



Artificial Intelligence: An Opportunity and a Challenge for Think Tanks

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Abstract Guntram Wolff, Director of Bruegel in Belgium, explores the Future of Think Tanks and Policy Advice around the World.

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How is artificial intelligence changing the nature of think tanks and what does the public expect from think tanks on the topic itself? In this chapter, I will illustrate the ways in which artificial intelligence has been changing the demand for Bruegel's research, both in terms of methods and in terms of substance.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF A POLICY-ORIENTED AND TRUSTWORTHY RESEARCH PROGRAM

Before we explore the impact of AI, we must investigate why it is important that a think tank's research be policy oriented and based on strong values and transparency. In my view, think tanks such as Bruegel need to

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play an important role in translating and developing academic research into policy advice that can be understood and used by policymakers. Often, academic work is far away from political realities. It can also be unsuited in its approach if it ignores institutional, legal, and governance constraints. Therefore, think tanks can play a role in translating findings as well as practicing applied research with a more policy-oriented focus that complements more academic work.

Credibility and trustworthiness are central to that process. In an information-rich society, policymakers receive multiple inputs from many sides. But whom can they trust? In our understanding, reputation, expertise, independence, and transparency are of fundamental importance for being a trusted advisor. It starts with the scholars working for the think tank. They need to not only have an impeccable standing and be recognized academics themselves, but also need to understand policymaking and adhere to the highest principles of academic rigor. At Bruegel, they sign a statement of research integrity and have to declare all possible conflicts of interest. Scholars and managers also make an annual declaration of outside interests, which is available on the Bruegel website. These interests are not just financial; it is important for readers to be aware of other potential influences on a scholar's work. These public declarations are extensive in the areas they cover and represent the highest standard in public transparency for think tanks.

Equally important is the institutional setting. Transparency on all funding sources and governance is critical for credibility and trustworthiness. Bruegel's commitment to transparency means that we publish detailed financial statements every year. Our accounts are independently audited. We detail the origin of every cent of income, and we also report spending along nine spending lines. The financial statements clearly show what every member contributed in any given year, a level of transparency that is rare in our sector. State members of Bruegel also have the right to audit Bruegel at any time.

An important question then, is how research topics are identified and priorities are established. The process of drafting a research program combines bottom-up and top-down elements. The process always starts with suggestions by Bruegel researchers and the Director and Deputy Director, themselves researchers, give feedback and make suggestions as well. Bruegel's members then play an important role in reacting to ideas

and giving suggestions for research priorities. Bruegel’s scientific advisory council is consulted and Bruegel researchers and management hold numerous consultations with other stakeholders and civil society.

An important concern is the balance between long-term research capacity and short-term agility of research. Bruegel has opted for three-year cycles and a “Twin Peaks” principle, according to which long-term research investment beyond the usual annual programming cycle is combined with rapid responses to unanticipated policy developments.

Several evaluation processes are used to ensure that high standards of research, relevance, and impact are maintained. An external evaluation committee consisting of independent high-profile public figures is appointed by the general assembly to conduct a thorough review every three years. The scientific council conducts its three-year evaluation of academic and scientific standards. Beyond these external three-year evaluations, regular internal evaluations are carried out throughout the year. All Bruegel research passes through a weekly research seminar and peer review via email. Outreach reports by the communications team and regular discussions with the Bruegel scientific council complement the quality assurance process. The Director and the Deputy Director provide extensive feedback on the scholars’ work. The Director has the overall editorial responsibility for Bruegel’s research.

ON AI IN THINK TANKS

Informing the drafting of the research program with multiple interactions with important stakeholders in society, business, and government can help detect important new trends early on, and thereby preemptively adjust research capacities. Artificial Intelligence is an example of a topic with rapidly gaining importance. According to Google Trends, search queries for the term “machine learning,” an important part of artificial intelligence, have roughly tripled since August 2016.¹ Searches for “web scraping,” a method for data collection from websites, has doubled since 2013.²

¹Google Trends. 2020. Interest Over Time: Machine Learning. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=machine%20learning>. Accessed 1 February 2020.

²Google Trends. 2020. Interest Over Time: Web Scraping. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=%2Fm%2F07ykb>. Accessed 1 February 2020.

The rise of this new technology poses at least three challenges with respective opportunities to respond.

First, the topic itself is of increasing importance to the global economy and is therefore worth studying in detail. Numerous questions arise, regarding how AI can be best integrated into business operations, as well as how some countries and companies may be put at an advantage or disadvantage because of AI. How is AI affecting productivity growth (Petropoulos et al. 2019)? What are the ethical implications of increasing use of AI? Should the state regulate the use of AI and, if so, how?³ Last but not least, what implications will AI have on global labor markets? For example, how will AI-based pattern recognition of breast cancer impact the work of medical doctors? Bruegel has explored these questions in a recently published book (Petropoulos et al. 2019).

Second, web scraping and machine learning can be important tools for research. For example, one can use the information that large numbers of individuals put into social media feed to extract trends and new emerging topics. In a recent analysis, Bergamini (2019) explored the trends on Twitter among millions of professional economists (Bergamini 2019). Such an analysis combines web scraping techniques with machine learning tools that are necessary for text analysis. The key challenge in this space is attracting and keeping the right talent. In fact, in the EU, there is a scarcity of data scientists and programmers. The new skills needed by think tanks in order to continue to influence policies can become quickly outdated; therefore, think tanks need to invest in training and hiring new staff.

The third challenge deals with the ethical use of such methods. The way data is gathered to choose the “right” policy responses is full of political consequences. For this reason, the European Commission’s 2015 Better Regulation Guidelines emphasized that impact assessment seeks to inform political decision-makers but not to supplant their political function. With the increased automation and real-time data processing promised by the AI “revolution,” the discourse on evidence-based policy will inevitably change (and so will Think Tanks). We might see the automatic processing of data and an automatic proposal for the best possible way of responding to it.

³Bruegel had the pleasure of hosting the European Commission’s executive vice president Magrethe Vestager for an in-depth discussion on the question of a European regulatory approach to AI.

A crucial question will be, who will own the “evidence” in the future? The data or algorithms used for machine learning might be private or common goods, according to political choices. An example of the complexity of the issue is the October 2015 decision by the European Court of Justice, which first ruled that the transatlantic Safe Harbour agreement, which let American companies use a single standard for consumer privacy and data storage in both the United States and Europe, was invalid. The framework was replaced in February 2016 by a new pact calling for companies to agree to “robust obligations” to protect European personal data and enables Europeans who feel their data has been assessed by US intelligence agencies to complain to a new ombudsman.

CONCLUSIONS

AI could change the nature of evidence-based policymaking forever by becoming an indispensable aspect of governance around the world. Think tanks like ours could quickly become irrelevant if we fail to adapt. However, even if smart policy decisions become dependent on AI, those same decisions will lack credibility if they aren’t informed by the delicate standards of transparency and accountability that institutions like ours have spent decades honing and refining. Without today’s expectations of checks and balances, the AI-assisted policies of tomorrow will be considered with trepidation and suspicion, and with good reason. It will require a combination of values and innovation to ensure that the policies that touch everyone are written with everyone in mind. A forward-looking, policy-oriented research program can help charter the way for any think tank. New research priorities, significant investment in staff, and high ethical standards are crucial to ensure that think tanks remain relevant and impactful in a rapidly changing world of policymaking that uses AI.

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