



## ESSAYS

# Measuring Think Tank Performance: Updated with 2014 Data

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## Summary

In 2013, our CGD colleagues Julia Clark and David Roodman designed a low-cost quantitative approach to ranking think tank performance. We applied [their methodology](#) in early 2015 to produce an updated ranking of US and international development think tanks on the basis of 2014 data. The rankings aim to provide a transparent and objective method of assessing the influence of select think tanks. We use citations in traditional and new media as well as academe to evaluate think tanks' ability to garner public attention. Thus, the rankings are best understood as an indicator of *public profile*. While policy impact is hard if not impossible to measure, the strength of a think tank's public profile is likely to be a good marker of its influence and potential for impact: ideas need to be noticed to be adopted (Clark and Roodman, 2013). Our methodology helps reduce the biases inherent in expert-perception based rankings and provides think tanks with clear strategies based on concrete metrics to improve their performance. In addition, by incorporating the size of a think tank, in terms of operating expenses, our rankings benefit from an added efficiency ('bang-for-your-buck') dimension that other approaches lack. The comparison of rankings between 2013 and now indicates considerable continuity of the measured public profile over time, with only moderate changes in aggregate rankings; although there is more variability in individual indicators. [\[1\]](#)

# The highest ranking think tanks of 2015

The Index looks at public profile both in absolute terms and adjusted by the size of institutions' budgets and ranks think tanks in two groups: US think tanks and international development think tanks (both US and non-US). [\[2\]](#) See Table 1 for the indicators used.

The Cato Institute tops the budget-adjusted ranking of international development think tanks, followed by the Brookings Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (Table 3). The Center for Global Development ranks fourth. The new rankings signal an improvement for both Brookings and CSIS, while Cato held on to its top spot compared to 2013. Brookings stood out with its high number of scholarly citations, while Cato scored highly both on social media fans and web traffic.

In the absolute international development think tank rankings, Brookings ranks highest, followed by the Cato Institute and CSIS, consistent with the 2013 rankings (Table 4). Without budget adjustment, Brookings does well not only in scholarly citations, but also media mentions and web traffic; CSIS's strong points are social media and news media mentions.

In the budget-adjusted ranking of US think tanks (all disciplines), the Pew Research Center takes the top spot, followed by the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation (Table 6). Brookings and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace are both noteworthy for jumping seven places in our rankings compared to 2013. For Brookings, the jump is due largely to the increase in scholarly citations, combined with improved web traffic rankings. Carnegie's rise is best explained by the six-fold increase of its social media fans as well as a doubling of scholarly references.

The Brookings Institution also tops the absolute ranking of US think tanks, followed by Heritage and Pew (Table 7). The new rankings signal an improvement for both Brookings and Pew, while Heritage moves down one spot compared to 2013 despite ranking first in terms of social media fans and web traffic.

## Social media and web traffic are #trending

Think tanks are increasingly embracing social media both as a way of generating publicity for more in-depth publications and to communicate simple messages directly to a broader audience as well as policymakers. We used the number of Twitter followers and Facebook likes for each think tank to generate our social media indicator. Without exception the think tanks have gained Twitter followers and Facebook fans since 2013. The gains were large, with most institutions doubling their followings. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace increased their Twitter followers sevenfold (from 20,191 to 148,200). CSIS increased its followers tenfold from fewer than 10,000 followers in 2013 to more than 100,000.

Other think tanks had better success increasing their followings on Facebook. The Institute for Development Studies had about 6,000 Facebook likes in 2013 and now has almost 35,000. Although many of the organizations in our analysis have succeeded in expanding their social media audiences, none has approached the reach of the Heritage Foundation with its nearly 500,000 Twitter followers and about 1.8 million Facebook likes.

While the exact spending of a think tank on social media outreach is difficult to determine, based on the total size of their budget, the Heritage Foundation had been most effective in converting dollars into social media fans, with over 27,000 fans per million dollars spent, replacing Cato at the top. Cato and Carnegie

are ranked second and third, with 18,400 and 11,200 supporters respectively. Pew has been the most effective at converting expenses into web traffic, followed by Cato and Heritage.

The continued increase in social media fans is of course not surprising. Retaining fans is relatively easy, as once someone had clicked 'like' or 'follow', they are much less likely to withdraw their support. One viral tweet, Facebook post, or video—whether in a positive or negative context with regards to a think tank's image—can hugely increase an organization's following without necessarily translating into a larger regular readership of its work or identification with its messages.

With growing social media audiences, it perhaps is no surprise that the websites of most think tanks websites are more popular now than in 2013. We used web traffic rankings from Alexa.com to track the number of sites that link to each think tank's website and to see how each think tank compares against other websites on the Web. Heritage has the most popular website—as in 2013—ranked 17,204 in the world. The Brookings Institution follows closely behind at 17,644—a big improvement compared to 2013, when it ranked sixth among all think tanks in the index with an Alexa.com ranking of 51,466. Clearly, social media are becoming a more important part of the public presence of think tanks and their efforts to gain a larger audience appear to have been rewarded by more visitors to their websites.

## Think tanks gain traction in news media

New media has long been an important channel for think tanks to disseminate their ideas and have been used as an indicator of think tank influence in various rankings and assessments. Media citations of all 36 think tanks in our comparison have gone up in 2014 compared to 2012, with several think tanks more than doubling their citations in the news media. Among US think tanks, the median number of media mentions for 2014 was 4,063 compared to 1,701 two years prior.

The Brookings Institution retained its top spot with over 23,000 media mentions, followed by the Pew Research Center, with over 15,000 and the Heritage Foundation with just over 10,000. Among think tanks with international development programs, the Center for Strategic and International Studies ranks second after Brookings, while the Cato Institute comes in third. The Urban Institute and RAND Corporation registered particularly impressive growth in the number of their citations, more than doubling media mentions compared to 2012.

In terms of converting budget dollars into news citations, the Pew Research Center held on to its top spot from 2012, with 500 media mentions per million dollars spent, followed by Brookings and the Center for New American Security. These displaced Cato and the American Enterprise Institute as second and third most news citations per dollar spent.

The reasons for the rise of think tank presence in news media are open to speculation. It could be that think tanks have been more successful in publicizing their work to news outlets; or perhaps the media are reaching out more to think tanks in search of added credibility. Alternatively, the increase in media citations is a result of the proliferation of digital news outlets and niche media covering a handful of topics in greater detail.

## Impact on the research community has been mixed

Think tanks have clearly become more engaged with their audiences online and through news media, but has this improvement translated into more recognition and influence within the research community? Using Anne-Wil Harzing's Publish or Perish software, we analyzed how think tanks' work has been cited by other scholars. Because scholarly work often takes years to be disseminated and cited by others in published work, we measure citations for papers published in 2012. (We used the same lag in 2013, measuring citations for 2010 papers.)

A few think tanks increased their scholarly citations substantially. The Overseas Development Institute more than doubled their citations to 653. The Brookings Institution improved from 1,960 citations to 3,755, retaining its first place in this year's rankings. The second most-cited organization is the International Food Policy Research Institute with 707 citations, while the Pew Research Center had the third highest ranking with 701. As might be expected, a handful of particularly influential papers tend to drive scholarly citations. For example, eight out of 264 Brookings publications in 2012 accounted for about two-thirds of the organization's total citations.

On a per-dollar basis, Brookings also takes the top spot with 39 citations per million dollars. The Pew Research Center and the Center for a New American Security follow, while the South African Institute of International Affairs is ranked fourth.

## Think tanks are becoming more valued – but not everywhere

Overall, most think tanks have increased their budgets over the past two to three years — over one-fourth of US and international think tanks in our rankings achieved a growth of 20 percent or more. The median think tank budget was \$30.6 million, up slightly from two years ago. The biggest spender was the RAND Corporation with over \$275 million in operating expenses, while the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies spent the least, at little over \$1.3 million. The International Food Policy Research Institute had the highest jump in spending among US think tanks, with an 83 percent increase in 2013 compared to two years before. Although small, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies had also increased its expenses by over 80 percent over the course of two years. At the other end of the spectrum, the Canada-based Centre for International Governance Innovation spent close to 60 percent less in 2014 than it did in 2011. The finances of the North-South Institute decreased by over 30 percent between 2010 and 2012; it closed its doors in September 2014.

## Trends in think tank influence: our main take-aways

The Roodman-Clark methodology is of course not a perfect guide to the impact of think tanks, but it provides an objective and quantifiable scale to measure some dimensions of their influence and to adjust them for size. It also provides some useful trend indicators, including of the speed to which new channels of communication are growing relative to traditional ones. As public discussion shifts increasingly to social media, think tanks have extended their use and reach of these fora considerably in the last two years. Think tanks are also being quoted more in the news media, which also signals increased engagement with a wider, popular audience. There is less continuity of impact within the research community — academic

conversation tends to be dominated by a few highly successful publications, which tend to change from year to year.

**Table 1: Indicators of think tank public profile**

	INFLUENCE				EFFICIENCY	
	Social Media Fans	Website traffic	Incoming links	Media Citations	Scholarly Citations	Organization Size
<i>Metric</i>	Facebook likes + Twitter followers	Relative global web traffic rank	Number of sites that link to the website	Mentions in global news sources, all languages	Google Scholar citations	Annual operating expenses
<i>Timeline</i>	Snapshot (13 Jan 2015)	3-month avg. (12 Jan 2015)	Weekly count (12 Jan 2015)	1-2 year total (2014)	Total for 2012 publications (taken 16 Jan 2015)	Most recent fiscal year (often 2013)
<i>Source</i>	facebook.com twitter.com	alexa.com	alexa.com	lexisnexis.com	Harzing's Publish or Perish	charitynavigator.org or annual reports
<i>Access</i>	Free	Free	Free	Subscription required	Free	Free

**Table 2. Aggregate profile for international development think tanks**

Name	Expenses (\$ million/year)	Age (years)	Social media fans	Web traffic	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations
African Economic Research Consortium	12.7	27	0	408	192	59	0
Bangladesh Inst. of Development Studies	1.3	44	2,565	262	64	160	0
Brookings Institution	96.7	99	278,677	56,676	14,476	23,388	3,755
Cato Institute	26.0	38	479,167	27,447	11,047	4,535	250
Center for Global Development	13.3	14	118,450	8,474	2,611	707	235
Ctr. for Strategic and International Studies	33.0	53	366,299	11,413	5,057	6,256	266
Ctr. for Int'l Governance Innovation	15.4	14	12,956	2,240	717	451	55
Council for Dev. of Social Science Research in Africa	4.8	42	7,058	2,417	637	120	13
Danish Institute for International Studies	13.5	12	4,687	608	468	74	67
Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	190.5	90	42,579	8,082	3,405	1,575	335
Institute of Development Studies	30.4	49	165,646	5,165	1,752	114	76
Int'l Development Research Centre	257.2	45	27,014	4,940	3,028	318	211
Int'l Food Policy Research Institute	145.5	40	165,693	8,484	2,682	814	707
Int'l Inst. for Environment & Development	29.2	44	32,443	2,147	1,453	404	156
Int'l Inst. for Sustainable Development	16.4	25	13,452	10,235	3,193	181	148
Konrad Adenauer Foundation	173.6	60	31,132	9,483	3,306	1,724	48
Korea Development Institute	66.2	44	590	2,903	216	195	17
North-South Institute (L'Institut Nord-Sud)	2.2	39	2,353	266	175	39	11
Norwegian Inst. of International Affairs	14.0	56	10,762	1,050	347	148	18
Overseas Development Institute	40.1	55	107,789	661	1,754	747	653
South African Inst. of International Affairs	3.2	81	6,171	1,083	294	431	68

Woodrow Wilson Int'l Center for Scholars	19.3	47	82,942	9,546	4,016	906	49
Minimum	1.3	12	0	262	64	39	0
Median	22.6	44	29,073	3,922	1,753	418	72
Mean	54.7	46	89,019	7,909	2,768	1,970	324
Maximum	257.2	99	479,167	56,676	14,476	23,388	3,755



**Table 3. Budget-adjusted scores and ranking for international development think tanks**

Rank	Change (from 2013)	Name	Social media fans	Web traffic	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations	Overall
1	0	Cato Institute	30.8	20.4	23.1	16.9	6.7	19.6
2	+3	Brookings Institution	4.8	11.3	8.1	23.5	27.2	15.0
3	+1	Ctr. for Strategic and International Studies	18.6	6.7	8.3	18.4	5.6	11.5
4	-2	Center for Global Development	14.9	12.4	10.7	5.2	12.4	11.1
5	-2	South African Inst. of International Affairs	3.3	6.6	5.1	13.3	15.1	8.7
6	+2	Woodrow Wilson Int'l Center for Scholars	7.2	9.6	11.3	4.6	1.8	6.9
7	0	Int'l Inst. for Sustainable Development	1.4	12.1	10.6	1.1	6.3	6.3
8	+1	Council for Dev. of Social Sci. Research in Afr.	2.5	9.7	7.2	2.4	1.9	4.8
9	-3	Bangladesh Inst. of Development Studies	3.2	3.8	2.6	11.7	0.0	4.3
10	0	Overseas Development Institute	4.5	0.3	2.4	1.8	11.4	4.1
11	+2	Institute of Development Studies	9.1	3.3	3.1	0.4	1.8	3.5
12	+3	North-South Institute (L'Institut Nord-Sud)	1.8	2.4	4.4	1.8	3.6	2.8
13	+4	Ctr. for Int'l Governance Innovation	1.4	2.8	2.5	2.8	2.5	2.4
14	-2	Int'l Inst. for Environment & Development	1.9	1.4	2.7	1.3	3.8	2.2
15	-1	Int'l Food Policy Research Institute	1.9	1.1	1.0	0.5	3.4	1.6
16	0	Danish Institute for International Studies	0.6	0.9	1.9	0.5	3.5	1.5
17	-6	Norwegian Inst. of International Affairs	1.3	1.5	1.3	1.0	0.9	1.2

18	-1	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	0.4	0.8	1.0	0.8	1.2	0.8
19	-2	Konrad Adenauer Foundation	0.3	1.1	1.0	1.0	0.2	0.7
20	0	African Economic Research Consortium	0.0	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.0	0.4
20	+1	Int'l Development Research Centre	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.6	0.4
22	0	Korea Development Institute	0.0	0.8	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3

**Table 4. Absolute scores and ranking for international development think tanks**

Rank	Change (from 2013)	Name	Social media fans	Web traffic	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations	Overall
1	0	Brookings Institution	15.7	35.8	26.2	59.4	57.9	39.0
2	0	Cato Institute	26.9	17.4	20.0	11.5	3.9	15.9
3	0	Ctr. for Strategic and International Studies	20.6	7.2	9.1	15.9	4.1	11.4
4	+1	Int'l Food Policy Research Institute	9.3	5.4	4.8	2.1	10.9	6.5
5	+1	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	2.4	5.1	6.2	4.0	5.2	4.6
6	-2	Center for Global Development	6.7	5.4	4.7	1.8	3.6	4.4
7	+1	Overseas Development Institute	6.1	0.4	3.2	1.9	10.1	4.3
8	+1	Woodrow Wilson Int'l Center for Scholars	4.7	6.0	7.3	2.3	0.8	4.2
9	-2	Konrad Adenauer Foundation	1.7	6.0	6.0	4.4	0.7	3.8
10	4	Institute of Development Studies	9.3	3.3	3.2	0.3	1.2	3.4
11	-1	Int'l Inst. for Sustainable Development	0.8	6.5	5.8	0.5	2.3	3.1
12	-1	Int'l Development Research Centre	1.5	3.1	5.5	0.8	3.3	2.8
13	-1	Int'l Inst. for Environment & Development	1.8	1.4	2.6	1.0	2.4	1.8
14	+2	Ctr. for Int'l Governance Innovation	0.7	1.4	1.3	1.1	0.8	1.1
15	-3	South African Inst. of International Affairs	0.3	0.7	0.5	1.1	1.0	0.7
15	+1	Council for Dev. of Social Sci. Research in Afr.	0.4	1.5	1.2	0.3	0.2	0.7
17	+1	Korea Development Institute	0.0	1.8	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.6
18	+1	Danish Institute for International	0.3	0.4	0.8	0.2	1.0	0.5

Studies								
18	-4	Norwegian Inst. of International Affairs	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.5
20	+1	North-South Institute (L'Institut Nord-Sud)	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.2
20	+1	Bangladesh Inst. of Development Studies	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.0	0.2
20	0	African Economic Research Consortium	0.0	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.0	0.2

**Table 5. Aggregate profile for US think tanks**

Expenses (\$ million/ year)	Web traffic	Name	Age (years)	Social media fans	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations
American Enterprise Institute	31.8	72	150,150	21,618	6,239	7,371	255
Brookings Institution	96.7	99	278,677	56,676	14,476	23,388	3,755
Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace	31.5	105	353,209	9,656	4,209	3,308	662
Cato Institute	26.0	38	479,167	27,447	11,047	4,535	250
Center for a New American Security	5.0	8	28,006	2,273	1,440	1,194	109
Center for American Progress	34.2	12	104,121	15,769	8,478	5,161	550
Center for Global Development	13.3	14	118,450	8,474	2,611	707	235
Center for Strategic and Int'l Studies	33.0	53	366,299	11,413	5,057	6,256	266
Council on Foreign Relations	61.6	94	432,953	40,368	10,555	6,394	366
German Marshall Fund	37.3	43	53,739	3,858	1,475	1,059	57
Heritage Foundation	81.7	42	2,252,094	58,126	13,019	10,193	168
International Food Policy Research Inst.	145.5	40	165,693	8,484	2,682	814	707
New America Foundation	21.6	16	31,765	7,154	5,077	2,821	100
Peterson Inst. For International Economics	11.7	34	15,345	6,471	2,705	2,101	233
Pew Research Center	30.6	11	282,072	51,448	11,267	15,284	701
RAND Corporation	275.1	67	89,656	22,864	8,893	4,142	451
Urban Institute	77.4	47	59,733	12,208	5,345	3,983	619
Woodrow Wilson Center	19.3	47	82,942	9,546	4,016	906	49
Minimum	5.0	8	15,345	2,273	1,440	707.0	49.0
Median	32.4	43	134,300	11,810	5,211	4,063	261
Mean	57.4	47	296,893	20,770	6,588	5,534.3	529.6
Maximum	275.1	105	2,252,094	58,126	14,476	23,388.0	3,755.0

**Table 6. Budget adjusted scores and ranking for US think tanks**

Rank	Change (from 2013)	Name	Social media fans	Web traffic	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations	Overall
1	+1	Pew Research Center	6.9	16.2	10.0	17.5	9.6	12.0
2	-1	Cato Institute	13.7	10.1	11.5	6.1	4.0	9.1
3	+2	Heritage Foundation	20.6	6.8	4.3	4.4	0.9	7.4
4	+7	Brookings Institution	2.2	5.6	4.1	8.5	16.2	7.3
5	-2	Center for a New American Security	4.2	4.4	7.8	8.4	9.2	6.8
6	+7	Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace	8.4	2.9	3.6	3.7	8.8	5.5
6	-2	Center for Global Development	6.7	6.1	5.3	1.9	7.4	5.5
8	-2	Peterson Inst. for Int'l Economics	1.0	5.3	6.3	6.3	8.3	5.4
8	-1	American Enterprise Institute	3.5	6.5	5.3	8.1	3.4	5.4
10	-2	Center for Strategic and Int'l Studies	8.3	3.3	4.1	6.6	3.4	5.2
11	-1	Center for American Progress	2.3	4.4	6.7	5.3	6.7	5.1
12	-4	Council on Foreign Relations	5.2	6.3	4.6	3.6	2.5	4.5
13	-2	New America Foundation	1.1	3.2	6.4	4.6	1.9	3.4
14	0	Woodrow Wilson Center	3.2	4.8	5.6	1.6	1.1	3.3
15	0	Urban Institute	0.6	1.5	1.9	1.8	3.3	1.8
16	+1	German Marshall Fund	1.1	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.6	1.0
17	-1	International Food Policy Research Inst.	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.2	2.0	0.8
18	0	RAND Corporation	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.7	0.6

**Table 7. Absolute scores and ranking for US think tanks**

Rank	Change (from 2013)	Name	Social media fans	Web traffic	Incoming links	Media mentions	Scholarly citations	Overall
1	+1	Brookings Institution	4.7	13.6	11.0	21.1	35.5	17.2
2	-1	Heritage Foundation	37.9	14.0	9.9	9.2	1.6	14.5
3	+2	Pew Research Center	4.8	12.4	8.6	13.8	6.6	9.2
4	0	Council on Foreign Relations	7.3	9.7	8.0	5.8	3.5	6.9
5	-2	Cato Institute	8.1	6.6	8.4	4.1	2.4	5.9
6	+1	Center for American Progress	1.8	3.8	6.4	4.7	5.2	4.4
6	0	RAND Corporation	1.5	5.5	6.7	3.7	4.3	4.4
8	+1	American Enterprise Institute	2.5	5.2	4.7	6.7	2.4	4.3
9	-1	Center for Strategic and Int'l Studies	6.2	2.7	3.8	5.7	2.5	4.2
10	+1	Carnegie Endowment for Int'l Peace	5.9	2.3	3.2	3.0	6.2	4.1
11	-1	Urban Institute	1.0	2.9	4.1	3.6	5.8	3.5
12	+1	International Food Policy Research Inst.	2.8	2.0	2.0	0.7	6.7	2.9
13	+2	New America Foundation	0.5	1.7	3.9	2.5	0.9	1.9
14	-2	Center for Global Development	2.0	2.0	2.0	0.6	2.2	1.8
15	+1	Woodrow Wilson Center	1.4	2.3	3.0	0.8	0.5	1.6
15	-1	Peterson Inst. for Int'l Economics	0.3	1.6	2.1	1.9	2.2	1.6
17	+1	German Marshall Fund	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.5	0.9
18	-1	Center for a New American Security	0.5	0.5	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.8

[1] We excluded the Center for Development and the Environment (Norway) from the 2015 rankings because its internet domain is the same as that of the University of Oslo's, making it impossible to produce indicators related to web traffic.

[2] Several of the think tanks included in our international development rankings work on a range of non-development related issues; at times, international development-related research represents only a minority share of their activities. For example, Cato Institute lists 66 'policy scholars' of which 13 are listed under "international economics and development." However, as the influence and impact of a development-related research or division within a large think tank is very difficult to filter out, we considered the overall output and budget of all think tanks.