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## The challenge for think tanks in 2017

Jennifer Rubin

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Washington is populated by dozens of think tanks — some liberal, some conservative and some libertarian. Like everything else, they vary in quality. Some associated with a university (like the Hoover Institution) require tenure-level credentials; others hire former political flacks or washed-up politicians. Some have scholars who regularly are invited to testify before Congress and help educate key political players; others specialize in panel discussions by think tankers, for think tankers and attended mostly by think tankers. Some are politicized information peddlers for one political party; others conduct serious, independent research.

In an era of “fake news,” with a president-elect who regularly lies and partisan hacks who dispute that there are such things as “facts,” think tanks seem more important than ever. We hope in 2017 to see more of this:

**1. Joint efforts to confirm facts, dispel fantasies and push politicians to embrace reality.**

Rather than a paper by a single think tanker or an op-ed from several in the same think tanks, multiple think tanks (e.g. American Enterprise Institute, the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress) might consider a joint project confirming Russian attempts to interfere with our and our allies’ elections. There is power in forging consensus across party lines when the administration, the media and political players are engaging in mass denial or outright fabrication.

**2. Civil debate and respectful disagreement.** Think tanks like to put on programs featuring a parade of essentially like-minded experts. There is much more to be gained by, say, the Cato Institute inviting professional colleagues from, say, the Council on Foreign Relations to discuss American support for democratic values in the world. If nothing else, inculcating an atmosphere of convivial debate may spread to pundits, lawmakers, activists and voters themselves. (Even more daring, do a scholar exchange for six months — a conservative goes to a liberal think tank, a liberal to a conservative. Who knows what they might learn from each other?)

**3. The involvement of civil society.** As government becomes more dysfunctional, social and economic problem-solving will need to be taken up by philanthropic organizations and the private sector. The effort to collaborate with and interact with a wider segment of Americans beyond D.C. politicians and staffers is essential, both to bring new ideas into the Beltway and to encourage private efforts in lieu of or to supplement public initiatives.

**4. The inclusion of scientific experts.** Politicians, political staffers and the media (and the rest of America, for that matter) have become less scientifically literate. Programs and publications, on issues ranging from regulation to the environment to innovation, regularly should make use of experts in the relevant field. The blind too often lead the blind when it comes to wrestling with policy requiring some technical knowledge. Adding some topical expertise to the mix would enlighten everyone.

There certainly are many other ways to broaden the horizons of think tanks, which supply political parties, interest groups, administrations and staffers with policy ideas and raw data. Raising the quality of their products, reducing think tank partisanship and involving those outside the Beltway might go a long way toward finding legislative consensus and stimulating civil debate. With an administration that seems eager to go to war with reality, there will be a heavier burden than usual on think tanks to maintain intellectual rigor and to keep the public, politicians and the press grounded in reality.