

THINK TANKS AND UNIVERSITIES IN THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY: CROSSING, BLURRING AND SHIFTING BOUNDARIES

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Abstract

Taking into account the current trend of blurring boundaries between diverse knowledge providers, competing for personnel and funding, think tanks (TTs) need to defend their “label” as research-based organizations emphasizing their “organizational distinctiveness”. Using as an analytical framework the approach elaborated by T. Medvetz in combination with the concept of the organizational identity and the concept of boundaries, the paper looks at the issue of self-identification by TT representatives, analysing how their position towards the academic world is reflected in the building of their organizational identity and strategy. Based on the analysis of materials from TT websites and data obtained from semi-structured interviews with representatives of the stand-alone and university-based TTs in Brussels, France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, this paper presents how TT staff members build their identity on the perceived similarities and differences between their organizations and universities and shows how a blurring nature of a TT itself and its staff contributes to its continuity as an organization. The paper concludes by discussing the embodiment of the TT identity through its strategy involving formal and informal inter-institutional cooperation with universities.

Introduction

A university has until recently been considered the main centre of knowledge production.¹ The processes of internationalization and globalization, as well as development of information technologies, have significantly changed the environment for knowledge production and dissemination, with the emergence of new types of knowledge providers and communication platforms. At present, the general public and policy-makers can quickly collect necessary information from an abundance of structures giving policy recommendations free of charge and accessible via the Internet.² At the same time, the rapid scattering and immense expansion of knowledge make difficult the consumption of data by policy-makers, who are searching for the most relevant expertise in conditions of the “plenitude of information”.³

“Think tank” is a “brand name” for structures, capable of editing and confirming information convincingly⁴. However, if fifty years ago, the assertion that the role of linking social science with the power was implemented by independent think tanks was feasible, nowadays,

¹ Ruth Finnegan, “Introduction: looking beyond the walls”. In: Ruth Finnegan (ed.), *Participating in the knowledge society: researchers beyond the university walls*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005, pp. 1–19; James G. McGann, “Think tanks and the transnationalization of foreign policy”, *The role of think tanks in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. foreign policy agenda. An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State* 7: 3 (2002), pp. 13–19.

² Diane Stone, *Knowledge actors and transnational governance. Private-public Policy nexus in the global agora*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

³ Keohane and Nye, 1998, p. 89, quoted in Diane Stone, “Think tanks beyond nation-states”. In: Diane Stone and Andrew Denham (eds.), *Think Tank traditions: Policy Research and the Policy of Ideas*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004a, p. 45.

⁴ Diane Stone, 2004a, op. cit., p. 45.

a diversity of bodies conducts policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation. This term is used to denominate international organizations, internal research units of multi-national companies, consulting firms, governmental and non-governmental research organizations, research structures affiliated to interest groups or university-based research centres.⁵

Think tanks compete with universities for financing and for the attention of the policy-makers. As universities need to show their social and economic appropriateness to governments, they create university-based research institutes conducting policy-relevant research, preparing publications and organizing conferences, i.e. they are trying to construct a bridge between the academic and policy worlds.⁶

Since interest groups have tried to gain greater policy expertise to improve their position in the policy-making community and think tanks have followed interest groups to master more lobbying strategies, the organizational dissimilarities between think tanks and interest groups have become increasingly blurred.⁷

⁵ Andrew Rich, *Think tanks, public policy, and the politics of expertise*. Cambridge University Press, 2004; Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

⁶ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

⁷ Donald E. Abelson, Christine M. Carberry, "Following Suit or Falling Behind? A Comparative Analysis of Think Tanks in Canada and the United States", *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XXXI: 3 (1998), pp. 525-555; Donald E. Abelson, "Think tanks and U.S. foreign policy: an historical view", *U.S. foreign policy agenda. An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State* 7: 3 (2002), pp. 9-12; Andrew Rich, Kent Weaver, "Think Tanks in the Political System of the United States. *Think Tanks in Policy Making – Do They Matter?* Briefing Paper Special Issue. Shanghai: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Shanghai Office, 2011, pp. 16-25.

Because of the absence of the complete agreement about the type of organizations able to demand the label “think tank” some think tank managers worry about what other structures could be included within the same category. Organizations that formerly would not have been considered as think tanks, at present often strive to obtain this label in order to have a complimentary credibility.⁸ This trend shows the efficacy of the label in both public opinion and in policy world, as well as its utility for addressing international funds and philanthropic foundations.⁹ Due to this more competitive situation of the “cacophony of advice and analysis”, issues concerning power and influence in this sphere emerge.¹⁰ According to Ulrich, the influence of EU think tanks on the EU policy-making process is gained from three interconnected sources: expertise-based authority, independence and legitimacy.¹¹ Think tanks are acknowledged as “independent centres for expert, scientific and authoritative advice” thanks to the academic diplomas and professional experience in university of think tank experts, giving credibility in policy debates and raising the authority of their research products.¹²

⁸ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, *British think-tanks and the climate of opinion*. London: UCL Press, 1998; Thomas Medvetz, “Think Tanks as an Emergent Field”, *The social science research council*, 2008, <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/A2A2BA10-B135-DE11-AFAC-001CC477EC70/>, retrieved on June 22, 2016; Andrew Rich, op. cit.; Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

⁹ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 68.

¹¹ Heidi Ullrich, “European Union Think Tanks: generating ideas, analysis and debate”. In: Diane Stone and Andrew Denham (eds.), *Thinks tanks traditions. Policy Research and the Policy of Ideas*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, pp. 51-68.

¹² Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

Taking into account the rivalry between diverse knowledge providers for personnel and funding sources think tanks need to defend their “label” as research-based organizations emphasizing their distinguishing features.¹³ However, in the conditions of the blurring of boundaries between think tanks and other structures performing the function of policy analysis, claiming their “organizational distinctiveness” has become less convincing.¹⁴

With a view to building their legitimacy in the opinion of policy-makers think tanks produce strategies of self-materialization and formulate manifold identities, thereby contributing to the delineation of “the boundary between the policy-relevant expert and the non-expert advocate”. Being not only an organizational demonstration of this social boundary, but also arbitrators of it, think tanks elaborate tales, practices and standards with regard to their own roles between academic and policy worlds along with their assertion of independence and cognitive autonomy.¹⁵

The importance of self-conception and organizational identity consists in its capability to form and to be formed by “strategic choice and action”. Because organizations inevitably operate through their employees, their opinions, sentiments and conduct mirror and become set into the organizational framework.¹⁶

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Boucher, 2004, p. 97 cited in Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹⁵ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit., p. 83.

¹⁶ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, “Organizational Identity and Strategy as a Context for the Individual”, *Advances in Strategic Management* 13 (1996), p. 20.

Using this perspective, the article looks at the issue of self-identification by think tank representatives in four European countries, analysing how their position towards the academic world is reflected in the building of their organizational identity and strategy.

This article is organized as follows. After reviewing the literature and describing the methods and the analytical framework of the study, I present how think tank representatives build their organizational identity on the perceived similarities and differences between their organizations and universities. The subsequent part shows how a blurring of the nature of a think tank itself and its staff contributes to its continuity as an organization. The paper concludes by discussing the embodiment of the think tank identity through its strategy involving formal and informal inter-institutional cooperation with universities.

Literature review

European think tanks have only recently begun to capture a more comprehensive attention by scholars. This is something unexpected taking into account that European think tanks are becoming more plentiful, more prevalent and more powerful¹⁷ with more than 600 think tanks extended over 20 countries in Western Europe, many of

¹⁷ Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), “European Commission. European think tanks and the EU”. Antonio Missiroli and Isabelle Ioannides (eds.), *Berlaymont Paper 2* (2012); Heidi Ullrich, op. cit.

which were created long ago. The quantity of think tanks in the Brussels EU Quarter has risen sharply over the last ten years.¹⁸

Despite the increase in prominence and number of think tanks worldwide,¹⁹ there is still disagreement over the precise definition of what a think tank is²⁰ which resulted in the elaboration of rival classifications of these institutions.²¹

Ulrich includes university-based EU research institutes, actively furthering EU policy programmes, in the framework of the wide definition of EU think tanks.²² Nevertheless, Stone considers that the discrepancies between these structures are sufficient that a distinct categorization should be made.²³

In order to distinguish think tanks from universities, some essential aspects are usually examined. Firstly, the personnel of think tanks should not teach students as do the majority of full-time academics.²⁴ Secondly, the spectrum of issues studied in think tanks is more concentrated on policy than research in universities which is often

¹⁸ Dieter Plehwe, “Paying the piper – think tanks and lobbying”. In: Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation in the EU (ALTER-EU), *Bursting Brussels Bubble the EU: the battle to expose corporate lobbying at the heart of the EU*, Brussels, 2010, pp. 53–67.

¹⁹ Diane Stone, “Introduction: think tanks, policy advice and governance”. In: Diane Stone and Andrew Denham (eds.), *Think Tank Traditions: Policy Research and the Policy of Ideas*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004b, pp. 1–16.

²⁰ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.; Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

²¹ Stephen Boucher, “Europe and its think tanks: a promise to be fulfilled”, *Studies and Research* 35 (2004); James McGann, 2002, op. cit.; R. Kent Weaver, “The changing world of think tanks”. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 1989, pp. 563–578.

²² Heidi Ulrich, op. cit.

²³ Diane Stone, 2004b, op. cit.

²⁴ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.; Diane Stone, 2004b, op. cit.

motivated by arguments of a theoretical and methodological character only remotely connected to real policy difficulties.²⁵

Weaver considers that research products of these two kinds of structures differ generally in content and form due to their distinct motives and channels of knowledge dissemination.²⁶ While universities have often been represented as being occupied with the unselfish aspiration to knowledge, think tanks are explicitly striving for policy influence.²⁷ Think tanks try to attract attention to their research from the corresponding policy-makers, looking for access to them in order to have action upon political decisions.²⁸ Unlike experts in think tanks, university researchers are less inclined to get in touch with policy-makers.²⁹ The usual publication channels for academics such as peer-reviewed journals and university publishing houses are commonly more involved in furthering disciplinary discussion than policy debates.³⁰

These factors lead to a production of research products in think tanks which are more adapted for a wide use³¹ than those from

²⁵ Richard N. Haass, "Think tanks and U.S. foreign policy: a policy-maker's perspective", *U.S. foreign policy agenda. An Electronic Journal of the U.S. Department of State* 7: 3 (2002), pp. 5-9; Waltraut Ritter, "Are Think Tanks an Indicator for Societal Progress?" 3rd OECD Forum on Statistics, Knowledge and Policy. Session 2.2.d: The Role of Think Tanks, 2009, <http://www.oecd.org/site/progresskorea/43596145.pdf>, retrieved on June 22, 2016.

²⁶ R. Kent Weaver, art. cit.

²⁷ Diane Stone, "Think global, act local or think local, act global? Knowledge production in the global agora". *Reshaping Globalization: Multilateral Dialogues and New Policy Initiatives*, Budapest: Central European University Conference, 2001; Donald E. Abelson, Christine M. Carberry, art. cit.

²⁸ Andrew Rich, op. cit.

²⁹ R. Kent Weaver, art. cit.

³⁰ Andrew Rich, op. cit.

³¹ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.

universities. Their form also differs, such as books and brochures instead of scientific articles.³²

In spite of this long-dated consideration of the think-tank expert and the academic public intellectual as two separate categories, the growing popularization by the media and confidence in the expertise of think tanks combine to uphold the concept of indistinctiveness between these two groups, which is common in both popular papers and academic literature on think tanks.³³

The sociology of intellectuals regards think tanks as a more effective means of attracting attention for research in comparison with universities, as well as their researchers as possessing the same validity and soundness as academic intellectuals. At present, many think tanks continue to be connected to universities either directly (institutional affiliation to the universities) or indirectly (common dependence on private funding). Factors used to explain the growing interchangeability between academic scholars and think tank experts include the research inclination of many think tanks and participation in intellectual exchange with partners from governmental and nongovernmental sectors, as well as the structure and high level of their professional personnel.³⁴

A complementary factor extending the lack of distinction between think tank experts and academic researchers is a frequent exchange of

³² R. Kent Weaver, art. cit.

³³ Barbara A. Misztal, "Public Intellectuals and Think Tanks: A Free Market in Ideas?" *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 25 (2012), pp.127–141.

³⁴ Barbara A. Misztal, art. cit.

personnel between universities and think tanks.³⁵ This phenomenon of the “revolving door” between people from government, think-tanks, legal offices, academia or the media, became customary not only in the USA, but also in the UK.³⁶ There is also multitude of cases of simultaneous affiliation between universities and think tanks.³⁷

The growing role and expansion of neoliberal economics is also considered as one of the factors which blur the boundaries between the policy expert and the academic scholar. Due to fiscal severity some universities turn into for-profit enterprises, concentrating more on their economic effectiveness, budgets and on nurturing private contributions. In these new conditions of knowledge production the nature of research is transformed, undermining the research priorities and independence.³⁸ Moreover, the blurring of boundaries between the think-tank expert and the academic scholar is also explained by internal conflicts within their corresponding roles.³⁹

According to a “three against one” model⁴⁰ policy analysts use particularly four aspects of their activity to describe their own mission: the academic scholar, the policy assistant, the entrepreneur, and the media specialist. Nevertheless, what may initially seem quadrilateral striving for academic, political, entrepreneurial, and

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Diane Stone, 2004b, op. cit.

³⁷ Barbara A. Misztal, art. cit.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Thomas Medvetz, “‘Public Policy is Like Having a Vaudeville Act’: Languages of Duty and Difference among Think Tank-Affiliated Policy Experts”, *Qual Sociol* 33 (2010), pp. 549–562; Thomas Medvetz, *Think tanks in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012a.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

media impact, appears to have a dual frame. The objectives related to three of the four roles: political influence, financing, and media visibility could be simpler to agree with each other than they can be adjusted with the aspiration of academic devotion. Political influence is frequently favourable to the publicity of a policy analyst, which may beneficially contribute to his or her ability to raise funds. The purpose of academic rigour, conversely, more frequently requires keeping some distance from economic considerations, independence from political supervision, and comparative apathy towards media visibility. Therefore, overlaying the quadrangular frame of the policy analyst's mission could be presented as a principal contrast between intellectual credibility and temporary authority. Obviously, a majority of think tank members cannot really meet both requirements; however, they try to keep a delicate balance between both of them. Due to the "three against one" model, the position of think tank member toward the academic field is inclined to be dual.⁴¹

Thus, owing to the extent of coincidence of think tanks and other institutions in the society, the determination of the clear boundaries between them is problematic.⁴² According to Rich, the outlining of incontestable differences between think tanks and other types of organizations is neither completely possible nor desired due to the often formless and intersecting character of organizational boundaries.⁴³ Medvetz argues that an attempt to determine the

⁴¹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁴² Diane Stone, 2004b, op. cit.

⁴³ Andrew Rich, op. cit.

boundaries between think tanks and other organizations only provokes a perpetual discussion concerning a question of which institutions it is possible to consider as genuine think tanks.⁴⁴ Hart, recognizing the fruitlessness of establishing external boundaries of think tanks, believes that it would be more effective to apply a very wide definition: producers of policy-oriented ideas; and to distinguish a certain number of separate types in the general totality of institutions enveloping this.⁴⁵

However, the concept of boundaries is one of the most fruitful conceptual tools in social sciences, because concentrating on it may contribute to producing new theoretical understandings about principal relational processes existing across a broad spectrum of organizations, such as boundary-work and boundary crossing. Social scientists have widely used the concept of boundaries in fields such as identity formation, as well as the social construction of occupations, knowledge and science. A principal topic of these scientific works is the use of symbolic resources for establishment, preservation or challenging institutionalized disparities establishing differentiations between “‘us’ and ‘them’, the in or out”.⁴⁶ These studies have concentrated on true effects of so called ‘symbolic

⁴⁴ Thomas Medvetz, 2008, art. cit.

⁴⁵ Paul ‘t Hart, “Think Tank Transformations: From ‘Knowledge for Policy’ to transnational idea brokerage”, *GovNet conference*, Canberra, 28-30 November 2006.

⁴⁶ Michele Lamont, Virag Molnar, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences”, *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002), pp. 167-195.

boundaries⁴⁷ on creating and upholding respective social boundaries.⁴⁸

Heracleous⁴⁹ emphasizes the expediency of further empirical research on boundaries taking into account perceptions of representatives of the “market” themselves concerning organizations which could be considered inside and outside (or at the borders) of a particular field (think tank activity in our case), which criteria they use for this differentiation, as well as which shifting models of the individual and organizational positions, roles or boundaries can exist.

In subsequent parts of this article I will elaborate on positions which think tank representatives employ towards universities in the building of their organizational identity and strategy, as a type of organizations which is one of the most frequent reference points used when describing think tanks by not only scholars but by think tank representatives themselves.

Methods and analytical framework

This study is based on the analysis of materials from think tank websites, such as mission statements and organizational histories, as well as on the data obtained from 33 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with managers and staff members of the stand-alone and university-based think tanks and related organizations in Brussels, France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom conducted between June

⁴⁷ Lamont, 2001 cited in Loizos Heracleous, “Boundaries in the study of organization”, *Human Relations* 57: 1 (2004), pp. 95-103.

⁴⁸ Loizos Heracleous, art. cit., p. 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

and November 2014.⁵⁰ Interviews lasting from 45 to 90 minutes each were conducted in English or French. Although the analysis takes into account all the conducted interviews, this paper directly employs data taken from 11 cases, relevant to this study. Their characteristics are given below.

The think tank representatives studied include the head of a university-based research centre, the head of a think tank's branch, three research directors, two heads of departments dealing with education issues, the director of programme, the head of communications and two senior research fellows. Two of the eleven think tank representatives are women. Four people have a degree in political science, other disciplines are law, economics, sociology, sociology of education, European affairs and international relations, as well as security studies. The majority of respondents have doctoral degree (6), three think tank representatives have Master's degree and two others have Bachelor's degree. Concerning experience in academia one interviewee was previously an Assistant in University Department, seven interviewed persons were lecturers in different universities, and one served in secondary education during the time of interviews. Eight interviewed persons have political experience in various roles, ranging from former Minister to party activist, five of

⁵⁰ These interviews represent the first stage of data collection in the framework of the author's doctoral research project "Think tanks and academic entrepreneurs in the knowledge production". This study respects the principles of research ethics (Christel Hopf, "Research Ethics and Qualitative Research". In: Uwe Flick, Ernst von Kardoff, Ines Steinke (eds.), *A companion to qualitative research*. London: Sage, 2004, pp.334-339), such as voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.

them were involved in advisory role on the national or European level, and one was engaged in European and international representation. Five interviewed persons are based in London, two in Paris, two in Brussels and two in Ljubljana. They represent three think tanks on European affairs and one think tank's branch in Brussels, one having Europe and three ones having education as one of their research areas, two university-based think tanks (one specialized on higher education).

As an analytical framework for analysis of self-identification of think tank members I use the approach elaborated by Medvetz⁵¹ in combination with the concept of the organizational identity and the concept of boundaries.

Thomas Medvetz's approach is based on the theory of Pierre Bourdieu and its recent developments by Gil Eyal and Loic Wacquant. In order to explain the position of the equivocal structures as think tanks, Medvetz proposes formulating their conceptualization on the basis of their structural blurriness. Think tanks are structures divided by the counteractive logics of academic, political, economic and media spheres. A prerequisite for a think tank's existence as an organization consists in an everlasting counterpoising process of alienation and joining. While the first part of this counterpoising process distinguishes the think tank from every of its "patron" fields,

⁵¹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.; Thomas Medvetz, "Murky power: "think tanks" as boundary organizations", *Rethinking Power in Organizations, Institutions, and Markets. Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 34 (2012b), pp. 113–133; Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit.

the second part restores its dependence on the same fields for the physical and symbolic advantages granted by them. However, a think tank cannot just turn into a university, an advocacy group, a company, or a media organization, because this would void its distinctiveness as a think tank and expose itself to the particular criteria of belonging to those worlds. Consequently to be acknowledged as a think tank, an organization must accumulate a composite blend of different forms of capital in Bourdieu's terms from various worlds: scientific authority and academic degrees, ability in particular political forms of rhetoric, funding and fundraising skills, and access to the mass media. A victory in this "game" is gained not only as result of accumulating large amounts of capital, but by creating a correct combination.⁵²

Think tanks appear to prosper not as members of a specific field but in the "spaces between fields".⁵³ This concept is regarded helpful by Medvetz for apprehension of the particularity of think tanks as organizations consisting in their ability to assert their role as a mediator between fields. Medvetz portrays think tanks as "members of an interstitial field" or a "semi-structured network of organizations" that intersects, connects and partly coincides with the more deep-rooted academic, political, business and media fields.⁵⁴

⁵² Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit., p. 24.

⁵³ Gil Eyal, "Spaces between Fields". In: Philip S. Gorski (ed.), *Pierre Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, pp.158-182.

⁵⁴ Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit., p. 25.

An organizational identity represents relatively permanent and self-defining essential features which distinguishes an organization from other organizations.⁵⁵ Albert and Whetten⁵⁶ determined three criteria of an organizational identity: centrality, distinctiveness and continuity. Organizational identity relates to a collection of the central or essential characteristics that signify the kernel of the organization. A central character of an organization's identity is greatly related to its mission. However, as there are many methods of accomplishing a mission in question, there is broad freedom to render concrete opinions, values and norms to describe the organization.⁵⁷

The concept of distinctiveness relates to comparison with other structures. Interorganizational comparisons give the possibility of forming and formulating unique identity. An organization in question is compared to similar organizations generally with similar missions, because this allows making a careful differentiation and thereby more comprehensively evaluating comparative dissimilarities. Therefore, while centrality outlines the essential features of the organization, distinctiveness outlines the boundaries of the organization.⁵⁸

The concept of boundaries helps to comprehend the differentiation of professions from one another. The concept of “professions” initially appeared as a delimitation issue, i.e., an issue of boundaries between different activities. Individuals can distinguish themselves

⁵⁵ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

⁵⁶ Albert and Whetten, 1985, cited in Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

⁵⁷ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

from others by using criteria of community and a feeling of common affiliation with their subgroup. For an appearance of objectified joint identity this process of self-identification should be acknowledged by strangers. The strategies employed by professionals to define and institutionalize the boundaries of the profession against strangers form the entity of the “professionalization project”.⁵⁹

The continuity criterion of identity signifies a fundamental property, that the organization possesses an adequate importance, assistance and capacity to justify the confidence of the people.⁶⁰

Organizational identities are not formed haphazardly. The quest for organization's identity is driven by the requirements and predilections of members of the organization, particularly the owners and chief executives. The identity represents an all-sufficient inwardly compatible system of central beliefs, values and norms that inspire and justify the activity of the organization. Moreover, an organizational identity serves as a source for strategic planning. Organizational identity deals with its defining characteristics while strategy deals with the ways for its implementation. Even if identity does not govern strategy, self-conception and strategic choice are mutually connected. An organization may realize and portray an identity through strategy and may deduce, change, or assert an identity from strategy. Strategies are used for illustration of identities

⁵⁹ Michele Lamont, Virag Molnar, art. cit., pp. 177-178.

⁶⁰ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

and contribute to their “social validation”, whereas identities are used for legitimating strategic choices.⁶¹

This study identifies four positions of think tanks towards academic world, perceived by think tank representatives as contributing to the building of think tank’ organizational identity and strategy:

“*Crossing boundaries*” between think tanks and universities is based on the affirming of similarities between these two types of institutions manifested in appointment of academic researchers (or people with PhD degrees), application of similar research standards and providing training services (i.e. playing the role of the academic scholar). We can see here the central character of think tank identity, because their mission statements frequently mention implementation of academic research and education of the general public.

“*Distinctiveness of think tanks*” is based on the emphasizing positive differences of think tanks in comparison to universities such as media visibility, policy relevance and entrepreneurship skills which become apparent in the accomplishment of the functions of media specialist, policy aid and entrepreneur, thereby insisting on their distinctiveness as organizations.

“*Blurring boundaries*” encompasses the blurring character of boundaries within a think tank itself, dealing with a hybrid nature of this type of organization and its staff, which tries to reconcile its different roles in one strategy. The “bridge metaphor” can be seen as a continuity criterion of think tank identity, because it is grounded in

⁶¹ Ibid, p.34.

the historical examples of think tanks as mediators between the academic and policy worlds.

“*Shifting boundaries*” consists in encouraging formal and informal inter-institutional cooperation between think tanks and universities, underscoring the complementary character of their activity instead of the competitive one. This position could be seen as a strategy illustrating and realizing the organizational identity of think tanks.

In the following sections I examine these positions in detail.

Crossing boundaries between think tanks and universities: academic excellence, intellectual independence and degree-granting capacity

Policy analysts build their hybrid self-representation symbolically on the basis of producing research. Usually this position starts with an assertion of similarity with universities.⁶² Euro-think tanks aim at encouraging the production of concepts mainly by means of academic research. In order to create added value, heads of think tanks commonly strive to engage researchers with good academic qualifications or researchers blending academic excellence with rich policy-making experience.⁶³

Think tank representatives usually mention the university researchers in describing their own activity. Indeed, many think tanks call their expert staff members “scholars” and sometimes think tank

⁶² Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁶³ Stephen Boucher, op. cit.

experts occupy positions with university style titles, as “research fellows”,⁶⁴ regardless of their diplomas and academic certificates,⁶⁵ and affirm that their essential role is to inform and educate the general public.⁶⁶ In this regard, the policy analyst aspires to elaborate knowledge based on thorough empirical findings so it can be published in books and articles. In this model the think tank researcher should be a person of keen intellect, possessing strong analytical skills, advanced academic background, and independence from one-sided view, as well as from political and economic engagements.⁶⁷

This academic style generally spreads from the individual to the institution: if the policy expert is similar to a scholar, in this case the think tank is represented as a “university without students”.⁶⁸ It is the first category of classification of think tanks according to Weaver,⁶⁹ which portrays them as big organizations with significant number of employees, composed of researchers with PhD degrees, funded by philanthropic foundations and producing lengthy studies, corresponding to academic standards of neutrality and rigor.⁷⁰

One of the American think tanks corresponding to this model is the Brookings Institution. The tradition at Brookings is described as a situation in a university when there are no students and the academics

⁶⁴ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit.

⁶⁶ Andrew Rich, op. cit.

⁶⁷ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ R. Kent Weaver, art. cit.

⁷⁰ Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.; Andrew Rich, Kent Weaver, op. cit.

are attempting furiously to make up for research activity. Due to the great abyss in funding between American and European think tanks, it is difficult to find a similar organization in Europe,⁷¹ at the same time many of the earlier generations of European think tanks considered this model as “ideal”,⁷² this tendency is still displayed up to now.

This idea is also reflected in think tank missions. For example, one of the goals of the Brussels-based think tank, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), is “[t]o achieve high standards of academic excellence and maintain unqualified independence”.⁷³ The purpose of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a British think tank “is to conduct and promote research into, and the education of the public in, the economic, social and political sciences [...].”⁷⁴

Other think tanks clearly liken themselves to universities or portray their knowledge production as an academic one. Although education is not a central occupation of the think tanks, some of them initiate units and departments providing trainings and educational seminars, as well as organise scientific events. Finally, a few think tanks are capable of granting degrees,⁷⁵ establishing joint Master and doctoral

⁷¹ BEPA, op. cit., p. 13.

⁷² Andrew Denham, Mark Garnett, op. cit.

⁷³ CEPS, 2016. About CEPS, <http://www.ceps.eu/content/about-ceps>, retrieved on June 22, 2016.

⁷⁴ IPPR, 2016. About IPPR. <http://www.ippr.org/about/>, retrieved on June 22, 2016.

⁷⁵ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.; Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

programmes. For example, the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Germany offers an Online Master Program.⁷⁶

Think tank experts make comparisons with the academic sphere in personal interviews when they speak about knowledge production, typical research projects or their staff. For example, think tank representatives emphasize the proximity of their activity with university departments, manifesting in the similar ways of conducting research projects, in particular it concerns the long-term projects funded by the European Commission.⁷⁷

The research director of one British think tank indirectly assimilate think tanks with academic institutions affirming their core values, which guide their activities, such as their independence: “we do not have links with political parties or funding from political parties” and enlightenment function of his organization: “our purpose is to bring educational benefit” which “involves [them] in conducting research, writing reports, holding events”.⁷⁸

The think tank research directors who previously worked or simultaneously work in academia underscore the similar research practices and standards in think tanks and universities, such as “rigorous methodology, research design, use of qualitative and quantitative data and techniques”. They regard the level of these requirements as an asset of the academic world, which they try to

⁷⁶ IEP, 2016. Online Master EUCAIS. <http://iep-berlin.de/en/training/study-programmes/the-european-union-and-central-asia-in-the-international-system-eucais/>, retrieved on June 22, 2016.

⁷⁷ Interviews, London, September 2014; Brussels, October 2014.

⁷⁸ Interview, London, September 2014.

preserve in a think tank. From this perspective good academic training of staff members is seen as very useful.⁷⁹

Despite the affirmed kinship with universities with regard to their research function, policy analysts still direct considerable criticism at university scholars. One of the elements of this criticism is meaningless or ritual demonstration of methodological ability in academic social science.⁸⁰ According to think tank members, in order to ensure convincingness of its research publication, a university “goes through so many rigorous checks, processes and procedures”. They claim that the research in a think tank is not less robust, but they “move much more quickly”.⁸¹

The second element of the critique of scholars by policy analysts is that the discursive turn in the human and social sciences fosters exorbitant abstraction and relativistic reflection.⁸² In order to distinguish themselves, think tank representatives emphasize that they do not do “abstract” research or “research for its own sake” as distinct from academic writing which is “very remote from practice”.⁸³

Recognizing the high quality of research produced in universities, think tank representatives, however, consider that university findings are remotely connected to real problems, in contrast to the research products of think tanks, which are from their point of view are also

⁷⁹ Interviews, Paris, June 2014; London, September 2014.

⁸⁰ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁸¹ Interview, London, September 2014.

⁸² Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁸³ Interviews, Brussels, October 2014; London, September 2014.

evidence-based, but propose concrete solutions in order to influence policy-making and political process.

Nevertheless, academic researchers are not always interested in the type of ideas produced by think tanks. In spite of the recognition of a certain utility of the knowledge created by think tanks for specific purposes, academic scholars consider that the ideological orientation of think tanks as well as their inclination to applied instead of fundamental research, and their concern mostly with problems of public policy instead of scientific, technical or cultural questions, if they do not directly affect policy, does not allow them to make a significant knowledge contribution.⁸⁴ Although think tank experts take part in the search for knowledge, but as distinct from academic scholars, their work is generally arranged around particular practical projects and publicized in a form which is comprehensible to the general public and policy makers. The data produced by think tanks could be collected by scientific methods but is intrinsically guided by a pragmatic political agenda and their reports can be comparatively partial.⁸⁵

Many policy analysts, certainly, are well aware of the reproach from their opposite numbers that they are unsuccessful scholars and that their research is insufficiently rigorous, and that their criticism of academia originates more from self-protection than from a fair

⁸⁴ Posner, 2001, quoted in Barbara A. Misztal, art. cit.

⁸⁵ Charles F. Gattone, *The social scientist as public intellectual: Critical reflections in a changing world*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2006.

assessment of academic research.⁸⁶ Think tank representatives even admit not always fulfilling sufficiently certain academic requirements in their own work.⁸⁷

In answer to the opposing critique, some think tank representatives acknowledge the positive sides of previous experience in academic institutions, such as organization competencies, as well as network relations with experts, which could be mobilized in think tank activity, however, they indicate the additional skills they should have develop for their work at the think tank, such as editorial and dissemination skills, as well as foreign languages skills.⁸⁸

We can see here, that when describing their central mission of conducting research and policy analysis, think tank representatives actively portray their resemblance with universities be it their research practices or staff. In response to the possible critics from the part of academics concerning their insufficient rigor, they indicate their advantages over them such as faster operation, practical orientation of their research, as well as additional skills of their staff. Moreover, policy experts understate their similarity to academics when talking about other sides of their activity, trying to emphasize their distinctiveness.

⁸⁶ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁸⁷ Interview, Paris, June 2014.

⁸⁸ Interview, Paris, June 2014.

Distinctiveness of think tanks in comparison to universities: policy relevance, entrepreneurship and media presence

Policy-relevance

A second aspect of their professional role represents the policy experts as political assistants who should be acquainted with the principles, procedures and norms existing in national and European politics, with the functioning of legislative and executive authorities and with the wording of policy discussions. Therefore, the important features of a policy expert comprise the capacities to foresee burning policy issues before their emergence and produce helpful papers in sufficient time to respond to these developments.⁸⁹ In this regard, think tanks are looking for people who have both good understanding of policy and political environment but also have some feeling of politics.⁹⁰ Therefore, previous political experience is regarded as a useful advantage for senior positions in a think tank, even if it is not a formal requirement, taken into account that their main target audience is policy-makers.⁹¹

On this point, their academic degrees seem to be less important. In difference from the universities, PhD degree is not a prerequisite for working in the majority of think tanks, although their employees sometimes do have this qualification. A formal requirement is to be

⁸⁹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.; Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

⁹⁰ Interviews, London, September 2014.

⁹¹ Interviews, Paris, June 2014; London, September 2014.

educated to Master's level, "bringing high level research skills"⁹². However, among our respondents there are Research Director and Head of Department with a Bachelor's degree.

Furthermore, some think tank representatives highlight their proximity to policy-making in terms of the temporality of policy research⁹³, even as it moves them from the extended periods of academic research. In order to be efficient think tanks should understand the worth of time. Thus, one of the often emphasized disparities between universities and think tanks is that academic scholars do not feel time frame.⁹⁴ Even claiming to maintain such academic standards, as rigor and methodological robustness, think tank representatives stress the "huge difference of the time" in these types of activities: "the typical research project is 5-7 years in length in the university, in a think tank it could be 5-7 months".⁹⁵

This difference in the duration of the projects is related to another element of distinction portrayed between academic research and policy analysis, consisting in their different wordings and target audiences. Many policy experts accentuate that their research products are more relevant for policy-makers. The criterion for a sound policy brief consists in its expediency for the policymaking process and less in its academic rigor.⁹⁶ The affirmation of the abilities of think-tank experts could be accompanied by the opinion

⁹² Interview, London, September 2014.

⁹³ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

⁹⁴ Rich, 2004, op. cit.

⁹⁵ Interview, London, September 2014.

⁹⁶ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

underlining the obstacles encountered by the academic scholars to possess an expertise in the political issues, which brings them to providing idealist and inapplicable policy recommendations.⁹⁷

For instance, a think tank research director and former political science lecturer explains the essential difference of a policy brief in comparison to an academic article by its operational character and effort to produce effective proposals which can constitute a tool of assistance for public decision-making and of enlightenment: “The objectives of public action and this utility are not always in the centre of academic work”.⁹⁸

A policy analyst must speak the language of political polemics. The fault to avoid is to be “too academic”.⁹⁹ Think tank report should contain “crucial” policy recommendations: “It is not just an academic paper, a clear policy”.¹⁰⁰

In line with this role, a successful policy expert positions himself as an efficient actor in the policymaking process. Improving access to political networks and remaining in the centre of everyday policy situations are necessities for the policy expert.¹⁰¹

A representative of Brussels-based think tank explains the need of this ability by the applied character of their research, i.e. their aim to provide policy recommendations for decision-makers. Therefore, their researchers need to be able to interact effectively with policy-

⁹⁷ Posner, 2001 and Galbraith, 1972, cited in Barbara A. Misztal, art. cit.

⁹⁸ Interview, Paris, June 2014 (translated from French by the author).

⁹⁹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

makers on almost-daily basis, not only by sending publications to them but also by meeting them and by engaging in debates with them.¹⁰²

According to a research director of a British think tank, a younger researcher in his think tank would be dealing with people of very senior level in European institutions, therefore they should have a good degree of confidence but also comfortability to get over with other people.¹⁰³

Thus, according to Medvetz, inability to produce reports with evident importance for political polemics can isolate a policy expert and undermine his or her capacity to captivate attention of journalists and to raise funds¹⁰⁴. In this regard, think tank representatives try to keep away from the academic world, emphasizing the operational character and timeliness of their recommendations, their knowledge of political environment and political access.

Entrepreneurship skills

A third aspect of their professional role represents the policy expert as an entrepreneur in a “marketplace of ideas”. The essential purpose is to sell think tank research products to three kinds of consumers: lawmakers, including turning think tank ideas into policy; donors, funding think tank activity; and media, referring to think tank studies and their authors. In line with this role, an effective policy expert should have the characteristics of a successful marketer: “human

¹⁰² Interview, Brussels, October 2014.

¹⁰³ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

skills”, an inclination for self-promotion, and ability for re-packaging ideas to increase their attraction.¹⁰⁵ Thus, think tanks are interested in broad skills because think tank experts “need not only to be good at research” but also “need to be good at gaining funding”.¹⁰⁶

Policy experts plainly mention the ideas of salesmanship and trading bargains to describe their organization and the characteristics indispensable to stand out in it.¹⁰⁷ The concept of salesmanship has been shaped in the broadly used phrase “policy entrepreneur” by the early 1980s¹⁰⁸.

According to a British think tank representative, the core skill, which is not similar to those in academic institutions, they spend a lot of their time focusing on “raising money” and preparing grant applications. Assuming that fundraising is one of the important skills in universities as well, this interviewee notes their primary focus on research councils at domestic and EU level, whereas think tanks can search for support from private sector organizations and charity foundations.¹⁰⁹

The commercial role generally spreads from the individual to the institution: like enterprises competing for market share, think tanks rival with one another in an overflowing “marketplace of ideas”.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹⁰⁸ John W. Kingdon, James A. Thurber, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. New York: Longman classics in political science, 2003.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

A representative of a Brussels-based think tank relates this skill to the necessity to maintain their independence, which means for them “to look for money from as many different actors as possible”. That is why, one of the skills of people working in a think tank is considered being able to identify projects that they can apply for, to look for tenders they can compete in and to prepare application materials.¹¹¹

Recognizing that fact that fundraising skills are necessary for both university and think tank researchers, think tank representatives point to different funding sources, as well as different motivation, because diversification of sponsors is seen as a guarantee for think tank independence.

Media presence

A fourth role of think tank members, which is more recent and less prominent than the first three roles, underscores the similarity between policy experts and media specialists.¹¹² For a head of the communications of a Brussels-based think tank, one of the important differences between think tanks and universities represents a “public relations dimension” of this job, which is becoming typical in academia as well “it is not that university researchers are locked in their rooms in the university”, but from his point of view university researchers are probably not engaged in this activity as much as some of his colleagues.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Interview, Brussels, October 2014.

¹¹² Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹¹³ Interview, Brussels, October 2014.

Bringing a lot of the same skills, but looking for different target audiences consequently lead to the application of different communication tools in think tanks which allowing them to have a bigger public impact than that of university researchers. Think tanks try to privilege media presence as one of the main dissemination channels of their research findings instead of publishing in peer-reviewed journals as for academic scholars. Think tanks elaborate a media-communication strategy, prepare press releases in order to have media coverage (broadcast and print) of their research, as well as establish their own journals.¹¹⁴

In this regard, a policy expert should demonstrate a skill for writing in clear language and be ready to create brief, concise studies like press releases or newspaper articles. In addition to writing skills, ease and rhetoric on television and Internet are highly regarded advantages for think tank members as well.¹¹⁵

The application of a media role mirrors one of the main trends among think tanks since the 1970s. Formerly being bashful, many think tanks now hire communication specialists and maintain media outreach departments.¹¹⁶ It is a common practice for think tank papers to be cited in the authoritative press (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Economist*) or for think tank representatives to participate in a discussion of questions of vital importance in news programmes. Adapting quickly to the possibilities given by technological progress

¹¹⁴ Interviews, London, September 2014.

¹¹⁵ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹¹⁶ R. Kent Weaver, art. cit.

in telecommunications, the most think tanks elaborate refined websites and social media strategies.¹¹⁷

A website is a key promotional “vehicle” for think tanks, through which they publicize their research. In order to attract audience to their work they increasingly use digital social media, infographics and video. An ability to condense complex work in to more “digestible chunks” is seen as particularly valuable: they turn a 50 pages report into a little video or an interesting graphics, which draws people to reading the whole of their work.¹¹⁸

Most of our respondents have personal accounts in different social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn), as well as participating frequently in debates and giving interviews on different national television channels and contributing to a wide spectrum of national and European newspapers, journals and websites.

Well-timed research, the political access, perceived credibility and active promotion of their research products represent factors extending the influence of the knowledge produced by think-tanks. All these characteristics are considered as contributing to a higher policy relevance of think tanks in comparison to universities.¹¹⁹

According to the literature on social identity, there are some essential aspects related to the organizational distinctiveness. Organizations try to contrast themselves with direct opponents which represent a possible danger due to their obvious likeness. In order to

¹¹⁷ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹¹⁸ Interviews, London, September 2014.

¹¹⁹ Rich, 2004, op. cit.

raise the level of attractiveness of their identity, the groups and organizations try to employ positive differences in comparison with other structures¹²⁰. We have seen this when think tank representatives compared their organizations with universities. The nonrandom choice of criteria for comparison is aimed to increase the dissimilarities and to reduce the resemblances. A group can also depreciate the significance of those aspects which everyone knows are weak at this group.¹²¹ In our case, such characteristics of think tanks as policy relevance, entrepreneurial skills and media presence are highly praised, whereas the role of methodical rigor and theoretical aspect of the knowledge production are underestimated.

At first glance, this self-conception seems to come to a thorough tactic of distinction. In order to prove that a think tank does not constitute a university, it should just outline its dissimilarities from these structures. Nevertheless, on closer examination it is possible to see, that every apparent action of dissociation is based on a conformable strategy of joining. Even confronting think tanks and universities, think tank representatives indicate similarities between them (similar practices and methods). Therefore, the interrelation between a think tank and a university could be represented not as a complete distinction, but as a controlled similarity.¹²²

¹²⁰ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit.

Blurring boundaries within a think tank: think tanks as mediators between fields

According to Medvetz, the separation of roles on which policy analysts build their self-perceptions is a useful but possibly delusory analytical method. This is because not many think tank representatives are satisfied to choose only one of the above mentioned roles. Instead, they partake in a professional tradition based on the purpose of learning and playing all four¹²³.

The significance of blending incompatible modes is an omnipresent topic in the speech of the majority of policy analysts. The think tank representatives use different bright metaphors in order to portray the liminal feeling which can arise because of the complexity of playing manifold roles and adjusting oneself to different social fields:

“J’ai une double casquette”.¹²⁴

“I wear two hats”.¹²⁵

“Je suis un couteau-suisse”.¹²⁶

According to many think tank members the necessity to be many-sided in order to work in a think tank, is represented as a difference from an academic scholar. However, taking into account a small number of people combining all these skills, almost all of our respondents speak about diversity and mixture of their staff in

¹²³ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹²⁴ French analogue of the expression “I wear two hats” (to have a dual responsibility) from Interview, Paris, June 2014 (translated from French by the author).

¹²⁵ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹²⁶ “I am a Swiss army knife” from Interview, Brussels, October 2014 (translated from French by the author).

different senses as one of the main criteria of recruitment in order to multiply different forms of expertise.

Taken into account their asymmetrical structure of engagement with the four professional roles, and the internal dispute related to it, the question arises as to why policy analysts do not abandon the academic role and not comprise just the political, entrepreneurial, and media ones. The claim of an academic role gives notice of being set apart from political and economic pressures, supplies policy analysts with a necessary source of credibility, as well as represents a symbolic distinction from lobby and advocacy groups¹²⁷. For example, research director of a British think tank, acknowledges that the “depth and length” of research in think tanks is not of the same level as in academia, however, it is more significant than that in campaign organizations.¹²⁸

Thus, whereas the academic constituent of the policy analyst’s mission may be hard to adjust with the other roles, it is nevertheless crucial to the overall strategy.¹²⁹

The use of a language of academic production by policy experts is not unexpected. Although the concept of the interchangeability between think tank experts and academic scholars is related to the actual point in the development of think tanks, its explanation is founded on historical grounds. The earliest think tanks were created

¹²⁷ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

¹²⁸ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹²⁹ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

with the definite objective of bridging the division between academic and political fields, between the thoughts and practical application.¹³⁰

According to one general opinion of the public role of think tanks, they serve as a “conveyor belt” between the field of knowledge production and the field of policy making. Another frequent metaphor portrays think tanks as “bridges”¹³¹. According to the definition of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) think tanks are described as a “bridge between knowledge and power”.¹³² The UNDP definition captures the belief that think tanks are an interlocutor between knowledge and power, science and the state. The discourse of “bridging”, “linking” or “connecting” the policy and research worlds have an effect on the websites, mission statements and publications of think tanks.¹³³

That is why think tank representatives emphasize the intermediate character of their institution between academic and political fields when they try to define it. According to a research director of a French think tank, an idea of a think tank consists in a mixture between academic and political logics:

¹³⁰ Richard N. Haass, art. cit.; Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.; Waltraut Ritter, op. cit.

¹³¹ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹³² James G. McGann, “Think Tanks: The Global, Regional and National Dimensions”, *Think Tanks in Policy Making – Do They Matter? Briefing Paper Special Issue*. Shanghai: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Shanghai Office, 2011, p. 8; Rudolf Traub-Merz, “Do We Need More and More Think Tanks?” *Think Tanks in Policy Making – Do They Matter? Briefing Paper Special Issue*, Shanghai: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Shanghai Office, 2011, p. 4.

¹³³ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit., p. 77.

This is a structure in fact which is half-way, between research centre in academic sense of the term and say almost cabinet. It is a structure, which could approximate to a research centre, but which adds to requirements of academic centre other requirements in terms of the effort of operational proposal, in terms of more important dissemination of produced innovation beyond only one academic circle and indeed an objective in terms of influence, that is the dissemination and impact beyond the impact of produced ideas [...].¹³⁴

A research director of a British think tank sees one of the roles of his organization in its situation between an academia and pure government politics trying to improve understanding between these different worlds and ensuring translation of the research into political change.¹³⁵

This vision relies on ideas of science and politics as two substantially different fields of human activity. Representation of think tanks as a “bridge” leads to bringing on a concept of these structures as disinterested publicly driven mediators between the detached scientific and political worlds. The boundaries between the two fields remain unaltered but are connected by think tank bridges where think tanks also take part in both protecting and “mediating the boundaries”. The bridge metaphor means that think tanks editing or

¹³⁴ Interview, Paris, June 2014 (translated from French by the author).

¹³⁵ Interview, London, September 2014.

recycling knowledge move one-way from fundamental to applied science and from scientists to informed decision-makers.¹³⁶

The metaphor of the “bridge”, as well as the concept of distinct boundaries between scientific and political worlds has been called in question.¹³⁷ Think tanks do not represent knowledge organizations located out of or over decision-making processes, transferring research from their scholarly autonomous situation into the world of politics. On the contrary, many think tanks assist in supplying the conceptual wording and the empirical illustrations then serving the commonly used postulates for decision-makers. Thus, research and policy are interconnected in the activity of decoding, explaining and reformulating socio-economic actuality. Rather than to be positioned between knowledge and power, think tanks form the “knowledge-power nexus”.¹³⁸

Nevertheless, what differentiates think tanks from other structures it is not the simple phenomenon of blurriness, it is rather a special “brand of blurriness” demonstrated by think tanks that allows comprehending their identity.¹³⁹ Organizations are inclined to tell tales about their identity, about their history and their future. A story about identity “allows the organization to draw coherence from its past and establish direction for the future”.¹⁴⁰ The “bridge” metaphor plays the role of the continuity criterion of the organizational identity

¹³⁶ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit., p. 79.

¹³⁷ Ladi, 2011 and Halffman and Hoppe, 2004 cited in Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹³⁸ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹³⁹ Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit., p.16.

¹⁴⁰ Kimberly, 1987, p. 233 quoted in Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

of many think tanks which is founded on the historical past of their predecessors, as well as determines their future existence as organizations.

At the same time, social validation is essential in upholding an organizational identity. Taking into account that the legitimacy of an organization is recognized if its goals and methods seem to comply with social norms, values and expectations, rejection of such external validation will complicate the attraction of necessary resources by the organization.¹⁴¹ The bridge metaphor has more strength in public imagination than the knowledge-power nexus. This description of think tanks persists “because it serves a purpose in policy discourses”. Policy makers and donors require independent, expedient rigorous research coupled with this label. Moreover, legitimacy for assistance to think tanks and the wish of the journalists to use think tank researchers are related to the opinion that they serve the public interest.¹⁴² Thus, the bridge metaphor is socially validated.

Shifting boundaries between think tanks and universities: joint study programmes and collocation of think tanks within universities

In spite of some criticism towards the academic world, like a model a French think tank representative used the example of university-based think tank:

¹⁴¹ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit.

¹⁴² Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit., p. 84.

I think that a model, which summarizes in the best way, what should be a think tank, it is in the United States, Brookings, which is a think tank and it reposes on the academic researchers, or always in Washington, for example, SAIS¹⁴³ John Hopkins, which is a think tank within a university, but which strives for producing papers, analyses, which purposes are not strictly academic.¹⁴⁴

Even if think tank representatives perceive more academic institutes as a model, a research director in a British think tank makes a distinction between a university-based think tank and a stand-alone organization. From his point of view, universities, willing to do policy engagements, aim to be represented more as research institutes, than think tanks, which are “more political, more media, more short term”.¹⁴⁵

Normally, distinguishing a “research institute” and a “think tank” in certain countries rotates around the role of advocacy or conduct in search of media attention, and not to capacity to carry out policy research of high quality, when research produced in institutes is considered as more objective and rigorous than in think tanks. Although a symbolic role played by these differences in the competitive market of policy analysis can be significant, these dissimilarities are frequently more assumed than really existing.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ School of Advanced International Studies

¹⁴⁴ Interview, Paris, June 2014 (translated from French by the author).

¹⁴⁵ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Stone, 2004b, op. cit., p. 4.

Pointing to differences, this interviewee again uses the terms of other policy analysts' roles, such as policy assistance and media communication, as well as reminds us about different temporalities of academic and policy research, however, he sees opportunities of shifting inter-institutional boundaries between these organizations and universities:

I think there is not necessarily always complete compatibility between university and think tank, but they do behave and do continue to work closely together¹⁴⁷.

Think tanks regard universities more like partners than like competitors. And from the point of view of some of them their differences could be basis of their cooperation:

I think in the UK and also in other European countries universities obviously have very powerful research capabilities. They probably have less capabilities to engage with political and policy audiences. So, we tend to find ourselves and advertise to work with us, because we provide capabilities to engage, that most universities do not have now¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁷ Interview, London, September 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Interview, London, September 2014.

Besides possessing political access, which is not possible “for hundreds and hundreds of academics” think tanks can also provide a good platform for academics to publish their works focused on policy practitioners. However, instead of publishing an eight thousand word paper, university researchers should be ready to produce an eight hundred word summary, giving key conclusions and key implications for policy makers.¹⁴⁹

Normally think tanks are very open to this kind of cooperation. One of the examples of such collaboration is the Jean Monnet Project.¹⁵⁰ Another form could be the establishing of joint study programs. For instance, the London-based think tank Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) created a joint PhD programme with the University of Roehampton: “Within the programme PhD fellows will conduct their research in a double function as full members of the think tank staff and the university’s learning community, thereby benefiting from both the network of one of the world’s leading think tanks and a high-quality academic environment tailored to enhance the employability and career prospects of students”.¹⁵¹

Therefore, the cooperation between these types of institutions is considered by think tank representatives to be mutually advantageous: universities could obtain an access to policy-makers

¹⁴⁹ Interviews, London, September 2014.

¹⁵⁰ European Commission, 2015. Jean Monnet Projects [online]. Available from: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/jean-monnet/jean-monnet-projects_en, retrieved on October 15, 2015.

¹⁵¹ RUSI, 2012. News. <https://rusi.org/rusi-news/rusi-welcomes-successful-candidates-joint-rusiuiversity-roehampton-business-school-phd>, retrieved on June 22, 2016.

and wider audience through networks provided by think tanks, while think tanks could use the research capabilities of universities.

There are also financial considerations for this cooperation. Many of the funding programmes, especially funded by the EU, are looking for excellence, so in the majority of the calls for tenders, think tanks have to show that they are able to carry out a given project in their applications. The members of the team should have PhD degree or 5 years of equivalent research experience.¹⁵²

According to policy analysts the collocation of think tanks within universities could be mainly beneficial for universities:

In the future there might be more collocation of think tanks within universities. Personally, I think that would be quite beneficial, because I think students tend to be interested in think tanks, because it is quite fast, interesting, political. Obviously it does create chances for universities.¹⁵³

A representative of a university-based research institute also considers that the results of their policy-relevant research and preparation of publications contribute to their teaching process:

The main purpose is to research in the area of international relations from the political prospective, as well as economic relations. These are topics, members of the team are looking into

¹⁵² Interview, Brussels, October 2014.

¹⁵³ Interview, London, September 2014.

for research purposes, resulting in publication of papers or books, to bring new knowledge in our teaching processes and also quite importantly providing advice to both government and hopefully also to the business sector from this area.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, a university professor, who simultaneously acts as a researcher in a university-based research centre, regards his “think tank activity” only as a “side product” of his main function as a university professor. At the same time he thinks that this experience could be mutually beneficial for his two roles:

We are group of university professors; our main arena is to be teachers. We are researchers at the same time. A side product of our life trajectories is appeared to be a relatively influential think tank. So, if you ask me if our approach is different, yes, of course, but it does not mean that one cannot use experience and knowledge established here, I do not see important differences.¹⁵⁵

We can see in the case of cooperation of think tanks with universities an example of transcending not so called “symbolic boundaries”¹⁵⁶ but social boundaries between these types of organizations. Taking into account the permeability of social

¹⁵⁴ Interview, Ljubljana, July 2014.

¹⁵⁵ Interview, Ljubljana, July 2014.

¹⁵⁶ Lamont, 2001 cited in Loizos Heracleous, art. cit., p. 95.

boundaries, under certain conditions boundaries could produce distinction or they could disappear generating hybridity or new forms of categorization. Considering boundaries as a way of communication, in contrast to separation, demonstrates that they are crucial to the circulation of knowledge and information across different organizations forming networks, partnerships and other forms of cooperation.¹⁵⁷

Medvetz proposed to conceptualize think tanks as “boundary organizations” based on the concept of a “space between fields” elaborated by Gil Eyal and concept of “boundary spanner”, transferred from the individual to the organization, which gets power from their position within larger systems of organizations. The boundary spanning concept spills out the boundaries crossed by a think tank. The being of these organizations relies on the creation of “interstitial fields”. These boundary organizations could be considered as influential to the extent that they are successful in exceeding the “spaces between fields” and get “field-like properties of their own”.¹⁵⁸

The need for a concept of “spaces between fields” is related to the notion of “boundary work”. According to Eyal, the boundary should be regarded not as a thin line, but as “a real social entity with its own volume”. The boundary is not only a means of detachment of internal and external components of the field, but is also an area of important

¹⁵⁷ Michele Lamont, Virag Molnar, art. cit.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Medvetz, 2012b, art. cit., p. 128-129.

relations and deals between them.¹⁵⁹ The power of a boundary organization consists in its capacity to settle on the location of the end of political, market, and media production and of the beginning of knowledge production. This aspect becomes more important with regard to the issue of “the conversion rates among different forms of capital”. A think tank can transform one form of capital into another by reinvesting it properly.¹⁶⁰ In our case of joint study programmes and collocation of think tanks within universities, think tanks aim to convert political capital into academic capital, which could be consequently converted into economic capital. The university-based research centres also reinvest their policy-relevant experience into teaching and research process and vice versa, but in a less strategic way, than in stand-alone think tanks, but rather as a “side product” activity.

Thus, the partnership between think tanks and universities could be regarded as a concomitant strategy of the organizational identity of think tanks based on their positions towards academic world. This strategy can play four roles with respect to their organizational identity in the terms of Ashforth and Mael:¹⁶¹ “instrumental” (to put their identity into practice or to implement joint research projects and study programmes with universities, i.e. converting one form of capital to another); “expressive” (to show the examples of their identity or to differentiate “think tanks” and “research institutes”);

¹⁵⁹ Gil Eyal, op. cit., p. 162.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Medvetz, 2012b, art. cit., p.128-129.

¹⁶¹ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, art. cit., p. 34.

impressive (to convince society in their desirable identity or to consider universities as partners and not as competitors); constructive (to build their identity retrospectively or to use academic style in think tanks or university-based research centres as a model).

Conclusion

In this article I presented how think tank representatives try to build their organizational identity based on their positions towards academic field.

The same organization can tell different narratives at different times and places. Due to the “relational and comparative” character of identity, the meaning of an organizational identity will differ depending on the reference points and the objectives of comparison. Social comparisons are conducted to idealizing the central organization, in spite of its real position. Owing to “malleability of identity” an organization could be portrayed at the same time in absolutely contradictory manners with certain purposes and could be still correct. However, according to the concept of “veracity of identity” this does not imply falsity of organizational identity, but rather selectivity of identity assertions, which emphasize positive attributes instead of less desired.¹⁶² This selective sense-making is incited by the contradiction, complication and dynamism that often penetrate organizational existence.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Alvesson, 1990 cited in Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, p. 31.

¹⁶³ Blake E. Ashforth, Fred A. Mael, pp. 25, 30.

Therefore, the concept of a “think tank” turned into the mixture of numerous diverse plots applied depending on the audience. Their plurality of adjusted myths and ability to accommodate rapidly in various conditions makes them the preferable means of generating discourse and reasoning.¹⁶⁴

According to the findings of this study, the approach of Medvetz, elaborated for the conditions of the United States, could be applied to the European context. European think tank experts also carry on an everlasting struggle to countervail and adjust their multiple conflicting roles.

Firstly, when think tank representatives explain their central function as producing research and policy analysis, they try to underline their similarity to universities (academic excellence, intellectual independence, employment of people with PhD or at least with similar expertise and research experience). Taking into account that their credibility as researchers depends on the ability to give notice of their independence, they permanently declare their similarity with scholarship, even if they try to underestimate it in other manifestations of their activity.¹⁶⁵

On the other hand, in spite of spread of the concept of interchangeability between think tank experts and academic scholars, the representatives of European think tanks themselves acknowledge that it is completely different “enterprise”. Think tank representatives

¹⁶⁴ Diane Stone, 2013, op. cit.

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Medvetz, 2010, art. cit.

permanently differentiate their organizations from universities highlighting their advantages in comparison with universities in other aspects of their own activities: policy relevance, entrepreneurship ability and media presence, thereby they try to show their distinctiveness. The acknowledgement of think-tank experts as providing a more realistic connection to politicians and as being a more expedient source of expertise than academics strengthens an advantage of policy analysts working in think tanks over university-based researchers.¹⁶⁶

However, think tanks can never entirely separate themselves from their “patron” organizations because every linkage provides a form of power that gives credibility to its supposed disconnection from the other organizations. Consequently think tanks must look for taking up a boundary status by accumulating different forms of capital from various worlds.¹⁶⁷ Therefore, in their self-description think tank representatives actively use the “bridge” metaphor or its derivatives, which are based on their historical role of linking academic and policy worlds. So they are not only similar to universities (or imitate their features), but they play a role of “mediator” between the universities and policy-makers, they transform abstract academic research into policy-relevant policy briefs, as well as into accessible information for journalists and policy-makers. This mediation role is possible due to their hybrid nature uniting features of their “patron” fields, but also thanks to employment of people with mixed profiles, who have

¹⁶⁶ Turner, 2012, cited in Barbara A. Misztal, art. cit.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Medvetz, 2012a, op. cit.

experience in both worlds. The highly policy-relevant “bridge” metaphor, which is widely contested in academic circles, plays the role of the continuity criterion in the building of the organizational identity of many think tanks.

At the same time, in contrast to other patron fields (policy, media and business worlds), their dependence on universities is not mutual. If policy-makers need their advice, journalists are interested in their commentaries and funders seek their advocacy abilities, universities do not express an explicit necessity in their cooperation with think tanks. Whereas think tanks depend on universities and academic world not only in symbolic terms (their identity building), but also in real terms: they need academic researchers for implementation of research projects, as well as for application for research grants. So the continuity of their existence as organizations is conditioned by their formal or informal partnership with universities, which is represented by think tank representatives as beneficial for universities, as well as for the consumers of their services. That is why one of the possible future scenarios of their cooperation is seen in collocation of think tanks within universities taken into account that it is based on the comparative advantages of both types of institutions: academic excellence of universities and policy-relevance, media presence and entrepreneurial spirit of think tanks, especially in the Internet age when any blogger can become “media intellectual” and compete with both types of these organizations. This strategy of “shifting boundaries” between think tanks and universities could become instrumental, expressive, impressive and constructive with regard to

“ideal” think tank identity based on their orientations toward academic world: fulfilment of research function (crossing boundaries), investment of their political, media and economic capital into academic capital (distinctiveness), creation of “bridge” between academic and policy worlds, as well as preparation of researchers with mixed profile (blurriness). However, it could raise the question of their independence; therefore think tank representatives at the same time disconnect themselves from universities, differentiating think tanks and research institutes.

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