MP-IDSA
Issue Brief

Reimagining Think Tanks in Times of Pandemic

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Summary

The late 20th century sowed the seeds of the information revolution. In a way, it led to the flattening of the knowledge economy between the haves and have-nots. Even as the content was democratised to a large extent by far-sighted open societies and institutions, the "think tank" circuit has remained resilient in its form and function, despite the winds of change that seemed to be transforming all else. This issue brief argues in favour of converting the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 onslaught into an opportunity to upgrade and evolve the very method of human interaction prevalent in think tanks across the world.

The modern-day think tanks are a legacy of the industrial age. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), London, established in 1831, is the oldest defence and security studies think tank in the world and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC, established in 1910, is the oldest in the United States (US).[1] The United Service Institution (USI) of India came up in 1870 at Delhi, founded by then British Colonel and later Major General Sir Charles MacGregor,[2] while the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), India's foremost defence and security studies think tank, was established in 1965.[3]

The late 20th century sowed the seeds of the information revolution and most of the think tanks, much like other institutions, replaced their typewriters with computers. Library records became automated. A large number of publications were now available on the internet, easing access and revolutionising research. In a way, it led to the flattening of the knowledge economy between the haves of the past, with access to the haloed portals of distant libraries, and the have-nots, in small towns with neither the resources nor the ability to reach traditional knowledge banks.

Even as the content was democratised to a large extent amongst far-sighted open societies and institutions, the traditional method of human interaction, guided by the presentation of papers, holding annual conferences and roundtable discussions, largely remained the same. The "think-tank" circuit, as it came to be referred to, remained resilient in its form and function, despite the winds of change that seemed to be transforming all else.

The dogged persistence of remaining ensconced in the comfort zone of a conference — despite a multi-thousand-mile haul and the obvious cost in terms of time, money and human endeavour to present a 10 to15 minute paper — remained a startling puzzle at most times. All this continued until COVID-19 intervened, derailing all forms of social interaction, including those of think tanks.

This issue brief argues in favour of converting the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 onslaught into an opportunity to upgrade and evolve the present method of human interaction prevalent in think tanks across the world. This involves a judicious combination of the socially distant methods of interface and interaction, which is likely to enhance efficiency and productivity and will remain less prone to the kind of disruptions witnessed during the past couple of months.

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[1] **"About RUSI"**, *Royal United Services Institute,* London and **"Carnegie at 100: A Century of Impact"**, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington DC.
[2] **"USI History"**, *The United Service Institution of India*, New Delhi.
[3] **"About MP-IDSA"**, *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, New Delhi.

Most think tanks carry out a number of activities as part of their routine functioning. At the individual level, the mandate includes writing of comments, briefs, papers, monographs, and both edited and single-author books. It also involves the presentation of some of these research findings to an informed audience from amongst the institution and beyond. Institutional events that involve the presence and personal involvement of scholars include project meetings, roundtable discussions, briefings and presentations, interactions with visiting officials and scholars, and organising workshops and seminars – both national and international.

The scope of individual actions in the fulfilment of the mandate further involves field visits, online research, interviews with experts, and visits to archives and libraries. With the exception of visiting the library, none of the other activities necessarily require the regular presence of a scholar within the premises of a think tank building. And in more cases than not, libraries allow the issue of books as well as photocopying of the reference material. This implies that an occasional visit as deemed necessary could meet the requirement of utilising the resources.

The conduct of research, both at the individual and collective level, does benefit from regular interaction between groups of scholars who work on related areas of research. The cross-pollination of ideas, validation of facts, figures and arguments are all essential elements of quality research. However, the modern tools of interface increasingly provide the necessary means to not only interact seamlessly but also enter into collaborative academic ventures, connecting people and institutions across cities, countries and continents. The following illustration from the aircraft industry highlights this possibility and reinforces its applicability for the think tanks as well.

The example of Boeing shows that the complex process of designing and developing parts for the aircraft has been outsourced across the globe for a number of years. The Boeing 737 has 367,000 parts which are designed and manufactured worldwide only to be integrated at a factory in Renton in the US.[4] This demands very close coordination, exchange of ideas and documents on a daily basis, and adherence to strict protocols and timelines.

The ability to have relatively high-quality interaction has also been facilitated by improvements in connectivity, both in case of handheld devices and broadband networks over time. The era of the second and third generation of data transmission placed obvious limitations on the ability to have virtual interaction through electronic means. However, with the advent of fourth generation data transfer speeds at a personal level, access to broadband transmission, and the introduction of fifth generation transfer on the horizon, it is likely that the existing quality of virtual interaction will become an even more viable option.

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[4] Allison Linn, **"Hundreds of Suppliers, One Boeing 737 Airplane"**, *NBC News*, April 28, 2010.

The aforementioned points reaffirm the technological viability of virtual interaction, something which has emerged as an option of choice for webinars over the years. However, unlike their corporate cousins, think tanks have studiously shied away from the concept, instead opting for mega-scale seminars, often at a large comparative cost. As an illustration, as long back as 2011, HubSpot set a record for organising the largest online marketing seminar, with the registration of 30,000 and participation of 10,899 people.[5] Therefore, purely in terms of technical feasibility and practicality, the concept of webinars has a long record of successful conduct.

While the conduct of a large event, as in case of a mega-webinar, does require elaborate coordination, the same is not the case with smaller interactions like roundtable discussions and individualised interactions in think tanks. Its feasibility, both technical and social, is as good or as bad as the quality of the medium and the platform being used. While tools for this interactivity have been available for long, awareness regarding the same in the public consciousness has witnessed a sudden spurt during the last two months. It has reinforced the practicality of its effectiveness, despite security breaches that have been the case with some of the video conferencing platforms.[6]

Advantages of Socially Distant Virtual World

Most think tanks have scholars travelling daily to their institutes. This involves varied commuting durations, often ranging from a few minutes to more than an hour one way. This is bound to be at the cost of both time and money, which can arguably be spent on more productive means related to research. A recent study of commute times in metropolitans in India suggested that a 10 km distance takes 29 minutes in Delhi, 24 in Bengaluru, 37 in Mumbai and 39 minutes in Kolkata.[7] This could often be worse during times of road improvement and construction activities, which is a regular feature in most of the Indian cities. This is more than 10 per cent of each working day purely in terms of time spent. The findings of a recent Gallup poll in the US do not come as a surprise, which suggests that commutes are linked "to poorer overall wellbeing, daily mood, and health."[8]

The mandate to physically remain present in think tanks on a regular basis robs an institution of the talent of individuals who are located beyond the geographical limits of the cities. It needs little emphasis that scholars given their distinct talent, despite

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[5] Kimberly Partrick, **"HubSpot Set New Largest Online Marketing Seminar Record"**, *Guinness World Records*, September 14, 2011.

[6] Kamaljit Kaur Sandhu, **"Zoom Not Safe, MHA Says in its Advisory on Videoconferencing App"**, *India Today*, April 16, 2020.

[7] Sriharsha Devulapalli, **"The Slowest Roads in Urban India"**, *livemint*, September 08, 2019.

[8] Geoff Mukhtar, **"How Long Commutes Impact Workplace Productivity"**, *Fringe Benefit Analysis*, February 20, 2018.

their widespread location across the world, can contribute significantly to the research undertaken by a think tank. In other words, a think tank can potentially create not only a national but also an international faculty through an online presence, thereby considerably improving their quality of research.

The aforesaid reality emerges as a unique opportunity for smaller think tanks with limited resources. Given that a think tank's standing is largely dependent on its output in terms of research in all forms of expression, both text and audio-visual, this model allows smaller and more nimble institutions to compare favourably with their larger and better financed compatriots. Resources which tend to get locked down for maintaining large fixed assets and associated high expense outflows instead can now get suitably focussed towards hiring a more diverse research faculty and enhancing outreach.

This is not a new concept as it has remained the basis for innovation since the information technology revolution. There are numerous examples of young, bright and focussed engineers who have outdone large established software and hardware behemoths. From Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak creating Apple to Bill Gates and Paul Allen's experiment with Microsoft, it has always come at the cost of an IBM or similar behemoth clones. While there has been a case for change for long, however, the information revolution has flattened the knowledge curve. The free flow of technology and knowledge has levelled the playing field like never before in human history. There is no reason for the same not to be replicated in the arena of think tanks.

Research quality and output are not only enhanced as a result of external inputs but is also improved in-house, given the flexibility of the work environment, availability of additional working hours and lower commute related stress levels. The COVID-19 related work environment has provided an interesting opportunity for experimenting with this proposition. The website of MP-IDSA, the think tank this author has been associated with on a fulltime basis, presents interesting statistics. The Institute's website posts write-ups (commentaries and issue/policy briefs) on strategic issues of concern on a regular basis. These usually numbered an average of eight to nine every month. However, during the tentative period of lockdown, from March 20 to April 20, 2020, the website posted 25 commentaries and briefs. In the month of April, a record 35 write-ups were posted on the website.[9] Though the COVID-19 outbreak may have partly contributed to the increase, however, the trend is very much evident. While this period did see a drop in the number of large-scale events and physical interactions, the tremendous jump in research productivity, as reflected in the record number of write-ups posted on the Institute's website, as well as wider participation in the Institute's webinars which served an equal purpose are indeed noteworthy.

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[9] Based on a study of the website of Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) during the said period.

This trend of flexible working conditions leading to greater research output is reinforced by the findings of some of the studies conducted earlier.[10]

In addition to the tangible output, the frequency, quality and attendance of virtual interactions too improved dramatically. The participation of individuals from across the world further added value to discussions, with the inherent flexibility of scheduling and taking away the stress of cross time-zone travels. Physical space and cost were no longer critical elements for planning virtual events. This resulted in an increased frequency and more diverse inputs from scholars who would have otherwise found it more difficult to participate in proceedings.

Challenges of Virtual World

Some of the examples discussed indicate the feasibility of conducting certain activities undertaken at the individual and organisational level online. This does not come without its attendant costs. Some of these, given their intangible nature, might seem insignificant but can have a considerable long-term impact on efficiency and effectiveness.

The importance of human interactivity lies in it being a social activity, which contributes towards the psychological wellbeing of individuals. A study done in the context of four cities of China reinforces this factor. It suggests that the "use of the Internet for interpersonal communication is not the same as offline face-to-face communication in enhancing quality of life."[11] Social interaction also alleviates psychological levels amongst people as studies undertaken since the advent of the information age have repeatedly suggested. While sharing the findings of a study conducted among older adults, Alan Teo, a psychiatrist at Oregon Health & Science University, had stated: "We found that all forms of socialization aren't equal. Phone calls and digital communication, with friends or family members, do not have the same power as face-to-face social interactions in helping to stave off depression."[12]

Think tanks also play host to visiting scholars from other countries. Their physical presence allows them to interact with scholars and visit archives, a facility which may not be available online. In certain exceptional circumstances, studies which are classified cannot utilise online resources and need to rely on interactions alone to work within the necessary security parameters.

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[10] Prithwiraj Choudhury, Barbara Z. Larson and Cirrus Foroughi, **"Is it Time to Let Employees Work from Anywhere?"**, *Harvard Business Review,* August 14, 2019.

[11] Paul S.N. Lee, Louis Leung, Ven-Hwei Lo and Chengyu Xiong, **"Internet Communication versus Face-to-face Interaction in Quality of Life"**, *Social Indicators Research*, February 2011, p. 386.

[12] Alan Teo, **"Research: Face-to-face socializing more powerful than phone calls, emails in guarding against depression in older adults"**, *Oregon Health & Science University*, October 04, 2015.

There is little doubt that the interpersonal interactivity not only enhances the work atmosphere, it also facilitates better quality of research, both for psychological reasons and the quality of interaction that personal meetings can potentially generate.

The need to access facilities like the library has already been outlined earlier in the brief. This is likely to remain a factor which will necessitate physical proximity to resources unless a stage is reached wherein all documents are available in the digital format.

The Way Ahead

The contestation between the virtual and physical functioning is a reminder of yet another discussion between seemingly opposing ends of the strategic spectrum – ensuring security vs building the economy for the public good, more popularly known as the guns versus butter debate. However, it has since been widely acknowledged that security and economy are integral and concomitant elements of state function.

Similarly, for think tanks, the ability to balance the reality of socially distant interaction and proximity functioning too must co-exist seamlessly. There are obvious advantages of best employing the virtues of an interconnected world. Yet, this virtual world is not perfect, nor is it without its limitations. The logical solution to overcome existing challenges as a result of COVID-19, as also maintaining social interactivity, emerges from a more judicious co-relation of the two seemingly opposing options. The existing status of events and functioning in most think tanks suggest that there is a need to increase the proportion of virtual interaction in our daily lives. Simultaneously, it would be useful to explore the option of working from home on specified days of a week, to begin with, with stipulations that require the simultaneous fulfilment of existing work norms. This will enlarge the scope of interaction, improve the quality of output, bring down costs of operation and make institutions much more resilient to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A series of initiatives successfully undertaken at MP-IDSA and other think tanks in the country during the last one month serves as a useful example for challenging the status quo and integrating socially distant interaction more deeply into our work culture.[13] Some of these points can be used for future planning and implementation of research and outreach programmes in think tanks more productively and efficiently, even after the adverse impact of COVID-19 has faded away.

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[13] The trend of holding web-based interactions was also visible in the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Global Counter Terrorism Council (GCTC), to name a few.

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The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.