Technological Innovation and Data Visualization in Public Policy Research

*Portfolio Review of the* ***Think Tank Fund*** *held on April 22, 2014*

Summary of discussions[[1]](#footnote-1)

The role of technological innovation and data visualization has been contested among think tanks and policy researchers; but at TTF we feel there is a strong scope for understanding this tool, its place in the work of policy research organizations and its application in furthering and enhancing their ordinary work. Data visualization can advance policy research goals by opening up think tanks to a different set of tools and resources. Such innovations can open doors to new audiences – and engage analysis in a more captivating way to existing and new audiences. In an age when think tanks, policy research organizations or advocacy organizations increasingly have to compete for the attention or support of their broader target audience – the general public – with blogs, multimedia channels, social media, interactive news and a host of other technological advances, the ability of data visualization to capture the interest of this audience has arguably never been more important.

The question of how such organizations should fit in this ‘new world’ – or if indeed, they ought to at all – is a serious one to be discussed. With this portfolio, Think Tank Fund demonstrated its ability to facilitate such dialogues and help think tanks and research-based advocacy organizations discuss their perspective on such debates and where they may fit in this newer framework.

Adding to this debate, **participants at the portfolio review asked some general, perhaps existential questions related to the work of these organizations and their relationship to data visualization practices** which have helped inform the foundation of a useful framework of analysis. First, does TTF see more importance in asking think tanks how to do visualizations, or whether to do it at all? Second, in reference to the sociological imagination framework[[2]](#footnote-2), how important is data to the work of think tanks – either in their everyday practices or in furthering their programmatic goals? Third, is it important for think tanks to first establish clearer communication/advocacy strategies and have a more comprehensive understanding of the expectations of their research, before expanding their set of tools to include technological innovations? Finally, in the developing country context, where the field of competition is limited and governments are arguably more inexperienced in working with think tanks, are such innovations an obstacle to or opportunity for the work of policy research-based organizations?

In building this portfolio, TTF examined the fundamental questions behind the use of data visualization, its practical applications in the work of think tanks as well as more specific questions relating to the operations of such organizations. Central to this question is whether, to risk fading into irrelevance, think tanks are compelled to adapt and engage with newer technologies. Data and analysis are some of the distinguishing features found in think tanks and what set them apart from commentators, pundits and opinion-peddlers. They would be advised, therefore, to keep to their comparative advantage - sophisticated analysis based on reliable data.

Furthermore, the separate-but-related idea of distinguishing emotions from fact-based policy presentation is especially interesting when looking at data visualization. Is there a way to integrate emotional responses – ought they even be integrated? There could also be a need for a greater and more stable foundation in thinking about advocacy and how data visualization could be of use in the advocacy and communications goals of think tanks and NGOs. Introducing technology and data visualization is not a substitute for a well-crafted political, policy or advocacy strategy. TTF has witnessed how the introduction of these innovations has enabled think tanks to launch a serious examination of their overall advocacy goals and communication strategies. Furthermore, attractively visualized data helped level the playing field between think tanks and other organizations, making the former more influential in policy debates.

Participants were drawn to the involvement of think tanks in developing countries; given the smaller pool of competition in such markets, think tanks’ target audiences in such countries are more likely to be the educated elite, who are in turn more likely to be technologically-fluent. The potential for high-impact, low-cost output makes data visualization the tool by which such organizations and the countries they operate in are able to leap-frog other organizations in developed countries and to compete on an even playing field in larger, well-connected and influential spheres. In promoting such advancements, TTF has ensured that data visualization tools are aligned with programmatic aims, rather than being implemented simply for the sake of using progressive technology.

From these discussions flowed **a series of specific questions related to the operation of NGOs, think tanks and other organizations implementing data visualization innovations**. What sort of communication are such organizations already engaged in and what is TTF’s honest appraisal of how think tanks could reach different audiences better? In an ideal scenario, what would the perfect audience look like? Could technology play a role in communicating their program goals with this ideal audience? The tools used in achieving advocacy goals are important, certainly, but there was also discussion on whether those take precedence over the means of getting a message to appropriate audiences.

As an extension, what if any could the impact be on policy debate? Would it serve to add to it or supplement existing knowledge? An important point of worry and concern is the impact a reliance on data visualization could have on the spread of fact-free debate. Visualization can help fact-*free* debate become fact-*based* by making the most of data visualization. Could such research serve to supplement existing projects and synergies, or create new ones? Arguably, a clear process of identifying objectives, desired outcomes etc. first and then moving on to looking at data visualization tools and their efficacy, rather than starting the other way around could perhaps be of more use to think tanks and policy researchers.

It is also noteworthy that the messages to convey must remain central to a program’s aims and reach a well-defined audience. Data visualization could be an affordable tool for various types of advocacy and open the door for more creative thinking about other applications - for example, offline. The Hungarian Kurt Lewin Foundation’s (KLA) street art visualization program, for example, was careful and precise in its program aims and goals, and as such was able to achieve those results and reach the desired audience with a salient and appropriate message. KLA used carefully-placed visualizations to fill the space between the general public, public authority and civil society. By reaching out to a broader target audience – those without web access – and displaying their visualizations in public spaces, KLA demonstrated that a medium can change while leaving the message the same – and that data visualization need not be solely web-based.

There are also issues of how it could be used to add to existing policy discourses as well as how they could enhance the capabilities of think tanks and NGOs. Specific to the applications of data visualization work on the programmatic agenda of such organizations, the question of how it can be used – if at all – to level the playing field between think tanks and other organizations is an important one, as is the related question of whether the field is uneven to start with. Particularly interesting is the examination of the influence of data visualization work on the programmatic content of think tanks, advocacy organizations and policy research-based organizations. Is there power in data, or commentary (or both)? Is its scope diminished or altered by geography, as access to technology is greater in developed countries, for example? How may we work around such gaps in knowledge and best practices?

Could focusing on data visualization lead to too great a focus on outcomes, rather than helping think tanks focus on the processes? Or has it actually allowed for closer evaluation of these processes? In order for data to be a truly effectual programmatic tool, we need to ensure it helps our networking as well as the sharing of knowledge and best practices. Perhaps most importantly of all, what can we do to make sure that all actors – think tanks, government bodies, political consultants, advisors, etc. – are equally familiar and comfortable with data visualization, its uses, its benefits and its pitfalls? These deliberations led to some of the grantees’ questions being clarified and answered, especially within the particular context of their work; as a result, TTF intends to not only further develop this concept, but also to include it as a specific grant-making scheme in our support of think tanks outside Europe.

An off-shoot of these discussions **led to an assessment of specific elements of the portfolio**. The failed cooperation with Jefferson Institute (JI) was one of the key elements discussed. The institute and its successes at bridging knowledge gaps using hands-on coaching is an example of the symbiosis between data visualization and programmatic goals related to communication and advocacy. On the other hand, this case also highlights what could happen when such goals fall short of expectations and how a lack of quality output can lead to the partnership being discontinued, despite some programmatic successes. TTF learned important lessons about examining the role and qualifications of individual contributors, rather than solely the caliber of an organization’s leader, Aaron Presnall. This experience and the lessons learned have helped shape TTF’s relationship with a newer partner, TTC, enabling a more careful appraisal of the organizational relationship and its alignment.

**Next steps and follow-up**

This portfolio review has been an invaluable opportunity to review TTF’s achievements and fine-tune its future approaches. TTF will continue to underwrite demonstration projects; support or directly develop manuals, checklists and advising notes; convene or support the convention of networking and knowledge- and practice-sharing meetings between think tanks, technical experts, and other relevant stakeholders in local communities. Drawing on the lessons learned in this review process, TTF will add the following tools to its belt: a) resident fellowships for designers or technology experts to ‘embed’ with a think tank; b) support data visualization experts and spread their best practices to enable a greater knowledge-sharing base; and c) provide micro-grants to those who want to replicate tried-and-true approaches. TTF will continue to support think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe, but also expand this niche work to Latin America and explore demand for this work in South East Asia.

1. The document captures the key questions and contestation points raised during the discussion. As such, it complements the Portfolio Review Document prepared before the review. While this is a comprehensive account of all points raised it does serve as minutes from the meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mills, C. Wright.The Sociological Imagination (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)