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Free Market Think Tanks: Website And Social Media Presence

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The outcomes most often used to measure the impact of think tanks during the 1970s and 80s were the number of [books](#) and publications adopted by [university professors](#) in their courses and the mentions and articles in the media. Social media has added a new measurement to the list. [Heatsync.com](#) allows users to track over 80 metrics including: traffic, social media, load speed, and demographics. It is interesting to look at how the leading free-enterprise think tanks score in the most popular measures.

Unique visitors. For many think tanks this is the most relevant statistic of web presence, it counts how many different visitors visit the site during a specific period of time. As think tanks do not report this data in a consistent manner, analysts tend to use the less accurate, but free, [Alexa](#) or [Similarweb](#) rankings. Other competing measurement services, such as [Quantcast.com](#) and [Compete.com](#), also have weaknesses, but when ranking think tanks they tend to show similar results. In a confidential survey, the Chase Foundation of Virginia, which supports think tanks, asks potential grantees for their web traffic. When comparing the Chase data for 13 leading grantees with Alexa, the correlation was meaningful (0.77) with Alexa, but almost perfect (0.99) with Similarweb. Here, the rankings have some validity. In the pure think tank category, the [Heritage Foundation](#) comes out first, followed by the [Mises Institute](#) and then [Cato](#). [Reason](#) came in first in the libertarian magazine category with 2 million unique visitors per month.

Twitter. Heritage ranks first with 397,000 followers, Cato second (200,000),

and FreedomWorks third (173,000). In Latin America, the most followed is CEDICE in Venezuela (42,000), followed by Centro de Estudios Públicos in Chile (41,000), and CIDAC in Mexico (22,000). The Canadian leader, Fraser Institute has 14,000 followers and in Europe, the Adam Smith Institute has 18,000 and Istituto Bruno Leoni has 13,000. Among market-oriented university centers, the Hoover Institution is the most followed with 42,000 and second is the Mercatus Center (17,000).

Facebook. Heritage also ranks first in Facebook likes with over 1.1 million. Acton Institute, focusing on religion and liberty, ranks second with 581,000. FreedomWorks with 4.4 million likes ranks first among advocacy groups. It beats its counterpart Moveon in social media, but has less website traffic. In the category “talking about this page,” Heritage dwarfs the competition with 935,000. In Latin America, a much smaller but dynamic organization, the Instituto Mises Brazil, is the most liked, with 65,000. Among university-based centers Hoover tops Mercatus. A special mention should go to a program of the Acton Institute, PovertyCure, which has earned 1.2 million likes.

YouTube. Most think tanks are producing short educational videos. Some are investing millions. The most widely watched so far was produced by an advocacy group, Americans for Prosperity, with 2.2 million views, followed by a video produced by Learn Liberty (1.3 million), a project of the Institute for Humane Studies. Among think tanks, Mises Institute leads with a YouTube video that has garnered 871,000 views, followed by Heritage (528,000), and a video on inflation by Fundación Libertad y Progreso in Argentina (456,000).

Mises Institute leads in subscribers to its YouTube channel (39,000), followed by Cato (24,000), and Heritage (14,000). The leading university based center is again Hoover, with 22,000. Among focused media projects, Reason TV has the highest views with 96,000 and Learn Liberty is approaching 80,000.

Klout. This tool measures Twitter followers and Facebook likes as well as the institution’s presence in other sites such LinkedIn and Instagram. Heritage leads among think tanks with a score of 83 out of 100, Cato is second with 81 out of 100, and the Mises Institute is third with 79 out of 100. Advocacy groups and magazines score better, Reason ties with National Review with 91, followed by Americans for Prosperity 86, and Freedom Works 83. Klout scores change daily.

Traffic to think tank web sites, about 30 percent, comes from Google searches and Facebook, with Facebook being more relevant for think tanks that have important media presence, such as Heritage.

Market-Oriented Think Tank	SimilarWeb monthly visitors 000's	Alexa (lower is better) 000's	Twitter	Facebook likes 000's	Facebook "Talking about this" 000's if 0=<500	You Tube most popular video 000's	Suscribers to You Tube Channel	Klout
US based								
Heritage	4600	10	397	1117	935	528	14272	83
Mises USA	1700	27	43	94	4	871	39309	79
Cato	1300	37	200	201	10	199	24291	81
Acton Institute	170	205	12	581	4	149	1714	65
Foreign								
Mises Brazil	300	90	5	65	5	27	5288	n/a
Adam Smith Institute (U.K.)	150	225	18	11	0	19	2055	80
Fraser Institute (Canada)	130	361	14	5	0	55	829	62
CIDAC (Mexico)	25	600	22	27	0	206	1582	65
Istituto Bruno Leoni (Italy)	15	764	13	9	0	15	637	58
CEP (Chile)	10	346	40	1	0	122	1094	55
Fundacion Libertad y Progreso (Argentina)	8	2018	8	2	0	456	1141	52
CEDICE (Venezuela)	6	1828	41	n/a	n/a	10	122	63
Advocacy Groups								
FreedomWorks	670	55	173	4443	514	328	8119	83
Americans for Prosperity	80	301	2	906	100	2179	3432	86
University Based								
Hoover Institution	300	139	42	38	1	397	22493	65
Mercatus	220	253	17	2	1	40	2037	82
Magazines and Videos								
Reason	5500	7	130	126	28	1365	96275	91
National Review	2300	3	83	83	12	468	3453	91
Learn Liberty	100	292	22	265	3	1300	79882	68
Competition								
Brookings	1600	37	76	85	3	68	4408	79
MoveOn.org	4000	13	109	570	47	1773	33468	84

Table 1.1 Think Tank Statistics

If we weigh the above results by budget, as the Center for Global Development report did for some groups in 2013, the Mises Institute, and smaller groups, such as Fundación Libertad y Progreso (Argentina) and Instituto Mises Brazil, would emerge as providing more presence per dollar. Michael Rae, who as president and founder of Lexicom.ca has built and hosted websites for over 200 think tanks, argues that, “The big data available publicly, and at the server level, makes it impossible for a think tank to hide the size of their audience, but still doesn’t indicate in any truly meaningful way their effectiveness.” No think tank, for example, has achieved stable prominence unless also providing quality research. Brookings, which consistently tops the University of Pennsylvania’s GoTo rankings, does not appear at the top of any social media category, but the quality of its research is recognized by most.

In some areas, such as income and expenses, the U.S. non-profit sector, including think tanks, have considerable transparency. Each year, most of their reports are easily found. On issues of output, however, the story is different. For-profit media companies need to report accurately on their readership, no such common standards exist for non-profits, including think tanks. It would be healthy, for donors and honest players alike, to have think tanks agree on common standards of transparency and report about web traffic using the same method. Until that happens we will have to rely on a variety of metrics which, though imperfect, give

us some sense of a think tank's outreach and advocacy efforts in the digital world.

The data for Facebook, Alexa, YouTube, Similarweb, Twitter and Klout was collected during February 8 and 9, 2014. Anaïs Clement helped conduct research for this piece.