



The impact of think tanks on mass media discourse regarding the economic crisis in Spain



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ABSTRACT

Influencing mass media discourse is considered an essential part of the work carried out by think tanks. This research focuses on the influence Spanish think tanks have exercised in shaping the ubiquitous and all-pervading concept of “economic crisis” in the press of reference during 2013 and 2014. The results show that very few such entities have had even a minimally significant impact in this area, while also demonstrating that very diverse communicative strategies exist that can result in maximizing the amount of media attention gained. Consequently, despite being regarded as intelligence actors, Spanish think tanks do not seem to be so.

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1. Introduction

Even if they have not attained the critical role they play in the US, think tanks in Europe have experienced significant growth in recent years. Spain has not been unaffected by this trend, as evidenced by the growing number of organizations characterized as such.

With the emergence of new Spanish think tanks, these organizations have become the subject of study in different bodies of research, which have essentially concerned themselves with inventorying and classifying them, determining their structure and identifying their links with other relevant actors in the field of ideas and political practice, the two fields between which think tanks are called upon to build bridges.

Despite the fact that achieving media coverage has traditionally been considered the main strategy used by think tanks to influence political decisions and actions, the real impact they have on the media has scarcely been studied and, in the Spanish case, not at all. This research aims to determine to what extent the contributions of Spanish think tanks have influenced mass media discourse on a topic which, given its impact, depth and significance, has been both ubiquitous and all-pervading during the period of study: the economic crisis.

2. Theoretical framework

If “intelligence actors are not only those groups and individuals concerned with collecting, analyzing, and communicating information relevant to national strategic goals, but also those who utilize this information in policymaking” (Durbin, 2008, p. 16), a think tank must be regarded as an intelligence actor. After all, according to McGann (2015, p. 7), “the ongoing

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challenge for think tanks is to produce timely and accessible policy-oriented research that effectively engages policymakers, the press, and the public on the critical issues facing a country”.

In fact, achieving media visibility is widely attributed as the goal of think tanks (Rich & Weaver, 2000; Cook, 1998; Cigler & Loomis, 1995) and they are generally considered to be having increasingly more success in this (Misztal, 2012). Moreover, it is the main indicator by means of which think tanks themselves measure their effectiveness (Abelson, 2012). Consequently, it is logical that these organizations and their actions have been addressed primarily from the perspective of political sociology and the communication sciences, and particularly by scholars of public relations and competitive intelligence (Stone, 1996; Abelson, 2006, 2009; Xifra, 2008, 2010; Castillo, 2009). Thus, together with their widespread adoption of the “the marketing of ideas” metaphor, the incorporation of marketing and public relations professionals on their staff has also become widespread (Smith, 1991).

Of all the public relations strategies that think tanks can use to mobilize public opinion in the field of political communication, the most common is that of *media relations* (Xifra, 2001), in the case of think tanks aimed at incorporating ideas, data and approaches to spread to the media agenda. Although the media visibility of European think tanks tends to be considered significantly lower than that of their North American counterparts (McGann, 2007, 2015), the fact is that the true impact of think tanks on media discourse has rarely been addressed as an object of empirical study (Rich & Weaver, 2000). In the Spanish case, the issue has not been addressed at all.

The (mostly American) literature on the topic of think tank media visibility has traditionally linked greater visibility to greater resources; that is, a higher budget and more researchers (Danielian, 1989). However, this factor is not always proportional because some organizations may become little more than an obligatory source when commenting on certain issues, due to the fact that some think tanks use particularly effective resources in disseminating information to journalists or have personal ties with those who decide which articles to include in review sections (Rich & Weaver, 2000). In addition to the above, a kind of virtuous circle has also been detected (virtuous from the standpoint of visibility, but vicious in terms of plurality), leading journalists to consistently use those experts who most regularly appear in the media (Graber, 1993).

Seniority, geographical proximity to the media on which the impact is desired and degree of ideological affinity with its editorial lines are other success factors identified by Rich and Weaver (2000). These authors also suggest that the degree to which the financing of a think tank depends on its media visibility will also determine the effort invested in its promotion.

In the context of deep crisis in which the different market economy models use public relations to try to impose their political and socio-economic precepts over their global competitors (Lawniczak, 2007), the topic of economic crisis presents itself as a sufficiently relevant and meaningful field on which to focus the analysis of Spanish think tanks’ ability to influence media discourse.

3. Object of study, methodology and limitations

This research aims to determine the real impact achieved by Spanish think tanks on newspapers of reference in Spain, from both a quantitative and qualitative viewpoint, with regard to how the media have addressed such an all-pervading and transcendent topic as the economic crisis. *Impact* is to be understood as the raising of media coverage of the organization, of its activities, and of the ideas or the points of view it wants to spread.

In order to determine which think tanks to address as our object of study, we used as a basis previous studies that have inventoried these organizations in Spain (McGann, 2012; Tello, 2013; Barberà & Arregui, 2011; Ponsa & Xifra, 2010), although excluding those whose area of specialization was completely unrelated to economics and those which displayed almost total inactivity in the first year of their analysis. Thus, the following 27 think tanks included:

- Cercle per al Coneixement
- Círculo de Empresarios
- Consell Assessor per a la Reactivació Econòmica i el Creixement (CAREC)
- Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales (FAES)
- Fundació Catalanista i Demòcrata - CATDEM
- Fundació Catalunya Oberta
- Fundación Ortega y Gasset
- Fundació Privada Centre d'Estudis Jordi Pujol
- Fundació Rafael Campalans
- Fundación Universidad Empresa (FUE)
- Fundación Alternativas
- Fundación Ciudadanía y Valores
- Fundación de Cajas de Ahorro
- Fundación de Estudios de Economía Aplicada (FEDEA)
- Fundación Ideas para el Progreso
- Fundación Independiente
- Fundación Internacional para la Libertad
- Fundación COTEC para la Innovación Tecnológica

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