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On Think Tanks and Mobile Technology

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Joining the [Brookings Institution](#), and followed not long after by the [Heritage Foundation](#), the Cato Institute [made a splash in the mobile app world last week](#) with the release of the first Official Cato Institute iPhone Application. The first release of Cato's app features access to the [Cato@Liberty blog](#), a native podcast client and direct access to Cato's YouTube content, and policy studies and scholar op-eds in major publications. You can view screen shots and read more about the features in [a blog post I authored](#) the day of the app's release.

As Robert Bluey, Director of the Center for Media and Public Policy at the Heritage Foundation, [noted earlier this week](#), the release of the three applications by Brookings, Cato, and Heritage prompted Nancy Scola at Personal Democracy Forum's [techPresident blog to ask](#), "...does anyone actually use this stuff?" and "...is anyone seeking out these apps as they seek out research, news, and points of view?" Be sure to check out Rob's comments [here](#) and [here](#).

Here at Cato, we saw over 2,000 downloads in just 36 hours. As one of the most well-known public policy research foundations in the world, this wasn't too surprising, but we are nonetheless very proud and encouraged by consumers' expressed enthusiasm, especially given that we spent very little money to develop the application. Like Heritage, we don't have access to the demographic data on the app's consumers, although we've received some very positive feedback from media, Hill staff, and other stakeholders in the public policy arena. We are also monitoring and encouraging people to use the [#Cato20 hashtag on Twitter](#), which we are using as a primary feedback loop for people using the application.

But despite this instant success, Nancy's questions still remain. [The Obama campaign's development of a proprietary iPhone app](#) was nothing short of a total game-changer in the 2008 election, empowering volunteers with all sorts of tools (phone banking, canvassing tools with interactive maps and voter lists, along with scripts and on-demand campaign platform information, among other features). Do think tanks need tools like this? At Cato, a non-profit research foundation, we never ask anyone to do anything - we don't organize politically. We publish research papers and books (along with other media offerings), and host seminars, workshops, and forums for interested constituents. Our only real need is a steady stream of resources. So it is also interesting to note, then, that [Apple won't allow donation buttons in iPhone apps](#), ostensibly because [they don't want to be responsible for ensuring that the total amount of an intended donation actually reaches its destination](#).

Does this render a mobile application for a think tank useless? I'm not sure that it does, especially since [Cato's mission](#) is described thus:

In an era of sound bites and partisanship, Cato remains dedicated to providing clear, thoughtful, and independent analysis on vital public policy issues. Using all means possible — from blogs, Web features, op-eds and TV appearances, to conferences, research reports, speaking engagements, and books — Cato works vigorously to present citizens with incisive and understandable analysis.

A mobile application, then, helps the Cato Institute to continue to develop inroads with stakeholders at all levels by dispersing and distributing information resources to anyone with the technology. And just because Cato doesn't organize people, or ask anyone to write letters to their Congressman or Congresswoman (for example), doesn't mean that there aren't a broad swath of libertarians around the world who are passionate about spreading the message of free markets, individual responsibility, limited government and peace - so having the Cato Institute's scholarship in their hand wherever they are only helps them to achieve their goals.

Scola also critiques each application's usability factors, particularly how each organizes content. Her suggestion that it is a drawback to Cato's app for content to be organized by date is a fair one, given that we organize content on our website that enables users to search for content by scholar, by research area, by publication title, etc. But subsequent releases of the application will likely remedy this, and at the risk of tipping our hand, we will look to incorporate other features that permit users to share content across the social web directly from their mobile device. We are also currently working to develop applications for other mobile devices and platforms (including Android), and will announce them when they become available to users. We have also begun [making many of our books available in e-reader format](#), including Kindle and Nook.

The lesson from think tank applications, and it will be interesting to continue to monitor how each organization continues to develop their respective technologies, is that, as with any other technology or communications strategy, it's important to know: a) who you are, and b) what your goals are. Only from a coherent understanding of both can organizations from city council campaigns to global public policy research foundations develop and implement tactics that help realize those strategic goals.

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