De-constructing credibility

Factors that affect a think tank's credibility

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Author's biography

Andrea Baertl Helguero is a social psychologist with an MSc in Wellbeing and Human development from the University of Bath. She is currently On Think Tanks Research Officer and has more than 10 years of experiences in research and development, focusing on research communications, international development, south-south cooperation, capacity building for NGOs and think tanks, and corporate social responsibility. Her research has centred on education, wellbeing and development, and think tanks. She partook in development projects focusing on improving governance in regional governments and also worked in a programme seeking to inform Peru 2011's presidential electoral process by raising the quality of the debate with research and policy analysis. Her capacity building work focused on working with NGOs (in Scotland) as effectiveness and fundraising advisor supporting INGOs in strengthening their good practice in development projects, monitoring evaluation and learning, and internal governance. Before joining On Think Tanks, Andrea worked at the ELLA (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America) programme where she focused on ensuring that the research produced by research centres responded to the needs of the target research users (policy makers, communities, media, academics and practitioners), was absorbed by them, and provoked them to action.

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of credibility and its importance for think tanks. Credibility is paramount to a think tank as having it qualifies think tanks to be consulted on and invited to participate in policy processes. It makes them attractive to funders; promotes engagement with the media as experts in their field; and facilitates access to reputable networks. Without it, none of this can occur. The paper explores the concept of credibility, and explains (based on a literature review) that credibility is constructed through the interaction of characteristics and actions of an organisation, and the assessment of others in the context within which communication takes place. Stakeholders give (or take away) credibility based on their assessments of the information they have and the influence of the current context. The credibility of a think tank goes beyond the quality of its research. Quality research is desirable, needed and even the foundation on which credibility rests, but it is not sufficient. The paper argues that beyond it there are a common set of factors from which individuals draw from and focus on (in various degrees) to assess the credibility of a think tank. These are: Networks; Past Impact; Intellectual independence; Transparency; Credentials and expertise; Communications and visibility; Research quality; Ideology and values; and Current context.

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Introduction

Currently, fake news, fake think tanks, bad and fake research abound (Gutbrod, 2017; Williamson & Eisen, 2017; Fischer, 2014; Briggs, 2017, Bruckner, 2017) and although not an altogether new phenomenon it has recently become more prominent. The shadow of misinformation is apparently everywhere and the credibility of experts and think tanks is being increasingly brought into question (Lewandowsky et. al 2017). Some politicians have fuelled this crisis by questioning the credibility of the media, think tanks, and experts in general in an effort to advance their own interests, as we saw the Brexit campaign (Mance, 2016). All of this creates an uncertain environment in which people are not sure who to believe, or even who to listen to.

Added to this, at present there is also more ambiguity about who and what is a credible source of information. Traditionally, credibility was awarded to experts, journalists, doctors, organisations and others, whose, characteristics, signalled it. Their position indicated their expertise and knowledge, and their verifiable credentials gave them credibility. Currently, and also partly due to the vast quantity of easily accessible sources of information, there is more ambiguity about who the experts are, who is responsible for generating and sharing information, and who can be. (Flanagin & Metzger 2017).

Science, both'social' and otherwise, is in the middle of a credibility crisis (Erlich & Gilbreath, 2017). This crisis stems partly from the misinformation environment in which we are in (Lewandowsky et. al 2017), and from problems with the quality of research as evidenced by: the lack of reliability of some studies, scandals of data fabrication, misuse of statistics, among others (Briggs, 2017). But other factors are also fuelling this credibility crisis, especially for think tanks (or policy research centres)[1]: accusations (and evidence) of lack of transparency (Krugman, 2005), unreported conflicts of interests (Monbiot, 2006; Norington 2003), lack of intellectual independence (Friedman, 2001: Silverstein, 2013), accusations of lobbying on behalf of corporate interests (Monbiot, 2013; Williams & Silverstein, 2013) allegations that think tanks are vehicles for foreign powers to influence domestic policy (Lipton, Williams & Confessore, 2016), etc. All of this debilitates the credibility of the sector.

An important factor in this crisis is the somewhat thorny relationship with the private sector. The power of corporations, which can mobilise resources (mainly funding but also networks) to influence

1. Throughout the paper we will be using think tanks and policy research centre interchangeably.

governments to suit their needs, has increased the mistrust some people have for think tanks (exemplified in this open letter from US Senator Warren, 2013). Some policy research centres are seen by the public as an extension of corporate interests (Lipton & Williams, 2016) and even as fronts for lobbying (US Senator Elizabeth Warren, 2016).

The case of the New America Foundation is a good example of what has been fuelling the think tank credibility crisis. In August 2017 the think tank fired a researcher who had recently criticised Google, one of the think tank's funders. The researcher, and others, claimed he lost his job because of his comments on Google, while management denied this[2]. New America Foundation received opprobrium for the action, for how they handled the crisis, and for the lack of transparency and intellectual independence it showed (Vogel, 2017). All of this has undermined their own credibility and hampered that of the sector in general. Episodes like this feed the mistrust some sections of the public have for all policy research centres, and negatively affect the credibility of the sector, guarding users against the research and proposals made by them (Judis, 2017).

The credibility hypothesis in research use states that the use of research evidence is, partly, dependent on the credibility of the source or knowledge producer.

The *raison d'être* of policy research centres is to carry out research to inform policy and practice. To achieve that, they need to be perceived as credible sources of information and advice. The credibility hypothesis in research use states that the use of research evidence is, partly, dependent on the credibility of the source or knowledge producer (Ouimet *et al.* 2014). Thus, to fulfil their mission, they need to be and be seen as credible sources of advice.

In this milieu, this paper explores the concept of credibility and its importance for think tanks. Through a literature review it attempts to bring together research undertaken in various disciplines (communications, psychology, and policy research), with the aim of untangling how a think tank's stakeholders asses its credibility. It proposes a list of factors considered by think tank's audiences to assess if they are credible or not. This list aims to be a starting point in the discussion and research on the factors that impact on the credibility of think tanks, and how can it can be enhanced and sustained.

What is credibility? A literature review

Definition

Credibility has been of interest since Aristotle, who identified it as one of the three modes persuasion: *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *ethos* (the source's credibility or authority). It has been studied in several fields (psychology, information science, social sciences, and others) but most prominently by communication scientists (Flanagin & Metzger 2017). The landmark study on the field was carried out by Hovland and colleagues (Hovland, Jannis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951), who examined how the characteristics of a source influence the acceptance of a message by a recipient. Hovland *et al.* defined credibility as the believability of a communicator, determined by how the receiver evaluates its expertise and trustworthiness. Credibility is thus a construct based on the receiver; the recipient of the message awards credibility (or not) to the source.

2. The full case can be read here: Vogel (2017). New America, a Google-Funded Think Tank, Faces Backlash for Firing a Google Critic. New York Times

Source credibility is the perception of the receiver that the communicator (person, organisation or other) is able and willing to provide information that is correct and true.

This definition is still relevant today (Flanagin & Metzger 2017), and across disciplines credibility is associated with believability. Source credibility is the perception of the receiver that the communicator (person, organisation or other) is able and willing to provide information that is correct and true (Tseng & Fogg, 1999, in. Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007; Westerman, Spence, Van Der Heide, 2014).

The association of believability and credibility also holds true in policy science research. Doberstein (2017) operationalised credibility as "*an individual's assessment of the believability of an argument*" based on the evidence at hand, the argument presented to him/her, and other cues (or signals) like authority or credentials.

In more general terms, credibility is defined, as "*the quality of being trusted and believed in*" (Oxford Dictionary). This definition also locates the emphasis on others; to be credible, the organisation or person in question needs an'*other*' to award the credibility. Without this other, a communicator neither lacks nor has credibility.

This review of definitions serves to prove that all credibility related research and sources share the same basic principle: a credible source is a believable source. These definitions also agree that credibility is constructed by the interaction of the qualities and current circumstances of a person or organisation and someone who awards it. Thus, credibility is at the same time constructed of characteristics that belong to the person or organisation in question and also the evaluation of those characteristic by others.

Components of credibility

Researchers of credibility from across fields agree that credibility is a multidimensional construct whose main components are expertise and trustworthiness. Some have added other factors to their definitions, including: credentials, similarity to receiver beliefs and context (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), goodwill – having the recipients' best interest in mind – (Westerman, Spence & Van Der Heide, 2014), and attractiveness (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), to mention some. But these components can ultimately be said to belong or relate to either of the two main components first described by Hovland and his collaborators.

Expertise, also referred to as competence, is defined as the perception that a source is skilled and has knowledge and experience on the topic they are informing on (Westerman *et al.*, 2014). That it has the qualifications, authoritativeness and competence that the receiver deems to be necessary to be trusted and believed on that topic (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). A source that is considered to have expertise is perceived to provide valid and accurate information (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007).

Trustworthiness is understood as honesty and disinclination to deceive. In other words, it is the perception that the source is sincere and objective and that its asseverations are valid (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007).

Despite the general agreement that credibility, in general, is largely constructed based on the perception of these two components, it is important to reflect on the factors that influence a think tanks credibility more specifically. Also the meaning of trustworthiness and expertise in the context of policy research centres needs to be untangled. It is also important to assess if these are the only factors at play, or if, like the studies mentioned above suggest, other factors are also important. But before delving into these specific factors, the process by which credibility is assessed needs to be clear.

How is credibility assessed?

The cognitive process by which a person assesses the credibility of an organisation, individual, website, or any kind of source, is key to understand the construction of credibility. Hilligoss and Rieh (2008) argue that everyone has their own credibility constructs and their own definition of it. This construct is an abstract idea of what credibility is and what characteristic a credible source should have. Credibility is judged subjectively by individuals who use this idea, and contrast it with the sources they encounter, evaluating if their visible characteristics and information at hand fit or not with their construct. An individual's credibility construct interacts with the information at hand and through this encounter reaches a judgement. These judgments can be based on several aspects of a communicator and different types of information; for instance, on previous experience with the source, on hearsay, on reputation, on official or professional credentials, etc (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007).

Fogg's (2003)'Prominence-Interpretation Theory' serves to further understand how credibility is assessed. Although based solely on research on web credibility, it adds an important caveat to this process. Fogg argues that for people to make a credibility assessment, they first must notice something (prominence) and then make a judgement about it (interpretation). If a characteristic goes unnoticed, then it is impossible for the user to make a judgement about it. According to this theory, the user's assumptions (culture, experience), their level of competence in the subject, and their context (expectations, environment, salient norms, etc.) affects their interpretation. This means that the aspects in which judgements (interpretations) are based on, vary between individuals, but also that different aspects can be considered by an individual depending on what she is assessing, her knowledge on the subject and the context she is immersed in.

Petty and Cacioppo (1981; 1986), have famously studied how a person makes these judgements. They identified two forms by which information is processed to arrive at a credibility judgement (from a message): systematic and heuristic. Systematic processing is an in-depth evaluation of a message and its source, based on the content and information at hand. However, in most interactions, people lack the motivation or time to assess the message or source based on factual information, and so they rely on heuristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Heuristic processing involves making credibility judgements based on rules of thumb that a person holds. These rules of thumb include narratives or personal theories of how the world works and how things are. Heuristics play an important role in studies of credibility and are used by several authors to help explain how people assess credibility and what they base their judgments on. Social psychologists Tversky and Kahneman (1974), first identified and described them as mental shortcuts (rules of thumb) that people use to quickly form judgements and make decisions. Human beings are constantly exposed to an overload of information and stimulus. To deal with this, people resort to heuristics to make quick judgements about anything, not just credibility. This enables us to focus only on a few selected aspects and ignore others to make a judgement or reach a decision, thus saving precious cognitive resources (and time). Individual's experiences (either direct or vicarious) inform and construct their heuristics and, even though highly effective in many cases, they lead to error in some others. For example, a heuristic for someone could be that research done by Oxford University is of very good quality and should be trusted. They could base this heuristic either on personal experience (they have read good pieces before, know their quality control processes, etc.) or on information and experiences shared by trusted individuals (or other sources). In the future when this person encounters a piece of research affiliated to Oxford University, she will quickly establish that it is of good quality, without the need to delve deeply into it and regardless of the actual quality of the paper. This does not mean that people never systematically asses information, but if pressed for time and with an overload of information – which is often the case – people will resort to heuristic to make judgements. In summary, heuristics, enable individuals to reach quick conclusions and judgements without too much engagement with the actual source or piece of information.

Box 1. Heuristics at play

Heuristics are a useful way to sift through and make sense of all the information received. Perceptions of authority, status and expertise are strong filters used to process information easily and heavily influence the credibility assessments of policymakers and policy analysts when looking at research. Doberstein (2016; 2017) found that policymakers and policy analysts in Canada heavily relied in heuristics when assessing research presented to them. He found that academic research (i.e. from universities) had a positive heuristic attached to it, that academic institutions had higher credibility than think tanks, and that ideologically marked research (i.e. from think tanks that work under a strong ideology) had a negative one. Consequently, the latter were instantly assessed as less credible by bureaucrats examining policy-relevant information and advice. Interestingly, when an article produced by a think tank was attributed to a university its credibility rose substantially. In fact, the bureaucrats in Doberstein's (2016) study were almost 300% more likely to attribute it a higher level of credibility (in a scale questionnaire). In summary policy analysts seem to be assessing the credibility of a piece based mostly on heuristics and not on a systemic assessment of the information at hand.

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In conclusion, an individual's credibility constructs interact with the information at hand and through this, individuals reach judgement about the credibility of a source. People can contrast the information either by a systematic and analytical process or, most commonly, by relying on heuristics. Context and which source characteristics are more salient play an important role and can make some pieces of information more salient than others, thus affecting the final credibility assessment. Understanding this process enables us to examine how the public, policymakers and other stakeholders asses the credibility of a think tank, understand how it is constructed, and what are the factors that are more commonly considered in a credibility assessment.

Graph 1: Summary of credibility assessment processes.

CREDIBILITY CONSTRUCT	How an individual defines credibility (in general and specifically for each type of source)
TYPE OF JUDGEMENTS	How a person reaches each credibility judgement. Can be systematic processing or using heuristics
INTERACTION	How the context, construct and judgments interact to reach a credibility assesment

CREDIBILITY ASSESMENT

Source: Author's construction based on the literature review

We are emphasising perception and placing credibility, partly, in the eye of the beholder, but this does not imply that credibility is purely subjective. It is not. Credibility is constructed through the interaction of characteristics and actions of an organisation, and the assessment of others in the context within which communication takes place. Stakeholders, audiences or publics give (or take away) credibility based on their assessments of the information they have, their own heuristics and the influence of the current context.

Depending on the information at hand and the context, these definitions of credibility might vary and different aspects can gain importance (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007). Because of this, an organisation can lack credibility for some and have it for others. Therefore, depending on who is making the assessment, it is possible for the same think tank to simultaneously be seen as credible by some and to lack credibility to others. These assessments are also fluid, they change over time based on what the think tank does and fails to do, as well as by changes in the context[3].

Several implications for policy research centres follow. Prominence-interpretation theory highlights the importance of making certain characteristics more salient or visible, so that potential users may consider them for their credibility assessment. Also, it is important to know how credibility is constructed by different individuals, groups, or stakeholders, as well as their most common or go-to heuristics, so think tanks can work on improving said characteristics and signal them to their audiences.

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3. Heuristics also may change with the experiences of an individual. To change a heuristic new information that challenges it needs to become available. The person then chooses to either adjust his/her heuristic or disregard the new information.

Why is credibility important for a policy research centre?

As mentioned in the introduction, the credibility hypothesis in research use states that the use of research evidence is, partly, dependent on the credibility of the source or knowledge producer (in Ouimet *et al.* 2014). Moreover, the credibility of a source magnifies its influence in agenda-setting, as well as in framing public opinion (Flanagin & Metzger 2017). So as research shows, for think tanks to effectively inform policy and practice they need to be perceived as credible sources of information. In fact, the acceptance of policy advice has been found, in some cases, to be more highly correlated with the experience and reputation of a source than with the actual logic of the argument (Doberstein 2017). Therefore, the higher the credibility of the source, the higher the chances of influencing the policy process (Doberstein, 2017).

Academics, have historically had a position of legitimacy and authority in the eyes of the public and, therefore, high credibility in policy research (Stone 2007). But, because think tanks occupy a fluid and porous space between several other communities or fields – academia, politics, business, journalism (Medvetz ,2012) – they often lack the status usually attributed to the members of those other fields. For instance, think tanks are perceived as less credible that universities that inhabit the academic field (Doberstein, 2016, 2017)

Credibility is therefore important because it enables policy research centres to be heard by their audiences, thus fulfilling their mission of informing policy. Credibility qualifies think tanks to be consulted on and invited to participate in policy processes; it makes them attractive to funders; promotes engagement with the media as experts in their field; and facilitates access to reputable networks.

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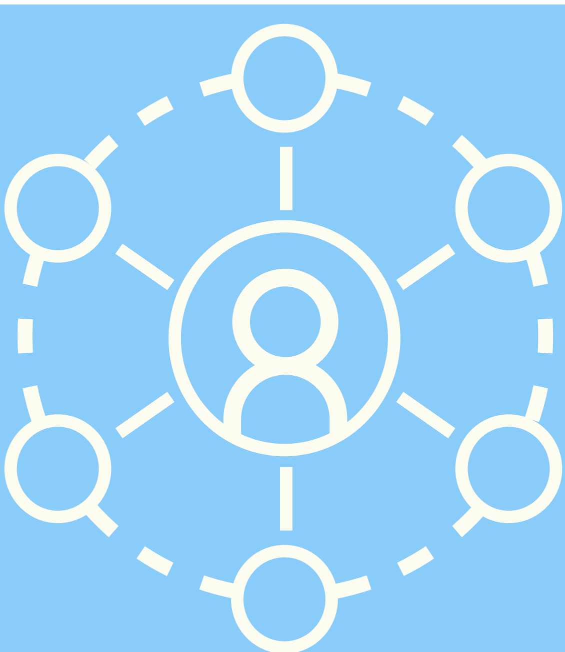


What influences a think tank's credibility?

Individuals have different credibility constructs, and these permeate their approach and assessment of the credibility of a centre and their work, as the theories above have shown (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2007; Fogg, 2003). But regardless of the variability, we argue that there are some commonalities as to what factors are used to build an individual's credibility construct and their assessment of the credibility of specific think tanks. Each individual may be focusing on different aspects of an organisation and valuing them differently, but there is a common set of characteristics that are assessed, and on which credibility judgements are based.

Research on credibility in policy research has mostly focused on the credibility of researchers and how this affects their reach and influence on policymakers (e.g. Haynes et al. 2012, and Ouimet *et al.* 2014), on the general perception of credibility of an organisation (Rich, 2004), and on the credibility awarded to specific pieces of research produced by academic sources and think tanks (e.g. Doberstein, 2016; 2017). However, fewer studies have focused on the characteristics of think tanks that signal credibility to their stakeholders

In a research carried out by Haynes *et al.* (2012), civil servants and politicians agreed on the factors they considered when deciding which researchers to work with. An interesting finding was that they assigned different weights to those factors depending on their role and the stage of policy development, which is congruent with Hilligoss and Rieh's (2007) proposal that people have different credibility constructs, mediated by their context. The factors found in this study were: trustworthiness, reputation, independence, pragmatism, breadth of knowledge, faithful representation of research, authenticity, understanding government, collaborative skills, and communication skills.

For their part, Jacobson and Goering (2006; see Ouimet *et al.*, 2014) identified four dimensions of credibility for policy research: scientific credibility (trustworthiness of the knowledge producer for producing sound information and good data), expertise (knowledge, experience, and skill); authority (respectability), and the stance adopted by researchers (separation of data from the researchers' values). This is congruent with the components initially described by Hovland and his colleagues.

Moving the debate towards think tanks as organisations (instead of the research they and other academics produce), Stone (2010) argues that to establish itself as a credible organisation, a think tank needs to gain a reputation for providing correct information, with a neutral stance and reliable analysis (signalling expertise and trustworthiness). She argues, for example, that in the case of the Brookings Institute, their legitimacy and intellectual credibility stems from their reputation, long and illustrious history, as well as their scholarly disposition and research credentials that establish their neutral stance and separates them from advocacy organisations. Adding to this, Rich (2004) found that congressional staff and journalists viewed think tanks as more credible than advocacy organisations – although some congressional staff were not able to adequately spot an advocacy organisation if they were partisan to their views.

The credibility of a think tank goes beyond the quality of its research. Quality research is desirable, needed and even the foundation on which credibility rests, but it is not sufficient.

As can be inferred from these studies – and building on the credibility crisis mentioned in the introduction – the credibility of a think tank goes beyond the quality of its research. Quality research is desirable, needed and even the foundation on which credibility rests, but it is not sufficient. A think tanks credibility is built from the assessment of different characteristics and varies from individual to individual. These studies also show that despite the variability on the aspects that people focus on for assessing the credibility of specific pieces of research, researchers or organisations, there seems to be a common set of characteristics or factors that people draw from.

A proposed list of think tank credibility factors

As mentioned, the credibility construct – the notion of what is a credible organisation – varies for each individual. But despite this, we argue that there are a common set of factors from which individuals draw from and focus on (in various degrees) to assess the credibility of a think tank.

Based on the literature review, we suggest a list of factors. These are an effort to operationalise current research on the topic, devising components and issues relevant and known to think tanks, and which can help them deconstruct what their credibility could be based on. The proposed factors are:

- Networks
- Past Impact
- Intellectual independence
- Transparency
- Credentials and expertise
- Communications and visibility
- Research quality
- Ideology and values
- Current context

These factors also are markers for trustworthiness and expertise,[4] and contribute – depending on who is doing the evaluation and the context – to an organisation being perceived as credible. All factors form part of a pool of characteristics that people draw from when judging the credibility of a think tank. These contribute, in varying degrees, to the overall assessment of credibility of an organisation – depending on who is doing the evaluation – and will reflect the experience, knowledge and information of that person. Not all of them are considered by everyone, but we propose that these are the most commonly-assessed characteristics used to base credibility judgments on. Also, every so often one factor can become the most prominent characteristic by which a think tank is judged, and therefore might singlehandedly help define if a think tank is credible or not.

All factors can be used either as heuristics or systematically analysed by the person who is making the credibility assessment. If processed through heuristics, a person will contrast the information at hand with their heuristics (rules of thumb), and if they fit (are satisfied), then they will award credibility (or not) to the organisation in question. If assessed systematically, an individual will reflect on the information at hand in more depth and assess if they award credibility or not to the think tank. In either case these assessments can either help award or hinder the credibility of a policy research centre.

Table 1. Factor summary

FACTOR	Definition	Signals
NETWORKS	Connections, alliances, and affiliations that an organisation and its staff and board have.	Expertise Trustworthiness
PAST IMPACT	Any effect that a policy research centre has had on policy, practice, media, or academia.	Expertise
INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY	Independence on deciding their research agenda, methods, and actions an organisation undertakes.	Trustworthiness
TRANSPARENCY	Publicly disclosing funding sources, agenda, affiliations, partnerships, and conflicts of interests.	Trustworthiness
CREDENTIALS AND AUTHORITY	Collected expertise and qualifications that a think tank and its staff have.	Expertise
COMMUNICATIONS AND VISIBILITY	How and how often the think tank communicates with its stakeholders.	Trustworthiness
RESEARCH QUALITY	Following research guidelines to produce policy relevant research in which the quality is assured.	Expertise Trustworthiness
IDEOLOGY AND VALUES	Ideology and values are the set of ideas and values that guide an individual or organisation.	Trustworthiness
CURRENT CONTEXT	The current setting in which a think tank and its stakeholders are immersed.	Frames the assessment and gives prominence to certain factors

4. As mentioned in a previous section trustworthiness and expertise are most agreed upon components of credibility.

NETWORKS

Definition

Our definition of networks is broad and includes all the connections that an organisation and its staff have. These may be in the form of official partnerships, alliances, individual staff or board connections, groups that they belong to, links to media, associations, belonging to policy communities, etc. Networks can be local, regional, or international.

Why are they important?

Think tanks are brought closer to the policymaking environment through the networks in which they seek to participate (Bieler & Higgott, 2000). Networks can provide access and closeness to politics, media, academia, funders, the private sector, etc. The partnerships that they have, who do they have access to in different fields, who have they worked with, who has funded them, the communities its researchers belong to, the connections they have with current governments, its links with the private sectors, their international and regional connections, etc., are all examples of the networks that policy research centres can have. These can give (or take away credibility) to think tanks, as the mere association with certain people or groups validates a think tank in the eyes of certain audiences. But also, they may negatively affect their credibility to those outside these audiences or who view these networks negatively.

Networks can signal both expertise and trustworthiness (or lack thereof). Trustworthiness, warranted, for instance by being part of a network or being recommended by someone the recipient trusts, transfers trust, partly, to an organisation. Networks can also signal expertise, as belonging to certain networks – e.g. the Think Tank initiative or the Royal Society of Arts – signals, to some, that the organisation or individual in question has passed through some filters that assure their expertise.

Often, people rely on the assessment of their trusted sources to filter out who has credibility and who has not. Hilligoss and Rieh (2007) found that people heavily used network-related heuristics to establish the credibility of a source. A source was deemed credible if it was endorsed by someone they trusted either personally – such as friends or colleagues – or not – such as an expert in the field, another organisation, etc.

Haynes *et al.* (2012) found that some of the government advisers (government employees) they surveyed avoided unsolicited meetings with researchers, and did not grant meetings to those not personally recommended by colleagues or who they had no previous knowledge on. They (government advisers) argued that if they had no previous information of a person or organisation, they were not able to assess if they could trust them, or what their "standing" was. Recommendations, were very powerful in establishing trust, as it implied that an endorsed researcher had been already risk-assessed by the referee.

In summary, networks are crucial in the assessment of credibility of a source. Belonging to certain networks signal trust and expertise to some stakeholders, and even open up (or foreclose) links with governments and other stakeholders.

PAST IMPACT

Definition

Past impact is defined as any kind of effect that the policy research centre has had on policy, practice, media, academia, or the policy debate.

Why is it important?

Even though past performance does not guarantee future results (borrowing a line from the financial market), past impact is a proxy measure of what the think tank could do in the future. Positive impact (in the eye of the beholder) signals expertise because the positive influence a policy research centre has had, shows their competence and authority. A lack of previous perceived positive impact might hinder the credibility of an organisation, as there is no way of assessing their past work. Lack of impact makes the other variables much more important for a think tank that is just starting. The influence a think tank has had can also be considered to be negative, and in that case, past impact hinders their credibility.

According to Hilligoss and Rieh (2007), previous experience with a source of information significantly affects subsequent credibility judgments (either positively or negatively). Haynes *et al.* (2012) also found that researchers who had had impact in the policy process had higher credibility, and entered a virtuous cycle of well-known policy-effective researchers. Their continuous participation in media and policy processes gave them credibility and a solid reputation in the eyes of policymakers.

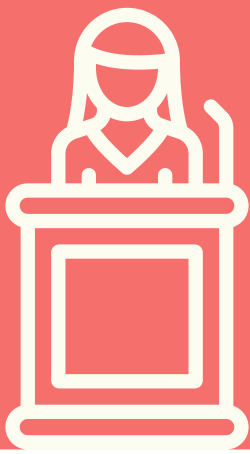
Past impact and influence is important to establish credibility, but it works in conjunction with other factors. It alone does not define the credibility assessment of an organisation. In some cases, past impact might not be remembered by stakeholders, and thus it might not be considered in their credibility assessment – as Fogg (2003) would argue, in that case their impact lacks prominence. Furthermore, past impact and influence are not the only drivers in the credibility assessment of stakeholders. For example, and as reported by Rich (2004), the Heritage Foundation was seen by congressional staff and journalists as the most influential[5] think tank in 1997 (80% said so), while the Brookings Institution came second (65%)[6]. This was so for both democratic and republican congressional staff, as well as

5. Even though influence is not exactly past impact, it is very similar to it and can serve as a proxy.
6. The survey question asked, "*which three think tanks would you say have the greatest influence in Washington these days (1997)?*"

journalists. But when asked which think tank "*comes to mind as most credible in the political process*", Brookings ranked first and Heritage ninth. This shows that influence or impact in the political process, albeit important, does not set the credibility assessment of an organisation in isolation. Other factors are also at play.

In summary perceived past impact serves to signal the expertise and authority of a think tank, both in general and in particular policy areas, and therefore is an important, albeit not the only, component in the assessment of their credibility.

INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE



Definition

An intellectually independent think tank follows its own research agenda and its researchers decide their methods and activities as they see fit. It seeks input from various stakeholders, but it does not allow the interests of any third party (donors, government, funders, international powers, etc.) to dictate its methods and results[7] – it keep the final word on how they conduct their research and activities. An intellectually independent think tank has an independent voice based on research, regardless of its connections. This does not mean that they are neutral, nor that they do not adhere to an ideology, but that they set their own research agenda.

Why are they important?

A think tank's independence is key to fulfilling its role of promoting communication between government and society (Buldioski, 2011). Policymakers value a researchers' independence, as it enables them to (in the policymakers' eyes) provide frank advice guided by objective results. A caveat to this is that advice should not only be objective and independent, but also be perceived by others to be so (Haynes et al. 2012).

In the long term, close affinity or partiality with an administration has been found to be damaging to the credibility of think tanks (Stone, 2007). If they are perceived to be following the mandates of others, they lose their independent voice and are no longer viewed as trustworthy sources of research and advice.

Relationships with donors has created media scandals all around the world and hindered the credibility of think tanks, sometimes with reason and sometimes without (Judis, 2017). The above mentioned

7. Intellectual independence differs from financial independence. An organisation's funding sources can be many: government, international organisations, foundations, philanthropist, corporations etc. However, they can (and should) still carry out their research autonomously.

> **Intellectual independence signals the trustworthiness of a think tank, understood as its capacity and willingness to make independent recommendations.**

case of the New America Foundation clearly highlights the importance of intellectual independence from funders, and how quickly credibility can be lost, even for an organisation who had, until then, a good reputation. This case also serves to illustrate the, probably small, albeit important, difference between intellectual independence and transparency. The New America Foundation list all its funders, and Google is only one of many. But in spite of being transparent on their sources, their intellectual independence was compromised, which shattered their credibility.

In essence intellectual independence signals the trustworthiness of a think tank, understood as its capacity and willingness to make independent recommendations. It is a factor that, if found lacking, undermines credibility, but if is positive, it does not dramatically increase its credibility, as it is expected to be a minimum standard of think tank behaviour.

TRANSPARENCY

Definition

Most commonly associated with financial transparency, a transparent policy research centre publicly discloses its funding sources in a way that it is accessible and easy to understand. But transparency in relation to credibility is broader and involves many aspects of an organisation including: interests, agenda, funding sources, affiliations, partnerships, conflicts of interest, etc.

Why is it important?

Being transparent signals trustworthiness and as such plays an important role in assessing the credibility of an organisation. All potential biases and affiliations need to be acknowledged if research is to be credible. Obscuring funding sources, affiliations, or conflicts of interest might pass until discovered but, if found, it can cast doubts over the motives of a think tank and hinder its credibility.

Transparency is also a tool to guard against lobbyist trying to mask as think tanks (Transparify, 2016). Making clear where the funding comes from protects a think tank from being thought of as a front for lobbyists (Gutbrod, 2016).

Transparency has gained importance in the last couple of years, and it is now widely considered (by stakeholders) when assessing the credibility of an organisation. Fifteen years ago it might not have been a factor at all. Transparify (2016) has documented the global move, in policy research and advocacy, towards greater transparency. In 2013 they did a baseline study of 169 institutions, only 25 of which were transparent. By 2016 this number had risen to 67 (from the same 169 institutions), which clearly indicates this trend towards improving transparency.

In summary transparency signals commitment to intellectual independence, integrity, and research quality, and respect for democratic norms (Transparify, 2016). All of these indicate that an organisation is trustworthy and therefore credible.

CREDENTIALS AND AUTHORITY

Definition

Credentials and authority are the collected expertise, experience, and knowledge that a think tank has in any given subject, evidenced by the qualifications of its members, their publications, public interventions and also any awards or recognitions they have achieved, either individually or as an organisation.

Why are they important?

Recognised authority in a given subject increases the changes a think tank will be consulted on it and provides social validation. The authority and expertise of think tanks is partly based on their scholarly legitimacy and the intellectual expertise they are perceived to hold (Bieler & Higgott, 2000). The knowledge credentials of think tank scholars gives weight to their recommendations and grants them a footing to partake in the policy debate (Stone, 2013). These credentials signal their expertise and affects the assessment of their credibility.

Credentials are common heuristics and widely used by stakeholders to assess the credibility of think tanks. Haynes *et al.* 2012 found that policymakers frequently linked the good reputation (of a researcher) with being part of a reputable organisation, and with having degrees from prestigious universities or institutes (or having worked for one).

Part of the success of a think tank resides in attracting top research staff. The authority they have cultivated rests in enrolling researchers who could easily be found in academic circles (Stone, 2007). Think tank staff sometimes move in and out of policy research centres into (and out from) government positions. For a think tank, former (or future) politicians and government employees can also increase their reputation (Stone, 2007) or in some cases hinder it. The expertise and authority of staff members – be them top researchers, former (and future) politicians or government employees, etc. – becomes part of the expertise of the organisation and lends or takes away credibility from it.

Networks are closely related to this factor, but differ from it, as credentials and expertise are directly related to the knowledge, publications, qualifications and recognitions that a think tank and their staff have. Meanwhile, networks are based on affiliations, which may correlate with knowledge but are not its basis.

In summary the credentials and authority of a think tank in a given subject are based on the collected expertise of the organisation, and/or the individual knowledge and credentials of its members. This, as mentioned, signals their expertise (or lack thereof) and affects the credibility judgment of an organisation.

COMMUNICATIONS AND VISIBILITY

Definition

Communications and visibility include all the different ways in which a think tank, its staff, researchers and board, present themselves to the public. It includes their traditional and social media presence, their website and their formal communications.

Why is it important?

How a think tank communicates with the public and the visibility they have can also signal expertise and trustworthiness. The amount of information, in what format it is transmitted, by whom, and who is it aimed for (and why) are only some of the aspects at play.

Ouimet *et al.* (2013) found that media exposure (radio and newspapers) enhanced the credibility of researchers, and served as an opportunity for knowledge mobilisation. Haynes et al. (2012) found that more politicians (as opposed to civil servants) relied on the media to identify researchers and approached them based on their media exposure, as it implies a certain recognition of their authority. To some, media presence was used as proxy or heuristic to identify expertise.

Nevertheless, media exposure can also be negative for credibility, as participation on TV has been associated with fewer opportunities to present evidence to policymakers by Ouimet *et al.* (2013). Consistent with these finding, Haynes et al. (2012) found that exposure to media outlets also made researchers a bigger threat to some policymakers, if they had a critical position regarding official policy.

An organisation's website, and their social media presence, are nowadays the most common way an organisation presents itself and communicates with the public. Westerman *et al.* (2014) found that social media pieces affect the credibility of the source; the recency of tweets of a social media account affected the assessment of credibility of the organisation (positively if the tweets were recent). On websites, Fogg (2003), found that several factors affected how the information presented is assessed and interpreted: assumptions, knowledge of the topic, and context. If a think tank is known and has a solid reputation for credibility, a poor website might be anodyne. But if the public is unfamiliar with the think tank in question, then their ideas of how the website of a credible source should look will affect their assessment. Fogg *et al.* (2002) found that users considered the design and look of a website as the most important factor in their credibility assessment (46% mentioned it), followed by the structure (28%) and focus (25%) of the information.

Rich (2004) argues that aggressive self-promotion and marketing subtracts from the credibility of an organisation. His research found that the organisations that were identified as most credible tended to be non-marketing oriented institutions[8]. He states that there is a trade-off between promoting their work and fostering credibility.

Communications and visibility can take many different shapes and, unlike with the other factors, there is less agreement on what stakeholders consider good or bad visibility and communications. There are many options available, and it is one of the policy research centres tasks to determine who their interlocutors are, what is the best way to reach them, and what signals credibility to them.

RESEARCH QUALITY

Definition

In strict methodological terms, research quality is "*the scientific process encompassing all aspects of study design; in particular, it pertains to the judgment regarding the match between the methods and questions, selection of subjects, measurement of outcomes, and protection against systematic bias, non-systematic bias, and inferential error*" (National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research, 2005, p. 2).

But research quality is more than that. Based on a review of different frameworks and guidelines, we have selected a few characteristics that make up research quality and are relevant for the assessment of credibility of a policy research centre. These characteristics are assessed either independently or as part of the concept of research quality.

Clear purpose and fitness for purpose. The purpose of a research should be clear and the questions it wishes to answer should inform it (Mendez, 2012). Boaz and Asby (2003) discuss that fitness for purpose

8. Rich (2004) uses the term marketing oriented institutions to refer to those organisations that heavily advertise themselves to their audiences. All organisations need and use marketing techniques but these ones, as Rich argues use them heavily.

is a marker for research quality, stating that the methods should be adequate to the aim of the study and fit how the results will be used.

Relevance for stakeholders and policy/Legitimacy. Several sources mention relevance as a key aspect of research quality. Boaz and Ashby (2003) emphasise that research should address the needs of stakeholders.

Integrity and scientific merit. Is an assessment of the technical quality of the research, design rigour, execution, how conclusions follow from the analysis, transparency (showing design and methodology), and following of ethical guidelines (Mendez, 2012).

Quality assurance processes. How an organisation ensures that its research fits all these criteria is also part of the assessment of the quality of the research they produce. Having a quality control area, engaging in peer review, tracking citations, validating the results with stakeholders, etc., are all ways to ensure that the research that they carry out is timely, fit for purpose, policy relevant, well designed, ethical, etc.

Why is it important?

Research quality signals both expertise and trustworthiness, and is at the core of the assessment of a think tank's credibility. All these factors rest in the organisation actually carrying out quality research. As Stone (2007) mentions "*the worst fate for a think tank is to be seen as delivering unreliable or sloppy analysis*" which gives issues of quality and rigour the utmost importance.

Research quality can also act as a safeguard against criticism. Critiques are unavoidable, as is the eventual backlash of those who do not agree with the agenda or research results of a policy research centre. But basing their assertions and arguments on quality research can help defend their viewpoint when a crisis arises, thus safeguarding credibility (Grayson, 2002).

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The Think Tank Initiative (2012) mentions that, for participating think tanks, the quality of the research they produce is central to their success, identity, and reputation. Haynes *et al.* (2012) found that researchers were highly valued by government when they were able to produce fit for purpose research that responded to their needs. Showcasing mechanisms for quality assurance, and informing the public and stakeholders of it, is a way to give prominence to the quality of the research an organisation produces, with the aim of enhancing a think tank's credibility.

Producing quality research enables a think tank to inform policy and practice, and as such it is at the core of what a think tank is. Delivering poor research hinders a think tank's credibility as it undermines their expertise and authority and affects their trustworthiness, as stakeholders can no longer rely on their evidence.

IDEOLOGY AND VALUES

Definition

Ideology and values is understood as the set of ideas, ideals, and doctrines that guide an individual or an organisation.

Why is it important?

The scholarly legitimacy of think tanks and their reputation can be undermined by ideological advocacy and politisation, by losing their reputation of purveyors of objective advice and expertise (Bieler & Higgott, 2000). Strongly ideological think tanks (sources) have less credibility for policymakers than think tanks who have a more neutral stance, which in turn have less than purely academic organisations (Doberstein (2017). Haynes *et al.* (2012) found that politicians distrusted researchers and institutions who gave ideologically-driven advice.

Rich (2004) reported that, in the USA, both Democratic and Republican congressional staff, as well as journalists, rated non-ideological (or centrist) think tanks as the most effective (46%), while 36% named ideological centres within that same criteria. A closer look at the results revealed that Republican staff (when research was conducted congress was dominated by Republicans) in the sample were driving this result. 54% of all Republican staff viewed ideological think tanks that were congruent with their beliefs as the most effective (Rich, 2004). The study showed that the differences in the perceived credibility of think tanks, particularly between Republican and Democratic congressional staff, seem to relate to the perceived ideologies of the various organisations.

Both the ideology of the think tank and the person assessing it affect how an individual assesses an organisation's credibility. If the think tank's ideology is opposed to who is assessing it, then its credibility suffers, regardless of other factors. If they coincide, then it will depend on who is doing the assessment – in some cases it will be irrelevant, but in others it might award credibility to the organisation, as seen with the Republicans example.

Values also include a think tank's or an individual's stance on gender, inclusion, diversity etc. These values act as a lens that frame and influence the credibility assessment of an organisation. For example, assessing the credibility of a policy research centre through a gender lens can entail, for example, gauging the networks an organisation belongs to, and identifying their stance on gender issues. A gender lens is likely to be more prevalent if the topic of the research concerned has gender implications. If their sensitivity to the issue is found wanting, the credibility of that organisation will be compromised. Another example of this is when a think tank's staff is mostly male, and when they routinely participate in and convene male-only panels.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Definition

Context is defined as the current setting in which a think tank and its stakeholders are immersed. It includes socio-environmental characteristics, as well as expectations, salient norms, etc.

Why is it important?

Context functions differently than all the other factors. It frames the assessment and gives (or takes away) prominence to some factors. It can shift importance assigned to a factor or even change their assessment.

Hilligoss and Rieh (2007) propose that people's credibility constructs are mediated by the context, as it can affect how their credibility is assessed and which factors become more prominent. For example, the uncovering of the Paradise papers in November 2018 resulted in a credibility crisis for Fusades (a Salvadorian think tank). They had been somewhat transparent – its funding information was publicly available, if somewhat difficult to identify and understand – and had until then had a good reputation in El Salvador. But when the Paradise papers surfaced they found themselves in a credibility crisis as the public and media set their eyes on their offshore accounts. The existence of these accounts was known and legal, but the context made corruption and transparency more salient, and as such Fusades was discredited as something they had been doing became reprehensible.

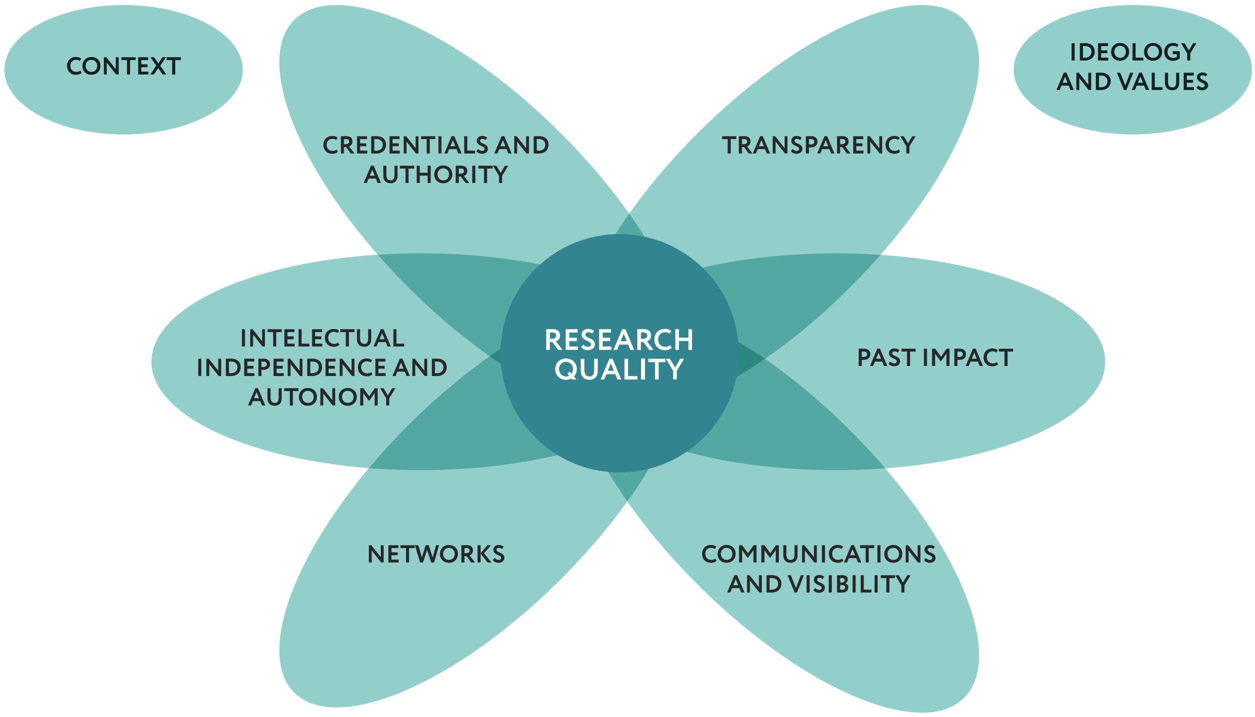
Context functions differently than all the other factors. It frames the assessment and gives (or takes away) prominence to some factors. It can shift importance assigned to a factor or even change their assessment.

Context can also be positive for a think tank: for example, in the USA in 1995 – a year in which Republicans took control of the Senate and House of Representatives – conservative think tanks were called to testify thirty-two more times than its Democratic or non-partisan counterparts, signalling that, at the time they had more credibility for policymakers than others (Rich, 2004).

How do these factors interact?

The factors presented are not totally independent from one another, and some of its features coincide and maybe even overlap. We have separated them because they ultimately refer to different things, but it is evident some aspects of these factors intersect and are linked to each other.

Graph 2: Interaction of factors that affect a think tank's credibility



Research quality is at the core of what a think tank does, and the credibility assessment of an organisations rests in it being perceived as carrying out quality research. Hence why it is placed at the centre of all factors. The fact that we have included research quality as the core does not mean that it is always the most salient factor, just that it is where most factors are anchored. Above all, a think tank needs to produce good research and analysis.

As previously discussed,'prominence interpretation theory' argues that assessments are based on which factors are most salient. Hence credibility assessments could be based in any combinations of these (and not necessarily all). A policymaker, for example, could be satisfied by the credentials of a think tank and its scholarly expertise; another could focus more on the networks that it belongs to, and who has recommended it. If not satisfied, he/she could look into their research quality, or another factor the context makes salient. For others, information on their intellectual independence (or lack thereof) might bolster or singlehandedly take away their credibility (as we saw in the case of the New America Foundation). For others, contextual issues might put them in the middle of credibility crisis, as was shown by the Fusades case. Or it could be ideology that trumps and the work of a research centre is simply not even assessed because it is of the opposite ideology. Or, for instance, a think tanks' credentials might be good, it can be highly transparent, but if it fails to include a gender perspective – and if the person considers that to be important – then the organisation's credibility might suffer.

Furthermore, these factors might change with time, as they derive from what stakeholders consider important at a given point for awarding credibility to a policy research centre. As mentioned earlier, ten years ago transparency might not even have featured at all. But as the sector has evolved, transparency has become a valuable aspect of a think tank, and now forms part of the credibility construct of several stakeholders.

People are considered transversally in all factors, because they make up an organisation, and it is they who enact all the actions and factors that lead to an organisation being perceived as credible. Competent and ethical people at every level are the foundations in which credibility is built. Good staff, well trained researchers and a strong board are necessary to build up an organisation's credibility. Capable and ethical individuals are needed to ensure a research centre is (and is viewed as) a credible source. High quality researchers will carry out quality research. Ethical individuals will behave with integrity, good communicators will make sure that research reaches all interest groups, a strong board will connect the organisation to others and direct it forward.

Closing remarks

This paper has integrated theories from several fields and explored how credibility is constructed, as well as what are the main factors that are considered to affect the credibility of a policy research centre. The main argument is that credibility is constructed by the interaction of the qualities and current circumstances of a think tank and of those awarding credibility to it. Ultimately credibility is bestowed to an object or person by others. This does not imply that credibility is purely subjective: real qualities and characteristics inform the judgements and assessment of credibility. Based on this, we proposed a list factors that influence the assessment of a think tank's credibility, and discussed their importance based on previous research and real-life examples. We argue that depending of the credibility construct of the audience, some, or all of these factors will impact the assessment of the credibility of an organisation.

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