Presence of think tanks in the Spanish digital press

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Abstract

The study of think tanks in Spain has been growing in the last few years with an equally increasing number of social and grassroots movements. This article offers content analysis results from a selection of eight Spanish think tanks in the digital press during a seven-year period, adding new conclusions to previous literature for the same period. Not only does this research explore the appearance on the media, but also the type of mentions and authorship of the articles and blogs included in the digital press, contributing to a deeper study of think tanks. The objective of this study is to analyse the limited presence of Spanish think tanks in media outlets and whether their appearance is ideologically motivated. The article built a constructed week sampling and followed a content analysis methodology to gather quantitative and qualitative elements from the selected sampling (n=1,101). The paper concludes that the presence of think tanks in the Spanish digital press is limited, causing not only a lack of knowledge of their existence but also raising questions about how they try to impact on the policymaking process.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The research on think tanks in Spain has grown in the past years with several studies describing their impact on the media and their different communication strategies. Despite this increasing interest in think tank communication (**Barberà**; **Arregui**, 2011; **Santillán-Buelna**, 2012; **Ponsa-Herrera**, 2014; **Guerra-Heredia**, 2014; **Martínez-Oña-López**, 2016; **Bermejo-Siller**, 2016; **Lalueza**; **Girona**, 2016; **Parrilla**; **Almiron**; **Xifra**, 2016; **Castillo-Esparcia**; **Guerra-Heredia**; **Almansa-Martínez**, 2017; **Planells-Artigot**, 2017), the study of think tanks in Spain is still a novel discipline in comparison with the situation in other international contexts. Given their nature at a crossroads in the social space (**Medvetz**, 2008), they act as in-between and knowledge bridge with all the other social actors (**Stone**, 2007). **Shaw** *et al.* (2014, p. 449) described a series of factors allowing the development of think tanks: business interests, the political arena, research-policy

interface, globalization, and the demand for political analysis. Thus, their study cannot but reflect an image of the social context in which they are born and where they attempt to cause an impact. Based on previous studies analysing the relationship between think tanks and the political actors, the Spanish political context provides an example of elitism (**Ponsa-Herrera**, 2014) and "extractive elites" (**Molinas**, 2012; **Benegas**; **Blanco**, 2013).

Some studies consider that there are 8,248 think tanks in the world, of which 1,872 are in the US and 2,219 in Europe (**McGann**, 2020) and around 30% of them were founded between 1981 and 1990 (**McGann**, 2017). Seminal research on think tanks dates back to 1989 with works like **Weaver** (1989), classifying their typology in three main categories that still appear (**Xifra**, 2008; **Tello-Beneitez**, 2013): the "university without students", the "advocacy tank" and the "government contract organization". Since then, there have been numerous attempts to establish other classifications, despite the "slippery" nature of the term (**Xifra**, 2008, p. 11; **Ponsa-Herrera**; **González-Capitel**, 2015, p. 14).

This study follows the definition of a think tank coined by Requejo, translated below:

> "Think tanks [...] are groups either privately organised or funded by the Administration, devoted to research, but not the implementation [of public policies]. [...] They communicate their conclusions both to the general public as well as a more specific audience through a series of own publications, articles, books, congresses, conferences or appearances in the media. Think tanks can depend on academic institutions, organise themselves as non-profit independent foundations, promoted by a particular set of professionals or affiliated to a political party or interest group" (**Requejo**, 1999, p. 26).

Despite the advantages of having an all-comprising definition, **Mendizábal** (2014) recommended a definition based on their functions, given the difficulty to include all the variations found in every single context. All this scholar literature analysed the influence think tanks exercise on other social actors before the implementation of public policies. The present study pretends to contribute to the study of the communication strategies of think tanks and their access to the public space through their presence in the digital press as a way to cause an impact in the policymaking process. Think tanks wish to have their work and activities described in the media in order to increase their social presence, informing government about their policies and establish themselves as experts on public policies (**González-Hernando**; **Pautz**; **Stone**, 2018). **Abelson** (2018) notes that there cannot be any influence on policymakers, if they do not discuss their research in any way either to the public or the policymakers, thus resorting to different communication strategies, which will vary from one national context to another. At the same time, media outlets want to rely on different experts and sources who can contribute with data, opinions or quotes on the publications. **Wouters** (2015) highlights that social actors reinforce their position of prestige every time they appear in the media and are quoted, acquiring "monopoly positions" over certain issues. The same applies to researchers who want their voices and publications to be included in the media as a way of reaching a larger public, establishing then a mutual dependence, among experts and institutions wishing to send their message across and communication professionals searching for an expert voice to quote from.

The main objective of a think tank is to communicate evidence-based studies to social actors in order to implement better public policies. However, it is not possible to establish how exactly they exercise their influence on every step of the policy process (**Abelson**, 2012; **McLevey**, 2013; **Shaw** *et al.*, 2014), given the lengthy series of actions involved (**Arshed**, 2017: 77). Attempting to measure the impact of the activities that a think tank develop is extremely hard to assess (**Abelson**, 2018; **Selee**, 2013). Every publication, action or collaboration that they carry out attempts to influence and inform policymakers and different social actors at large in order to make a decision on public policies. As for the best way to analyse the presence of a think tank in the media outlets, scholars agree on taking into account both quantitative and qualitative aspects (**Selee**, 2013; **Lalueza**; **Girona**, 2016). However, the quantitative elements include their presence in the media regarding events, studies or publications; by qualitative this article refers to the appearance of the different collaborators and researchers in those activities.

This study centres on how Spanish think tanks appeared on the digital press by analysing content of their appearances for a seven-year period. It will use the term 'experts' as the members of any think tank, either as scholars, researchers or directors, who appear on the press directly connected to either a think tank or an event organised by them. This study will concentrate on the use of experts and researchers of eight Spanish think tanks in eight different digital newspapers through their mentions.

2. Theoretical framework

Based on the definition above, the connection among all think tanks is their emphasis on researching how to improve, change or maintain public policies. Their objective to spread their ideas responds to a dual interest: exercising social influence and preserving their own reputation as a catalyst for the implementation of public policies. At the same time, think tanks depend on funding that can disappear in case their activities do not seem to offer any return on the investment by the funding bodies, entering a circle where think tanks need donors in order to keep their visibility. Through this visibility, they will gather more funding and again more public appearance in the media (**Rich**; **Weaver**, 2000), bearing in mind that public funding is assured in Spain for several think tanks (**Parrilla**; **Almiron**; **Xifra**, 2016).

> " A definition of a think tank should concentrate on their functions "

Mass media are one of the most frequent channels to communicate the studies that the think tank researchers carry out (**Abelson**, 2018; **Selee**, 2013). In the Spanish context, recent studies (**Bermejo-Siller**, 2016; **Castillo-Esparcia**; **Guerra-Heredia**; **Almansa-Martínez**, 2017) have dealt with the presence of think tanks on the media to study their impact, although the studies have been purely quantitative, focusing on the number of appea-

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rances in different media, excluding all reference to the type of mention, even if it was a passing comment. **Selee** (2013) and **Lalueza** and **Girona** (2016) coincide that in order to measure the media impact of a think tank, it is crucial to combine a series of qualitative and quantitative factors, not leaving aside a constantly evolving context and the need to adapt to its changes. **Mendizábal** (2014) equally insists on the importance of studying the context where a think tank operates together with its functions.

The appearance in the media can boost their credibility and helps the legitimacy of their activities. Previous studies attempted to know the opinion of think tanks about their own influence (**Rich**, 2004; **Barberà**; **Arregui**, 2011; **Abelson**, 2012), where experts from think tanks showed their confidence in the outstanding role they have within society. However, studies in Spain conclude that their influence on the media is scarce (**Barberà**; **Arregui**, 2011; **Ponsa-Herrera**, 2014; **Lalueza**; **Girona**, 2016), as most connections are with the political actors. That literature has centered around specific associations: Catalan party-affiliated think tanks (**Ponsa-Herrera**, 2014), or economic think tanks (**Lalueza**; **Girona**, 2016; **Martínez-Oña-López**, 2016).

Likewise, at an international level, there have been other areas of recent research regarding other factors, such as assessing the transparency of the funding through their websites (*Transparify*, 2014), measuring the impact they cause in social networks (**Clark**; **Roodman**, 2013) or classifying them based on their political ideology (**Pautz**, 2010). The study of the policy making process should consider the different interventions of experts of think tanks in media outlets. As not all of them attempt to cause an impact in a similar manner or express their views alike, hence the importance of analysing its links with the media outlets as much as with other channels (**Abelson**, 2018). Media outlets often make reference to their publications and activities, as journalists can contact them whenever there is a need for an expert in a specific field. The *Adam Smith Institute*, for example, was aware of the constraints conveyed by the medium to make the most of them and offered "a sound-bite or a pithy quote" (**Pirie**, 2012, p. 152).

The recurrence of think tanks scholars in a given topic can create a dependence on an expert in a particular area, particularly if they are ready to answer within the time constraints the medium imposes. Unlike a peer-reviewed academic article that can take long to be published, **Rich** (2004, p. 176) described the speed and flexibility with which think tanks can react, providing easily digested reports and infographics. **Misztal** (2012, p. 139) lamented the use of think tanks experts instead of academic public intellectuals because they cannot replace the "commitment, independence, and critical voices" of the public intellectuals. Although she recognises that think tanks experts "often come up with ideas that shed light on existing issues and expose weaknesses in the orientation of their political opponents."

Although

> "experts –especially think tanks– are a frequent presence alongside interest groups and lobbyists in the political process" (**Rich**, 2004, p. 209),

the figure of the expert is nonetheless experiencing criticism in an era where credibility and trustworthiness, basic components of expertise (**Baertl**, 2018; **Edelman**, 2020) are constantly questioned. Hence, the importance to maintain credibility through this series of factors:

> "networks, past impact, intellectual independence, transparency, credentials and expertise, communications and visibility, research quality, ideology and values, current context" (**Baertl**, 2018).

At the same time, they can also mediate and mobilise media opinion and broker expert knowledge (**Tchilingirian**, 2018).

Rich and **Weaver** (2000) studied the connection between think tanks and media and reached two conclusions. The first was that access to funding is basic to obtain visibility and have the possibility to communicate their message. The second conclusion was to highlight the importance of having a vast network of contacts with media professionals. In the same light, studies like **Pérez** (2014) or **Urrutia** (2017) emphasise the importance of think tank networks and the "human factor" as a way of acquiring an international reputation. Bearing all this previous research in mind, one of the objectives of this study is to explore those conclusions within the Spanish context. Thus, this article will analyse the media representation of eight different think tanks to establish a comparison of results in the same number of Spanish digital newspapers.

Similar to the studies by **Planells-Artigot** (2017) and **Castillo-Esparcia**, **Guerra-Heredia**, and **Almansa-Martínez** (2017), this paper wants to assess the impact that think tanks have on the Spanish press. However, the selection of think tanks and the methodology used differs from the latter. Whilst the latter analysed the number of appearances in the media and genres; this article will also analyse the impact of these institutions based on the type of mention in the media, deepening the analysis of how media outlets represented them and, at the same time, increasing the years of study found in **Planells-Artigot** (2017).

The research presents these hypotheses:

H1: The coverage of Spanish think tanks in the digital press is mostly as a mention and not as protagonists, hence displaying a limited influence.

H2: The presence of a Spanish think tank in a digital newspaper is linked to the dominant ideology of the digital daily newspapers.

Barberà and **Arregui** (2011) and **Lalueza** and **Girona** (2016) indicated that Spanish think tanks prioritised contact with political actors rather than with the media. **Lalueza** and **Girona** (2016, p. 277) concluded stating that maintaining links with a political party did not imply they were going to have a bigger presence in the media. Both authors observed that the crucial factor to appear profusely on the media was not the real affiliation to a political party but the perception of that dependence. This can explain how the closer ideologically a think tank is with a political party, the least attractive it results for the media, and vice versa. It is a proposition previously defended by **Rich** (2004) and **Lachapelle**, **Montpetit** and **Gauvin** (2014), who concluded that

"an individual's receptivity to a particular expert framing depends on their underlying worldview, but also on other factors, like media framing and contact with technologies, that inform their understanding of issues."

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

This research followed the references in the digital press of the eight Spanish think tanks included in the "Top think tanks in Western Europe" section of *Global go to think tank index report* (**McGann**, 2018), the annual report created by the *University of Pennsylvania*. The selected think tanks had to be operative during the entire period between the years 2012 and 2018, leaving out any that ceased its activity during that time. Although the report is still one of the most frequently referenced international rankings, it has generated criticism because of the obscurity of the measurement and frequent discrepancies (**Braml**; **Wolhrabe**, 2014; **Linbo**, 2015; **Mendizábal**, 2016; **Planells-Artigot**, 2017, p. 33). The period makes reference to the beginning of a new Administration by the *People's Party* [*Partido Popular*, in Spanish] until December 2018. This period is of particular importance in the current Spanish political context, as it covers two legislative terms together with the final part of the financial crisis; the increase of nationalist movements in some regions; the break of all bonds between the *People's Party* and *FAES*, until then the *People's Party*-affiliated think tank, including a rejection of any public funding from then on (*FAES*, 2016); and the loss of a parliamentary vote of confidence by the *People's Party* government.

The eight think tanks selected for this article, ranked as they appear in the report, are the following:

- *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs* (*Cidob*)
- *Real Instituto Elcano*
- *Fundación Alternativas*
- *Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales* (*FAES*)
- *Institución Futuro*
- *Instituto Europeo del Mediterráneo* (*IEMed*)
- *Fundación de Estudios de Economía Aplicada* (*Fedea*)
- *Instituto Juan de Mariana*

All of them focus on the development of different areas of public policies at a local, national and international level, and cover a wide spectrum of political ideologies. Five of the think tanks are located in Madrid (*Fundación Alternativas*, *Real Instituto Elcano*, *FAES*, *Fedea* and *Instituto Juan de Mariana*); *Cidob* and *IEMed* are located in Barcelona; and *Institución Futuro* in Pamplona.

After the selection of the think tanks, this study used *MyNews*, a newspaper database, to find the relevant articles for the period, basing the search on the appearance of the name of the selected institutions and their appearance on the above media outlets. The sample selection of articles refers to any of the studied think tanks for the seven-year period gave a total amount of 13,745 articles. Subsequently, this study structured the selection based on the methodology of the constructed week sampling, as several studies demonstrate the efficiency of that methodology for the analysis of digital news (**Hester**; **Dougall**, 2007; **Odriozola-Chéné**, 2012a; 2012b). Thus, the authors deleted from the sampling all those articles which were repetitions within the same media outlet or had diverging publication dates. After that, the coders compared units for the construct until reaching a common agreement. The constructed week sampling resulted in 1,101 units for the seven-year period, with a sample of one day for every eight days. This study considers Cohen's kappa coefficient (**Cohen**, 1960) to assess the final level of agreement between the coders who selected the units of registry. The resulting value for Kappa is 0.66, which demonstrates a good level of agreement.

The theory of the agenda-setting is particularly important in this study, as it demonstrated how communication is a complex process brimming with elements competing for the attention of multiple actors (**McCombs**; **Shaw**, 1993). The theory, currently on its third level of investigation (**Guo**; **Vu**; **McCombs**, 2012, p. 56) suggested that the news media and other factors kept on constructing and reconstructing associative links in the memory of the audience.

Likewise, the selection of newspapers included a variety of media with a national scope and from a different political spectrum, given the varied political ideology of the analysed think tanks themselves: *elpais.com*, *elmundo.es*, *abc.es*, *lavanguardia.com*, *elconfidencial.com*, *libertaddigital.com*, *publico.es*, and *vozpopuli.com*. The focus was exclusively on the digital publications of these media, as the first four also have a printed version. Although the location of the think tanks was in Madrid, Barcelona and Navarre, they possess a national and international scope, hence the selected media had to include national presence rather than local. **Gómez-Borrero** and **García-Santamaría** (2014) analysed the digital media whose figures soared, given that not all of them appear in the *OJD* (the Spanish office for justification of circulation and readership). This multiplicity of sections, blogs, op-eds and articles helps the readers understand the world based on their own ideology (**López-García**, 2006).

Given that **Ponsa-Herrera** (2014) concluded that Catalan party-affiliated think tanks had a very low impact on the media, this article sets the aim of extending the analysis to the rest of the country.

3.2. Sampling

After having built the constructed week sampling for the seven-year period, the study analysed the content of all the articles making reference to the eight Spanish think tanks analysed. Thus, this research established a content analysis of 1,101 documents to study the media representation of the think tanks. Not only does this paper register the sections where they appeared, but also it notes the type of mention and the role the think tanks performed in the article. This study followed a content analysis at a qualitative and quantitative level in order to carry out a detailed study of the documents. Content analysis methodology has proved to be highly useful in social sciences (**McNamara**, 2005; **Wimmer**; **Dominick**, 2010; **Lacy** *et al.*, 2015) and, specifically, for the study of agenda-setting (**Rodríguez-Díaz**, 2001).

This article classifies the type of mention on events and quotes bearing in mind if it reported an event or quote by a member of the think tank, an event or publication without commentary, a quote by a member of the think tanks, or a passing reference to a member or a think tank. Thus, the appearances of the think tanks were divided as such:

- *protagonist* (article centred on the think tank),
- *quote* (the think tank brings up relevant information or a quote),
- *mention* (passing comment on the think tank or a member).

At the same time, this study differentiates sources as *primary* when there is a quote from a member of the think tanks, or *secondary*, referring to all the other comments. Although being a protagonist of an article could be for negative reasons, this paper follows the system **Kiousis** (2014). Thus, units of register will have a valence or be neutral.

4. Findings

This study orders the Spanish think tanks from more influential to less, based on the ranking for western Europe, as established by **McGann** (2018). Thus, despite the fact that *Cidob* repeatedly appeared as the top Spanish think tank in the report by the *University of Pennsylvania*, it appeared in the fifth position (63 mentions) in the number of mentions for the seven-year period of this study. The total number of mentions of *FAES* in the selected papers (Graph 1) was 459, including those as a protagonist, source or a simple mention, clearly surpassing the other think tanks, followed by *Fedea* (221), *Real Instituto Elcano* (192) and *Fundación Alternativas* (114).

Although previous studies (**Castillo-Esparcia**; **Guerra-Heredia**; **Almansa-Martínez**, 2017) coincided in reflecting an outstanding role of *FAES* in the press, a detailed analysis of the type of mentions reflects that a high percentage of *FAES* appearances were passing mentions (57%), as opposed to those of *Fedea* (18%) and *Real Instituto Elcano* (29%). In other words, both *Fedea* (82%) and *Real Instituto Elcano* (71%) had a vast number of publications including them as protagonists, or they were quoted within the articles. At the same time, the articles simply mentioned *FAES* and its members, especially his founder and former president of Spain, José María Aznar, directly linked to the think tank to the *People's Party* in 305 occasions, that is, 66.4% of all the instances in which *FAES* appeared in the press. Those passing mentions were linked to the role of a member or a publication of the think tank, and they made an explicit relationship of the until-then affiliation with the political party. The content of the article was often related to the think tank itself, unlike *Real Instituto Elcano* or *Fedea*.

Fundación Alternativas, unlike the other think tanks, has its own blog in *elpais.com*, using it as a platform for its researchers to inform about its events and publications, hence the reason why 47% of its 114 mentions were as a protagonist of the articles. *Cidob*, as mentioned above, appeared 63 times during the whole period, 21% of which were as a protagonist, reducing it to a lesser presence during those years.

When observing the combined use of primary and secondary sources for the think tanks from the total amount of articles (Table 1), *FAES* still led the presence (18%), followed by *Fedea* (16.5%) and *Real Instituto Elcano* (12.4%), while the other think tanks appeared less frequently.

Fundación Alternativas and *Real Instituto Elcano* surpass all the other think tanks when it comes to penning articles on the press, publishing most of their articles in

> The appearance in the media can boost their credibility and helps the legitimacy of their activities
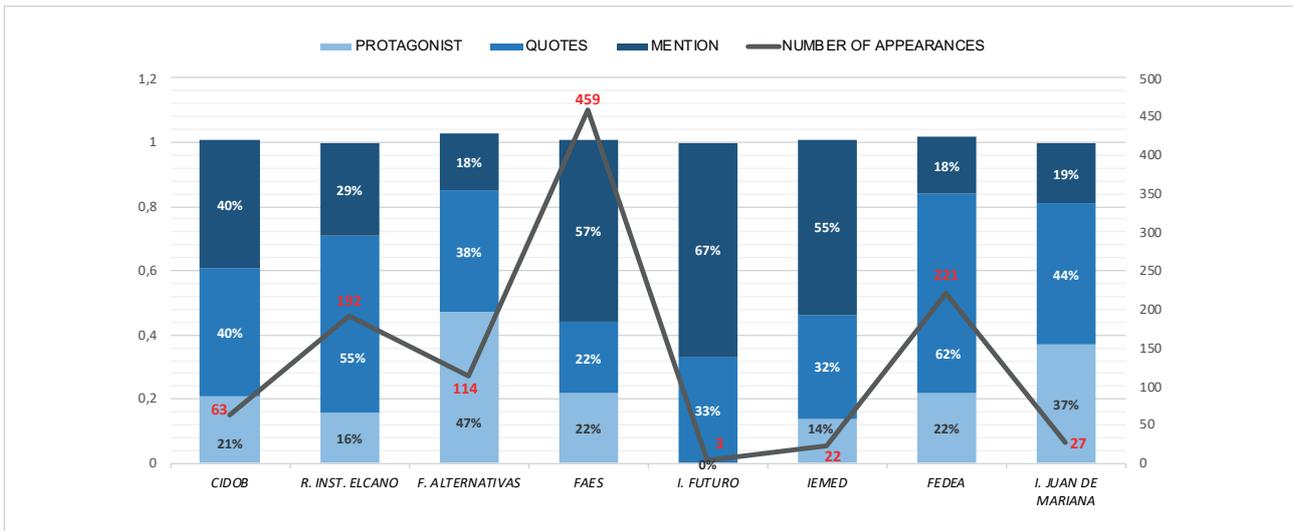
Graph 1. Percentage of types of mentions of think tanks

elpais.com (Table 2). This newspaper is, at the same time, the main source of publication for think tank scholars, as there was a total of 49 articles authored by a member of a think tank (Table 2), including 27 articles of *Fundación Alternativas* in their own blog. *Instituto Juan de Mariana* is the third think tank to publish more articles, as two of its experts have got their own sections in both *vozpopuli.com* and *elconfidencial.com*.

The number of quotes of members or experts of think tanks and the amount of articles with reference to their events or publications (Table 1) shows how the three most present think tanks are *FAES*, *Real Instituto Elcano* and *Fedea*. *FAES* was more frequently mentioned when it came to events or publications, but *Real Instituto Elcano*, *FAES* and *Fedea* had a more frequent presence when its scholars were quoted. The other think tanks, followed by *Cidob*, had a lesser role in the period, and only *Instituto Juan de Mariana* appeared in *vozpopuli.com* and *elconfidencial.com* for the reasons above, or *Fundación Alternativas* due to its having its own blog in *elpais.com*. *Cidob* and *IEMed*, both established in Barcelona, did not have a remarkable presence in the Barcelona-published *lavanguardia.com.* The presence of *Institución Futuro* was, however, even less noticeable throughout these years, due to its mission of concentrating on the region of Navarre, unlike the others, whose scope is national and international, therefore having little presence on nationwide newspapers.

Table 1. Comparison of quotes and references in the press

	Protagonist and quotes combined, excluding mentions (N = 1,101)	Articles with reference to event or publication of a think tank	Quotes of members of experts of think tank
Cidob	3.5%	45	32
R. I. Elcano	12.4%	161	137
F. Alternativas	8.4%	86	66
FAES	18.0%	306	131
I. Futuro	0.1%	4	0
IEMed	0.9%	18	7
Fedea	16.5%	175	120
I. J. de Mariana	2.0%	20	19

The leading presence of *FAES* in some articles disappeared when it comes to articles signed by think tank experts in the press (Table 2). The study showed that *elpais.com* was the most frequent channel for several think tanks to publish articles. Not only did *Fundación Alternativas* had a presence there, but also *Real Instituto Elcano* (16), *Fedea* (3) and *Cidob* (2). *Elpais.com*, therefore, reinforces its image as an international newspaper of record, attracting op-ed articles from different think tanks, either linked ideologically and with their own blog within the newspaper (*Fundación Alternativas*) or institutionally-sponsored (*Cidob*, *Real Instituto Elcano*, *Fedea*, or *IEMed*). This exemplifies its position as a reference newspaper in Spain on which to publish. At the same time, institutional think tanks choose it, aware of the prestigious position the newspaper has. *Elmundo.es* was the second most popular option for various think tanks to publish op-ed articles, including articles from *Cidob*, *Real Instituto Elcano*, and *FAES*. *Vozpopuli.com* and *elconfidencial. com* acted as a vehicle for *Instituto Juan de Mariana*, through the director of the think tank. The collaboration

> "Unlike a peer-reviewed academic article, think tanks can react with speed and flexibility, providing easily digested reports and infographics"

between researchers from think tanks and the presence of that institution in a particular media outlet reflects how the newspapers highlight the voices of likeminded institutions, close to the ideology of the newspaper.

Table 2. Articles signed by a think tank expert in the press

	Cidob	*R. I. Elcano*	*F. Alternativas*	*FAES*	*I. Futuro*	*IEMed*	*Fedea*	*I. J. de Mariana*	*Total*
El país	2	16	27	0	0	1	3	0	49
El mundo	2	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	6
ABC	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
La vanguardia	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
El confidencial	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5
Libertad digital	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Público	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vozpópuli	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	6	7
Total	4	19	27	3	0	1	4	11	69

5. Conclusion

Despite the difficulty in establishing the influence on policymakers, the study of the continuous interaction among all the actors intervening in the policymaking process is of paramount importance. Gathering all the data of the presence of think tanks in the media is not enough to know their influence in the policymaking cycle (**Abelson**, 2018). Nonetheless, it helps clarify the stages where they exactly attempt to exercise an impact. Unless a think tank communicates its ideas, it will not be possible to know its research, so in order to understand its impact better, studies need to analyse both its connection to media outlets and other actors. Even then, as **Stone** (2007) and **Arshed** (2017) also concluded it is not possible to know the exact system to understand the origin of ideas and how those influence governments.

This study has examined the presence of eight main Spanish think tanks and how they interact with different media outlets. The findings demonstrate that those Spanish think tanks with a direct connection with an ideologically like-minded media outlet have assured themselves a bigger presence in those media, as it was the case of *Fundación* Alternativas and *Instituto Juan de Mariana*. The former, a socialist party-linked think tank appears in *elpais.com*, whereas the latter, in the liberal *vozpopuli.com* and *elconfidencial.com*. Those two think tanks were, however, hardly represented in the other media. At the same time, *elpais.com*, with a larger readership, appeared as the medium of reference for four of the think tanks analysed in this study. Although *FAES* was frequently mentioned in relationship with its until then political affiliation to the *People's Party*, scholars of *Fedea* and *Real Instituto Elcano* were often quoted in various media due to its publications and expertise in economy, terrorism or Spain as a nation brand.

Overall, this study has confirmed the limited presence of most Spanish think tanks in the press, resulting in an apparent lack of presence among the citizenship and whose influence in the market of ideas remains to be found in a different arena. At the same time, the seven-year analysis maintains the trend first observed in **Planells-Artigot** (2017) for fewer years.

5.1. Limitations and implications for future research

The obvious limitations of the study are its reduction to a small number of think tanks. Despite the politically turbulent years of this study, there is a limited scope in the study, and it covers a small section of the policy process.

This study has attempted to delve into the difficulties of measuring the impact of think tanks as social actors in Spain in the policy process. At the same time, it has deepened the study of previous think tank literature in an attempt to comprehend the stages of the policymaking process on which they are trying to cause an impact. Given the rapidly evolving political scenario in Spain, there remains further study of the presence and growth of think tanks alongside other Spanish institutions involved in the market of ideas.

Future studies could equally measure the links between media outlets and think tanks in other national contexts, where they are long established and widely known. Likewise, they could observe spreading connections among think tanks networks and media groups. At the same time, subsequent research could also stress how think tanks communicate expertise based on communicating their own events and earn media attention in an evolving digital communication environment, including the tone adopted in the articles to refer to the think tanks. All these comparative studies could shed light on the different links among social actors and communication professionals in order to understand the measures they adopt to inform about public policies. In an uncertain future, where funding and impact from other social actors can affect their evidence-based labour, their valuable work will be sadly affected.

> Both *Fedea* (82%) and *Real Instituto Elcano* (71%) had a vast number of publications including them as protagonists, or they were quoted within the articles

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