

# DIGITAL CONTENT ECOSYSTEMS AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF THINK TANK INFLUENCE

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**Abstract.** This study explores the strategic evolution of think tanks from traditional research bodies into "digital advocates" within the contemporary information ecosystem. Utilizing a qualitative comparative case study of nine think tanks across China, Eastern Europe, and Spain, the research identifies how national political and media ecologies dictate the "interactivity potential" and communicative latitude of these institutions. The findings reveal distinct regional models: Spanish think tanks harness digital channels for broad advocacy and democratic deliberation; Eastern European organizations adopt a posture of "tactical neutrality" to mitigate political risk; and Chinese think tanks sustain unilateral, state-aligned communication trajectories. Furthermore, the study analyses the disruptive impact of emerging technologies, specifically AI-powered personalization and the shift toward "zero-click" search environments; which are fundamentally reshaping the mechanisms of institutional visibility and audience engagement. The research concludes that in an era of automated content and fragmented discovery, think tanks must transition from one-way broadcasting to a participants-led engagement model. Maintaining policy relevance and legitimacy requires the integration of multi-platform "liquid" content with authentic, human-led storytelling to distinguish deep research from AI-generated outputs.

**Keywords:** *branding, think tanks, digital strategy, digital marketing*

## Introduction

The evolution of technology has shifted communication from traditional mass media to interactive forms disseminated through networks. Social media platforms have reshaped public discourse for individuals and organizations alike. Zhao and Zhu (2023) point out that AI-powered algorithms on these platforms enhance visibility and access, enabling these institutions to operate as 'digital advocates.' Furthermore, AI and automation technologies are transforming interactions and communications through content personalization and process streamlining. However, this technological advancement also introduces complexities, as the same algorithmic frameworks that facilitate reach can also embed and amplify hegemonic power structures within digital ecosystems, profoundly impacting political communication and democratic processes. Think tanks operate under specific "knowledge regimes" that shape their policy influence within a given country, with some functioning as independent research bodies and others as advocacy or government-affiliated advisory groups. While some prioritize an ideological or political agenda, others engage in impartial academic research. Additionally, they provide expert testimony during legislative processes, participate in public discussions, and train future policymakers and leaders. Their analytical output, often presented in the form of reports, briefs, and scholarly articles, is critical for informing public debate and governmental decision making (Gong et al., 2020). In the United States, think tanks have played a significant role in policymaking for nearly a

century, with a notable increase in their prominence post-World War II (Ballor and Pitteloud, 2025; Koç and Önsoy, 2025).

Think tanks mediate the relationship between knowledge production and policy influence, functioning as intermediaries between academia, government, civil society, and media (Zafarullah and Das, 2025). Their traditional authority has historically derived from research output, personal networks, and policy briefings. Yet in the digital era, visibility, legitimacy, and influence increasingly depend on sophisticated online engagement. The expansion of social media, AI-driven algorithms, and multi-platform communication has transformed think tanks into “digital advocates” (Zhao and Zhu, 2023), requiring them to adapt branding, messaging, and dissemination practices across diverse geopolitical environments. Despite widespread adoption of digital platforms, existing literature rarely examines how think tanks strategically construct and deploy digital content (Arslan, 2025), nor how contextual variables, such as censorship, political openness, or media freedom, influence communication choices. This study addresses these gaps by comparing digital strategies across three contrasting geopolitical regions: China, Eastern Europe, and Spain. The research objective for this article is: (1) To explore how think tanks communicate their policy research and advocacy through digital platforms and content; (2) To identify recurring strategic themes (message framing, engagement tactics, platform choices) across selected case studies and (3) To analyse how contextual factors (governance, media control, political openness) influence digital communication strategies.

### *Literature review*

#### *Defining Think Tanks*

Think tanks are organisations that undertake policy research and analysis (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2025). Accordingly, definition of “excellence islands” is that either fully engage in policymaking or act as an intermediary between power and knowledge (Castelló-Sirvent et al., 2020). Along with this, (Abelson, 2009) defines them as independent, non profit organisations made up of specialists on various societal issues. For (Zhu and Xue, 2007), ‘think tanks’ in China refer to “stable and autonomous organisations which research and consult on policy matters to affect the policy process.” The Chinese government has also given an official definition, considering them non-profit organisations who strategically and publicly research policies, often qualifying for government assistance. In Spain, think tanks are conceptualized as “laboratories of ideas. Moreover, argues that think tanks actively shape the policy-making process by setting agendas and employ both direct and indirect methods to influence public perception, rather than remaining neutral. Despite the ubiquity of the term ‘think tank’ in political discourse, a consensual definition or understanding of their precise roles and functions remains elusive, leading to various interpretations across different geopolitical contexts (Stone, 2017). The ambiguity surrounding their definition significantly impacts the development of a coherent field of study, often leading to challenges in inter-contextual and inter-organizational comparability.

Think tanks are research organizations that serve as a bridge between specialized knowledge and political decision-making. While they are often described as “islands of excellence” or “laboratories of ideas,” their specific structure and purpose vary by region. For instance, in Western contexts, they are typically seen as independent non-

profits, whereas in China, they are recognized as autonomous yet state-supported entities that strategically consult on public policy.

### ***Role of Think Tanks***

Think tanks are important components in formulating public policy owing to their generating insights based on research, as well as offering policy recommendations and encouraging rational public discussions. They are situated within the interface of knowledge and power, as they are the link between complex academic work and the media, policy makers and the public through advocacy (Stone, 2017). In the ever-interesting political world, they also have agenda-setting authority serving as both national and international policy discourse centers (McGann, 2016). Moreover, with the advent of technologies, they are changing into advocates incorporating social media, blogging, and multimedia into their work to increase visibility. In China, there is a growing focus and attention on think tanks owing to their academic undertakings and their impact to the policy process. They not only engage the public with debate on political issues, but also directly involve themselves in policy making.

Furthermore, think tanks increasingly collaborate across borders, contributing to international policy networks and global governance discussions. Many institutions work with international organisations, universities, and non-governmental organisations to address transnational issues such as climate change, cybersecurity, migration, and global health. Their global engagement allows for the exchange of ideas and comparative policy learning, strengthening international cooperation and innovation in policymaking (Zhao and Zhu, 2023). Overall, think tanks play a crucial role in modern governance by serving as knowledge producers, policy advisors, agenda setters, and public educators. Their growing integration with digital technologies and international networks has further strengthened their capacity to influence policymaking processes at both national and global levels. As governments face increasingly complex challenges, the importance of think tanks in providing informed, research-driven, and innovative policy solutions is expected to continue expanding.

### ***Think Tanks branding and visibility***

In the contemporary digital era, branding has become an essential mechanism through which think tanks compete for influence and visibility in increasingly crowded information environments. The rise of social media platforms, digital news ecosystems, and online policy debates has transformed how think tanks communicate their research and engage with audiences (Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020). As a result, many think tanks have shifted from operating as behind-the-scenes policy advisors to becoming highly visible public actors that actively shape narratives and public opinion. Through strategic branding, think tanks are able to position themselves as authoritative voices on particular policy issues such as governance, climate change, economic reform, public health, or international relations. Digital communication technologies have significantly amplified the importance of branding for think tanks. Websites, podcasts, webinars, newsletters, social media campaigns, and multimedia content are now essential tools for enhancing institutional visibility and audience engagement. Strong digital branding allows think tanks to disseminate research findings quickly, simplify complex policy discussions for broader audiences, and increase their accessibility to journalists and decision-makers. Lindquist (2021) argues that digital platforms have enabled think

tanks to exercise “brand leadership” by strengthening their institutional narratives and establishing consistent public identities across multiple communication channels.

Furthermore, branding contributes directly to trust-building and legitimacy. In an era characterised by information overload, political polarisation, and widespread misinformation, audiences are more likely to engage with institutions perceived as credible and trustworthy. A well-established think tank brand signals intellectual reliability, methodological rigor, and policy expertise. Consequently, branding has become closely tied to institutional influence, as policymakers and media organisations often rely on recognisable and reputable think tanks for analysis and commentary. However, the capacity to build and sustain strong institutional brands is not equally distributed across think tanks globally (Gong et al., 2020). Western think tanks, particularly those based in the United States and Europe, often benefit from stronger financial resources, professional communication teams, established media relationships, and advanced digital infrastructures. These advantages enable them to maintain high visibility and dominate global policy conversations. Institutions such as Brookings Institution, Chatham House, and RAND Corporation have successfully cultivated globally recognised brands associated with policy expertise and intellectual leadership (Ozturk, 2025).

In contrast, think tanks operating in developing countries or politically restrictive environments often encounter significant challenges in establishing visibility and credibility. Limited funding, government restrictions, weak media ecosystems, and lower digital capacities may constrain their ability to compete within the global knowledge marketplace. Some institutions also face political pressure that limits their freedom to engage openly in public discourse, thereby reducing opportunities for brand expansion and public engagement. Consequently, branding disparities can reinforce existing inequalities in global policy influence, where well-funded institutions dominate international narratives while smaller or regional think tanks struggle for recognition. Another important dimension of think tank branding is the role of personal branding among scholars and policy experts. Many think tanks increasingly rely on the public visibility of their researchers, fellows, and directors to strengthen institutional reputation. Prominent experts who frequently appear in media interviews, publish opinion articles, participate in international forums, or maintain active social media presences contribute significantly to enhancing the think tank’s brand image. In this regard, institutional branding and individual branding often operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. Moreover, branding strategies are increasingly intertwined with audience engagement and public diplomacy (Kelstrup, 2020). Modern think tanks no longer communicate solely with policymakers behind closed doors; they now actively target broader audiences including students, civil society organisations, journalists, and online communities. By using accessible language, visually engaging content, and interactive digital communication, think tanks attempt to bridge the gap between academic research and public understanding. This transformation reflects the broader evolution of think tanks from “silent architects” of policy into visible and influential actors within the public sphere.

### ***Regional differences in strategic communication***

From Spain, Eastern Europe, and China, their respective digital content strategies differ owing to the unique political, institutional, and media landscape customised for each region. While all have some public communication engagement, the form, tone

and strategic goals behind their messaging is highly context dependent. In the case of China, a majority of think tanks closely situated to the state operate as extensions of government policy planning units (Zhu and Xue, 2007). Digital communication is highly restricted, and channels like WeChat or even government run portals are more information silos than interactive platforms. Consequently, style is mostly unidirectional and formal, with a focus to support state narratives. On the other hand, Spanish think tanks are under direct government scrutiny which allows unrestricted functioning within a competitive and diverse media context. This encourages the use of digital interaction through Twitter, Facebook, and even YouTube. Their messaging is primarily oriented towards advocacy and public debates which leads to increased participation from citizens. The emphasis on these digital platforms focuses primarily on the strategic framing of the issues. Think tanks in Eastern Europe sit in the middle as some are independent; however, their independence to communicate freely is highly constrained by fluctuating political climates and infrastructures (Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas and Gil-Ramírez, 2025).

Overall, these regional differences highlight how digital content strategies are not merely technological choices but are deeply embedded within governance structures and media ecologies. Whereas Chinese think tanks prioritise controlled dissemination and narrative consistency, Spanish think tanks leverage digital platforms for participatory advocacy and public influence, while Eastern European think tanks navigate a more constrained and variable environment that necessitates strategic adaptability. This comparative perspective underscores that digital engagement in think tanks is fundamentally shaped by the interaction between political context, institutional autonomy, and platform affordances.

## Materials and Methods

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study design to understand how various strategic geopolitical contexts approach Digital Content Strategy Deployment for brand building at different geopolitical think tanks (*Table 1*). The case study method is useful for providing detailed, contextual understanding of institutional activities within particular spatial and political settings focusing on document-centric comparative case study design with nine think tanks (three per region which is China, Eastern Europe, and Spain regions). Digital content analyzed included websites, social media posts, visual materials, policy briefs, and videos published between January 2021 and August 2025. A collection period of January 2021–August 2025 ensures temporal consistency across geopolitical disruptions, including the COVID-19 aftermath and regional conflicts. A purposive sampling strategy was employed (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2025) and selection criteria were based on: (1) Policy relevance and recognized influence within their national or regional policy community. (2) Active and visible digital footprint, including consistent website updates, social media activity, and multimedia dissemination. (3) Availability of publicly accessible digital materials between 2021–2025. Each of the three case studies was selected for having an active digital footprint and for their significance in the national or international policy arena in conjunction with having representative comparative political systems and media. The research seeks to understand the impact of varying regional and political settings on the development and implementation of digital strategies by studying divergent geopolitical think tank regions. These organizations were selected to maximize contextual contrast

while ensuring analytic parity across cases. Data were imported into a structured matrix and coded using thematic analysis. The study relied exclusively on publicly available digital materials, no human subjects were involved, and no institutional review board approval was required. Based on the identified criteria, nine think tanks were chosen, three from China, three from Eastern Europe, and three from Spain.

**Table 1.** *Think tanks based on their policy relevance, active digital footprint, and the availability of public digital materials.*

Region	Selected think tanks	Selection criteria
China	CICIR, CASS, SIIS	Policy relevance, state-alignment, and visible digital presence.
Eastern Europe	GLOBSEC, OSW, UIF	Influence in national/regional policy, active social media activity.
Spain	Real Instituto Elcano, CIDOB, Fundación Alternativas	Recognized policy influence, consistent website and multimedia updates.

## Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that think tanks in China, Spain, and Eastern Europe operate within fundamentally different political and communicative ecosystems, which significantly shape the nature, intensity, and direction of their strategic communication practices. From the findings, it becomes evident that digital content is the central medium through which think tanks construct, negotiate, and regulate their public presence, yet its communicative function is fundamentally shaped by the surrounding political and media ecology. While all three regions increasingly rely on digital platforms, multimedia dissemination, and issue framing to amplify institutional visibility and policy relevance, the degree of openness, audience participation, and communicative reciprocity differs substantially according to the surrounding political-media environment. These findings reinforce the argument that communication strategies cannot be understood independently from the broader structures of governance, media freedom, and political opportunity that condition institutional behaviour (McGann and Whelan, 2020).

In democratic environments such as Spain, think tanks exhibit a comparatively expansive and dialogical communication orientation. Spanish institutions actively integrate websites, podcasts, webinars, visual storytelling, and social media engagement into coordinated communication ecosystems that not only disseminate research findings but also encourage public deliberation and stakeholder participation. Their communication approaches are frequently advocacy-driven, aiming to influence policy debates while simultaneously cultivating legitimacy among civil society actors, journalists, academics, and policymakers. Through platforms such as X, LinkedIn, YouTube, and institutional blogs, Spanish think tanks strategically frame policy issues in accessible and persuasive ways, allowing them to occupy visible positions within public discourse and policy advocacy networks (Castelló-Sirvent et al., 2020). This interactive orientation reflects the broader democratic media culture in Spain, where public engagement, ideological contestation, and communicative pluralism are institutionally tolerated and often encouraged.

By contrast, think tanks in Eastern Europe operate within more ambiguous and politically sensitive communication landscapes. Although many organisations in the region increasingly adopt digital tools and social media channels to improve outreach and visibility, their communication practices tend to remain cautious, measured, and

strategically neutral. Interactive engagement is often moderated to avoid political controversy or institutional vulnerability, particularly in states where democratic consolidation remains incomplete or where media systems continue to experience varying levels of governmental influence and political polarisation. Consequently, Eastern European think tanks frequently prioritise institutional credibility, technical expertise, and evidence-based professionalism over overt advocacy or confrontational public discourse (Bátorfy and Urbán, 2020). This produces a communication style that balances visibility with political survivability, allowing organisations to maintain relevance while minimising exposure to political retaliation or reputational risk.

In China, the communication trajectory of think tanks is markedly different due to the highly centralised and state-regulated media environment. Chinese think tanks largely function within institutional boundaries defined by party-state expectations, resulting in communication practices that are predominantly top-down, policy-aligned, and non-participatory. Although digital technologies and social media platforms are extensively utilised, these tools primarily serve the purpose of controlled dissemination rather than open deliberation (Wang and Yin, 2025). Communication outputs are carefully calibrated to align with official state narratives, national development priorities, and ideological directives, leaving limited room for critical engagement or public contestation (Zhu and Xue, 2007). Consequently, audience interaction remains highly constrained, with think tanks functioning more as instruments of policy reinforcement than as independent arenas for public intellectual exchange. The public sphere, therefore, becomes significantly restricted, and communicative practices emphasise authority, policy coherence, and narrative consistency over reciprocal dialogue.

Across all three regions, a common communication pattern nonetheless emerges: think tanks increasingly adopt a dual-channel dissemination strategy whereby comprehensive policy reports and research outputs are hosted on official institutional websites, while condensed narratives, infographics, videos, and advocacy messages are circulated through social media channels to maximise reach and accessibility. However, despite this apparent technological convergence, the nature of audience engagement differs substantially. In Spain, social media platforms facilitate participatory dialogue and advocacy mobilisation; in Eastern Europe, they function more cautiously as instruments of moderated visibility; while in China, they operate primarily as controlled extensions of institutional and governmental messaging structures (Castillero-Ostio et al., 2025). Furthermore, significant differences are observable in the framing of policy discourse and the permeability of communicative boundaries. Spanish think tanks commonly employ broad and inclusive framing strategies designed to stimulate debate, shape public opinion, and legitimise reform agendas through persuasive communication. Eastern European organisations, meanwhile, often adopt restrained framing approaches characterised by neutrality, pragmatism, and diplomatic ambiguity in order to navigate politically uncertain contexts. Chinese think tanks, conversely, maintain highly disciplined framing structures that systematically exclude politically sensitive discourse and reinforce state-approved ideological narratives. Such divergence illustrates how political regimes and media governance structures decisively influence not only the channels through which think tanks communicate, but also the substance, tone, and limits of permissible discourse (Stone, 2017).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that although digital technologies provide think tanks worldwide with broadly similar communicative infrastructures, the extent to

which these infrastructures enable genuine dialogue, participatory engagement, and discursive openness remains profoundly shaped by national political and media ecologies. Digital platforms may create the technical possibility for global visibility and interaction, yet the political environment ultimately determines whether communication functions as a mechanism for democratic deliberation, cautious institutional positioning, or tightly regulated policy promulgation. In more open or pluralistic media environments, digital infrastructures tend to support relatively higher levels of interaction, where think tanks can engage in two-way communication with audiences, respond to public discourse in real time, and incorporate external feedback into policy narratives. Here, digital platforms function not only as dissemination tools but also as spaces for deliberation, agenda negotiation, and epistemic exchange between policy communities and the public sphere.

## Conclusion

In China's geographically concentrated media landscape, loyalist think tanks within the system may still develop their own forms of communicative interactivity as long as such activities do not breach their fidelity to the ruling party (Mokry, 2025). Instead of establishing digital portals that circumvent access controls and risk heightened scrutiny from regulatory bodies, these institutions tend to favour carefully regulated, self-moderated environments such as expert-led webinars, targeted policy briefs tailored to specific sectors, or closed mailing lists restricted to trusted practitioners and scholars. The implication here is that interactivity becomes a strategic instrument of compliance rather than openness, allowing think tanks to maintain relevance, demonstrate expertise, and circulate technically informed knowledge without destabilising the political status quo. In Spain, by contrast, civic involvement is encouraged by the country's democratic environment, enabling public think tanks to enhance their role as deliberative conduits that link policy elites and broader society (Yáñez, 2025). These organisations can foster long-term civic participation by engaging in advocacy around issues of substantial social value, even when such issues are not yet prioritised in national discourse. The significance of this lies in the capacity of think tanks to shape emerging public agendas, influence opinion formation, and cultivate participatory policy cultures that reinforce democratic norms.

Meanwhile, the delicate and often turbulent political environment of Eastern Europe necessitates a cautious, low-risk approach to public communication. Think tanks in this region may adopt participatory techniques through controlled, monitored formats such as pre-screened webinars, invitation-only roundtables, and regulated Q&A sessions. These approaches allow organisations to manage exposure to politically motivated backlash while maintaining a minimal yet meaningful degree of engagement. The implication is that interactivity becomes both a protective mechanism and a boundary-setting practice, enabling think tanks to preserve institutional credibility under uncertain conditions. Across these diverse contexts, interactivity potential, where institutional readiness intersects with technological affordances, should be understood as a critical competitive asset that think tanks can leverage to expand their influence (Taylor and Oviedo, 2025). Its significance extends beyond communication efficiency: it determines how think tanks negotiate visibility, legitimacy, and authority in politically varied environments. Furthermore, regardless of the political climate, the integration of multi-platform communication remains essential, particularly the blending of long-form

institutional texts with timely, socially responsive messaging on digital platforms (Kingma, 2025). This multi-platform hybridity not only broadens audience reach but also enhances agenda-setting capacity, positioning think tanks as agile knowledge institutions capable of both stability and rapid adaptation.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research relied exclusively on publicly available digital materials such as websites, social media posts, policy briefs, videos, and multimedia content. While these sources provide valuable insights into external communication strategies, they may not fully capture internal decision-making processes, organisational constraints, or strategic intentions behind digital communication practices. Second, the study adopted a qualitative comparative case study approach involving only nine think tanks across three geopolitical regions. Although the selected cases were purposively chosen to maximise contextual diversity and analytical contrast, the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to all think tanks globally. Future research should expand the geographical scope of analysis by including think tanks from additional regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Broader comparative studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how political systems, media freedom, and digital infrastructures shape communication strategies across diverse global contexts. Finally, longitudinal studies would be valuable in tracing how think tank communication strategies evolve over time in response to political change, technological disruption, or shifting media ecologies. Such studies could provide stronger theoretical understanding regarding the long-term transformation of think tanks from traditional policy institutions into digitally mediated public actors.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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