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QI Panel:

Think Tank Funding in America

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Nick Cleveland-Stout 0:20

Nick, Hello and welcome. My name is Nick Cleveland Stout. I am the junior research fellow in the democratizing Foreign Policy Program at the Quincy Institute. We are a trans partisan think tanks in Washington is working to build a world where peace is the norm and war is the exception. I am very excited to be with you here today with an incredible lineup of speakers to discuss the very important topic of Think Tank funding in America for those who live outside the Beltway, think tanks are an inescapable feature of the policy making process. Here in Washington, they are at the nexus of policy making, media, academia and advocacy. Their experts give interviews, they testify in front of Congress, and even in some cases, help write legislation. By my count, experts from seven different foreign policy think tanks testified to Congress on important questions such as Syria policy and Chinese investments in the Western Hemisphere, just in the last week alone. But we also know that although many of these institutions present themselves as objective, neutral research organizations. They are reliant on special interests for funding sources such as weapons manufacturers and foreign governments, which is rarely disclosed.

Wanting to better understand these special interests, the Quincy Institute recently launched a database called the think tank funding tracker. This is a first of its kind, database that allows anyone to go and untangle some of these funding relationships for yourself at [Think Tank funding tracker.org](https://www.think-tank-funding.org) you can either search for a specific donor, something like Lockheed Martin, or a specific Think Tank, be it the Atlantic Council or the Brookings Institution, and see some of these funding relationships for yourself. And what we found over the course of putting together this project, by the numbers, was \$35 million from defense companies over the past five years going to the top foreign policy think tanks. We also found \$110 million coming from foreign governments, led by the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the kingdom of Qatar, going to these think tanks. And lastly, we found \$1.5 billion most of which came from the Department of Defense, coming from the US government. So if you tally all of that up, the multi billion dollar question becomes, you know, what role exactly does think tank funding play in influencing US foreign policy and what can be done? It's a huge question.

Fortunately, I'm here with three distinguished panelists to help make sense of all of this. I'm going to introduce the three of them, and then we'll move to their opening statements later in this webinar. So please put your questions in the audience, Q and A. So first, we have Estefanía Teran Valdez, the senior associate and director of on think tanks, consultancy platform and source of information and support for people working in funding think tanks. Before

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joining OTT, Teran worked for seven years in Grupo Faro, one of the leading think tanks in Ecuador. Estefanía is an international human rights law lawyer with a Master's in Public Policy from the Herdby School of Governance in Berlin, Germany, Estefanía oversees the think tank directory out on Think Tank saw their number of articles about think tanks and was a contributor to their state of the sector report in 2024 we are also very fortunate To be joined by Benoit Pelopidas. Professor Pelopidas founded the program nuclear knowledge, and holds the chair of excellence in Security Studies at the Center for International Relations at Science Bowl. He is also an affiliate of the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, and has been a frequent visiting fellow at Princeton University's program on science and global security. Professor Pelopidas, as we will get into, is also co author of a study of think tanks that took funding from nuclear vested interests such as defense companies and foreign governments. That study is titled no such thing as a free donation research funding and conflicts of interest in nuclear weapons policy. Our final panelist is Michael Hartmann. Michael is CO editor of the giving review and a senior fellow at the Capital Research Center in Washington, DC. For almost 20 years, Michael served in various roles on the program staff of the Lynd and Harry Bradley Foundation in Milwaukee, including as its director of research. Before joining Bradley, he was director of research at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. He's also author of a number of fascinating articles about funding in the nonprofit sector, including a recent piece for American Affairs titled foreign agents and American nonprofits. So with those introductions, complete the panelists, which give their their opening remarks. So I'm happy to hand over the floor to Estefanía. First, the floor is yours.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 5:49

So here, here's the report that will give you the code afterwards too. So it was a self administered email survey of think tanks worldwide, 54 questions we distributed to a list of 2400 individuals from across different regions that were part of the open think tanks directory, and also targeted contents of from our 21 local partners that we had for this edition. So in total, we analyzed 297 valid response from 95 countries. So when it comes to the findings of international funding and core funding, we see that think tanks in poorer countries are more dependent on international sources of funding. So 60% of think tanks from low lower middle income countries come their funding comes from international sources, whereas 70% of funding of high income in high income income countries is domestic, so and also in high income nations whole they hold larger budget think tanks. In the case of the United States, it's highly higher the dependence on international budget on funding, but very slightly so also think tanks in poor countries are less likely to access core funding, so only 18% of the organizations that responded had core funding. And project based funding is more common also in low and lower middle income countries, and we will see why this is important to care about.

Globally, the majority of think tanks rely on a single donor for 30% or less of their funding. So 20% of think tanks reported that 80% or more of their total funding depends on a single donor, and this is the case especially in MENA countries, 50% of their think tanks rely on a single donor for 80% or more of their funding. So now what's the effects of funding on intellectual independence? So the way funds are first funding structure matters more than source the ways

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funds are provided. For example, core versus project specific shapes a Think Tank's autonomy more than who provides the money. So short term, project based funding often limits independent research agendas, while core funding allows greater for. Stability, short term project based funding can constrain the resources, for example, time and space that is available for think tanks for developing their research agendas and ideas. So therefore, even when the funding originates from multiple sources or organizations view it as independent, its short term nature undermines their intellectual independence. So additionally, it is important to consider the terms of reference of this funding. So are the funds provided in exchange of a cert for a service to address a research question posed by the funder, or to pursue an objective defined by the third party, or is it funding for the think tank to carry their own ideas and agenda?

Nick Cleveland-Stout 10:49

I don't mean to interrupt you may need to share your presentation. I'm currently just seeing the home screen the first slide.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 11:31

So I'm very sorry for the for the previous slides. So here also the other thing is dependence on external funders, so heavy reliance on international or single source funding can lead to shifts in research priorities that align more with donor agendas than local policy needs trade off. There's a trade off between stability and flexibility, so core funding supports long term self defined research, but may reduce adaptability. In contrast, project based funding offer responsiveness, but risk in coherence, in research focus, there's a huge need for diversification. So a diversified funding base helps mitigate donor influence, reducing the risk of student shifting priorities dictated by a single entity. And finally, balancing affiliation and autonomy. So formal or informal affiliations don't inherently undermine independence. However, the nature of these relationships and the conditions attached to funding determine the extent of the intellectual freedom. So ultimately, financial sustainability and intellectual independence are in constant tension. Think Tanks must navigate the complexity by strategically managing their funding sources while maintaining transparency and credibility. And this is completely understandable, but when you see crucial and important initiatives such as transparent following the money from Century or open democracy, the main concern here is who is behind the money, whose agenda is the one of the think tanks.

So there are concerns that some policy advice provided by think tanks but might be driven more by the best interest of funders than by truly independent research and analysis. So here there's a complexity of independence when it is understood as ideologically ideology neutral. The impartiality issue is challenging because think tanks are political actors in their nature. Think tanks are inherently political actors engaging with political parties policy makers to influence policy and to drive informed debate. So while daily strive for independence, their funding sources, affiliations, ideological perspectives, shape their work, their research, their research is shaped by the political landscape in the in which they operate. So the question here is how they balance independence and political influence. So unless the think tanks are have a significant

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and permanent core funding or endowment, as we saw and previously, funding is fundamental and often comes from donors which is specific and political interest. So some think tanks might align their research with funders agendas, whether in the intentionally or not. So this is okay, because what we decided to prioritize transparency over neutrality. So hands good for good brought from transparify, we argue that transparency allows a more sensible debate on credibility. People can be motivated by a particular interest and still be credible developed richer, rigorous and high quality research. So being open about motivations beyond funding contributes for a better debate. Think Tanks must be clear about this, instead of. Trying to present themselves as entire, entirely ideology, neutral or free of all motivations.

So we need a nuance approach to transparency, balancing different considerations, because each case is a world. Also. Gordon bulldozke states that instead of pursuing an unattainable ideal of objectivity, think tanks should focus on being transparent about their values, affiliations, funding, sources and research methodologies. So this open is a low allows stakeholders to understand the potential biases and assess the research credibility. So here siddop, for example, there a think tank from Barcelona defines itself as a plural thinker without dominant partisan or ideological agendas that seeks to influence global politics. However, they do subscribe to some principle like human rights and democracy. So to conclude, this first part, transparency should go beyond financial disclosures to include research research methodologies, governance structures and quality control measures. This holistic approach ensures that funders' interest do not simply shape research fundings, but are subject to scrutiny and verifications. So in essence, think tanks operate within political framework frameworks, while maintaining a degree of independence, their credibility in hinges not on the absence of political influence, but on their ability to be transparent about the motivations, affiliations and research integrity. So this is this is it. Thanks for your time. I welcome any questions or comments on this important issue.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 16:43

Thank you so much. Estefania, we will now move to Professor Pelopidas. The floor is yours for some open remarks. Thank you.

Benoît Pelopidas 16:54

Thank you Nick Good evening everyone. It's a great pleasure to be here to discuss this important issue. I want to be transparent about where I speak from. Nick very kindly mentioned the nucleonologists program, and I want to emphasize that I practice what I preach, meaning that the nuclear knowledges program is a research program that refuses any funding that carries conflict of interest. So we refuse funding that would come from nuclear disarmament advocacy or manufacturers of nuclear weapons or ministries of defense of nuclear weapons, states, including my own, France, were located in Paris.

And so with that opening remark, what I'm what I'm going to tell you about is essentially a research that I conducted with Dr Sheryl Wegeland, in which is published in the journal

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international relations. It's a paper entitled, and the title tells you everything. It's entitled no such thing as a free donation, research funding and conflicts of interest in nuclear weapons policy analysis. So it's essentially discussing several of the issues that Stefania just mentioned, but with a specific focus on the policy area that we know best, which is nuclear weapons policy analysis. So let me, let me zoom into this for a second. It's crucial to assess the impact of vested interest funding on Think Tank policy analysis on this issue, because, as you probably know, in the United States, the current program to modernize the entire triad is estimated to cost \$1.7 billion in the costs are rising.

It's also interesting because and important because, there are ultimately two opposite policy choices available today. One is simply full on re nuclearization, and another one is a demand for denuclearization. And so it's crucial to be able to have a discussion on that choice in not simply to be dependent on minuscule managerial propositions that do not give us a clear view of what the choices are. This is, I would say, all the more important, as historians have shown us that the existing, the current size of the US nuclear arsenal, far exceeds the requirements of nuclear deterrence, not according to me, but according to the US military. It's also interesting insofar as while think tanks, or the I mean our sample, which is the top 45 Nuclear weapons policy think tanks recommend small scale adjustments, in contrast to the fact that within a decade, Russia and the United States between the mid 80s and the mid 90s, essentially dismantled 80% of their arsenals. So it's not that it's materially impossible to do drastic change. It's just that the discourse promoted by existing think tanks in that issue is not open to drastic change, with a few exceptions, of course, the additional reason why this is interesting is Nick alluded to it is that ultimately, what we found is absolutely trivial.

What we found is that vested interest, funding of scholarship and research introduces biases in analysis, and you're like, Duh, not quite does. Oh, because in the field of nuclear policy analysis, no one had asked this question before, and the field was operated, was operating under the assumption that it was not necessary to ask it, and that funding was not problematic in any way. So again, our finding is consistent with what has been established in every other realm of public policy when the question of the effects of funding was asked. And now this is even more important because the information space is being deregulated and disproportionately influenced by uh actors which have vested interest in this issue. So to summarize, uh, what we find is that in the top 45 nuclear weapons policy think tanks, all of them receive some funding that carries vested interest. And this turns into three forms of impact on the analysis that is being produced.

The first type of impact is direct censorship, which is very rare, and I'll get back to that. The second type of impact, which is widespread, is self censorship. And the third type of impact is perspective filtering. And here I'm going to emphasize this third aspect a little bit, because usually when the question of funding and the effects of funding comes up, the answer is, but wait, ultimately you're questioning the sincerity of the analyst, and then the pushback is to say the analysts believe in what they write. So that's fine. And here, what we're finding is that what we call perspective filtering is actually a way in which the funders, because of their expectations, and what's it what's understood of their expectation, they lead to choice of hiring people who actually already agree with the policy advocated by the funder. So sure the analysts will be

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sincere. But that doesn't mean that the funding has no effect, because if the funding leads to hiring of analysts with particular inclinations, that's an effect that we need to take into account. So essentially, the point I'm trying to make is that when we look at the effects of funding, we need to look at three types of effects, direct censorship and not just that, because a lot of the conversation is either there is direct censorship, and that's not okay, but it's very rare, so we're fine, but we need to incorporate self censorship and perspective filtering.

And I should, I should also commend the work done on the think tank tracker, because the way we did this work was to trace funding, but also to interview Think Tank workers about how they dealt with the funders and their expectations. And we also interviewed funders about what they expected from think tax in the findings are surprising, essentially on all counts, I'll just say I'm looking forward to your questions, but you should know that the paper so no such thing as. As a free donation is available in open access, so it's only two clicks away from you. Thank you.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 25:07

Thank you so much, Professor, now we're going to move to Michael Hartman. The floor is yours.

Michael Hartmann 25:14

Thank you so much, Nick for including me in this today. I appreciate it, and thanks, of course, as well, for the report and the tracker. Let me say this will be related to the comments I'm going to make the the report is, is value added, and its value added is increased, I think because of its sort of just the facts nature and its acknowledgement. It's its warning caution. It's observation that the numbers in there might be a little low. It's conservative estimate. It should be considered that way, because it's reliant on the self reported data of many of the think tanks. And I also like the recommendations actually, because I think they're responsible narrow, modest, really, though I understand not everybody might think so the main recommendation, or maybe the first one, I don't know if it's the principal one, is to journalists to pay attention to this issue and transmit information about it, or the lack of information about it to the degree that that might be relevant, which is a high degree, I think, in evidence class, in law school, at least where I went, the professor would say, of a piece of evidence that either should or shouldn't come into a case argument this is relevant, but not dispositive, they'd say. And I think that applies here. It's worth including in your judgment of a work product from a think tank as you're trying to judge the credibility of it or the trust in it.

So two points I just want to make, on the basis of my experience in philanthropy, and then related to what I do now, which is study philanthropy more generally, though, I should say mostly in America only. So first, about working in philanthropy at a foundation in America, you're usually going to be asked if you're applying for money from it. The grant application form will say, tell us your sources of support, your other sources of support. So just worth noting, they want ask for, if not demand transparency. Why don't others get that now, as a staff member, young, scared, you know, not really knowing what to do. I don't know what the purpose of the question was, but I'll tell you how we use the answers. It was for comfort, you know, in making the right

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recommendation. You know, foundation B is doing it, you know, so we shouldn't be, you know, too worried or to raise a red flag and ask more questions. Well, why? Why? Why that source of support? Well, what's the motivation of that funder? To what end? You know, for what purpose is that being made? And, of course, you know, once the recommendation is made to the board, then the board can use those they have the same two things comfort. You go, Okay, well, you know, those places are doing it, so we're okay here. Or a little bit of a red flag. This is a choice. These are options that every consumer of the work products of these institutions should perhaps have I would, I would say, again, relevant but not dispositive, probative, but not dispositive.

Now, as for some of the other recommendations that might be a little more policy oriented, I'm now going to what I think is my second sort of major point on the basis of what I do now, research, philanthropy in general, you know, the nonprofit sector, including grant making foundations, the philanthropic part of the sector, is a little bit on the defensive in America right now, and there are calls for reform, or if not, there will be soon, and the menu of reform options is long. So at the risk of boring you. This is I was trying to place foreign funding as an issue in this context in the review that Nick nicely mentioned of Casey Michelle's book, foreign agents in American affairs. But here are areas of potential reform of the sector in America, nonprofit hospitals generating a lot of income and competing with for profit, hospitals that don't have an exemption, nonprofit colleges and universities with massive endowments that are tax advantaged, not they're taxed very minimally, but they are still tax advantaged. And maybe, or maybe. Maybe not. Someone wonder whether it's being devoted to the charitable activities for which, you know, incentivized by the tax advantage. Nonprofit donor advised funds, I just got three more after this, which also have a lot of money, which doesn't necessarily have to go to charity right away or even really anytime soon, even though, even though a deduction was given to a donor to them, there's debate about, has been, will be, about the degree to which nonprofits, including private foundations, should be funding or participating in political activity.

And then you can fight about how to define what that is, which is might be where we're headed again. And then the foreign funding of nonprofits is an area that might be looked at of all those I would have thought, and I think still do, that the foreign funding would be the sort of lowest hanging reform fruit, because the objections that could be raised to all of the others differ from the objections that can or can't be raised to non to foreign funding in almost all of those but for the foreign funding aspect, it'd be said, You're violating my rights, my constitutionally protected first Amendment rights, or associational rights of privacy. Well, I mean, in America, foreign funders can't raise that objection. They have no rights, really to assert so that then would leave the nonprofit American, nonprofit recipient of foreign funding. You know, they might have some rights, they would assert them right, but there might still be a difference that's worthy of note here, and that's how they should be treated the American nonprofit recipient of foreign funds. So I'm going to quote from a 1965 Senate report on the foreign Agents Registration Act, which I know we might talk about. And this, this was quoted in Casey Michel's book, 1965 Senate. Quote, the place of the old foreign agent has been taken by the lawyer, lobbyist and Public Relations Council. And then Dot. Dot, dot. The sentence continued.

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We're basically talking here today about whether think tanks are in that category, and it seems fair to ask, I must say, speaking for myself, there the same report then says just one more sentence, the Constitution, which protects the right of citizens to petition their government, does not afford The same protection to the citizen who exercises that right at the direction of or in the interest of a foreign principal. And that's, again, the question. It's it's still with us here today, maybe worse, on the basis of numbers in that report, or numbers that are not in that report, that can be so that, I think, just provides a little context. One final quick note, which may or may not be fair, but I think it is fair. You know, I get Wi Fi, and I'm on x, and it sure seems to me in America currently among among conservatives, maybe more populist conservatives, that there's a concern about us, government funding of nonprofits. This is an issue generating a lot of intention, attention and heat, maybe some light, we can perhaps hope. But if there's concern about us, government funding of think tanks. Why wouldn't there be of a foreign funding of them, and why isn't a database about that a good thing that we should all be thankful for? Thanks.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 35:03

Thanks Michael, and yeah, 80 years on, some things haven't changed so much. So I want to remind folks to put any questions that you have for our panelists in the Q and A. I'm going to take moderator's prerogative here and just ask a first question to each of our panelists, starting with Estefanía. I wanted to ask you about Think Tank transparency. I mean, you know something that we saw in this report. And as you all know, is think tanks are not legally required to disclose their funding sources, and many don't you know what we found in that database is really just kind of the tip of the iceberg. We found that over a third of the major foreign policy think tanks that we looked at here in the US at least, are totally opaque about their funding sources. So I wanted to ask you, why is it that it's still a common practice for for many think tanks, not not just in the US, but in a global context, to to not disclose their funding sources? And what is the consequence of this prevalence of, of dark money think tanks.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 35:03

Thank you for the question Nick. And I think that sometimes something tanks might be indifferent to the potential reputational consequence of their lack of transparency, particularly those that, for example, are have already a strong reputation. So others might be might disregard the implications for the democratic process and inform decision making. Know that transparency supports because they don't share these values, probably so for instance, the research by central UK is following the money initiative found that right wing organizations tend to be less transparent than their left wing counterparts. So something some think tanks actively promote the specific agendas which make it unappealing for them to ensure intellectual independence. So however, there are like other factors that that can be contributing to the limited transparency.

For example, there's no mandatory or required by the law. There are no like global standards. Some funders also prefer to remain anonymous to avoid public scrutiny or unwanted solicitations. And there are also other things, like security concerns. So in politically a sensitive

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context, revealing funders identities can put research on staff at risk so or if any other is doing it, and anyone else is doing it, then it disclosure is a disadvantage for those that are actually doing because they are going to be the spotlight right for that government that that it's in that context, also maintaining the infrastructure needed for transparency often requires time and funding, and some think tanks that might be smaller, for example, make lack of them and disclosure, disclosure funding from corporations or government services might create also perception of biases undermining the institution's reputation that that's why, another reason why they don't do it right, and this in this article, is too much transparency, a bit of a problem that Enrique menti savant does, argues that excessive transparency also have, can have unintended negative consequences, suggesting that they should be like balanced in terms of the transparency and also considerations of security, privacy and the complexity of operating within some political landscapes, right? Of course, this is not the case of not right now, the case of the US, but some other countries might be and the consequences are in terms of trust and credibility, not just for that think tank, but for the whole sector. And since they are, you know, influential, influential in terms of the political context and the and the policies it also might undermine, you know, like that, trust in the whole system, in the whole democratic system.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 38:08

Thanks so much. Now I want to ask Professor Philippi this just a little bit more you know about this study that you conducted? You know, you conducted a lot of interviews in this and you know, what is your sense of the the industry, the think tank industry, after conducting these interviews, I mean, without naming names, you know, what can you tell us? What are some of the or you can name names if you want. What are some of the things that people in the industry thought were most concerning? You know, from think tanks, and you know how explicit are the benefits from the donor perspective.

Benoît Pelopidas 38:50

Thanks, Nick. So again, I'm applying strict scholarly standards, so I will not name names under any circumstances, because the reason why we got the information that I will give you is because we promised not to name names, but I will directly actually cite from some of the donors. So so funders, so for you to see how they are interested, sometimes in producing direct self censorship. One of them explicitly, which is a major offender, explicitly said, quote, to be honest, I'm not interested in the research and analysis they produce. If I wanted substantial, solid analysis, I would go elsewhere. If I wanted serious research, I would read peer reviewed articles and books in Then he continued, if you don't want to have a debate, funding potential critics is a good option. If. In several discussions along those lines. So it's important and interesting if you interview donors to realize that what they get from association to think tanks is not just a knowledge transfer of the kind that we tend to think about. They also get benefits in terms of access to people that would otherwise, that would, you know, meet at those conferences. They get benefits in terms of rebranding. So, you know, if I, if I were to just joke about the name, it's not all about the think, but it's also about what the tank actually provides.

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Nick Cleveland-Stout 40:44

Thanks so much. And just last question here, and then we'll get to some Q and A there's already a lot of great questions I'm seeing in the chat. Michael, I wanted to follow up with you on how a lot of this relates to FARA, the foreign Agents Registration Act we've seen in the past. Some think tankers get indicted under Farah. It now seems like things might be moving in the opposite direction. The Trump administration has already issued orders saying that they're not going to enforce Farah except in cases of espionage. So what does the Trump administration's move moves mean for the think tank world, especially for think tankers that have close entanglements, especially receiving gifts or funding from foreign governments that have previously been indicted for these, these actions.

Michael Hartmann 41:43

Well, for that, either existing or hypothetical situation, if you're a think tank with foreign funding, and you might have been worried about what could happen regarding application of fair to you, you can breathe easier. I mean, you know it's on record now, on paper out there that there likely will not be pursuit of that. Now, I don't know if that means there never will in the next four years. You know if there is, it will, of course, now have to be, or probably should be, from from the standpoint of the DOJ, a broad interpretation of what traditional espionage is, or whatever. But I thought the memo was kind of unfortunate in that if any action is taken, it will now be easier to say of it, that it's targeted at me or somebody because of what I what I'm saying or what I believe. But we will see. You know, while it's on paper, there may still be some use of FARA. I'm not predicting that, but I wouldn't be surprised if there is. It is the case in other contexts that the new administration has, in the higher education context, I think there's been a little bit of a signaling that there's going to be reliance on that acts provisions regarding foreign funding. So here again, not unlike the question I asked for what's the difference? You know, some thought could be devoted, perhaps by somebody in the government or out to reconciling the desire for transparency in the one context, and apparently, maybe, you know, not the other.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 43:24

So let's, let's move to, thanks so much, Michael. We're gonna move to audience Q&A now, we've got a question here from Hamad, which connects, kind of the, the missing piece of the of this cycle in the we've in this conversation that we've been talking about, you know, we've got funding from special interests, in many cases, conflicts of interest and sympathetic policy recommendations. But I really like this question, because this connects, you know, what is the policy impact? Hamad asks, to what extent does the think tank perspective, often shaped by external influences impact US foreign policy decisions, and any one of you three, I think can can take that. So please just unmute yourself if you want to take this question.

Benoît Pelopidas 44:17

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I'll just say one simple thing, which is, it's important not to take as the only sign of impact, the fact that your recommendation is translated into policy. The act of removing options from the ones that are being considered is massive impact in in the field of nuclear weapons policy, that's a lot of what we see. It's removal of more ambitious goals in the other type of impact is simply legitimizing particular measures in the eyes of the more general. Public. It's not just, you know, policy facing impact, it's also impact facing the citizenry.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 45:14

So I might compliment too. So right now, we're organizing the conference, the annual conference of DT in South Africa in 20 and in June. And it's about impact and think tanks. Because in the state of the sector report, we found that 70, 70% of the think tanks worldwide will say that they actually influence policy. And we see that this is something that is really difficult to prove. We are seeing that they are overseeing some other influence that they might be having, or so the other impacts that might be as important as affecting, like public public policy. So for example, they can have other roles, such as inclusive dialog. They help like also, they have a training and role in terms of leadership and preparing future leaders. They also generate ideas support various actor actors, and also, including no political parties and private sectors. So these contributions are not being recognized, and they have they are giving a broader value to society, but but sometimes we think that this obsession with saying that they are impacting public policy might be from an external demand, probably from funders or from other stakeholders that actually have an interest in doing that. So that's why we are like like in this conference, trying to redefine what impact is, and also impact is different, and depending on where you are right, what does impact look look in an non temporary space or in an estate capture. So it's really different how it looks and how it should be seen, depending on the political context.

Michael Hartmann 47:12

I would just say, in agreement really, while often overstated, because they have to raise money, you know, they're overstating it to donors. Would be or existing. The think tanks have an impact, and that's not by definition bad. I think the skittishness here, the concern is that it's compromised, you know, or that the intention of a funder, at least, would would be, you know, to not fully and fairly present the facts, or something like that. But you know, argumentation is not by itself, bad. It's the might just be worth asking as you're consuming the argumentation as a policy maker or citizen, be probative, but not dispositive, to ask who's picking up the tab in the nature. You know, if you read a brief in a case and you're the judge, you know that's from an attorney who's being retained, you know, by Company X or person y to argue Z. Guess same with public relations agents. Whether we're in the same spot with think tanks or not, I don't know, but it's worth wondering.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 48:20

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Absolutely. Thank you. Three. We've got we've got a question from Ashley gate, who is an intern with us in the democratizing foreign policy program. She asks Professor Pelopidas, how rampant would you say perspective filtering is in the field of nuclear policy? What would you say is the most concerning impact of perspective filtering. Do you believe there is any way to avoid such filtering while an organization still receives funding from these donors?

Benoît Pelopidas 48:54

So I'll be brief, but this is an interesting question, so I would encourage the person who asked it to follow up with me afterwards. The first thing is the data we had, which is why I'm so happy that this think tank funding tracker exists was at a particular moment, and so it's an ongoing process to make sure that what we've identified either continues as amplified or is decreasing. But the one thing you're asking for recommendations, the one thing I would say is that in an information landscape in which obvious vested interests have disproportionate influence, it would be important to elevate notions of a precautionary principle and notions of avoidance of conflicts of interest as requirements to treat a judgment as credible, so that that goes well with your request for more transparency.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 50:00

I have also got a question from Almut Rochowanski, a non-resident fellow here at the Quincy Institute, who says all of this has been brilliant and helps me enormously with my own thinking about our foreign funding in poor countries civil societies. Why do you think kind of the flip side of this question we've been talking about are Western elites usually so defensive about our money in other countries civil societies and pretend it is altruistic and does not interfere. If at home, we accept that funding creates biases. Stephanie, that might be a good question for you if you want to take that. But in any one of you three, feel free to jump in on that.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 50:42

No, I think that it's a very relevant question, right? Like the two coins, the two sides of the coin, and I think that it's, it's the same case for both, right? So we do have, like, some recommendations, regardless where like the donor is and where they are working on so, for example, if you, if you ask me about what will be the type of funding that the promote independence, is core funding, right? Because this gives a lot of flexibility and freedom to the think tanks to actually develop their own ideas and have their own agenda. But also, think tanks have to be, like proactive in terms of showing what's their strategic planning, what's the research agenda from the beginning of the year?

For example, there, like some so many tools, that we can see whether this theme time is actually working on behalf of their own objectives or is being, you know, just managed or pushed by an external actor. So another thing is that transparency is a two way street. So also, we need to demand for from donors to be transparent as well know, what are they funding? Where, for what and those kind of things we it's easily for it's easy for a funder to also provide

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that information, but also they should require think tanks to be fully transparent about the funding that they are receiving before considering any applications. It's just a requirement that they can have. So I think that also funders play a very important role here, regardless where they are, you know, like just to show that they are actually helping think tanks to be sustainable, to have impact, rather than just pushing their own objectives.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 52:33

Absolutely we have a question here from Patricia Hogan, who asks if these outfits do not fund think tanks, who will do it? And I think this, this kind of dovetails with something that I've been thinking about with reds, this project, which is, you know, is the is the problem, the fact that there are these, these conflicts of interest, that that that go so often undisclosed, or is the problem the sources of funding themselves. Obviously, it's good for these think tanks to be transparent for you know, as Michael was mentioning with this database, like we want journalists in particular to use this in order to call out these conflicts of interest, or at least just you know, allow their readers to know when they're quoting someone you know on defense policy, for example, to mention that someone that they're quoting is funded by Lockheed Martin or General Dynamics. So the question is, is, you know, just to add a second part to this question, is the problem that these funders are so dominant in the debate, or is the problem that question of transparency, both on the part of the media and the think tanks themselves, that's a big question. But if anyone wants to jump in on that, please feel free.

Benoît Pelopidas 53:53

Can I jump in? Absolutely. Okay, so very briefly, I just want to say two things on this. One is to give you a quote from the canonical book on the evolution of nuclear strategy by Sir Lawrence Friedman and Jeffrey Michaels, where they say the fundamental ideas remain in place and tend to be recycled. So the way that relates to your question is, I think the right question is, not who's funding this given place, but do we want a given activity to be funded? What that reveals is that what passes, what passes for new knowledge production, if it's actually strategic communication or non innovative additional discourse, do we really want to fund that? That actually changes the type of question we ask about what should be funded. It's not Which place do. Which activity and everything I've said should be about giving funders, but also citizens, a way of distinguishing knowledge production from strategic communication. One thing on that, because we've talked about domestic versus foreign funding, I think we too often use convenient distinctions, domestic versus foreign, public versus private, whereas, at least in the field, we studied what, what changes everything is whether the funder has a conflict of interest. It's not about whether it's public or private, domestic or foreign. It's if it has a conflict of interest, then it will introduce the biases I've described.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 55:50

All right, if no one else wants to jump in on this as well, thank you so much, Professor Pelopidas, I think we're gonna we're almost wrapping up here. So I want to thank everyone for

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the questions, and I just want to end on a question of my own. And I love just a few brief words from each panelist on the question of, kind of, where do we go from here? You know, we've painted, I think, a picture of, especially identifying a lot of, a lot of problems with this sector, you know, rife with, with conflicts of interest. And, you know, we clearly need to, I think, reorient the way in which we think about this industry, as Professor Kelley, this is getting at. But you know, where do we go from here? You know, what can be done on this? How can we move towards a culture of transparency and independence within this sector, or do we need an entire reframing? How do you think about that question? And we can start with with, with Michael, maybe here.

Michael Hartmann 56:51

Well, you know, I complimented the modesty of the initial recommendation. Just encourage journalists to be aware of and talk about this issue and report on it. That might be too modest to really move the ball too terribly much. I don't know, but it's a start, and it's fair, and can't raise too many objections. It is, in fact, that's the journalists job beyond that, if there's movement, you know, there's probably this isn't a prediction, maybe probably is too strong, doesn't? It seem as if there's going to be a scandal, you know, and then a reaction, which is often what moves policy. So I guess maybe the better answer your question is to be ready for that.

Benoît Pelopidas 57:46

Yeah, just a quick thing, essentially echoing what Michael said in repeating that leverage, essentially encouraging journalists to document that, to ask that question into not just say, oh, expert from Think Tank A said this, but expert from Think Tank A working on a project funded by X said this. That would be a way. And the second thing is simply to implement rules about look for vested interest in conflicts of interest in the way you assess the credibility of the information you receive, and apply a precautionary principle like the people who avoid those conflicts of interest, they will say that they do.

Estefanía Terán Valdez 58:40

I think that we need to think how like damaging credibility and trust actually matters to some important stakeholders, right, and especially under the actual political context that we are going to and I think that we have plenty experiences and tools To help think tanks to be more transparent, and also funders in different parts of the world, they're like very good examples of how to be transparent. So I think that there's no excuse, right? Unless there are, like, few exceptions related to security, most things and should be transparent. And if they are not, something is happening, right? But I always call to know and analysis and to understand better what's going on there, because independence also is not an absolute estate, but a balancing act, right? So think tanks have to secure funding, because that's how they survive, but also we have to be really aware that those who fund them, like governments, corporations, philanthropies, also have expectations, so we have to be also conscious about it.

Nick Cleveland-Stout 59:53

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Thanks so much. And with that, I just want to thank all of our speakers today, and thank everyone for. Being here, you all have provided invaluable wisdom on this, on this topic, which is, which will likely be an ongoing conversation, especially if, as Michael says, you know, there could be a scandal and this could be a topic conversation in the future again, before I let you go. You know, let me mention that our next webinar achieving durable peace in Ukraine will be this Thursday, at 10am Eastern Time. You can register for that by going to our events page, [Quincy inst.org/events](https://quincyinst.org/events), that's Q, U, I N, C, Y, I N, S, T.org/events, you can also subscribe to the Quincy mailing list from our home page, [Quincy inst.org](https://quincyinst.org) to receive invitations to all of our events and be able to follow our work. Thank you all again and to our panelists. And have a great rest of your day.