



2018

Think Tanks: A Bridge Over Troubled Waters and Turbulent Times

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Recommended Citation

McGann, J. G. (2018). Think Tanks: A Bridge Over Troubled Waters and Turbulent Times. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/ttsp_papers/5

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Think Tanks: A Bridge over Troubled Waters and Turbulent Times*

By Dr. James G McGann

The world is witnessing a rise in populism, nationalism and protectionism, signaling a challenge to the post-WWII order and multi-lateralism. At the same time, transnational challenges such as growing trade tensions, economic turbulence, increasing economic inequality, climate change, mass migration and refugee crises, as well as traditional and non-traditional security threats, demand that countries and institutions cooperate more regularly and effectively. We are facing a significant period of change where established international organizations that have helped sustain relative peace and prosperity are under assault. This all taking place while enduring and emerging existential, transnational threats are growing. The post WWII economic, political and security order are being challenged and redefined by national and regional tectonic shifts in domestic and international politics. We are living through an extraordinary historical moment in world history and it is important to take stock of the technological, political, economic and organization trends and disruptions that are taking place in real time. It provides us with an opportunity to assess cross cutting issues and trends. These are daunting challenges, and so it essential that we marshal our intellectual and institutional resources in order to assess cross cutting issues and trends.

There are four key trends that flow from the 4th industrial revolution that will transform all of our jobs and lives over the next 10 years. It is these forces that are driving the digital and political disruptions that sweeping across the globe:

- The disruptive power of social media, artificial intelligence and big data;
- The dramatic increase in the rate of technological change;
- Global information interdependence and
- The increased velocity of information and policy flows.

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*Excerpted from the [2018 Global Go To Think Tank Index](#)

The internet, human and digital networks that are constantly being enhanced by new technologies are increasing both the volume and velocity of information flows around the world. These new realities are making possible to manage and manipulate massive amounts of data which is disrupting business, politics and public policy. Henry Kissinger famously said that being a policy maker is like being at the end of a firehose, today we are all at the end of a fire hose.

These trends in information and technology have served as an accelerant that is fueling the political discontent and disruptions that are on the rise in US, France, Britain, Italy, Philippines, Hungary, Brazil and other countries around the world. Some have erroneously attributed the source of this discontent to be a backlash against globalization. The reality is the much more complex and involves a number of issues and problems that thanks to the internet, social media and social networks have become omnipresent and inescapable. The uncertainty of our times has created a sea of insecurity that has made people concerned and confused about their future of their work and wellbeing. This sea of insecurity is comprised of 7 factors that have intensified over the last 5-7 years. The failure of government or elected officials to address these issues because of political polarization and policy paralysis has left many citizens disillusioned and discontent. These factors help explain why people are gravitating to nontraditional politicians who promise security and quick fixes to complex problems. The sea of insecurity is comprised of the following factors:

1. **Economic Insecurity** job, entire careers and professions are reengineered or simply vanishing, the income gap is growing and the opportunities for the current generation may not be as promising or secure as it was for us or our parents.
2. **Physical Insecurity** we are reminded on a daily, hourly basis of terrorist attacks, the impact of climate change and other catastrophic events, such as the prospects a nuclear conflict, all of which increase our sense of insecurity.
3. **Loss of National and Personal Identity** changing demographic patterns and regular and irregular migration are raising questions about national identity. In 20 years, Asians, Hispanics and those of European decent will be of equal numbers in America. Similar changes are taking place in Europe. This change is disconcerting and is compounded by other economic and social factors.
4. **The New World Disorder** The balance of power that was characteristic of the Cold War provided a degree of order and

security that is missing today and history tells that the most unstable and dangerous periods are ones where there are multiple power poles and powers are raising and falling. We are in just such a period where everyone is in charge and no one is.

5. **Information Insecurity** The Information Age has given us unprecedented access and convenience but this comes at the cost of privacy, security, loss of identity, and, to a certain extent, humanity. The flood of information, which includes disinformation, misinformation and attempts to manipulate us, makes us feel uncertain and insecure.
6. **Sea Change Insecurity** The world is undergoing a revolutionary change in science, technology and society. In addition, the rise of Asia as a economic and military power and the subsequent change in economic, social and political status that will bring is unsettling.
7. **No Answers** The most unsettling aspect of all of this is that our leaders and institutions are not focused on these issues. They are not addressing these concerns and that is why there has been a loss of trust and confidence in governments and elected officials.

This is where think tanks can play a critical role by helping create the answers and action that is needed in many countries today.

Think tanks play a critical role in analyzing, developing and promoting policy solutions, particularly in times of extreme disruption and change. However, these organizations now operate in information-rich societies where facts, evidence and credible research are often ignored — and where disinformation can gain a footing.

To remain relevant and impactful, think tanks and policy institutes must simultaneously pursue rigor, innovation, accessibility and accountability more than ever before. In short, think tanks must adapt and innovate by transforming their organization to be smarter, better, faster and more mobile.

Think tanks can provide a range of strategies and best practices for transforming public policy and institutions in an era of digital and political disruptions, as well as increased social and economic turbulence. While these are challenging times, it is also time of opportunity for those institutions that can develop new and innovative solutions to the complex problems we face.

Think Tanks & Civil Societies Program

The Lauder Institute

The University of Pennsylvania

“Helping to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy”

Researching the trends and challenges facing
think tanks, policymakers, and policy-oriented
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Sustaining, strengthening, and building
capacity for think tanks around the world...

Maintaining the largest, most
comprehensive database of over
8,000 think tanks...

All requests, questions, and comments should be directed to

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The Lauder Institute

University of Pennsylvania



About TTCSP

Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program

The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program (TTCSP) of the Lauder Institute at the University of Pennsylvania conducts research on the role policy institutes play in governments and civil societies around the world. Often referred to as the “think tanks’ think tank,” TTCSP examines the evolving role and character of public policy research organizations. Over the last 30 years, the TTCSP has developed and led a series of global initiatives that have helped bridge the gap between knowledge and policy in critical policy areas such as international peace and security, globalization and governance, international economics, environmental issues, information and society, poverty alleviation, and healthcare and global health. These international collaborative efforts are designed to establish regional and international networks of policy institutes and communities that improve policy making while strengthening democratic institutions and civil societies around the world.

The TTCSP works with leading scholars and practitioners from think tanks and universities in a variety of collaborative efforts and programs and produces the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index that ranks the world’s leading think tanks in a variety of categories. This is achieved with the help of a panel of over 1,900 peer institutions and

experts from the print and electronic media, academia, public and private donor institutions, and governments around the world. We have strong relationships with leading think tanks around the world, and our annual Think Tank Index is used by academics, journalists, donors and the public to locate and connect with the leading centers of public policy research around the world. Our goal is to increase the profile and performance of think tanks and raise the public awareness of the important role think tanks play in governments and civil societies around the globe.

Since its inception in 1989, the TTCSP has focused on collecting data and conducting research on think tank trends and the role think tanks play as civil society actors in the policy-making process. To date TTCSP has provided technical assistance and capacity building programs in 81 countries. We are now working to create regional and global networks of think tanks in an effort to facilitate collaboration and the production of a modest yet achievable set of global public goods. Our goal is to create lasting institutional and state-level partnerships by engaging and mobilizing think tanks that have demonstrated their ability to produce high quality policy research and shape popular and elite opinion and actions for public good.

The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies

The Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies offers an M.A. in international studies and conducts fundamental and policy-oriented research on current economic, political, and business issues. It organizes an annual

conference that brings academics, practitioners, and policy makers together to examine global challenges such as financial risks, sustainability, inequality, and the future of the state.

University of Pennsylvania

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is an Ivy League school with highly selective admissions and a history of innovation in interdisciplinary education and scholarship. Its peer institutions are Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, Brown, Dartmouth, and the University of Chicago in the US and Oxford and Cambridge in the UK. A world-class research institution, Penn boasts a picturesque campus in the middle of Philadelphia, a dynamic city that is conveniently located between Washington, D.C. and New York, New York. Benjamin Franklin founded the University of

Pennsylvania in 1740 to push the frontiers of knowledge and benefit society by integrating study in the liberal arts and sciences with opportunities for research and practical, pre-professional training at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Penn is committed to meeting the full-demonstrated need of all undergraduates with grant-based financial aid, making this intellectually compelling integration of liberal and professional education accessible to talented students of all backgrounds and empowering them to make an impact on the world.

TTCSP Recent and Forthcoming Publications:

Think Tanks: The New Knowledge and Policy Brokers in Asia (Brookings Press and Asian Development Bank Institute, 2019) <https://www.brookings.edu/book/think-tanks/>

Trends and Transitions in Security Expertise from Deterrence to Climate Change and Back Again (Routledge, 2017) <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Trends-and-Transitions-in-Security-Expertise-From-Nuclear-Deterrence/McGann/p/book/9781138304000>

Think Tanks, Foreign Policy and the Emerging Power Policy Networks (MacMillan, 2017) <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783319603117>

Think Tanks and Emerging Power Policy Networks (MacMillan, 2017) <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9783319719542>

The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks Public Policy and Governance (Brookings, 2016) <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/chapter-one-the-fifth-estate.pdf>

Think Tanks and SDGs: Catalysts for Analysis, Innovation and Implementation (TTCSP 2015) <http://www.lulu.com/shop/james-mcgann/think-tanks-and-sdgs-catalysts-for-analysis-innovation-and-implementation/paperback/product-22563604.html>

How Think Tanks Shape Development Policies (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) <http://www.upenn.edu/pennpress/book/15244.html>

Security Expertise Practice, Power, Responsibility (Chapter 6) (2014 Routledge) <https://www.routledge.com/Security-Expertise-Practice-Power-Responsibility/Berling-Bueger/p/book/9781138819115>

Think Tanks and Global Policy Networks, Chapter in an edited volume (Routledge, 2013) <https://www.routledge.com/International-Organization-and-Global-Governance/Weiss-Wilkinson/p/book/9781138236585>

Global Think Tanks, Policy Networks and Governance (Routledge, 2010) <https://www.routledge.com/Global-Think-Tanks-Policy-Networks-and-Governance/McGann-Sabatini/p/book/9780415779791>