

How Do Advocacy Think Tanks Relate to Academic Knowledge? The Case of Norway

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Think tanks often present themselves as contributors to a more reflective and informed political debate and their policy advice as based on knowledge and research. Yet, they also claim to be alternatives to university research and research institutes and often use knowledge and expertise to pursue explicitly ideological agendas. How do think tanks handle this balancing act of knowledge provision and ideological commitment? How do they relate to academia and what characterizes their approach to academic knowledge? The paper explores these questions through an investigation of the three main advocacy think tanks in Norway, based on an analysis of their organization, activities, staff and publications, and through interviews with think tank staff. The paper describes the specific ways in which these think tanks gather and utilize knowledge, and how they position themselves relative to academia. It also reflects on possible explanations for this pattern and on its normative implications.

Introduction

Think tanks have in recent decades emerged as a new type of political actor, challenging various aspects of existing policy-making arrangements. Notably, think tanks have challenged existing ‘knowledge regimes’, that is, the system of organizations and institutions for producing and incorporating knowledge in policymaking (Campbell & Pedersen 2014). Think tanks have established themselves as an alternative channel for transmitting knowledge to policymakers, putting pressure on traditional channels such as bureaucratic policy advice and corporatist mechanisms and advisory bodies (Craft & Howlett 2013).

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Yet, the role of think tanks as knowledge actors deserves closer scrutiny. Think tanks often present themselves as contributors to a more informed political debate and their policy advice as based on knowledge and research. They may resemble universities and research institutes in important ways: their staff members tend to have higher education, they publish and engage in public debate, they refer to research and their impact depends on the credibility of their analyses. At the same time, think tanks claim to be alternatives to university research and research institutes and often use knowledge and expertise to pursue explicitly ideological agendas. This tension is fundamental to the operation of think tanks and to their role in the political system. How do think tanks tackle the balancing act of knowledge provision and ideological commitment? How do they relate to academia and what characterizes their use of academic knowledge?

The paper explores these questions through an analysis of Norwegian advocacy think tanks. Think tanks are a relatively recent phenomenon in Norway. The right-of-centre think tank Civita was established in 2003 and has over the years come to be perceived as quite influential. It has a strong presence in public debate and, according to many commentators, played an important role as ideological and strategic coordinator behind the formation of a right-wing coalition government in 2013. Only more recently were two left-leaning think tanks established to counter the ideational influence of Civita: Manifest (founded in 2009) and Agenda (established in 2014). These three organizations explicitly identify themselves as think tanks, and have the biggest staff and are the most active in Norwegian public debate among the self-identified think tanks (Bjerke 2016). They are also all advocacy think tanks, that is, they have an explicit ideological profile (Weaver 1989). Of course, other organizations are also sometimes referred to as think tanks. Norway has a large sector of independent research institutes, including in the social sciences, which would fall under some think tank definitions. For instance, the University of Pennsylvania's 2017 Think Tank Ranking included two independent research institutes, PRIO (Peace Research Institute Oslo) and NUPI (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs). PRIO and NUPI are however not regarded as think tanks in Norwegian public discourse, and both qualify firmly as highly ranked academic institutions. Given our interest in understanding the tension between advocacy and knowledge use and production, our analysis is therefore limited to the three main advocacy think tanks Civita, Agenda and Manifest. (For a full overview of Norwegian think tanks, see Bjerke 2016.) We examine how these think tanks relate to academic knowledge by analysing their self-presentation, organization, staff and publications, and through 11 semi-structured interviews with think tank staff.

The paper makes two main contributions: First, it contributes to the broader literature on think tanks by closely examining the relationship of

advocacy think tanks to academic knowledge. While existing studies have pointed to the general tension between advocacy and knowledge production in think tanks (Weaver 1989; Stone 2007; Medvetz 2012), we lack detailed studies of the specific ways in which think tanks relate to research and academia in their daily operations. Second, this paper presents one of the first academic studies of think tanks in Norway. To date, the research on Norwegian think tanks consists of a few studies of the role of think tanks in the media (e.g., Bjerke 2016) and of think tank employees as policy professionals (Steinsbekk 2018), and a few master theses (e.g., Sandvik 2015). Our analysis contributes to a better understanding of the emerging phenomenon of think tanks in the Nordic countries.

In the theoretical section of the paper, we discuss, first, think tanks in the context of changing 'knowledge regimes', and the particular characteristics of the Nordic system of knowledge transmittance to policymakers. Second, this section takes up the relationship between think tanks and academia. We then outline the research design, before presenting the findings from the organizational analysis and interviews. In the final section, we reflect on Norwegian advocacy think tanks' knowledge use and approach to academia in light of distinctive features of the national knowledge regime, and on the normative implications of our findings.

Theoretical Discussion: Think Tanks and Academic Knowledge

Think Tanks as New Actors in Knowledge Regimes

Think tanks are usually defined as organizations that seek to influence the policymaking process based on expertise and analysis (Rich 2004). Different from both academic bodies and interest groups, think tanks constitute a distinct type of organization at the intersection between the research and policy worlds. In many countries, think tanks have in recent decades emerged as a new type of political actor, challenging various aspects of existing policymaking arrangements. The rise of think tanks has not only affected political parties and interest group politics, it has also challenged existing systems for incorporating knowledge in policymaking.

Craft and Howlett (2013) see the role of think tanks as part of a broader 'externalization' of 'policy advisory systems', that is, the increasing reliance of governments on external sources of advice in policy formulation. Think tanks have established themselves as an alternative channel for transmitting knowledge to policymakers, reducing the importance of traditional channels such as bureaucratic policy advice and corporatist mechanisms and advisory bodies. Similarly, Campbell and Pedersen (2014) point to how think

tanks have complemented or disrupted existing ‘knowledge regimes’, that is, the systems of organizations and institutions for producing and incorporating knowledge in policymaking. Yet, they highlight that the role of think tanks depends on the specific national characteristics of knowledge regimes. Whereas the U.S. knowledge regime is characterized by competition and great involvement of private actors, European knowledge regimes are more statist (France), corporatist (Germany) and consensual (Denmark) in character.

Although Campbell and Pedersen emphasize the consensual nature of decision-making in the Nordic countries, a great role for the state and corporatism are also characteristic of Nordic knowledge regimes (Christensen et al. 2017). First, Nordic government bureaucracies have traditionally possessed considerable professional expertise. Civil servants have often been specialists in their field and important providers of information and analysis (Hecló 1974). Second, the Nordic countries have a strong tradition of corporatism with extensive and routinized participation of interest groups in policy formulation, particularly from the main labour market organizations. Third, Nordic policymaking has often been described as consensual (as opposed to the adversarial politics of the Anglo-Saxon countries), with political parties and interest groups going to great lengths to find compromise and broadly shared solutions (Arter 2008). A more specific feature of some Nordic knowledge regimes that is relevant in discussions of think tanks is the existence of a large sector of independent research institutes engaged in applied research.

Yet, even if it has been recognized how think tanks have emerged as a new force within this landscape, their role as new *knowledge* actors has so far not been closely examined. What is their more specific function in the Nordic system of incorporating knowledge in policymaking? In what ways do they connect academic and other knowledge with policymaking? In the next sub-section, we look more closely at theoretical arguments about think tanks and the academic world.

The Relationship between Think Tanks and Academia

Existing literature points to an ambivalent relationship between think tanks and academia. On the one hand, think tanks may resemble research organizations: their activities are knowledge based, their staff often have higher education, they publish and engage in public debate, and their impact is based on the credibility of their analyses – earning them the label of ‘universities without students’ (Weaver 1989). On the other hand, the intellectual activities of think tanks differ from those of universities. While university research is oriented towards disciplinary debates and publication in academic outlets, think tank research is typically oriented towards current policy

debates and more accessible publications aimed at policymakers. This gives rise to a 'tension between the professional norms of academic researchers (notably thoroughness and objectivity) and relevance to policy debates' (Weaver 1989, 566). Moreover, the 'studentless universities' model has increasingly been challenged by more advocacy-oriented think tanks, which are openly partisan and ideological and further removed from the academic world. In other words, there is great variation in how scientific think tanks are. While some organizations have a more academic profile, others have a clear ideological agenda and are geared towards advocacy (Stone 2007, 262).

Stone furthermore deconstructs the notion that think tanks 'think', pointing out that think tanks are involved in 'different kinds of thinking, analysis, evaluation and informing policy endeavors' (Stone 2007, 272). This includes synthesizing existing research and rendering scholarly ideas more accessible for policymakers and the public; connecting existing solutions to salient policy problems; and drawing on scientific credibility and status to command authority in policy debates. Again, the relation to scientific knowledge is a contradictory one. While policy entrepreneurship and communication are crucial for having impact, so is scientific credibility: 'Issues of quality and rigour are paramount. The worst fate for a think tank is to be seen as delivering unreliable or sloppy analysis' (Stone 2007, 275).

Medvetz presents a more elaborate theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between think tanks and surrounding spheres, such as politics or academia. He argues that think tanks over time have established an institutional space at the crossroads of the academic, political, economic and media spheres, with distinct norms and criteria of intellectual judgement. Think tanks have thrived by gathering resources from these neighbouring spheres and combining them into novel packages (Medvetz 2012, 15–18). These resources include credentialed knowledge from the academic field, funding from economic interests, communication skills from the media sphere and connections to politicians. Think tanks are dependent on these surrounding spheres for resources. At the same time, they need to show their independence (Medvetz 2012, 24), and tend to do so by drawing on the association with the other fields. For instance, they use their academic credentials to show that they are not simply an interest group. Conversely, they use their ties to politics to distinguish themselves from academics, who are isolated in the 'ivory tower' and removed from real policy debates.

Medvetz's argument has a couple of important implications. First, it implies that the relationship between think tanks and the academic world is characterized by both attachment and separation. Think tanks draw on the scientific authority of the academic world by adopting practices, personnel, products and organizational forms from academia (Medvetz 2012, 32–33). Yet, they simultaneously distinguish themselves from academia through the adoption of practices and organizational forms from other fields. This

ambivalence gives rise to distinct ways of using knowledge, which we will attempt to examine in this paper. Second, the argument implies that the strategy of think tanks vis-à-vis academia depends on the configuration of the institutional space between the other spheres. The presence of other types of organizations in this space conditions the profile of think tanks.

Research Design

We explore how think tanks relate to academic knowledge through an empirical analysis of three Norwegian advocacy think tanks: Civita, Manifest and Agenda. We examine various dimensions of this relationship. The first is how think tanks present themselves and their knowledge work, and to what extent they draw on academic forms and practices in their organization, products and events. Examining these elements is crucial for understanding how think tanks position themselves with respect to the academic world (Medvetz 2012). This is investigated by analysing the content available on the websites of the think tanks. The second is to what extent think tank staff and affiliates have academic credentials. Is think tank personnel drawn from the academic world? Is higher education a relevant qualification for engaging in think tank work? Personnel is one of the core resources of think tanks, and the qualifications of staff can tell us a lot about the type of knowledge production that takes place (Weaver 1989). This is examined by looking at data on the background of staff, which were collected from online sources (information as of 7 January 2020). The third dimension is how think tanks use knowledge in their publications. To what extent do they reference relevant academic literature? How do they approach and use research findings? We have reviewed the three think tanks' publications to pinpoint overall publication profile, important publication categories, and different ways of relating to academic knowledge.

Finally, and most importantly, we look more closely at how these think tanks gather and use knowledge, how they see their own knowledge role and how they position themselves relative to academia through 11 semi-structured interviews with think tank staff conducted in January and February 2019. We interviewed the leaders and scientific directors/deputy leaders of all three think tanks and other staff with an academic background in each think tank. The interviewees included 5 Civita employees, 3 from Agenda and 3 from Manifest. The interviews were carried out by one or both authors and lasted 1–2 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews were confidential. In order to protect the anonymity of our interviewees, interview quotes are not linked to specific individuals or specific organizations and are only referenced with a number (Interview 1, etc.).

Studying think tanks raises some specific methodological challenges. Advocacy think tanks are politically savvy actors, eager to advance their

agenda and protect the image of the organization. When interviewing think tank staff, getting truthful answers is therefore a non-trivial concern. We addressed this challenge by focusing the interviews on the concrete practices of knowledge gathering and utilization, by anchoring the discussion in specific cases, dwelling on apparent dilemmas, and taking up seemingly contradictory statements with the interviewees. In addition, most interviews were carried out with two interviewers present, one of which has extensive experience with elite interviews. The question of positionality is also worth mentioning. Given that the topic of the study is the relationship of think tanks to academic knowledge, there is a danger that our own position as academics influences the research. When being interviewed by two academics, interviewees may be reluctant to say what they ‘really think’ about academia and may exaggerate their commitment to knowledge and expertise, or they may be overly defensive or dismissive about their own knowledge work. Against these potential disadvantages stands the advantage that we as social scientists are well placed to assess and challenge interviewees’ statements about their knowledge activities.

The Role of Knowledge in Norwegian Advocacy Think Tanks

Organization, Staff, Publications and Activities

Civita

The right-of-centre think tank Civita was established in 2003, based on donations from employers and private corporations. Since 2006 it has been led by Kristin Clemet, a former minister for the Conservative Party and vice managing director of the Norwegian Confederation of Enterprise. Civita describes itself as ‘a liberal think tank’ that aims to promote liberal values, ideas and policies. It seeks to ‘disseminate knowledge and ideas’ and describes ‘research and analysis’ as one of the ways in which it promotes liberal values (Civita 2020).¹ Interestingly, the Norwegian text avoids the word for research that would be used to describe university research (*forskning*) and instead uses the term *utredning*, derived from the verb *utrede*, which means to analyse or examine. In other words, Civita does not claim to carry out research in the strictest sense of the word. The organization further presents itself as ‘a network’ of people from different sectors of society: ‘academia, business, media, organizations and politics’. Civita is funded by various private contributors but states that it is independent from political parties, interest groups and public authorities.

Civita has around 20 full-time and part-time staff. Most have a master’s degree in the social sciences or humanities, mostly from the field of

economics but also from fields like history and philosophy. Four staff members have a PhD, of which three are affiliated part-time staff with additional full-time positions at universities. Civita also recently established an 'Academic Council' composed of university professors and researchers from various fields, which replaced a previous advisory council which included people from research, business, government and interest groups.

Civita has by far the most extensive publication activity of the three think tanks, publishing a number of books, reports and discussion papers every year. Among these publications, there are some with very few references, but several refer quite extensively to academic literature. Many contributions are oriented towards policy recommendation or state a position in an ongoing public debate. However, there are also review articles that purport to present the state of the art of research on some issue, and publications that take up liberal or conservative ideology and history of ideas. Civita affiliates with a position at a research institution in part rely on Civita as a channel for disseminating contributions with a more explicit ideological, political or polemic edge, in part publish scientific contributions as Civita publications. Generally, there is considerable variation among Civita authors in the level of sophistication in the use of academic literature.

Finally, Civita is very active in organizing events. These include a well-attended series of breakfast seminars and network conferences for young people from politics, business and academia. The lists of speakers include a range of Norwegian academics, but also international academic profiles, most recently Stanford professor Francis Fukuyama, visiting in February 2020. Civita also organizes a 'Civita Academy', a course on politics and philosophy for students and professionals aged 20–40. The course consists of lectures from academics and politicians and includes academic elements such as a syllabus and paper-writing. In addition, it organizes a 'Civita School' for young people (17–20 years), which also includes a syllabus. These events are oriented towards training of young professionals and a grounding in political–philosophical debates.

Agenda

The centre-left think tank Agenda was founded in 2014 after several botched attempts at establishing a social-democratic counter-weight to Civita. Agenda is financed by trade unions and private donations. It was initially led by Marte Gerhardsen, a former executive and civil servant with a background in the Labour Party. Since 2018 it has been headed by Trygve Svensson, a former under-secretary of state and political advisor for the Labour Party with a PhD in social science. Agenda presents itself as a 'think tank that contributes to societal analysis (*samfunnsanalyse*) and policy development for the modern center-left', which seeks to strengthen public debate through i.a. 'the diffusion of knowledge' and 'research' (*utredninger*) (Agenda 2020). Just like Civita,

Agenda avoids the word *forskning*. Agenda further states that it is ‘a meeting place’ for people from ‘politics, academia, organizations, business and media’, which echoes the formulation on Civita’s website. Agenda stresses that it is non-partisan but also reports that it is owned by a Norwegian businessman and philanthropist and the trade union confederation LO.

Agenda has a staff of around 10 people. Most but not all have at least a master’s degree, primarily in economics or political science. Two staff members – including the director – have a PhD. Like Civita, Agenda has an ‘Academic Council’, which is composed of academics and researchers from a broad range of disciplines.

Agenda publishes less than Civita, and the types of publications produced are primarily shorter reports and discussion papers. These are produced mostly by the staff, have an applied, policy-directed orientation and are written in comprehensible, non-technical language. The reliance on references to research publications varies considerably. Several publications have relatively short reference lists and/or refer mostly to news media and magazines, and policy documents, but there are also examples of outlets on topical issues (e.g., social inequality or educational mobility) with rather extensive lists of academic references. Recently, several staff members have also published books under an affiliated publishing house (Res Publica).

Finally, Agenda organizes a number of events, including regular seminars and lectures. On a few occasions, it has organized events featuring high-profile academics, such as a 2016 lecture by the Stanford economist Ray Chetty that was co-organized with the University of Oslo. Like Civita, Agenda organizes an ‘Agenda Academy’ for people aged 20–35 with lectures from politicians, academia, business and organizations, including a syllabus and practical tasks.

Manifest

The leftist think tank Manifest was established in 2009, and is funded through subscription fees from trade unions and private donations. It is led by Magnus Marsdal, a writer and former journalist who has been active on the political left. Manifest presents itself as the ‘think tank of the left’, whose goal is to set the political agenda through ‘knowledge-based, popular information work (*folkelig opplysningsarbeid*)’ (Manifest 2020). The organization states that it aims to ‘generate knowledge’ that is useful for political debate and the labour movement, ‘document’ societal problems and ‘analyse’ their causes. Beyond the references to knowledge and analysis, there is no mention of research of any sort. Manifest highlights its links to the labour movement but also emphasizes its independence from political parties.

Manifest has a small permanent staff (about 6 people). Most but not all of its staff have a master’s degree, mostly in the social sciences or humanities. None of its current employees has a PhD, although until recently the staff included someone with an economics PhD. Manifest does not have an

academic advisory board but rather an advisory council made up of representatives from various trade unions (*fagligpolitisk råd*).

Manifest publishes a 'Pamphlets' series, but also short reports and fact sheets. The 'Pamphlets' series includes reports and essays with a clear ideological profile on topics such as profit in social care or TTIP. Manifest also has an affiliated publishing house, with a varied portfolio, but including books on topics relevant to the political left. There is some variation, but academic knowledge and references generally play a limited role in Manifest publications. Some publications are framed as dissemination of one or a few specially selected pieces of research. For instance, they present a comprehensible version of a statistical bureau report or an academic journal article with politically relevant insights. Manifest also organizes seminars, an annual conference and debates, and offers courses to trade unions.

To summarize, the three think tanks vary in their orientation towards academia. Agenda and Civita both adopt symbols and practices from academia ('academies', 'academic councils'). Yet, in terms of staff and publications, neither organization has a systematic academic profile. Civita is the more academically oriented of the two, with university professors included as members of staff and overall and over time a more extensive and ambitious engagement with academic research, even if the variation in the publication portfolio on this point is significant. Of the three think tanks, Manifest is the one less focused on cultivating academic credibility.

Knowledge Use and Relation to Academia

The interviews with think tank staff offer further insights into why and how think tanks gather and use knowledge, how they see their own knowledge role and how they position themselves relative to academia.

The Importance of Scientific Credibility

What is the basic motivation of advocacy think tanks for drawing on expert knowledge? A recurring theme in the interviews was 'scientific credibility'. As one respondent put it, 'Academia has a credibility that we also want' (Interview 1). Several interviewees highlighted how think tanks need to be scientifically credible to be influential. Some respondents tied this to the initial scepticism they faced as a think tank with a clear ideological profile. Being credible and knowledge based was necessary to counter widespread suspicions that they were simply pursuing a partisan agenda. 'It is an uphill battle ... If you have an opinion, many people's first thought is that you are not credible' (Interview 9). Some respondents also emphasized the long-term aspect of credibility: the organization has sought to 'build credibility' and a reputation for knowledge-based recommendations over time

(Interview 2). Yet, this concern is constantly weighted against other concerns such as ideological fit, political relevance, accessibility and urgency.

Gathering Knowledge

Although think tanks are interested in scientific credibility, very few respondents claimed to be engaged in research. 'We are not supposed to be a research institute', as one respondent stressed (Interview 5). What kind of knowledge work do these think tanks do then? Starting with knowledge gathering, the approach to collecting and analysing knowledge and information varies considerably among think tank staff. Whereas some staff approach the task more or less as an academic would, others do not gather and analyse knowledge according to any systematic method. One respondent described the process as 'gathering what's out there' (Interview 1). Yet, the knowledge gathering activities of the think tanks do have some common features. First, the think tanks rely extensively on second-hand knowledge, as they rarely have the resources and capacity to carry out their own research. As two respondents put it, 'Our analysis work ... is based on other people's research. We don't have the possibility to find our own numbers or do long case studies' (Interview 1); 'Very often we lean on research that already exists' (Interview 2). Second, the knowledge-gathering and analysis of these think tanks is often characterized by 'satisficing'. Given tight constraints on time and resources, think tank staff aim to satisfy certain minimum requirements. The works needs to be 'sufficiently academic' (Interview 9) and 'not factually wrong' (Interview 2). One respondent put it in even starker terms: 'We do the research we need to gather 10 good points' (Interview 4). Yet, third, think tanks report having rather elaborate routines for quality assurance and peer review. The content and quality of reports are checked by superiors or colleagues, and sent to experts in the field for comment. One frequently mentioned reason for this practice was to avoid embarrassing factual errors that could be exploited by opponents.

Fourth, the knowledge work of these think tanks is frequently non-specialist. Staff usually have some core areas of expertise (e.g., immigration policy, taxation), but they often work beyond their specialization. This means that even the most 'academic' think tank staff frequently operate in foreign intellectual waters. A former academic described that in fields where he is not an expert he 'works pretty much like a journalist' (Interview 5), contacting people who know more. This sets their work apart from the more specialized knowledge work of academia. Finally, Norwegian think tanks are more oriented towards locally produced knowledge than international research. This finding is surprising, given that think tanks are often portrayed as vehicles for importing knowledge and ideas from abroad (e.g., neoliberal economic ideas from the U.S.). Several respondents emphasized the difficulty of translating and applying insights from international research to specific

Norwegian debates. 'It is difficult to find good examples abroad A lot is based on following the Norwegian debate and seeing what is salient here' (Interview 1).

Using Knowledge

Once think tanks have gathered and analysed knowledge, how do they put it to work? Knowledge employment often corresponds closely to what is often referred to as 'political use of knowledge' (Weiss 1986; Boswell 2008). The observed patterns are mostly in line with existing literature (e.g., Stone 2007). First of all, knowledge utilization is to a greater or lesser degree selective. Think tanks rarely seek to give a complete picture of research on a specific issue but rather take a certain angle and present parts of a larger debate. There is much variation though. Sometimes, think tanks provide a more or less representative picture of the state of the art, but conclude by emphasizing contributions that are considered particularly convincing or politically relevant. At other times, they only seek knowledge that confirms their points and consciously disregard knowledge with unfriendly conclusions. As one respondent described, 'Then we make a report ... that is characterized by cherry-picking, where you find the research that supports your own view to a very great degree' (Interview 4).

Second and related, Norwegian think tanks use knowledge strategically. Knowledge is often used to buttress a specific argument or to support a certain political position or camp. 'We are an ammunition factory', as one respondent put it (Interview 4). Another interviewee stated that 'I think about [the role of think tanks] as a tug-of-war over influence in Norwegian society. It's not objective. We are not a research institute... We work for different interests in Norway' (Interview 8). This is of course not always the case. On some issues, think tanks engage in reflection without any clearly defined direction or political agenda, and several respondents described having the freedom to also pursue their pet projects and personal interests. However, third, Norwegian think tanks to a greater or lesser extent self-censor when using knowledge. Most importantly, they tend to avoid issues that are difficult or divisive for their supporters or constituencies. As one respondent described an issue, '[This issue] is very divisive, and it's not a goal for us to divide our constituencies' (Interview 4). Yet, on occasions, think tanks also allow themselves to challenge their own camp, for ideological reasons (say, upholding liberal principles) or to signal their independence.

Challenging Academia?

Beyond the knowledge work of think tanks, an important aspect of think tanks as knowledge actors is how they position themselves relative to academia. Overall, Norwegian think tanks have been reluctant to engage in major attacks on academic and research institutions. Yet, they have launched

more targeted challenges. One recurring critique is that academics are not neutral; they have values, too. For instance, Kristin Clemet, head of Civita, put it subtly in an op-ed entitled ‘What is a think tank’?

Some people think that we have less credibility than for instance researchers, because we have a fundamental value orientation. Other people think that everyone, also researchers, have values, and that it is more honest to state what those values are. (Clemet 2014)

Some respondents voiced a more specific criticism, namely that academics sometimes draw on their scientific authority to support political claims that are not based on their research or knowledge. One respondent argued that it is important ‘to make visible when what is said [in political debate by a professor] is loosely based on research or there is an ideological premise that is not clearly communicated’ (Interview 3).

Second, some respondents raised careful criticism of political bias in academia. One respondent argued that ‘[some debates] have missed certain perspectives or balance ... Our goal is to bring another perspective ... that should be part of the debate’ (Interview 1). Some respondents also raised questions about the representativeness of academics in political terms, referring to how few researchers in Norway are known to support the right-populist Progress Party (Interview 6). The left-of-centre think tanks did not raise this kind of criticism. Rather, they mostly saw academic research as vindicating their arguments: ‘We often feel that research is on our side’, as one interviewee put it (Interview 2). However, some criticized academics for being elitist and stuck in their ivory tower. ‘There is a too large distance between research communities and people’s everyday lives’, one respondent argued (Interview 7).

Third, think tank staff referred to some instances where they had directly challenged the scientific standards of academic work. For instance, there were cases where think tanks had criticized the data and methods of researchers, or whether conclusions actually were supported by findings. As one respondent argued, ‘I see it as a sign of quality that we can enter into debates with “real” researchers ... also about methods and the quality of the research’ (Interview 9). However, this kind of challenge is relatively rare. This is partly because think tank staff were pessimistic about their chances of winning the debate against someone with greater scientific standing. More generally, Norwegian think tanks are reluctant to challenge academia and academic knowledge in more fundamental ways. Partly this has to do with not being wanted to be seen as cranks: ‘A lot of public debate rests on hidden premises. But if you start questioning many of these things, you can be labelled as a crank’ (Interview 10); ‘To be taken seriously we need to work within a certain understanding [of how the economy works]’ (Interview 7). But perhaps more fundamentally, some respondents pointed

to a basic respect for and acceptance of science within Norwegian think tanks, which made all-out attacks on the credibility of academia unthinkable (Interview 6).

Discussion and Conclusion

Think tanks are boundary organizations at the interface between knowledge production and policymaking, and can have a more or less academic orientation. Civita, Agenda and Manifest are distinct in several respects but all have a clear ideological profile. These organizations thus look less like ‘universities without students’ than like advocacy organizations with a varying orientation towards knowledge-based arguments and scientific research. The foregoing analysis has zoomed in on the specific ways in which these think tanks seek scientific credibility, gather and use knowledge and position themselves relative to academia.

The findings show that Norwegian think tanks are engaged in a careful balancing act of attachment and separation vis-à-vis academia (Medvetz 2012). They draw on symbols and practices from academia. Yet, none of the three think tanks presents themselves as academic, or ‘objective’, or as carrying out research in the strict sense. Similarly, staff is mixed: most staff have a master’s degree and a few have PhDs or work/have worked as academics; yet others have a background from politics or communication. Think tank publications show the same ambiguity: a willingness to present the state of the art of knowledge on a topic or transmit specific research findings, yet in a way that is more accessible and less complete or balanced in its coverage. The concrete knowledge work of these think tanks follows the same pattern: knowledge gathering is usually non-systematic, heavily reliant on existing research, satisficing and non-specialist, and the use of knowledge tends to have a selective and strategic side to it, and to be subject to a degree of self-censoring. How Norwegian think tanks position themselves relative to academia is also a subtle exercise in separation and attachment: think tanks voice careful and targeted criticisms of academics – for hiding their value premises, for being left-wing, for being elitist – but they are loath to launch any more fundamental attacks on the credibility of established knowledge.

We would argue that in comparative terms the Norwegian think tank landscape is characterized by its late emergence and a relatively partisan and non-academic profile. One important reason for this is undoubtedly the so-called ‘institute sector’ – the large group of applied research institutes in Norway. These institutes occupy part of the space between academia and the political-administrative system and cover the government’s demand for research on more applied questions, for instance regarding the effect of specific policy measures. The fact that these organizations fill the niche for policy evaluation has arguably pushed think tanks towards the advocacy end of

the spectrum (cf. Medvetz 2012). The institute sector has moreover mostly recruited social scientists, and some of the institutes have a centre-left orientation.² This can contribute to explaining Civita's more academic profile, and the larger reliance on economics and business economics.

Another factor may be the traditional concentration of expertise in the Norwegian state. The absence of political party research institutes and parliamentary research units and the limited analysis capacities of interest groups has meant that there are relatively few competing sources of expertise on policy questions. As such, the willingness of employers and trade unions to fund think tanks that are able to formulate and present alternative premises and solutions in public debate is understandable. For the political parties it is convenient to have ideologically aligned think tanks to raise issues on the public agenda and back up political arguments with some form of knowledge. At the same time, there are limits to the partisan contestation of expertise in Norway. There seems to be little appetite for competing expertise that radically challenges the academic consensus. This can probably be related to the large degree of consensus and limited polarization of the Norwegian political system (cf. Campbell & Pedersen 2014 on Denmark).

What are the normative implications of Norwegian think tanks' balancing act between academia and advocacy? Do their approach and advice contribute to more 'truth-sensitive' and knowledge-based political processes (Christiano 2012), or to an unfortunate politicization of the knowledge basis of politics? On the one hand, even if the picture is not straightforward, Norwegian think tanks' reliance on academics and academic knowledge indicates a non-trivial role of scientific argument. Significantly, Norwegian think tanks take on an important bridging role in the sense that they contribute to disseminating research and more abstract policy arguments to a larger audience. On the other hand, ideology and predetermined positions do affect approaches and framings, and sometimes the range of acceptable conclusions (Boswell 2008). This may contribute to a problematic politicization of knowledge communication and transmittance.

At the same time, it has been a recurrent claim from right-wing circles that academia is liberal and left-leaning. Advocacy organization and social movements on the Left worry that mainstream knowledge production in academic institutions and bureaucracy is out of touch with ordinary people's everyday struggles, or influenced by right-wing or centrist ideologies. From both these perspectives, think tanks' contribution to politicize knowledge may paradoxically result in an overall more balanced knowledge basis for politics. However, there is limited evidence that Norwegian think tanks radically challenge mainstream academic knowledge. To the extent that established agendas in academia and policymaking are in fact biased, these think tanks' limited opposition could be seen as questionable and disappointing.

At the same time, a more aggressive emphasis on ‘alternative’ knowledge production and opposition to ‘establishment’ expertise would easily compromise cognitive quality.

Finally, we should bear in mind that think tanks’ normative legitimacy rests not only on their credentials as knowledge providers, but also on their democratic merits. From a democratic perspective, think tanks should contribute to a better representation of values and interests, and frame their activities and advocacy as supportive of democratic procedures and ‘ways of life’ (Gora 2017). Our study has given us little reason to doubt that Norwegian think tanks are committed to a democratic ethos. However, more studies are needed to establish their more detailed participatory and representative credentials: whether think tanks overall are good news for democracy, or whether they, as critics claim, are ‘elitist’ and mobilize interests that are already well represented.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

One of the authors (Holst) has contributed on different occasions to all three think tanks as presenter/commentator at events. Until January 2017, she was also member of Agenda’s academic advisory board. She resigned from the advisory board before this study was initiated.

NOTES

1. All translations from Norwegian are by the authors.
2. One of the largest institutes, Fafo, was founded by the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO). Fafo is independent, but states that it does research that ‘highlight the perspectives of employees and those who are excluded from the labour market’.

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