout Europe, especially in Brussels (Boucher et al. 2004, p. 20).

Democratic consolidation, economic development and greater prospects of political stability in Latin America and Asia provided fertile conditions for think tank development. The demise of the Soviet Union also opened political spaces for policy entrepreneurs. The global think tank boom has been fuelled by corporations and other non-state actors demanding high quality research, policy analysis and ideological argumentation as well as by governments as they develop in size and capacity.

Think tanks have been exported to nation-states via development assistance from governments and international organizations seeking to extend policy analytic capacities, aid civil society development or promote human capital.
development. For instance, in 2003, the UNDP regional office in Bratislava organized a think tank capacity building conference to help improve the quality of governance in Central and South Eastern Europe. USAID, the World Bank, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Freedom House, amongst many others, have convened similar activities. The existence of the Lithuanian Banking, Insurance and Finance Institute, for instance, has been explained as the consequence of ‘foreign institutions (that) looked for partners to work with’ and ‘if they did not exist, encouraged their creation’ (Chandler and Kvedaras 2004). On the other hand, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Office of the High Representative undertakes many state functions and is the main source of demand for policy analysis. Thus policy analysis has tended to come from outside rather than from local organizations. The presence of numerous public and private donor organizations has seen the proliferation of many civil society capacity building bodies, but think tank-like organizations more often resemble consultancy firms (Miller and Struyk 2004). A similar situation prevails in Serbia (Andjelkovic 2003) and Slovakia (Boucher et al. 2004, p. 24).

The think tank concept has been exported around the world and the term ‘think tank’ has been adopted in its English wording, with all its cultural connotations. However, it has actually been applied to hybrid organizations. The Western view that a think tank requires independence or autonomy from the state, corporate or other interests in order to be ‘free-thinking’ does not accord with experiences in other cultures. In many countries, the line between policy intellectuals and the state is blurred to such an extent that to talk of independence as a defining characteristic of think tanks makes little sense. Many organizations that are now called ‘think tanks’ operate inside government. This is evident in countries such as the People’s Republic of China. Some institutes have been incubated within government and subsequently made independent. It is not unusual to find institutes – an example being Malaysia – with political patrons or formal links to political parties. Many German foundations, to give another example, have been established by political parties or have strong ties to the Lander. Elsewhere, research institutes are attached to corporations – something that is evident in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Notwithstanding funding dependence or political affiliation, high-quality research and technical analysis, along with critical advice, can be feasible within these political contexts. However, such developments destabilize the discourse of think tanks located ‘in-between’ the domains of knowledge and power.

Other think tanks nevertheless have found new spheres in which to do ‘bridging’ work. Beyond the nation-state, there are strong signs of think tank adaptation and evolution. International organizations such as the United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have drawn think tanks into their ambit. The Evian Group, based in a business school, is in the policy orbit of the WTO but provides ‘intellectual ammunition’ as a business oriented think tank to promote an open world economy.
With the emergence of EU-wide think tanks disengaged from specific national identities, the European Union provides yet another institutional forum for think tank activity (see Boucher et al. 2004). Furthermore, with the revolution in information and communication technology, the possibilities for policy research that is disconnected from specific organizational settings has become increasingly feasible as well as fashionable. Most think tanks also have a virtual presence. This has also made international research exchange and collaboration between think tanks commonplace. Extensive global and regional think tank networks have resulted.

**Networks as bridges**

While think tank networks are not new, over the past two decades the scale and density of networks has mounted significantly and extended from North American and European institutes to include a more globally diverse range of organizations. Networking ranges from the very informal, *ad hoc*, socializing or the ‘thin’ element of a virtual network through to formal international associations with a secretariat and large membership.

International networks have coalesced around common areas of interest and policy themes as well as around ideology. To give a few examples: the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) has offices in London and Brussels and is dedicated to the advancement of European environmental policies. It operates in a network with like minded institutes in Berlin and Madrid. In contrast, the Atlas Foundation convenes free market institutes worldwide, providing start-up funds and technical assistance. Operating as a ‘think tank without walls’, the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), based in London, operates through a network of economists spread throughout Europe and North America with whom it contracts to produce policy studies. Since 1997, the Japan Center for International Exchange has convened ‘Global ThinkNet’ meetings to promote policy-oriented dialogues.

Think tank networks are particularly noticeable at the regional level, often reflecting shared historical conditions, ties of language and ethnicity, or of encountering similar trans-border policy problems. For example, think tanks in the transition countries of Eastern and Central Europe have shared interests in privatization and public sector reform. The enormous growth in the number of think tanks in this part of the world has propelled think tank networking. In 2004, PASOS was created to institutionalize and regularize relations between the Open Society Institute funded network of think tanks in CEE and fSU and reflects the OSI turn from capacity building to policy research (Palley 2003).

These networks have promoted the transnationalization of policy analysis and scientific expertise. They create the overlapping personal and communications infrastructure that allows the fast transfer of new ideas and policy approaches between global and local domains. More importantly, networks have become a form of governance. The typical target of the think tank has been government. However, in an age of privatization, contracting-out, and
the NPM, alongside the growing importance of the private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of public goods and services, public-private partnerships de-centre policy dialogues. This is most pronounced at transnational levels among ‘global public policy networks’ (Reinicke 2001). Governance structures above the nation state tend to be more weakly institutionalized and the science-policy boundaries more fluid.

Returning to Myth One, discussed above, the development of transnational research networks has stretched the traditional idea of ‘think tank’ as an organizational bridge between science and state. This has occurred alongside the hybridization of think tank styles with their international spread and the cross-pollination with other organizations developing policy research orientation. Legal-organizational form no longer follows function. The label think tank is now applied to bodies as diverse as government research units attached to the executive, international organizations such as the OECD, or corporate research arms such as the Nomura Research Institute.

MYTH TWO: THINK TANKS SERVE THE PUBLIC

The mission of the think tank is often to ‘serve the public interest’ and their role in society is often to ‘educate the community’ with their policy analysis. Indeed, many think tanks have legal status as charitable organizations and are obligated to pursue public objectives as ‘third sector’ organizations based in civil society. Echoes of such publicly motivated aspirations can be found in the mission statements or home pages of many think tanks. Some examples follow:

- The motto of the Federal Trust for Education and Research is ‘enlightening the debate on good governance’ (http://www.fedtrust.co.uk/);
- The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, known as ‘Clingendael’, promotes understanding of international affairs. The Institute acts in an advisory capacity to the government, parliament and social organizations (http://www.clingendael.nl/about/);
- The Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Georgia ‘is committed to providing a forum for substantive dialogue between representatives of different branches of the government, the civil sector and the Georgian public’ (http://www.ips.ge);
- The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies indicates that its research is carried out ‘in the spirit of public interest’ (http://www.eces.org.eg/About/Index2.asp?L1 = 1&L2 = 1).

The examples given above are illustrative and are very common. Civil society institutes play a self-proclaimed role in representing the public interest. Rarely do think tanks seek to demonstrate that public debate has been ‘enlightened’ by their research. Instead, ‘enlightenment’ is presumed to ‘trickle down’ and have ‘atmospheric influence’ on the culture of debate.
Some institutes do not express public objectives. The strategic focus is on policy communities and on addressing decision-making elites. Some examples follow:

- The mission of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is to ‘inspire and inform policy and practice…” (http://www.odi.org.uk/about.html);
- The IEEP seeks to ‘raise awareness’ of environmental issues and its ‘audience range from international and European institutions to local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry and others who contribute to the policy debate’. (http://www.ieep.org.uk/);
- For the Chr Michelsen Institute in Norway, public motivations run third in priority. ‘CMI research assists policy formulation, improves the basis for decision-making and promotes public debate on international development issues’ (http://www.cmi.no/about/index.cfm).

Working to ‘promote understanding’ or ‘research in the public interest’ begs the question: understanding for whom? The language of engagement is one of a three-fold hierarchy.

The ‘public realm’ is an ‘audience’ to which policy analysis is transmitted downwards – as a subject to be educated and wherein to raise awareness – rather than the public being treated as a source of ideas and knowledge. In OECD countries people are used to seeing the quality press such as Le Monde Diplomatique and the Economist address institute reports or to seeing a think tank expert debating topical matters on a news programme. This route to the public (or the electorate) is in reality a one-way, top-down process, interpolated by the media. Relatively few think tanks have mechanisms that allow feedback from society. Those that do might use devices such as e-discussions, focus groups, Open Days, meeting series and sometimes research partnerships with NGOs and community groups. When practised, these represent the deliberative elements of think tank activity emphasizing discourses of public participation, the public accessibility of knowledge and the importance of experiential knowledge (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

By contrast, the ‘policy community’ is the realm of the think tank where relatively horizontal relationships pertain. Think tanks interact with other stakeholders – the media, NGOs, political parties, industry representatives and bureaucrats. It is in these realms where think tanks play brokerage and gate-keeping roles that constantly redefine science/policy boundaries.

At the other end of the spectrum, think tanks operate more as supplicants in relation to decision makers and other actors in the political sphere, pushing ideas and analysis upwards into decision-making circles. This is particularly so in political systems that are characterized by high degrees of state control such as Vietnam, Belarus or China.

This is not to suggest that there is no interaction between institutes and the public. However, it is not a strong dynamic. Very few think tanks are
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mem bership organizations. It is unusual to see think tank officials represent-
ing their organizations in schools and colleges. A high proportion are located
in the central business district of the national capital. They rarely venture
outside the national parallels to, for instance, the Washington ‘beltway’ or
the Parisian ‘boulevard périphérique’. The organizational cultures of think
tanks are not as open and accessible for the interested citizen as their web
sites might be. The elite venues, dress-codes, jargon and scientific debates
serve to keep the general public at bay and help to demarcate the bound-
aries of the policy community. Indeed, one role of certain think tanks can be
to cordon public debate to safe sites of discussion where only those with
mastery of policy and social scientific communication codes can participate;
that is, the opposite of ‘bridging’.

Interactions of international organizations with think tanks are a case in
point. Think tanks are implicitly placed in the role of ‘gate-keepers’ to the
UN, WTO or other international organizations, potentially becoming a
barrier between NGOs seeking more direct access to UN personnel and
procedures. In May 1999, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Kofi Annan, convened a closed meeting to ask the assistance of think tanks
in providing analyses to help guide UN policy-making (ODC 1999). Think
tanks were portrayed as organizations that could screen, channel and inter-
pret NGO analysis and advocacy directed at the UN, and adjudicate between
competing claims.

Think tanks cater primarily to the economically and politically literate and
are at some distance from the rest of society. The people who found these
institutes and the people who work in them are usually highly educated,
ma le, middle-class, Westernized professionals, often from privileged back-
grounds. The organizational mandates – to inform and/or influence public
policy – drives them to engage with other usually more powerful elites in
society. Those sponsored and funded by international organizations and do-
nor groups tend to be well institutionalized, mainstream institutes whose
research agendas concord in considerable degree with the policy interests of
their funding source. For example, the institutions at the core of the World
Bank sponsored Global Development Network are mostly economic think
tanks staffed by development economists (Bøås and McNeill 2004). In other
contexts, such as in the case of Serbia, it is apparent that donors and govern-
ments prefer to interact with think tanks and expert organizations as
their civil society partners (Andjelkovic 2003, p. 95). In an evaluation of
Romanian think tanks participating in EU accession assistance programmes,
the following was observed:

Though the intention of many such projects is to open up assistance pro-
grammes to non-state actors, these projects are often directed through
official channels, even when the declared objective is the monitoring of
the government by creating alternative expert capacity in the independent
sector. (Ionita 2003, p. 144)
NGOs may therefore view the ‘research community’ negatively: elite, exclusive and with insubstantial connections to the general public.

**Think tanks and the pursuit of private interests**

Rather than advocating the public interest, think tanks are sometimes interested in, firstly, empire building. This is most evident when the winning of grants or contracts becomes an end in itself. The corporate interest in expanding programmes, raising funds, publishing more books, securing media coverage and political patronage, and so forth, are essential to organizational sustainability and growth, as well as to the protection of jobs. The fund-raising treadmill and the day-to-day concerns of management are immediate pressures that compete with longer term, more intangible objectives to influence the climate of debate (Struyk 2002). ‘Organisational insecurity, competitive pressures, and fiscal uncertainty’ are becoming increasingly common. In seeking to ‘reconcile material pressures with normative motivations’, think tanks ‘often produce outcomes dramatically at odds with liberal expectations’ (Cooley and Ron 2002). Market pressures increase the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour.

Individual think tank staff can also be opportunistic, treating these organizations as vehicles for career development. Think tanks are a training ground where political aspirants can practise their hand in policy issues, hone their rhetorical skills, and induct themselves into policy communities. An institute can later trade on the success of people such as David Miliband, currently a Minister in the UK Blair government and formerly director of the Institute of Public Policy Research, the IPPR. The American diplomat, Henry Kissinger, was once a Council on Foreign Relations scholar. Think tanks produce human capital in the form of specialized analysts – who often move between think tank, university and government service – something that can have long-term ramifications, indirectly interweaving the think tank with government agencies via its former fellows. The Adam Smith Institute in the UK states this clearly regarding its ‘Next Generation Group’ which:

serves as a meeting point for the next generation of leaders in business, academe, the professions, journalism and public policy (http://www.adamsmithinstitute.org/policy/tng.htm).

Similarly, the Evian Group has launched an ‘Open World Initiative’ of ‘young Evian’ associates.

Think tanks need to trade on names and successful careers. Attracting new talent is essential. It prevents them from becoming stale and opens an institute to new ideas and thinking. Consequently, attracting unseated politicians and disillusioned bureaucrats works to promote the reputation of an institute while also providing a retirement post. The close association of the French economist, Jacques Delors, with Notre-Europe (http://www.notre-europe.asso.fr) dramatically raises the profile of this body.
In short, think tanks have an interest in cultivating the policy careers of their fellows and providing an environment where such individuals can pursue their own interests. In a few cases, the ‘vanity tank’ phenomenon crystallizes the tendency in which personal interest outweighs public motivation. Otherwise known as ‘candidate tanks’, these organizations rarely possess an extensive institutional infrastructure. They are established to promote (aspirant) political leaders in order to lend political credibility to their political platforms (Abelson 2006). Most often found in the US, such institutes are not noted for their scientific protocols.

The other danger that think tanks may be exposed to, especially in liberal democracies characterized by a system of political appointment, is ‘hollowing out’ (Denham and Garnett 2004, pp. 242–3). Think tank personnel are obvious recruits to government. ODI fellows are often ‘poached’ by OECD-DAC, the UK Department for International Development or the World Bank. Electoral turnover of governments can sap the strength of some think tanks in cases where staff are appointed as part of the new administration. This represents the so-called ‘revolving door’ phenomenon first noted in the US. However, the politicization of think tanks that usually comes with a close affinity with, and advocacy on behalf of, a particular administration or political party has been identified as having a more subtle and detrimental impact on the scientific integrity and scholarly credibility of think tanks. In the words of two British observers:

Recently the chief contribution of think tanks has been to foster the impression that power in Britain is concentrated within a charmed circle, where policy wonks rub shoulders with politicians and businesspeople in a kind of corporatism without the trade unions. … The existence of people who have never worked outside the policy sphere … lends support to the impression of the increasing distance between government and the governed. (Denham and Garnett 2004, p. 243)

A growing disjuncture between the public rhetoric of think tanks to promote an educated society in the face of the political apathy of the citizenry of many democracies, throws into high relief the exclusivity of the policy communities in which think tanks seem to prefer to circulate.

**MYTH THREE: THINK TANKS THINK**

The general presumption is that think tanks house people who are engaged in thinking on the major and minor policy issues of the day; that is, they are ‘thinking outfits’. This myth of intellectual and scientific enterprise seems to be an ‘idée fixe’.

There is also the phenomenon of the ‘think-and-do tanks’. That is, institutes initiate and support the implementation or execution of community programmes, policy trials, evaluation of programmes, monitoring, and so forth. Some institutes also engage in ethics training, delivering in-service courses, producing TV documentaries, or capacity building. As noted earlier,
organizational survival is a pre-eminent concern and one that takes resources away from ‘thinking’ or policy research towards marketing, advocacy and PR. Likewise, networking with other think tanks or within policy communities and global public policy networks is exacting upon the resources of think tanks.

Different kinds of thinking, analysis, evaluation and informing policy endeavours exist. These can be delineated as: (1) recycling, editing and synthesis; (2) the policy entrepreneurship of ‘garbage cans’; and (3) scientific validation. Working through these categories, the objective is to return to the question of how think tanks ‘bridge’ research and policy and negotiate the boundaries of knowledge and power.

Recycling bins
Recycling ideas, synthesizing ideas, re-interpreting scholarly work into a more accessible format is a valuable pursuit, of benefit to busy bureaucrats and electorate conscious politicians. The daily pressures of governance generally mean that decision makers function with a relatively short attention span and rely upon their staff for the collection of relevant research and data. Think tanks strive to provide it for them.

Much academic research that has policy relevance is not in a format suitable for government use. Think tanks are very effective organizations for translating dense ideas or abstract theory into ‘sound bites’ for the media, blueprints for decision makers and understandable pamphlets and publications for the educated public. Many academics disdain this kind of work, while universities and colleges do not provide the right institutional or career incentives to undertake it.

Think tanks are a vehicle to incorporate the perspectives of former military personnel, government officials or NGO leaders who would not easily qualify for appointment to a university. So not only do we have recycling of ideas by think tanks, but also re-cycling of the experiences of practitioners (Abelson 2006, Ch. 5). The recycling of professional experience is one of the more intangible modes of bridging. Nevertheless, it enriches policy analysis and, in the eyes of many decision makers, it enhances the credibility and likely practicality of think tank reports.

Part of ‘recycling’ involves repetition. The constant restatement of the policy message via different formats and products – seminars, conferences, workshops, policy briefs, web sites, books – both broadcasts and amplifies policy research. While this might be considered to be duplication, repetition is necessary to raise consciousness amongst both the general public and the media.

Think tanks also act as editors. International organizations and governments require knowledge organizations and reputable professionals to sift and vouch for the mass of information and analysis pressed upon them by NGOs, other governments, corporations and others,

to understand the effect of free information on power, one must first understand the paradox of plenty. A plenitude of information leads to a
poverty of attention. Attention becomes a scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, interpreters and cue-givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power. … Brand names and the ability to bestow an international seal of approval will become more important. (Keohane and Nye 1998, p. 89)

Think tanks have a ‘brand name’ and symbolize legitimate and neutral vehicles to make sense of both conflicting evidence and information overload.

Think tanks, then, act as recycling bins. This function applies in different measure from one policy institute to the next. However, the editing, synthesis and repetition of policy research and analysis is usually not sufficient to influence policy as a consequence of ‘trickling into’ policy communities. Instead, think tanks are far more strategic than simply acting as a bridge. They have direct engagement with the policy process.

‘Garbage cans’?
The ‘garbage can’ idea was formulated by Cohen et al. to argue that policy-making was a chaotic and irrational process (see Cohen et al. 1972). This is in contrast to some other theories of the policy process that portray more rational inputs of information into policy. Indeed, the bridge metaphor implies linearity, with think tanks editing or re-shaping knowledge in uni-directional movements from basic to applied science, from problem to solution, from abstract theorists to enlightened policy-makers.

In the garbage can model, decision making is portrayed as a highly unpredictable and ambiguous process. Actors define goals and choose means as they go along. Organizations such as national ministries and executives do not have goals in the rational sense; rather, they define them in the process of attaching problems to solutions. From this perspective, think tanks can be thought of as:

collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work. (Cohen et al. 1972, p. 1)

In short, problems are constructed in order to justify solutions. Think tank solutions are on the look out for problems. Solutions chase problems. Problems, issues and their solutions are all mixed.

The ‘garbage can’ concept was modified by Kingdon (1995). Here, political decisions emerge from the interaction of three streams: political events, problem recognition and policy proposals. The balance of importance between these three streams, and how they interact, varies from one policy setting to
another. Within the US legislative context, these streams are largely independent of each other, each developing with its own dynamics and decisions. Notwithstanding the assumptions of a pluralist political context, it has constituted an important theory of agenda setting, with direct relevance to analysing the role of think tanks and their ‘behind-the-scenes’ roles in policy.

Elected or (self-)appointed officials in the political stream are highly visible actors in agenda setting. By contrast, think tanks are less visible in the policy stream, but play a significant role in (re-)formulating policy alternatives. Since the agenda is always crowded and financial resources limited, as policy entrepreneurs, they are critical in keeping policy proposals alive.

Think tanks market policy ideas that have had long cultivation in the ‘garbage can’. Policy entrepreneurs in the think tank lift from their ‘garbage can’ policy recommendations, problem definitions and explanations for policy dilemmas as new problems arise. Think tank policy analysis often represents sets of solutions waiting for their ‘window of opportunity’. In conjunction with other ‘garbage cans’, they build coalitions of support via expert networks. In short, they channel the policy and political streams in order to promote a convergence and they seize opportunities (such as regime change, elections, policy crises) to change laws and policy. It is more than a re-drawing of the boundaries between science and politics; it involves re-configuring the political landscape and manoeuvring the political and scientific actors upon it.

Policy entrepreneurship takes many forms and is both organizational and individual. There is no ‘recipe’ or ‘toolkit’ for training for policy entrepreneurship. Instead, the role rests on a delicate phrenetic blend of ‘softening-up’ actors in the political and policy stream through use of personal contacts, networking, media strategies and the creation of powerful policy narratives that simplify technical issues into manageable items of public policy. It is the management of expert discourse rather than research that empowers think tanks in agenda setting. Policy entrepreneurship is an important social practice in negotiating, sometimes negating, the boundaries between experts and decision makers. However, equally important is the scholarly credibility and intellectual authority of the think tanks involved.

**Blinding us with science?**

It is usually the case that the best known think tanks carry out their own analysis. They have been described as ‘idea factories’, ‘brain boxes’ (Boucher et al. 2004) or ‘thinking cells’ (McGann and Weaver 2000). Thinking is a key function definitive of a think tank. This means attracting top research staff. The most successful institutes are those with staff who could as easily be found within academic circles. Thus the authority of think tanks has been cultivated and groomed through various management practices and intellectual activities.

The knowledge credentials of think tank scholars (PhDs; career profile in university or government research agency; service on ‘blue ribbon’
commissions or expert advisory groups) bestows some credibility and status in policy debates that gives weight to their recommendations. However, neither knowledge production nor knowledge exchange is apolitical. This may be obvious. However, a number of social practices give their product – ideas, publications, analysis – a patina of scientific objectivity and technocratic neutrality. Sophisticated computer modelling, positive economic theories, or scientific papers published in refereed professional journals, create ‘communication codes’ and protocols that construct some knowledges as more persuasive or reliable. Codified knowledge is not only expensive to reproduce but difficult to access. Practices such as peer review and professional accreditation are exclusionary processes in which only those with the relevant credentials and mastery of protocols can participate.

Issues of quality and rigour are paramount. The worst fate for a think tank is to be seen as delivering unreliable or sloppy analysis. With the emphasis on policy entrepreneurship and communication of easily digestible nuggets of policy information – in the form of policy briefs, media sound bites and ‘Power Point pitches’ – the products of think tanks may oversimplify complex and technical issues. There is a tension in demands for timeliness and informing the right people that can compromise the research process (Boucher et al. 2004, p. 22). In terms of management, think tank directors tend to stress academic publications, rigorous methodologies and scientific peer review. This is supplemented by organizational strategies such as: creating an Academic Advisory Council; encouraging university sabbatical or teaching for think tank fellows; building post-doctoral programmes and fellowships; or hosting scholarly associations. A steadfast commitment to intellectual independence and scholarly enterprise bestows authority. Think tanks, both individually and collectively, need to protect their social status as expert research and analysis organizations.

Think tanks do think. Furthermore, they can play an important role in setting the standard for policy research and independent analysis. Doing so, they help draw the boundary between the policy relevant ‘expert’ and the non-expert advocate. Indeed, think tanks are one organizational manifestation of this social boundary.

CONCLUSION: BRIDGES OR BARRIERS?

Returning to the UNDP quote at the beginning of this paper, think tanks have been portrayed as a bridge between knowledge and power. This image rests on conceptions of science and politics as being two essentially different fields of human endeavour. To portray think tanks as a ‘bridge’ is to maintain the distinctions and to invite a perception of these organizations as neutral, publicly motivated intermediaries between the world of science and the separate world of politics and policy. This frequently occurring metaphor of think tanks as ‘bridges’ establishes a false ontological divide between theory and practice, between the ‘ivory tower’ and the so-called ‘real world’ (Stone
1996). The boundaries between the two domains remain unchanged but are linked by bridges such as think tanks that also play a role in both policing and mediating the boundaries.

This paper argues that knowledge and policy is a mutually constituted nexus and that think tanks are not simple informants in transmitting research to policy. It is clear from previous studies that many think tanks help provide the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, the empirical examples, that then become the accepted assumptions for those making policy. Think tanks do not act alone in such intellectual action, but more usually in coalition with like-minded thinkers in journalism, universities and so forth. Through their networks and policy communities, think tanks have ‘boundary transcending’ qualities (Krause Hansen et al. 2002, p. 108) that allow them to act as mediators. That is, they have the power and intellectual resources that allow them to do the work of articulation between the national, regional and global levels of governance. Mediation is required to manage the ideological operation of ‘decoding’, interpreting and reformulating socio-economic realities. Far from standing between knowledge and power, think tanks are a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus. In short, knowledge and policy are symbiotic and interdependent.

These organizations also construct narratives, routines and standards concerning their own roles between science and the state or society. Recognition of think tanks as centres for expert, scientific and authoritative advice occurs because of the scholarly credentials of these organizations. It also happens because of the relationship with policy institutions and donor groups that have a vested interest in the ‘myth’ that think tanks think. In commissioning and funding studies, these interests require the independent, rational, rigorous analysis that is associated with the think tank brand. Similarly, legitimation for supporting think tanks – and the willingness of the media to use think tank experts – rests in the myth that they serve the public interest. More often than not, the think tank is represented as a neutral transmission belt of research, scientific ideas and policy analysis, playing the appropriate ‘independent’ role of communication between state and society.

The ontological division in the portrayal of think tanks continues to be perpetuated because it serves a purpose in policy discourses. The ‘myths’ and the metaphors have more public power, media resonance and policy attraction than does the more ‘messy’ modelling of ‘garbage cans’ or complex formulations of a knowledge-policy nexus. A diffuse and pervasive ‘nexus’ cannot be instrumentalized into a policy tool in the same way as a compelling but simplistic narrative can be built of think tanks ‘bridging’ or ‘linking’ the scholarly/political; the national/global; the state/society divides.

Why do the myths persist? Science matters but so do interests. The myths persist because it is useful for governments and international organizations to sponsor so-called independent ‘thinking outfits’ that represent one-way ‘bridges’ between themselves and the ‘public’.
THREE MYTHS REGARDING POLICY ANALYSIS INSTITUTES

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- Global Development Network (http://www.gdnet.org) conference: ‘Bridging Research and Knowledge’ in 1999, and as a Steering Committee member of its on-going global research project called ‘Bridging Research and Policy’;
- RAND ‘Linking think tanks’ conference May 2005;
- Center for Policy Studies (http://www.ceu.hu/cps) research program on ‘bridging research and policy’ and PASOS network;
- Overseas Development Institute’s ‘Research and Policy in Development’ (http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID) program since 2002;

Observations were supplemented by secondary material from the surveys listed in the reference section.

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