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Expanding The Reach Of Think Tanks: The Growing Relevance Of Online Media

Generally, think tanks produce five types of products: research, education, advocacy, networking, and direct services. In research and education, independent think tanks are facing increased competition from university based efforts. In networking, social media can create competition, but can also complement the work of think tanks. Staff members focusing on networking are leveraging social media and using external search engines and websites, such as Guidestar, Wikipedia or LinkedIn.

Think tanks focusing on advocacy are facing major competition from intellectual entrepreneurs with specialized talents such as web-aggregators or editors of online publications. In order to attract wide readership, these aggregators fill their portals with articles that have little to do with think tanks efforts.

The Drudge Report and Real Clear Politics are good examples. I estimate that 3 percent of the content of Drudge comes from articles written by leaders of think tanks. Real Clear Politics is more think tank friendly, but it also caters to a wider audience. The traffic of these two websites dwarf that of most think tanks. With over 20 million visits per

day, Drudge attracts more traffic than all U.S. free market think tanks combined.

The impact of web-based “think tanks” is reflected in the viewership of articles in [Forbes.com](#). One example is [Ralph Benko’s piece](#) on bullet purchases by the government. He received many more unique visits (almost a million views) than what the website of his think tank receives in a year. [John Goodman’s piece on ObamaCare](#) was viewed over 260,000 times, which is more than the monthly traffic of his organization. This impact leads to a simple conclusion: To be effective in their advocacy efforts, as well as to promote their own research to wider audiences, think tanks need to develop relationships with these web-mavericks and online editors.

The above also leads to a second challenge for think tank managers: learn how to better capture the web traffic of some of your “stars.” As with Benko and Goodman, it is not uncommon for talented individuals to outperform their own organizations. Impact on Twitter is an example. Agustin Etchebarne, leader of the think tank [Libertad y Progreso](#) in Argentina, has over 33,000 followers on Twitter. His think tank has yet to reach 8,000 followers. Juan Carlos Hidalgo, from the [Cato](#) Institute, with over 9,500 followers, beats several Cato units as well as other think tanks with multimillion dollar budgets.

Those who are engaged in the battle for ideas should monitor and interact with this world of web IEs (intellectual entrepreneurs). Some efforts abroad are worth watching. [El Ojo Digital](#) in Argentina is one to keep an eye on, for over half of its content comes from think tanks, both domestic and international, it is clearly poised for growth. It takes a big-tent approach. It collaborates with the Heritage Foundation as well as Cato, and several Argentinean think tanks. The traffic is over 200,000 unique visitors per month, which is much larger than the traffic attracted by other local think tanks.

Another recent effort is [PanamPost](#). Based in the U.S., it caters to a freedom loving audience in the Americas. Less than half of its content comes from think tanks, but expansion plans are focusing on articles

with value for their news and not just for their analysis. Its editorial line is very similar to Cato Institute's web page devoted to Latin America www.elcato.org.

Another new effort in the Americas, www.altavoz.pe was started by young talented Peruvians. Only a small part of Alta Voz is devoted to economics, but they are sympathetic to free-markets. In Mexico, all of the content of [Asuntos Capiales](#) resembles the material offered by the best think tanks.

The trend is occurring in Europe as well. Most of the content of El Diario Exterior in Spain, in its tenth year of operation, comes from writers from prominent think tanks. It covers the world but has especially good coverage of Europe and the Americas. With much more traffic, but looking more and more like a prominent newspaper, Libertad Digital, includes news and economic analysis from a free market perspective. In the difficult French terrain, the award winning website [Contrepoints](#), presents both sides of issues, but with a fair proportion devoted to free market views.

Farther to the East, in Romania, talented web intellectual entrepreneurs helped change the course of history. [The Blogary](#) platform, run by Mirel-Valentin Axinte, was very influential last year when anti-reform and anti-Western forces staged a coup against the pro-Western president Traian Basescu. Blogary was crucial in fueling an internet campaign which led to the boycott on a referendum to validate the coup. The referendum did not meet the quorum and the president was reinstated. Blogary is a preeminent platform of principled, intelligent defenders of free society ideas. In Slovenia, [NoviceJutro](#) tries to clone the Drudge Report and provides links to all free market think tanks.

These are just a few examples of how the web IE market can assist think tanks. Those who want to help disseminate free market policy solutions must not ignore the web IE market. Those who want to help can choose to be donors, investors, or both. I vote for both.

