



Do think tanks generate media attention on issues they care about? Mediating internal expertise and prevailing governmental agendas

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Abstract

Think tanks are expected to cut through the prevailing short-term government agenda of the day, and to inject long-term perspectives and research-based expertise into policy debates. In order to do so, they need to attract media attention to themselves in connection with those issue areas in which they have expertise, even if government is focusing elsewhere. Yet, existing studies of media attention among organized interests have thus far ignored the issue context. We argue that sinking costs into research in specific policy areas pays off for think tanks by funnelling more media attention towards them. This is notwithstanding the importance of governments' own issue agendas, which, if a think tank's expertise aligns with them, further raises media attention. We substantiate these claims with a content analysis of news coverage of 62 Australian think tanks in 19 different policy issue areas. The results broadly support our argument and contribute to studies of policy advisory systems, organized interests, and group-media relations.

Keywords Think tanks · Media attention · Agenda setting · Policy advisory systems

Introduction

Think tanks¹ are said to introduce long-term perspectives and fresh research-based insights into the political debate (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). The literature on agenda setting and decision making has noted the crucial role that expertise, the

¹ Defined as 'independent, non-interest based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and influence the policy-making process' (Rich 2005, 11). In using this definition, we acknowledge that not all think tanks fit this definition neatly—for instance some are aligned to parties, and as such suspect on the count of independent and non-interest based. These and related points have been made in previous work on what is a think tank (see Stone, 2007).

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'honing' of policy proposals, and long-term thinking, has in transforming the way policy issues are understood (Kingdon, 1995; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). Work on policy advisory systems has, in turn, suggested that think tanks—as compared to interest groups and commercial lobbyists—are among the best placed to provide policy input that is expert based, 'long-term' and 'anticipatory' in nature (Craft & Howlett, 2012). While think tanks vary greatly in terms of their outputs, methods, and capacities (Abelson, 2018), as a class of political organization they are often considered best equipped to fulfil these crucial functions (see Stone, 2007; Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). Indeed, international research points to think tanks as being a key source of policy ideas for public authorities and political parties alike (see Pautz, 2010, 2013).

Still, in order to play their unique role as foreshadowed by these accounts, think tanks need to garner the attention of the public, the prime conduit to which is coverage in the mass media. Media attention is important for all political organizations, and they often devote considerable resources to attracting it (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz, 2005). Yet, media attention is particularly crucial for think tanks, because, different from interest groups and campaign organizations, they have no representative claims that might propel them onto the agendas of policy makers and politicians. As Rich and Weaver explain, '[w]ithout a public constituency backing their efforts, the influence of expertise-providing organizations often depends on the visibility their research obtains' (2000, 81). Previous US research has shown that think tanks are quite often successful in gaining media access and in fact appear more often in the news than other types of interest organizations (Grossman 2012).

Most think tanks develop expertise and research capacity in one or a limited number of policy fields, whether that be the environment, international relations, education, and so on. That is, they develop what we refer to as a *policy focus*. In seeking access to the media, in turn, it is not the overall level of general media attention that matters, but the *policy context* in which this attention occurs. Viewed from the perspective of think tanks themselves, what they seek to attain is 'access' to the news agenda *in the context of reportage on those policy areas* that reflect their *policy focus* (e.g. education, health, environment, and so on). While such analysis has recently been conducted in respect of interest groups (Binderkrantz et al., 2020), existing studies of media attention among think tanks have thus far ignored whether the policy context of media mentions overlaps with the mentioned think tanks' policy focus.

In this article, we determine the factors enabling think tanks to attract media attention which is consistent with their policy focus. We should anticipate that in pursuit of this task they will face headwinds. For one, media attention among organised interests is in general biased towards the most resourceful organizations, such as business associations or trade unions (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz et al., 2015; Thrall, 2006). In addition, the nuanced and expertise-driven communications of think tanks may also not fit well with news routines that are more typically in search of novelty or drama (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Tuchman, 1978). And finally, their long-term anticipatory focus (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Fraussen & Halpin, 2017) may clash with the short-run agendas of government, which has been shown to strongly structure the media agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner et al., 2008). All this begs the question, can think tanks in fact gain media attention for *their* policy focus even when government is focussing elsewhere?

As has been argued previously, establishing a reputation with policy makers—and the media—is important for think tank success (Lindquist 1993). Consistent with this approach, we argue that sinking costs into developing a clear *policy focus* pays off for think tanks by funnelling more media attention towards them. Moreover, if a think tank's focus

aligns with that of the government, this *further* raises media attention. In that sense, think tanks, while generally riding the wave of government attention—as most political organizations do—also have the capacity to turn the tide through a concerted effort to develop a policy focus.

In order to substantiate these claims, we conduct a comprehensive analysis of mentions of think tanks in the Australian print media. Our three-pronged research approach involves collecting and coding data at the *policy topic* level. We operationalize policy topics following the policy agendas approach (Baumgartner et al., 2019). We (a) identify the policy focus of each think tank, (b) compile data on all its media appearances (coding these into policy topics and including those articles which are not related to the think tanks policy focus), and (c) note the proportion of overall government attention allocated to these policy topics. In total, this analysis encompasses 15,501 news items covering 62 unique think tanks across 18 different policy topics. With this research design, we can explore how successful think tanks are at getting media attention consistent with their policy focus, while controlling for variations in government policy attention.

Our results are broadly in line with our argument. The findings contribute to studies of policy advisory systems by confirming the expectation that think tanks are in principle capable of injecting research-based expertise and a longer time horizon into the political debate. By analyzing appearances in the media at a topic level, our approach also addresses a weakness in much recent work on media appearances of political organizations: namely, that not all organizations are active across all policy areas. Similar to recent work on organized interests (see Binderkrantz et al., 2020), we investigate the policy context on think tanks receive attention. Yet, we take this one additional step further by examining attention on issues that a think tank views as central to its policy competence, *and* those which it does not.

The article proceeds with a section theorizing the drivers of media attention to think tanks. Section three presents our research design and data, and section four discusses the results of our statistical analysis. Section five concludes, drawing out the wider implications of our findings.

Media Access, think tank policy focus, and government attention

The mass media cannot give all possible stories, viewpoints or interests, space on its finite agenda. Yet, research shows that the items they do report on have implications for the public understanding of issues (Barbaris and Jerit 2009) and help shape governmental agendas (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Baumgartner et al., 2008). Thus, for all political non-governmental organizations—such as parties, interest groups, campaign organizations *and* think tanks—gaining access to the media is therefore an important goal. Certainly, not all media attention is positive, and not all groups benefit equally from it (de Bruycker, 2018). Still, political organizations value it highly and often devote considerable resources to gaining media visibility (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Binderkrantz, 2005).

Existing work on organized interests in the media has enumerated the distribution of appearances in newspapers, and on radio or television. The almost unanimous finding, regardless of policy area or political system, is that appearances in all forms of media are concentrated among a small number of groups (Binderkrantz, 2012; Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Danielian & Page, 1994; Thrall, 2006). Furthermore, the diversity of groups in the media is skewed towards economic interests (Binderkrantz et al., 2017), especially in those

policy fields where they hold expertise, such as regulatory policy (Binderkrantz et al., 2020).

Explanations of media appearances have tended to privilege ‘journalistic norms’ in that group appearances in the news are mediated by the conventions of journalism and news production (Bennett, 1990; Cook, 1998; Tiffen et al., 2014). Media professionals select groups as sources and mention them in stories where they are viewed as legitimate, authoritative and trustworthy (Thrall, 2006). While resources and staff numbers tend to be important factors in this regard, groups can also get a leg up through specific media strategies that match well with journalistic routines (Grömping, 2019).

A smaller subset of studies has focussed specifically on think tanks, with the majority of the literature seeking to account for variation in appearances in the national print media. This body of work identifies level of resources, being headquartered in proximity to the national capital, being a policy generalist, being privately funded, and conservative ideological outlook as key factors accounting for varying levels of media access and attention (see Rich & Weaver, 2000; Rich 2005; McDonald, 2014; Kelstrup & Blach-Ørsten, 2020). These are all broadly similar to findings for interest organizations generally.

What has been missing from these accounts is the policy context of media attention. Extant research does not account for whether think tanks manage to gain access and garner attention *consistent with their own policy focus*. This is of particular importance because think tanks craft clear policy-based identities, and their normative value to the policy process at large is their capacity to air the findings of research and their policy ideas on specific policy topics (Craft & Howlett, 2012). Even more so, if think tanks are indeed to bring long-term perspectives to policy debates (as is claimed in the literature), they need to draw attention to ‘their’ policy focus even if shifting and fickle government attention is focusing elsewhere. Yet, while existing studies estimate aggregate levels of media mentions think tanks attract, we are as yet not clear on how this relates to areas of expertise or to governmental agendas.

Think tank policy focus

Think tanks—as with most political organizations—can control few things in the policy process. Yet, one matter they have direct agency over is choosing the policy focus they proactively seek to pursue (Halpin, 2015; Halpin & Fraussen, 2018). We reason that the supply of expertise by think tanks in specific policy domains is a key driver of appearances in the news.

We know from existing research that many organized interests do not engage in every policy area or issue that is of conceivable relevance (Browne, 1990; Gray & Lowery, 1996; Halpin & Binderkrantz, 2011; Heinz et al., 1993). These findings are echoed in the think tank literature where research notes variation with respect to the breadth of policy focus they pursue (Rich 2005). We also know that intra-organizational processes of prioritization and agenda management occur and that these organizations choose a subset of all possible issues on which to proactively advocate (Fraussen et al., 2020; Halpin et al., 2018; Strolovich, 2007). In relation to media attention, this means that at least part of the explanation for the presence—or absence—of a given organization in the news on a particular policy topic is its own decision on what policy domains to actively pursue. However, with some notable exceptions (see Binderkrantz et al., 2020), the organized interest literature has explained access and mentions in the media without recourse to the substantive policy

focus that groups themselves prioritize. And, moreover, it has been inattentive to the policy context in which mentions occur.

In the case of think tanks, their policy focus manifests themselves concretely as strategic decisions to build a research base and related expertise in specific areas of public policy. They often develop policy expertise through curated research programs in a range of delineated areas: be it in defence, agriculture or health, or some other field. This establishes a clear issue identity which buttresses their claims to expertise and, crucially, to recognition by the media and policy makers. Think tanks come to the public and political elites with their own research products and seek to gain attention for those products. Indeed, research has demonstrated that policy makers do increasingly draw on sources external to government—including various organized interests, including think tanks—for policy advice, both to firm up existing policy decisions or as sources of new ideas and thinking (Bertelli & Wenger, 2009; Craft & Howlett, 2012; McGann & Sabatini, 2011).

Media appearances of think tanks are thus likely shaped by the policy focus and policy programs that think tanks themselves foster and develop. Indeed, their investment in expertise on a clearly circumscribed area is what boosts their credibility with journalists (Laursen and Trapp 2019). Journalists are well aware of which think tanks possess insights in which domains, and think tanks themselves have well-developed routines of promoting the results of their research—through media launches of reports, mini-conferences, and policy briefings (Rich & Weaver, 2000). A supply-side account of think tanks therefore expects that:

H1 Think tanks will receive more media attention in connection with policy domains they claim as a focus.

Government Agenda – The Demand for Input

A steady stream of studies has documented the role that government attention to a policy area has for the mobilization of organized interests. It has been well established that the governmental agenda—the set of issues to which governmental institutions, like legislatures or executives devote attention—tends to set the parameters for the lobbying agendas of others. As Gray et al (2005) put it, the attention of government to a given policy domain creates a ‘demand’ for advocacy. Work in the USA has persuasively shown that shifts in government attention—measured as the proportion of hearings in a given policy topic—shapes the volume of lobbying in that same policy area (Leech et al., 2005). Put simply, changing government policy agendas are found to create the demand for policy input. In the context of media mentions, it is also established that journalistic attention will often track the agenda of government and is strongly structured by the political cycle (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Bennett, 1990).

For think tanks, this creates both a problem and an opportunity. Where their long-run expertise and governmental attention align, this suggests think tanks would gain visibility for their ideas due to their ‘thematic relevance’ (Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). Their expertise will find a willing audience: supply meets demand. However, when governments are focussed elsewhere, think tanks would face a difficult time getting attention. If, as outlined at the outset of this article, scholars of think tanks are right, and they disproportionately pursue policy research that addresses long term, anticipatory and strategic nature, then they are likely—at least from time to time—to be seeking media attention in an environment where they are out of step with governmental and political cycles. This implies that they

would face limits to media attention, and their foreshadowed role in shaping the agenda and understanding of public and elites would be curtailed. In summary, the demand-side account suggests that a think tank's media attention will be shaped by the extent to which it is consistent with the allocation of governmental attention:

H2 Think tanks will receive more media attention in connection with policy domains to which government is paying more attention.

Research Design and Data

Our study tests these propositions in the context the Australian think tank system. The Australian case is useful in that it represents an advanced democracy with a well-developed and growing think tank community. In comparative terms, it is a pluralist country (Siarrof 1999), but unlike a system such as the USA, its Westminster parliamentary system, with strong party discipline, means that there may be less partisanship among think tanks than in a more fully pluralist system. In regard to the media, Australia, although sometimes classified as 'liberal' alongside other Anglo-saxon democracies, in fact shares a surprising number of features with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) 'polarized-pluralist' media system—specifically high political parallelism, a lower degree of self-regulatory professionalism, and extremely high concentration of ownership (Jones & Pusey, 2010; Tiffen, 2015). Of course, there are challenges regarding the generalizability of single country case studies; however, in the conclusion we provide some guidance on how our findings might play out in other systems.

Testing our theoretical propositions is not straightforward. We need to identify all think tanks, then determine their stated policy focus, and code whether appearances in the national print media are related to this focus or other policy topics. At the same time, we need measures of government attention, coded in a common scheme to media appearances and think tank expertise. This is quite demanding in terms of data, although the decision to focus in depth on a single national case has eased the onerous data requirements to some degree.

Australian think tank population

We cover the full population of national think tanks in Australia, i.e. all organizations that are consistent with the definition of think tank outlined above (Rich 2005). This implies that we excluded interest-based research organizations (which we conceive as interest groups) and also omitted research organizations that are considered part of government, or linked to universities or private corporations. We designated a think tank as national if its scope was broader than one city or state of Australia. The population was derived in several steps. First, we started with a comprehensive list of 59 organizations that had previously been identified in research on Australian think tanks based on a host of studies spanning over twenty years (see Fraussen & Halpin, 2017). We reviewed each of these entries and excluded 5 because they had gone out of business since that study² and removed three

² We drew this conclusion because we could find no functioning web presence or because reports to the charity regulator indicated they had ceased operating. This included Australian Centre for Health Research, Education Standards Institute, IdeasLAB, Tourism Think Tank, Society for Knowledge Economics, Network Insight Institute.

because they were based in New Zealand.³ Second, in order to update our list, we searched all Australian newspapers for the simple term ‘think tank’ for the period June 2018 through to November 2019. Given that journalistic norms alone are an insufficient basis to select organizations as think tanks for scholarly purposes, we filtered out organizations that were returned in our newspaper search but did not meet our definition of a think tank, with this process yielding 11 additional think tanks.⁴ In total, our study comprises 62 organizations.⁵ No list is ever complete, yet our exhaustive efforts at checking and updating this list means we have assembled a well-curated list of the major national Australian think tanks operating in the period 2015–2019, which conform to the definition outlined above.

Dependent variable

In order to test the propositions outlined above, we constructed a data set which counts the number of media mentions each of our think tanks received over a five-year period (2015–2019), in each of 19 policy areas. The dependent variable(s) for our analysis are *media access*—which is a binary measure of whether or not a think tank appeared in the media in a given policy context—and *media mentions*—which is a count of appearances in the media in a given policy context.

In order to assess media access and mentions, we utilized the comprehensive archive of Australian print media in the Factiva database. We included all outlets covered in Factiva’s ‘Australian Papers’ collection, for the five-year period 1 January 2015 until the end of 2019, searching for the full text of the name of each think tank, and variations thereof where this was relevant. The full text of each article was downloaded and coerced into a data frame containing fields for title, newspaper, date, and the full text of the article itself. Each article in this text corpus of 15,501 articles is then first coded into one of 19 policy agendas topic codes using the Lexicoder topic dictionary (LTD) (Albugh et al., 2013) implemented in the Quanteda r-package (Benoit et al., 2018).⁶ We designated the individual topic code with the largest word count as the topic of each article. A key implication of this coding approach is that some articles may have very similar counts—for instance, some articles were allocated to macroeconomics, yet had high counts in labour—but in the end are allocated to a single topic. Given that our approach requires that all articles be coded to a single topic category, whether we resolve this by an automated or manual approach does not eliminate the fact that these boundary decisions are inevitable. What matters is that this is done reliably. A random sample of 100 articles were hand coded independently by two members of the research team, with both discussing categorization. This agreed code was then contrasted with the automated coding, with the inter-coder reliability test resulting in a Cohen’s kappa of 0.83. This is considered to be a strong level of agreement (Krippendorff 2013), giving us confidence in the article-level topic coding.

³ Maxim Institute, New Zealand Institute and McGuinness Institute.

⁴ One on our list—Reventure Ltd is a company styled as think tanks; two were removed as their websites could not be located—Women’s Economic Think Tank; World Growth.

⁵ The complete list of the 62 think tanks in our study appear in Table A.1 in the Supplementary Materials.

⁶ The LTD has been used widely in political science to code newspaper coverage and other forms of political communication into policy relevant topics (Soroka, 2012). It enables a count of words relating to 28 policy topics modelled on the major topic codes used in the Policy Agendas project (Baumgartner, Breunig & Grossman, 2019). To ensure consistency across our media and government agenda data sets we collapsed these 28 topics into 19 topics based on the Australian policy agendas codebook.

Based on this procedure, the analysis we report below works with the binary access variable, recording for each topic whether a think tank was mentioned at all, and the count variable, recording how often it was mentioned. Both have 1,178 observations (62 groups \times 19 policy contexts).

Independent variables

The first independent variable is think tank policy focus. To measure this, we manually examined in detail the websites of each of our think tanks. Particular attention was paid to the 'Policy' or 'Research' tabs of websites, where these organizations concretely demonstrate a commitment to actively engage in a given policy area. For each of our 62 think tanks, we recorded these issue areas, and coded those into one of 19 Australian policy agenda major topics. This is the same code scheme utilized for the media mentions of our think tanks. The variable is a dummy, indicating if an issue area is of interest or not (1 or 0). Across our 62 think tanks, the mean number of policy topics addressed is 2.4. A majority of groups indicate a single policy focus, with the balance ranging up to 9 topics. The substantive topic that is a focus to think tanks also varies considerably. A large minority of think tanks report that they are engaged in macroeconomics (37 percent), followed by the environment (35.5 percent), and international affairs and the labour market (both 19.4 percent).⁷

Our second independent variable of interest is the government agenda. The literature on comparative policy agendas routinely uses the enactment of legislation as a proxy for what government is paying attention to. In Australia, these data have been collected for 1966–2013, under the auspices of the Australian Policy Agendas project, and show variation in attention to topics over time (see Dowding and Martin, 2017). Here we repeated this approach for each bill enacted into legislation by the Australian parliament between 2015–2019, coding into one of each of the 19 Australian policy agenda major topic codes.⁸ The variable government agenda is the proportion of the governmental agenda—across this five-year period—which is focussed on each of the 19 topics, ranging from 0.0014–0.1857 (or from 0.14%–18.57% of the agenda). To aid interpretation of model coefficients, we express this as a percentage, rather than a proportion.

Controls

We include a range of organizational level variables as controls in our model. First, we consider whether think tank *type* may be associated with media attention. The four types we take into account are strategic, advocacy, and amateur think tanks, as well as sole traders, drawing on Fraussen and Halpin's (2017) categorization of think tanks based on their research capacity and their organizational autonomy. We are, however, agnostic about the expected direction of the association. It might be the case that strategic think tanks—those with high capacity and high autonomy—are best placed to garner media coverage because

⁷ The distribution of the breadth of policy interests is reported in the Supplementary Materials, Table A2.

⁸ We thank the Australian Policy Agendas team for providing the data and codebook(s). While their time-series did not encompass the time period for this analysis, we were able to follow the approach they pioneered. We are also grateful to Michael Vaughan who shared data on 2015, which was collected as part of Australian Research Council Discovery Project: DP160102551.

of their ability to provide research-based expertise. Or, conversely, sole traders (low capacity and low autonomy), often one man shows, may draw more attention because of their fit with journalistic norms around personalization and drama.

Secondly, we include a measure of *resources*, as these are almost ubiquitously shown to shape the level of media attention an advocacy organization or think tank receives (Binderkrantz et al., 2020; Rich & Weaver, 2000). As in most studies of organized interests, we use the number of policy/research staff as a proxy for resources (logarithmically transformed), as more staff boosts a think tank's capacity to develop its agenda in a way which qualitatively differentiates its output from its peers.⁹

Thirdly, some think tanks are more prepared to engage with the media than others (Rich & Weaver, 2000). Subsidizing journalists' work through regular press releases, or proactively seeking contacts from journalists has been found to boost organizations' media coverage in general (Grömping, 2019). We thus control for *media effort* by recording whether a think tank's website has a 'media releases' or similar tab (yes/no).

Fourth, we control for *ideology*. While many think tanks wish to adhere closely to a non-partisan line, international research over the past two decades has pointed to growth in the think tank population among ideological organizations, characterized by an aggressive pursuit of the media in order to gain attention for their perspective on contemporary policy issues (Pautz, 2010; Rich & Weaver, 2000). Following Rich (2005, 19), we coded the mission statements of each organization into one of three categories: conservative, liberal, or neutral.¹⁰

Fifth, we account for the *breadth of policy engagement* of think tanks. In his work on US think tanks, Rich (2005) distinguished 'full-service' think tanks—that pursued the broad gamut of policy terrain—from those with a multi-issue and single-issue agenda. Generalist think tanks might be better placed to gain access and mentions through a positive spillover mechanism: when they are cited in one issue area, they are likely also sought out by journalists to engage and comment on other areas. We therefore coded organizations into full-service, multi- and single-issue categories based on how think tanks branded themselves in their web presentation.

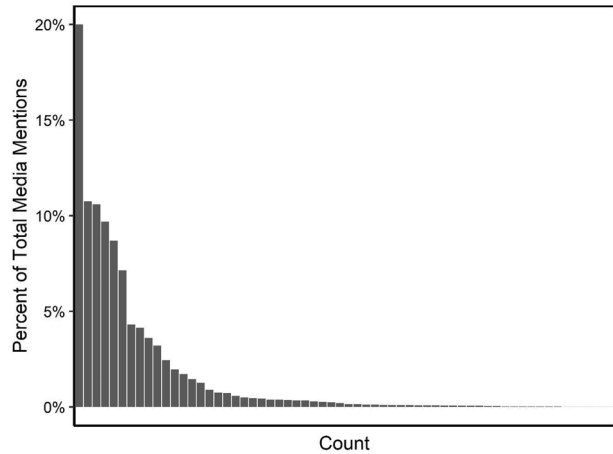
Sixth, we note whether a think tank has its headquarters in the Australian capital, Canberra (*HQ in capital*), measured as a dummy in our model (yes/no). This may affect media attention as the national media are concentrated in the capital, making groups located there more available for journalists' requests for comment and content (Schlozman et al. 2012).

Finally, we control for *age* measured as the number of years since formation, as this is highly correlated with legitimacy. In their early years, organizations endure a 'liability of newness' as they seek to legitimate their position with key audiences against organizations that already exist in the group universe (Stinchcombe, 1965). Conversely, older organizations may have an advantage in that they have had time to create reputations with journalists.

⁹ Following Fraussen and Halpin (2017), we reviewed Think Tank websites to note down staff recorded as policy or research staff. We do not exclude the possibility that some think tanks also utilize other experts or staff who are not formerly employed or otherwise not listed on websites. However, we have no way of knowing this, and self-reported data would have its own problems of reliability.

¹⁰ The code scheme utilized makes references to free market, limited government family values, religious rights and individual liberties and so on as markers of a conservative ideology. References to social welfare, economic, social and environmental disadvantage, and addressing inequalities and so on were considered liberal. All others were coded as neutral. Where we were unsure, we coded into the neutral category.

Fig. 1 Distribution of media attention across Australian think tanks, 2015–19, *Note:* Each of the 62 column represents the proportion of total mentions a single think tank received, ordered highest to lowest



Think tank recognition in the media

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, we describe the distribution of think tanks' media access and mentions in general and in their stated topic of interest in particular. We then analyze the drivers of media access and mentions with the help of logistic and negative binomial hurdle regression models.

Mapping media attention to think tanks

It is commonly observed in studies of other political organizations (e.g. organized interests, interest groups, and lobbyists) that media attention is highly concentrated: a small proportion of organizations attract an oversized proportion of the media mentions (see Binderkrantz et al., 2017; Schlozman et al., 2012). Previous work on think tanks has also found this pattern (Rich 2005). Across the five-year time window of our study, the 62 think tanks accumulated a total of 15,501 media mentions. As Fig. 1 shows, an organization was mentioned in an average of 250 articles (range min = 1, max = 3101). Yet, the six most frequently mentioned organizations—each of which received over 1000 mentions—accounted for 49 per cent of total mentions ($n = 7571$).

The results of our coding also reveal considerable variation in the number of policy contexts across which think tanks are reported. While the mean across the data set is 9 policy contexts, there are on the one hand ten think tanks mentioned only in conjunction with one policy context, and on the other hand nine organizations mentioned in the context of all 19 policy contexts (see Table 1). On average, a think tank receives just over 13 mentions across each of these 19 policy contexts, with a range of 0 through to 964 mentions.

Taken together, our data show the same power-law distribution of attention as previous studies of other political organizations, and of think tanks, and also exhibit considerable variation in the issue contexts in which groups appear. This certainly warrants the issue-level analysis we conduct here.

While we focus on the policy *context* in which think tanks are mentioned—and specifically if these match up with the policy *focus* of these organizations—this does not exhaust other interesting facets of the reporting of think tanks. Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to provide some more details about think tank reportage in general.

Table 1 Distribution of policy contexts across media mentions

No. of Policy Contexts	No. of think tanks	Percent
1	10	16.1
2–5	13	21.0
6–10	13	21.0
11–15	12	19.4
16–18	5	8.1
19	9	14.5
Total	62	100.0

Note: The number of policy contexts for each of the 62 think tanks is calculated individually and reported here in categories for ease of interpretation

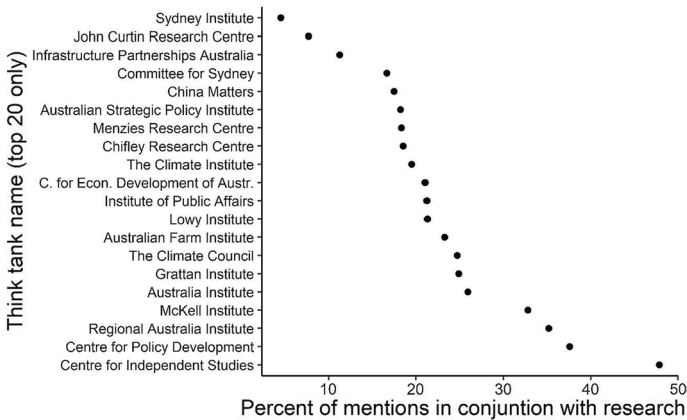


Fig. 2 Proportion of think tank media mentions on basis of research. Note: Observations are proportion of sentences mentioning a think tank that *also* refer to a research activity

Commentators often note that some think tanks—more than others—are personality driven enterprises, while others might establish reputations to emphasize the soundness of their research and analysis. We analyzed the full text of each article mentioning one of our think tanks to explore this further. We extracted each sentence in our corpus of articles that mentioned one of our think tanks. We extracted the top 10 features (weighted) for each think tank, and noted whether these included references to their Director, CEO, or other key staff member. This analysis effectively taps whether reporters typically ‘name-check’ a staff member when reporting on the think tank, or else simply reference the think tank alone. We found that 36 per cent of our organizations were mentioned—at least once—in the context of referencing their director or equivalent. In relation to research, we built a simple dictionary of terms associated with the research activity of think tanks.¹¹ Again, we searched all sentences mentioning one of our think tanks against this dictionary, noting if any of these terms were mentioned. Figure 2 reports the percentage of all the sentences mentioned that includes a reference to one of the research keywords. Of course, simply because a think tank calls something ‘research’, or a journalist repeats this framing, does

¹¹ These terms were, "report", "paper", "research", "submission", "survey", "review", "expert".

not mean that it reflects some real research capacity. For ease of interpretation, we report only for those think tanks with more than 100 total media appearances; after all, these are the 20 think tanks with a bona fide media presence. It is clear that there is considerable variation. This analysis provides the insight that—albeit to varying degree—media coverage of think tanks makes recourse to their concrete research outputs. As such, there are multiple dimensions to the context of think tanks' media appearances, and future research should unpack these in more detail. In this contribution, we focus on the policy context of the mentions of think tanks.

Explaining variation in media access and mentions

To test the hypotheses outlined above, we estimate two models: one with media access as a dependent variable and one with media mentions as the dependent variable. For the former, we use a logistic regression model, and for the latter a negative binomial hurdle model. Our choice of model for our count data was informed by a test for overdispersion, a comparison of AIC and BIC statistics and by a comparison of predicted versus observed counts, which on balance supported the use of a NB hurdle model.¹² Each of the think tanks appears multiple times in the data set, so we implemented random effects for individual think tanks.¹³

Our models (see Table 2) show that, when we account for the multiple organizational level variables, we see strong positive effects from our two independent variables of theoretical interest which confirm both H1 and H2. And, we see this for both access and mentions. Our model of access (M1) reports the log odds of receiving attention, which can be interpreted substantively by exponentiation. It shows that for a one per cent increase in government attention to a given policy area, the odds of attaining access in that policy area are just over one times higher ($e^{0.08} = 1.08$). Likewise, where a think tank explicitly focuses on a policy area, the odds of attaining media access on that topic are more than five times higher ($e^{1.66} = 5.26$). These findings suggest that the odds of a think tank gaining media access are higher on those policy areas where think tanks possess expertise and they seek to proactively shape the policy conversation, but that it is also higher where government too is paying an issue area attention. Our count model shows the same consistent results, with both think tank research programme priorities and government attention coefficients being positive and significant.¹⁴

This provides strong support for the policy scholarship which suggests that think tanks have a perhaps unique capacity to engage the public with policy ideas and arguments, even where government is not prioritizing that issue. Yet, it also shows that their capacity to gain media attention is certainly enhanced by government attention to their policy field.

To better comprehend this finding, in Fig. 3 we simply plot the predicted media mentions, conditional on whether the policy area is one in which a think tank has indicated it is a key focus area, or not. This plot is based on the coefficients from the results of Model 2, with all values of covariates held at mean values. It shows that think tanks, even in the absence of governmental attention, receive heightened levels of mentions in the news on those areas where they profess expertise and have sunk costs in research and staff capacity. Yet, it also shows that when government turns its attention to a policy area, the impact on

¹² See Supplementary Materials Table and Figure in A3.

¹³ This approach is also supported by an interclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.566.

¹⁴ Note that for the zero component of M2, negative coefficients denote a lower likelihood of a zero.

Table 2 Explaining media attention to think tanks

	M1: Access	M2: Mentions	
	Log odds (SE)	Count component Log odds (SE)	Zero component Log odds (SE)
(Intercept)	– 1.89 (1.05)*	– .75 (1.03)	1.89 (1.05)*
Policy focus	1.66 (.27)***	1.65 (.17)***	-1.66 (.27)***
Government attention	.08 (.02)***	.04 (.01)***	-.08 (.02)***
<i>Type</i>			
Sole trader (ref.)			
Advocacy	– 1.46 (1.00)	– 1.34 (.91)	1.46 (1.00)
Amateur	– 1.72 (.88)*	– 1.75 (.90)*	1.72 (.88)*
Strategic	– .22 (.91)	– .62 (.78)	.22 (.91)
Resources (staff log.)	1.39 (.34)***	1.21 (.24)***	– 1.39 (.34)***
Media effort (1 = Yes)	– .75 (.60)	.31 (.53)	.75 (.60)
<i>Ideology</i>			
Conservative (ref.)			
Liberal	– .72 (.74)	– .58 (.61)	.72 (.74)
Neutral	–.37 (.78)	– .59 (.72)	.37 (.78)
<i>Policy scope</i>			
Single-issue (ref.)			
Full service	3.90 (1.13)***	1.63 (.70)**	-3.90 (1.13)***
Multi	.79 (.54)	.13 (.47)	– .79 (.54)
HQ in capital	– .12 (.58)	.02 (.45)	.12 (.58)
Age (no. of years)	.01 (.01)	.00 (.01)	– .01 (.01)
Var (count model): TT	–	1.08	–
Var (zero model): TT	1.74	1.74	–
AIC	1127.25	4829.59	–
BIC	1203.33	–	–
Log likelihood	– 548.63	– 2383.80	–
Num. obs	1178	1178	–
Num. groups: TT	62	62	–

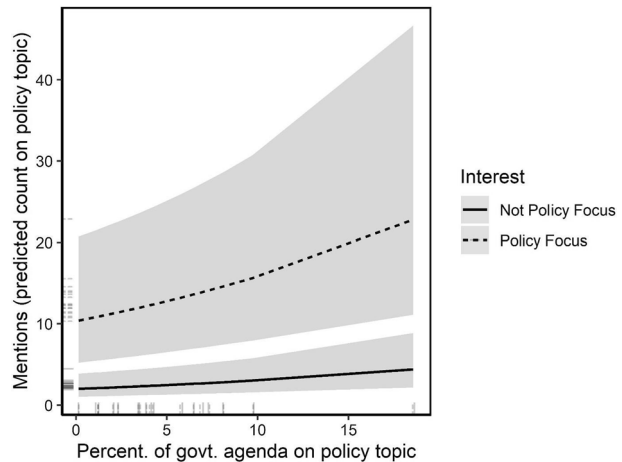
Statistically significant coefficients printed in bold

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$. Maximum likelihood estimation, generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM). M1 = logistic GLMM, M2 = zero-augmented hurdle model, negative binomial distribution. Random effect for think tank (TT). Note that negative coefficients in the zero component denote lower likelihood of a zero

the media mentions of think tanks is positive for both areas on which think tanks focus or not. However, the slope is somewhat higher, as is the intercept, for policy areas that think tanks focus on.

While considered for our purposes as controls, some of the organizational characteristics included in the models provide additional insights into the media profile of think tanks. First, different types of think tanks do not differ much in their media mentions. Although ‘amateur’ think tanks are somewhat more likely to achieve more mentions, this result is only significant at the 10% level. Second, we confirm the now ubiquitous finding

Fig. 3 Predicting media attention to think tanks. *Note.* Based on Table 2, M2 at median random effect, with other predictors fixed at mean, categorical predictors fixed at their proportions, 90% prediction intervals



that resources significantly and positively correlate with access and media mentions. Third, we find no association of ideology with either media access or media mentions. It is worth noting here that the majority of our think tanks are neutral. This finding is quite different to the US findings, which tend to show that the more partisan a group the better able it is to generate attention in the media (Rich 2005). We find no evidence of a ‘beltway’ effect (proximity to the capital) in the Australian context nor do we see an age effect—something consistent with previous work on Australian interest groups (Fraussen & Halpin, 2016). Again, this is a departure from analysis of the US think tank landscape. Also—somewhat contrary to previous research (Grömping, 2019)—we find no effect for media effort. This may be due to a lack of variation among this generally (compared to other political organizations) media-affine set of groups, as only nine of our 62 think tanks did not invest in media effort. Finally, we see a positive and significant correlation between think tank’s that are full service, and both media access and mentions. This confirms the expectation that those think tanks with broad policy engagement likely attain positive spillover effects.

Conclusion

By definition—if not always practice—think tanks pursue policy topics and issues that are of a strategic and long-term nature. Compared to other organizations and operatives in the policy advisory landscape—like interest groups, lobbyists, and advisors—it is expected that think tanks put information, expertise and ideas in the public domain, even where there might not be an appetite by government to address these issues (Craft & Howlett, 2012). Put another way, the public policy value of think tanks is that they pursue issue agendas that may not align with what government is actively working on. Policy scholars hold much store in the idea that think tanks—unlike other members of policy advisory systems—are able to cut through the prevailing short-term partisan agenda of the day, and to seek to re-set and reshape agendas, dragging the sight-line of politicians and policy makers from the short- to longer-term horizons. But can they deliver?

In this paper, we address one important component of this capability—the ability of think tanks to get their views into the media on an issue terrain where they possess expertise and have sunk costs into research programs and staff capability. We find that think

tanks will gain greater media attention in those policy areas that they have formulated a clear interest and claimed expertise. This holds when we control for variations in government attention, which is also positively and significantly correlated with think tank mentions. This suggests that think tanks can fulfill their claimed role of garnering media attention for their agendas, but that this media attention will be further enhanced where this same policy area is subject to heightened governmental attention.

Some limitations of the research should be acknowledged, which simultaneously suggests productive further avenues for research. Comparative work will help refine the hypotheses we test here further. While we see no reason why the basic expectations might not hold for other advanced democracies, peculiarities of the Australian media system, political institutions and the think tank system all create possible variations to the findings we report here. The Australian media system is often characterized as liberal, according to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) definition, albeit at a higher degree of political parallelism and a lower degree of professionalization than other systems in that category such as Canada or the UK (Jones & Pusey, 2010). Australia's media ownership is extremely concentrated (Tiffen, 2015), which in turn also relates to declines in public interest journalism (Carson, 2014). As such, the dynamics of media attention-getting may play out differently in either fully liberal media systems, or in democratic corporatist ones. For instance, we might expect partisanship to play an oversized role in appearances in Australia's polarized media system, possibly also rendering think tanks' ideology more important. The fact that we do *not* find ideology to be a significant predictor for media attention in this 'most likely' case suggests that the result will travel well. On the other hand, journalistic norms towards drama and conflict may be less pronounced in democratic corporatist media systems, while public service orientation might be stronger. This might help think tanks in their media attention-getting due to their perceived focus on expertise and research.

Australian institutions differ both from some other pluralist countries—its Westminster parliamentary system and strong party discipline, for instance mark it out as different to the USA—and countries with corporatist systems, such as Scandinavian nations and the Low Countries. This may alter the salience of partisanship in gaining attention, in that we would expect it to be more important in fully pluralist systems. Conversely, in corporatist systems we may expect a less concentrated distribution of media attention, something explored more generally for interest groups in Binderkrantz et al., (2017 & 2020).

Furthermore, the Australian think tanks system is relatively small. In more mature, and larger systems, such as the USA, we might expect there to be more competition among groups for access to the media—it may be that the Australian system is simply not big enough to reach thresholds of density for such competition to eventuate. This may affect the importance of some of our organizational variables—such as media effort, which may play a larger role in more competitive think tank systems.

Keeping these limitations in mind, the findings provide encouragement for public policy scholars who figure an important role for think tanks in advisory systems as sources of policy expertise (Craft & Howlett, 2012). We show that indeed think tanks can gain attention for ideas and research independent of governmental political agenda of the day, but also demonstrate that it is not entirely possible to escape the politics. When we control for the impact of resources, location, age, and other organizational characteristics that might be increase a think tanks capacity to supply media content, or shape the demand for their viewpoints by journalists, we still see robust effects for think tank policy interests and government policy attention. Interestingly, our results suggest that different types of think tanks do not vary in how successful they are at gaining media attention. Normatively, one would have hoped that those with considerable research credentials garner more media

prominence to inject longer time horizons and expertise into policy debates. Instead, sheer availability to comment and to supply copy for various news media entities may be enough in some cases to access the news. This certainly provides fertile grounds for future research into the normative and instrumental benefits of think tanks for policy advisory systems.

More generally, our findings provide further impetus to the broader study of political organizations in the news. Recent work has also shown that media appearances of interest groups are higher in those policy areas where they indicate a specific interest, or are otherwise more active (Binderkrantz et al., 2020). Our analysis here further establishes the value of issue-level analysis of media appearances of groups, but in addition highlights the contending forces of supply and demand when it comes to media attention.

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