

## Favoring the Elites: Think Tanks and Discourse Coalitions

NÚRIA ALMIRON<sup>1</sup>

Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

This article provides an overview of the role think tanks play in shaping public opinion and policies favoring economic and social inequalities. Despite increasing interest in think tanks as media and public opinion setters, the research so far has been mostly policy oriented and the communications perspective underresearched. This article addresses this communication research gap by conducting a literature review on the role played by discourse coalitions of think tanks in three main areas: climate change contrarianism, financial austerity, and speciesism. The article also provides a short overview of the critical theoretical perspectives behind the review and suggests ways for critical communication scholars to contribute. Research conducted to date reveals that conservative and industry-linked think tanks have a greater ability to build network coalitions and have been very successful in global discourse creation processes favoring elites.

*Keywords: think tanks, inequality, discourse coalitions, climate change contrarianism, financial austerity, speciesism*

It is argued that think tanks have the potential to make a difference in policy processes and the shaping of public opinion. However, it is very difficult to agree on the exact meaning of the term *think tank*. As a “verbal container that accommodates a heterogeneous set of meanings” (Hart & Vromen, 2008, p. 135), in recent decades, it has been applied to a wide array of different types of institutes devoted to policy research. Since the 1970s, the emergence of an academic literature on the subject has also played a key role in “the discursive creation of think tanks” (Medvetz, 2012, p. 28). The Anglo-American school and its predominant approaches have monopolized research in this area (Pautz, 2011)—*think tank* is a term that originated in the United States to define organizations involved in the political process through knowledge production.

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Nuria Almiron: [nuria.almiron@upf.edu](mailto:nuria.almiron@upf.edu)

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According to the University of Pennsylvania's global think tank database, there were 6,846 influential think tanks in the world in 2016 (McGann, 2017). Given that they first appeared after the Second World War, "the growth of public policy research organizations, or think tanks, over the last few decades has been nothing less than explosive" (McGann, 2016, p. 8). Among the many organizations labeled as influential, we encounter a vast array of organized political, social, and economic interests. Furthermore, the leading institutions on the list work with millionaire budgets (more than \$100 million in the case of the Brookings Institution in the United States, which is the largest think tank in the world, and around \$20 million in the case of the largest organization in Europe, Chatham House). Importantly, whereas some of these organizations are very much knowledge oriented, others belong to interest networks supporting very specific ideological stances. Consequently, it is not inaccurate to define think tanks as interest groups with a complex mixture of interests and knowledge and whose influence confirms the central role of ideas and related discursive processes in politics and policy change (Béland, 2009).

Think tanks have increased in number, scope, and impact and have become a relevant source of information and reference for policy makers, public opinion, and journalists alike. The above-mentioned database, coordinated by professor James McGann, was born out of requests received from, among other professionals, journalists eager to find out more about the combination of knowledge and interest that think tanks represent and the leading organizations in this area.

Because of the policy-oriented nature of the mainstream discussion on think tanks, with very few exceptions, communication scholars have mainly remained aloof from this field of research. However, in the last decade, a good number of critical political scientists, joined by a few communication scholars, have provided evidence of the huge impact think tanks have on the creation of very successful discourse coalitions. I label these coalitions as successful because their arguments have been widely replicated in policies, the media, and public opinion, as we will see.

The role that media and communication have in perpetuating social injustice and inequality is among the main concerns of critical communication scholars. However, interest groups are traditionally left out of the focus of their analysis. In this article, I aim to illustrate how relevant this field of study is for critical communication studies by conducting a literature review of research on the role played by discourse coalitions of think tanks in three main areas: climate change contrarianism, financial austerity, and speciesism. These three areas share a common trait: They all reveal that conservative and industry-linked think tanks have a greater ability to build network coalitions and promote successful global discourse creation processes favoring elite agendas and promoting inequality. By *elites* I refer here to governments, authorities, advisors, and big corporations.

The goal is to provide an overview of the true dimension of the impact of think tanks on narratives promoting inequality. For this purpose, this article is organized as follows: First, I introduce the critical theoretical perspectives that address the role of think tanks in society, in which the media and communication play a relevant role and that nourish the literature review of this article. Second, I describe the three areas chosen for the literature review—climate contrarianism, financial austerity, and speciesism. My description highlights the easily missed inequality inherent in all three areas. Third, I conduct a literature review of critical research on the three topics. The goal is to collect the main evidence

of think tanks' creation of successful (i.e., influential) discourse coalitions on these topics. Finally, I discuss how these three examples show a communication research gap, and I elaborate on how critical communication scholars can contribute to unveiling discourse coalitions that promote inequality in the media, policies, and society.

### **Theoretical Framework: From Elitism to Discourse Coalitions**

According to some of the most influential scholars, think tanks are instruments in a political setting where policy making is described as the product of a dynamic interplay among organized interests. These interests may not have the same resources and goals, but there is ultimately a pluralist representation of views. In this scenario, think tanks are one among many organizations competing to shape public policy (McGann, 2007). This approach, called *pluralism* (Thomas, 2004), is a very widely accepted explanation of how think tanks, as well as other interest groups, relate to the political system in liberal democracies. This approach is also as conservative as it is widely accepted.

Critical approaches typically try to fill the gaps missed by pluralistic approaches. The first developed critical approach was elitism (Thomas, 2004). The elitist perspective stresses that interest groups are neither disinterested actors devoted to the progress of knowledge nor competing equally in shaping public policies. The elitist approach derives from the elite theory tradition posited by U.S. political sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956). Accordingly, this framework considers that think tanks are not neutral organizations and should be analyzed as tools of capitalist ruling class power. William G. Domhoff (2010) supported such a view:

In concert with the large banks and corporations in the corporate community, the foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups in the policy-planning network provide the organizational basis for the exercise of power on behalf of the owners of all large income-producing properties. (p. 115)

Domhoff was not promoting a conspiratorial world view, but merely highlighting the fact that the pluralist view does not reflect reality. The essence of Domhoff's view was summarized by Dinan and Miller (2007) when they stated that the PR industry is "anti-democratic" (p. 3).

Other critical approaches include institutionalism, neo-Marxism, and political economy. Institutional approaches to think tanks focus on the environments (structures, rules, norms, and processes) that shape think tank behaviors. Institutionalists do not consider social and economic control by elites to be the main feature of these shaping forces. Although they deem institutional constraints to leave little scope for agency or independence, they also think that think tanks do not always serve the interests of capital (Stone, 1996).

The neo-Marxist perspective holds that think tanks are less the product of political elites or societal agreements than of class-consciousness. According to Thomas (2004), this approach assumes the centrality of class and class conflict in the Marxist political economy. In this regard, it is worth highlighting Gramscian analysis of hegemonic control. Within this perspective, the ideological apparatus constrains the

parameters of ideas, debate, and discourse in civil society and the state (Gramsci, 1971). Hartwig Pautz (2011), for instance, provided a neo-Gramscian understanding of the societal function of think tanks. This author showed that cooperative networks have become influential in policy making. Agency, ideas, power hierarchies, and context are relevant to think tanks' effectiveness in shaping policies (Pautz, 2011).

Critical political economy approaches to the think tank phenomenon—that is, theoretical frameworks including not only economics but also power relations from a critical stance—are represented by the works of John McLevey, Thomas Medvetz, and Dieter Plehwe. McLevey (2014) has studied the relationship between funding and the politics of policy knowledge for think tanks in Canada. His findings suggest a complex reality where think tanks are neither “the pawns of corporate-political donors nor representatives of many competing interest groups” (McLevey, 2014, p. 71).

Medvetz's work *Think Tanks in America* (2012) provides an analysis that includes sociology, history, politics, economy, and media approaches within a critical perspective. This is probably one of the most comprehensive critical attempts to analyze think tanks, and indeed his critical political economy perspective led the author to a new paradigm, which—after Bourdieu—he called field theory. In field theory, the focus is not on whether think tanks are the pawns of elites or representative of larger groups, but rather on the intricate organizational and political environments in which they operate and their underlying dependencies on powerful sponsors. Medvetz's central argument is that think tanks “have become the primary instruments for linking political and intellectual practice in American life” and that their growth over the last 40 years has “ultimately undermined the value of independently produced knowledge in the United States by institutionalizing a mode of intellectual practice that relegates its producers to the margins of public and political life” (p. 7).

According to Medvetz's research, think tanks consistently depend on three kinds of clients: political, economic, and media. Political clients (especially policy makers, parties, and activist networks) are needed for the political access they can provide; economic clients (especially foundations, corporations, and wealthy donors) provide the financial support; and media clients (especially journalists and media organs, e.g., newspapers, periodicals, and radio and television programs) confer public visibility. Additionally, think tanks also have strong, although ambivalent, bonds with academia—a majority of them exhibit strong academic ties,<sup>2</sup> but their commitment to academic objectivity and rigor is dubious when they also hold consistent political and economic servitudes.

On the other hand, discourse coalition theory is a critical approach developed to study institutional change and structural transformations beyond national confines. This theory has been applied to the study of interest groups, and particularly of think tanks, by Dieter Plehwe. Plehwe (2011) defined *discourse coalitions* as “social forces acting jointly, though not necessarily in direct interaction, in pursuit of a common goal” (p. 130). By studying these social forces, including think tanks, we can devise the national and transnational networks, institutionalized actor constellations, and power relations of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Academic ties* refers to “policy experts who report past or present employment as college or university professors, administrators, trustees, or graduate research fellows, and a small number who report employment in the fields of academic journal and book publishing” (Medvetz, 2012, p. 238).

hegemonic neoliberal discourse coalition at large. Like Medvetz, Plehwe (2011) urged adopting a sociological viewpoint, which does not isolate organizations from “the relevant societal circumstances” (p. 131) taking place at the time.

Field theory and discourse coalition theory have very much enriched critical think tank analysis in the last decade by going beyond the polarized approaches of pluralist and elitist views and providing more sophisticated and up-to-date tools of analysis. Such an expanded critical approach constitutes the main theoretical framework for the literature review conducted in this article. The three examples reviewed in this article, confirm that pluralism theory does not accurately represent reality if we look at the most successful discursive strategies, all of them promoting elite agendas. However, the promotion of elite agendas cannot be explained only in terms of think tanks serving the economic and political elites, given that the media and academia also play an important role. In the case of the media, their main role is as disseminators, whereas academia contributes its reputation by supplying scholars who sanction the think tanks’ output.

### **Discourse Coalitions Promoting Inequality**

The next section of this article reviews the critical research published to date on the role think tanks have so far played in shaping public opinion and policies on three narratives favoring inequality: the contrarianist climate discourse, the austerity discourse, and the speciesist discourse. These three discourses were selected because they represent areas where relevant research has already been conducted on the role of think tanks as disseminators of narratives favoring the elites on a global scale, although, as we will see, the communication perspective is underanalyzed.

The contrarianist discourse refers to the narrative spread by the group dubbed climate change “skeptics,” “contrarians,” or “deniers” (M. Boykoff, 2016). Against a contrasting backdrop of consensus on key issues related to climate science, this heterogeneous group has significantly shaped contemporary discussions on climate science, politics, and policy in the public sphere, in the United States at least (Dunlap & McCright, 2015). Political economic interests are a frequent motivator behind these groups and the discourse they promote (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Climate change contrarianism has been essential in the United States in blocking measures to reduce global warming emissions and protect the interests of the elites in relation to the most polluting industries (McCright & Dunlap, 2010). This discourse is a perpetuator of inequality given that climate change disproportionately affects the poor (World Bank, 2016).

The austerity discourse refers to the narrative that supports the set of economic policies implemented mostly in the peripheral eurozone economies to address the economic crisis between 2007 and 2016—for instance, raising taxes, reducing social services, freezing public investment, and passing labor laws to facilitate the dismissal of workers. These policies soon proved to be financially inefficient and socially harmful, especially for the working classes and poor (Oxfam, 2013), yet clearly beneficial for the financial elites promoting the so-called Washington Consensus (Plehwe, 2011), which has allowed for the deregulation of financial markets and established a kind of orthodoxy among the political and economic elites since the 1980s. Interestingly, the term *Washington Consensus* was created and promoted by an economist from the Institute for International Economics, an international economic think tank based in Washington, D.C.

Finally, the speciesist discourse refers to the narrative that denies nonhuman interests any moral consideration equal to humans. The term *speciesism* was coined by Richard Ryder in 1970 (2010) and popularized by Peter Singer (1975/1990). Speciesism is institutionalized so humans can profit financially, socially, culturally, and spiritually by exploiting nonhumans (Noske, 1997). As Stibbe (2012) reminded us, the power exerted on nonhumans is fully coercive, yet “it depends completely on a consenting majority of the human population” (p. 20). This discourse discriminates against other animals and thus creates interspecies inequality. It also has an impact that goes beyond other animals, given that the intersections between the oppression of nonhuman animals and the oppression of humans are many, including human violence and inequality (see, e.g., Best, 2014; Harari, 2014; Nibert, 2013).

Whereas the two first narratives, of climate denial and austerity, are rather well known, the last one, speciesism, deserves an expanded description. Speciesism—more specifically, anthropocentric speciesism—claims that the preferential consideration and treatment of human beings over the members of other species is justified and hence that the confinement, exploitation, and killing of billions of other animals for human interests is acceptable (Faria & Paez, 2014). This view is contested by nonspeciesist approaches, which claim that all the attempts made to defend moral anthropocentrism and thereby justify the awarding of less importance to other animals have failed because, as English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham stated over two centuries ago, the question with regard to other animals is not whether they can reason or talk as humans do, but rather whether they can suffer (Bentham, 1828/1988). Sentience is now behind all contemporary Western thought defending the rights and interests of other animals. In this respect, in discussing other animals, Martha Nussbaum (2004) stated that sentience is the “threshold condition for membership in the community of beings who have entitlements based on justice” (p. 309). Nevertheless, despite the increasing number and multidisciplinary background of experts opposing speciesism—including scholars from the humanities, the social sciences, and the hard sciences—and the increasing number of ordinary citizens opposing animal cruelty, speciesism is the most pervasive system of values on earth. It is included here because research shows how the public consent on speciesism is intimately linked to discourse coalitions promoted by networks of interest groups trying to protect profit based on the exploitation of nonhuman animals. Speciesism thus deserves attention primarily for its devastating impact on other sentient beings, though it has very relevant impacts on social justice for humans as well, as we shall see.

### **Global Discourse Creation Processes**

#### ***Climate Change: The Contrarianist Discourse***

The role of think tank networks involved in climate change policy skepticism or contrarianism has been addressed by a varied number of scholars and organizations in the United States, whereas it is almost underresearched in Europe because of the less explicit discourse of conservative think tanks on the continent.

In 2000, McCright and Dunlap conducted a thematic content analysis of publications circulated on the websites of prominent U.S. conservative think tanks to reveal that most of them were disseminating skeptical or contrarian messages regarding global warming and the anthropogenic causes of climate

change. Two years later, the same authors described how conservative think tanks in the United States mobilized themselves to challenge the global warming claims of mainstream climate science, how these countermovement organizations aligned themselves with prominent American climate change skeptics affiliated with the fossil fuels industry, and how the efforts of these conservative think tanks were enhanced by the shift in the structure of political opportunity created by the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress. The study demonstrated how this countermovement blocked the passage of any significant climate change policy (McCright & Dunlap, 2003).

In 2007, it was revealed that Exxon Mobil had financed many climate change denial efforts, including think tanks such as the International Policy Network (IPN), an organization promoting Exxon-friendly ideas on climate change (Greenpeace, n.d.; Rowell, 2007; Union of Concerned Scientists, 2007).

In 2008, Jacques, Dunlap, and Freeman published the results of a quantitative analysis of 141 environmentally skeptical English-language books published between 1972 and 2005. They found that 92% of them, most published in the United States, were linked to right-wing (neoliberal, conservative) think tanks and that 90% also espoused environmental skepticism. They thus concluded that skepticism was a tactic of an elite-driven countermovement designed to combat environmentalism and that the successful use of this tactic contributed to the weakening of U.S. commitment to environmental protection.

In 2013, Dunlap and Jacques conducted a similar analysis of 108 climate change denial books published up to 2010. In this analysis, they found a strong link between conservative think tanks and the volumes and concluded that the conservative movement, especially think tanks, played a critical role in denying the reality and significance of anthropogenic global warming. They also found climate change denial had spread to several other nations beyond the United States with the help of conservative think tanks and that an increasing portion of denial books was produced by individuals with no scientific training through editorial processes that did not undergo peer review—thus “allowing authors or editors to recycle scientifically unfounded claims that are then amplified by the conservative movement, media, and political elites” (Dunlap & Jacques, 2013, p. 699).

Other studies have adhered to the thesis that the countermovement promoting skepticism and contrarianism in the United States was a subsidiary of the larger conservative movement in that country (Dunlap & McCright, 2011; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). For this reason, this countermovement has been labeled as a force of antireflexivity discourse insofar as it attacked key elements of reflexive modernization (McCright, 2016; McCright & Dunlap, 2010).

As Brulle summarized in 2014, the mentioned studies and others have clearly shown that a number of conservative think tanks, trade associations, and advocacy organizations are “the key organizational components of a well-organized climate change counter-movement that has not only played a major role in confounding public understanding of climate science, but also successfully delayed meaningful government policy actions to address the issue” (Brulle, 2014, p. 681). To continue with this research effort, Brulle investigated these organizations’ sources of funding and traced carbon-based industry funding through a complex network of groups. His results showed that, for the period from 2003

to 2010, an overwhelming majority of the philanthropic support received by these organizations came from conservative foundations and that there was evidence of a trend toward concealing the sources of funding by donor-directed philanthropies.

As Plehwe (2014) reminded us, although less well known because of the lack of analogous regulatory requirements in Europe compared with the United States, the top European think tank coalition networks—the Stockholm Network of more than 100 neoliberal think tanks and the Global Atlas Network of neoliberal think tanks—feature many think tanks that originate and distribute climate change contrarianism and sustain the alternative storyline of natural causes of climate change.

For the United States, we know that the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (NIPCC) attempts to mimic the IPCC reports by publishing their own documents to counterbalance the IPCC ones—despite few, if any, of the authors of the NIPCC reports having a track record in the academic field of meteorology or any other climate-related fields (Plehwe, 2014). This panel is funded by the Heartland Institute, a right-wing U.S. think tank. Heartland, in turn, is known as the center of corporate-backed climate change denial in the United States (Klein, 2011).

In this respect, Plehwe (2014) argued that things are much more complex than simply pitching IPCC scientists against NIPCC think tank researchers. According to him, “the surprising advance of climate change policy contrarianism can arguably be much better explained by the strength of the normative economic and political perspectives . . . than by an academic constellation in the climate sciences” (Plehwe, 2014, p. 105). That is, the think tank constellation has been able to spread a contrarianist discourse not because there is scientific knowledge supporting it but because of the favorable political and economic context—so-called free-market environmentalism. To Plehwe (2014), although the large number of think tanks and think tank networks involved in climate change policy skepticism is central, “climate skeptical think tanks cannot be blamed . . . for the lack of progress in climate change politics,” yet they “can certainly be used to better identify and more fully recognize the transnational expert, consulting and lobby/advocacy forces at play” (p. 113).

M. Boykoff (2016) also referred to the cultural, political economic, psychological, and social elements that pervade perceptions and decision-making on climate change elsewhere and that prevent us from simply “naming, shaming and blaming” the individual or collective culprits. Boykoff remembered that there always has been opposition to environmental movements and protection efforts in the United States.

The latest analysis of contrarianism and think tanks stresses the tendency to overlook common responsibilities associated with anthropogenic climate change by blaming only conservative organizations such as think tanks—something that can “serve to distract citizens from the scale of the challenges associated with contemporary climate change, and from more textured dimensions of institutional analysis of how climate science and governance interact, as well as contestation therein” (M. Boykoff, 2016, p. 95).

Finally, Boykoff has provided a very detailed picture of what may be the impact of think tanks’ influence on media framing of global warming. As clearly showed by this research (M. T. Boykoff, 2011; M. T. Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004, 2007), U.S. reporting suffered from an important bias during the 1990s, with

overrepresentation of the arguments against the anthropogenic causes of climate change (this bias diminished from 2002 on).

To summarize, the complex analysis of the constellation of contrarianist think tanks provided by the research to date demonstrates that their economic sponsorship is not the only factor in their influence. The cultural and political environments have contributed on their own. The favorable political context (supporting free-market policies) over recent decades has proved to be fertile ground for the seeds of the contrarianist discourse. The traditional cultural opposition to environmental movements in the United States may explain why contrarianism has spread faster in the United States than in Europe. The objective, neutral nature of scientific research, which has traditionally allocated prestige to academia, has been imported by contrarianist think tanks with the cooperation of policy experts with an academic profile. The research also shows the cooperation of media as disseminators. Politics, academia, and the media have been thus collaborating with the economic elite interests without necessarily directly interacting with each other but nonetheless creating underlying dependencies between each other. Think tanks have become instruments linking all of them in the creation of a climate change denial discourse coalition.

### ***Finance: The Austerity Discourse***

The path leading to the predominance of austerity politics and the conversion of private into sovereign debt during the period from 2007 to 2016 is, first and foremost, the direct result of the United States' and the European Union's political choices of the past three decades; these choices allowed for the deregulation of financial markets and established a form of orthodoxy, also known as the Washington Consensus, among the political and economic elites (Grant & Wilson, 2012). Some have labeled the result of this consensus *casino-capitalism* (Lordon, 2010), a metaphor that fits well given that the principal trait of a casino is that the house never loses. The elites—a coalition consisting of governments, financial authorities, auditors, advisors, and big corporations—basically succeeded in imposing global measures against the crisis that turned a private sector problem provoked by the elites themselves into a public problem endured by the ordinary citizen.

Today, we know that policy makers and financial elites cooperate internationally, sharing a broad consensus in their choices and demonstrating that their agenda and storylines are consistent worldwide (see, e.g., Pilkington, 2014). Furthermore, research into interest groups has provided relevant insights on the role of lobbying in the financialization of the international economy over the past four decades (Hdez. Viguera, 2013; Igan, Mishra, & Tressel, 2009; Seabrooke, 2001) and in the creation of neoliberal knowledge and hegemony (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006). In short, this knowledge-interest nexus (the Washington Consensus) may explain the successful dissemination among the elites of narratives providing ideological support for socializing the cost of the crisis.

In 2006, Plehwe and Walpen rightly argued that the end to neoliberal hegemony was not yet in sight because of the continuing strength of neoliberal paradigms. According to these authors, this strength was based on the well-developed and deeply entrenched networks of neoliberal knowledge production and diffusion—intellectuals and think tanks—which articulate the core principles of neoliberalism in a cross-disciplinary fashion not only in the sphere of policy but also in civil society. To support this, Plehwe and

Walpen described the creation of the Mont Pelerin Society network of organized neoliberals and the origins and rise of neoliberal advocacy think tanks closely connected to individuals or groups belonging to said society. The story is worth reviewing.

According to Plehwe and Walpen (2006), the core group that would later create the Mont Pelerin Society coined the term *neoliberalism* at a meeting in Paris in 1938. This is the same meeting that triggered the founding of the Centre International d'Études pour la Rénovation du Libéralisme, an early think tank effort created by neoliberal intellectuals that would not survive the Second World War. In 1947, when some participants from the 1938 meeting gathered under the leadership of Friedrich August von Hayek, the Mont Pelerin Society was born. In 1949, Hayek published a paper ("The Intellectuals and Socialism") that would summarize the guiding principles of the neoliberal agenda. As remarked by Plehwe and Walpen, these principles included first that the political right lacked "capable scientists and experts able to match the rising stars of social liberal and socialist orientation" and "rebuild anti-socialist science and expertise in order to develop anti-socialist intellectuals." Second, the "socialist filter in the knowledge-disseminating institutions of society, universities, institutes, foundations, journals, and the media has to be attacked by the establishment of anti-socialist knowledge centers capable of effectively filtering, processing, and disseminating neoliberal knowledge". This second task was undertaken by founding and running a "fairly new type of civil society knowledge apparatus: the advocacy think tank" (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006, p. 33).

With the funding of a British businessman, in 1950s, Hayek created the second think tank aimed strictly at promoting the neoliberal agenda: the Institute of Economic Affairs, the prototype of the many neoliberal advocacy think tanks that would follow throughout the world. According to Plehwe and Walpen, in spite of the Left's many attempts to follow this path, by 2006, no force had "emerged that can match the neoliberal networks in terms of organizational capacities, knowledge production and dissemination on a wide range of policy issues" (Plehwe & Walpen, 2006, p. 41). Left think tanks are often absorbed by the neoliberal network.

For instance, Clark (2007) examined the relationships between think tanks regarded as left-leaning and the neoliberal interest network in the United Kingdom. He described a network of neoliberal influence comprising British New Labour and the Demos think tank—an organization traditionally regarded as being close to the Labour Party. According to Clark, the policy entrepreneurs around Demos were "thoroughly entwined with the right-wing networks which promoted Thatcherism and with their U.S. equivalents" (p. 239). Among the consequences of the co-option of this former left think tank by the neoliberal coalition was that Demos contributed to the attempt made in the United Kingdom to turn the Labour Party into a party of big business.

The influential scope of the neoliberal interest coalition has typically been described for the building of the European project and the many negotiations that followed with international trade organizations. Hoedeman (2007), for instance, reviewed how the neoliberal think tank network tried to mold Europe to the neoliberal agenda, inspired by the U.S. model.

Scholars have also analyzed the role of neoliberal think tank networks with regard to privatization (Stone, 1996), deregulation (Plehwe, 2000), the consensus on austerity (Blyth, 2013), the transnational

discourse coalition of think tanks supporting the neoliberal agenda in countries like Argentina (Plehwe, 2011), and the austerity agenda in countries like Spain (Parrilla, Almiron, & Xifra, 2016).

This latter case analyzed the degree to which Spanish economic and financial think tanks have been intertwined with advocates of the Washington Consensus during the economic and financial crisis in Spain, a crisis characterized by a clear commitment to austerity by Spanish governments, regardless of who was in office. According to the analysis of inputs and constituencies conducted, the leading Spanish economic and financial think tanks were to a large extent—with very few and less influential exceptions—aligned with advocates of the Washington Consensus that promoted the rescue of the banking system and the implementation of austerity policies for the working classes in Spain.

In short, and as defined by Plehwe (2011) and Medvetz (2012), even in the case of the neoliberal discourse in economics, we find a group of relevant societal circumstances that play a role beyond that of economic sponsors. The economic elites are joined by academia (a professor, Hayek, leading the creation of the advocacy think tank-type) and the political sphere (including the left), which contributed by building an unhealthy relationship with economic interests based on the granting of reciprocated privileges to the detriment of the working and middle classes and producing regulatory capture. The media again has been a principal collaborator.

The discourse consistency of the neoliberal interest coalition has been proved to receive considerable support from the mainstream media in the form of dissemination. In his research on the United Kingdom and the United States, Davis concluded that specialized or general media had a “significant, supportive function in the development of financialization via its influence within elite discourse networks” that

helped persuade financial and associated stakeholder elites, as to the validity of financial market discourses, narratives, and investment myths. These have become reified through financial media and other communication fora, producing unassailable ideologies of free and financial market logic. These have enabled such markets to grow, become dangerously autonomous and corrupt, to impose crude market thinking on a range of social policy processes, and to suck in public funds and private savings into unstable market bubbles. (Davis, 2012, p. 254)

### ***Food and Health: The Speciesist Discourse***

Unquestionably, the role of think tanks in promoting the speciesist discourse in Western societies is the most underresearched field of the three topics addressed here. Yet there are areas, mostly food and health, where relevant findings are available on the link between think tanks and the narrative of speciesism—that is, a discourse that supports a belief in the superiority of the human species to justify the economic exploitation of other sentient beings on the planet, regardless of the collateral consequences this may have not only on the lives of the exploited animals but also on the distribution of resources and wealth among humans, on the environment, and on free-living animals. The speciesist discourse, although

morally problematic for the mentioned reasons, is actually very beneficial for the elites whose business is based on the exploitation of nonhuman animals.

In 2007, Nestle reported on the massive lobby efforts of agri-food elites to shape policy making and the social environment in relation to nutrition and health. Although not addressing the speciesist discourse directly, this report provides many clues to understanding the radical increase in meat and milk consumption in Western countries—what Nibert called the “meat-habit” (Nibert, 2013). Nibert, who has emphasized the speciesist discourse, described the U.S. 1920s campaign to introduce bacon and eggs at breakfast and hamburgers on a daily basis, while Nestle reported on the U.S. meat and milk industry’s ferocious 1980s opposition to the Food Pyramid, a food guide threatening to slightly redefine social perceptions regarding meat and dairy consumption. Both cases saw the introduction of major advocacy strategies, mainly scientific claims at the core of the knowledge–interest nexus, the use of professional lobbying, and the elites’ revolving doors. In particular, direct lobbying evolved to include a wide variety of forms, among which we find the use of think tanks’ policy and research institutes.

The latter has been particularly studied in the case of the agri-food industry in Europe (Almiron, 2016). The close examination of the agri-food industry’s knowledge–interest nexus (i.e., its investment in advocacy, communication, and knowledge dissemination) provides a picture of increased networking through transnational actor constellations and coalitions influencing policy making, the media, and public opinion. Within this scenario, the leading agri-food companies and their interest groups maintain relationships with a large and diverse array of think tanks, which work as scientific agoras promoted and supported by the industry (e.g., the International Life Sciences Institute in the United States or the European Food Information Council in the European Union), regardless of the huge conflicts of interest involved. These agoras routinely sponsor programs and educational activities related to nutrition around the planet—either directly, through other think tanks or lobbies, or even through governments—encouraging an increased intake in animal-based food. Deconstructing the discourse promoted by the agri-food interest constellation can reveal the extent to which these elites are delaying our progress toward a nonspeciesist society and, thus, a less violent and unequal one not only for other animals but also for humans.

In this respect, several scholars have claimed that the fact that some people consume animal products causes hunger for other human beings (Lewis, 1994; Popkin & Du, 2003; Rifkin, 1993; Singer, 2009; Weis, 2013). Singer (2009), for example, has claimed that the fact that a lot of food that could be eaten by humans is fed to farmed animals is the primary cause of “the food crisis” (p. 122), and Weis has similarly claimed that “the meatification of diets” is “a vector of global inequality, environmental degradation, and climate injustice” (pp. 81–82). The reason for this is that (1) by consuming more human edible protein than they produce, livestock detract more from the total food supply than they provide, and that (2) raising animals for food is extremely wasteful of land, grain, water, and energy (FAO, 2006). Because the land that is used to farm animals includes both grazing and arable land, it has been estimated that the farmed animals’ sector occupies about 70% to 75% of all agricultural land (FAO, 2006). This produces monoculture and deforestation, which often jeopardizes food sovereignty in many developing regions, as is the case with the soybean industry in Argentina (Frayssinet, 2015).

As for the health industry, although some researchers have studied the role of think tanks in shaping health policies following market principles and in emphasizing the democratic deficit that increases inequality (Deckers, 2016; Shaw, Russell, Parsons, & Greenhalgh, 2014), research on the role of interest groups highlighting human supremacy has mostly focused on the animal testing industry. A relevant example of this is the work of Dan Lyons (2011, 2014) on animal research policy in the United Kingdom. Applying a dynamic policy network analysis in which he studied the context of the British evolution of animal research policy, Lyons (2011) concluded that an elitist, policy community-type network is in place: "Animal research interests have repeatedly withstood pressure for change from animal protection groups due to their greater resources, structural advantages, and a culture of secrecy that facilitates an implementation gap in animal research regulation" (p. 1). Lyons did not specifically address the role of think tanks, but in his pursuit to understand policy outcomes for animal testing, he disentangled the policy network model that is in place and in which think tanks play an important role. This model focuses on the interactions between interest groups and the state and argues that relatively closed policy communities tend to produce policy outcomes that favor network members at the expense of excluded groups.

The speciesist discourse promoted by interest groups regarding animal testing has specifically been researched for Europe. Almiron and Khazaal (2016) have discussed how the political economy of the vivisection industry supports the speciesist business of animal testing by mimicking the language of animal welfare to increasingly obstruct the public's compassion. Further research is needed in this area, but this work revealed the two-pronged strategy pursued by the vivisection industrial complex (defined as businesses that directly or indirectly conduct or support experiments with animals): on the one hand, stepping up lobbying efforts to protect its interests by blocking animal welfare regulation and vilifying animal rights advocates, and on the other hand, adopting an animal welfare narrative to demonstrate that it cares for animals and heeds ethical concerns. Both strategies are pursued with the help of industry-funded think tanks (e.g., [Understandinganimalresearch.org.uk](http://Understandinganimalresearch.org.uk)), as the research on Europe showed.

Research on the role played by think tanks on manufacturing consent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) for the health policies pushed by the industry also involves issues of access to and availability of drugs for poor communities and for diseases of poverty. Studies have shown that academic research is disproportionately focused on diseases that primarily afflict wealthy countries (Evans, Shim, & Ioannidis, 2014). The role of interest groups on this is underresearched, as is media framing of it.

The speciesist discourse coalitions are thus not one but several, and although they may not always interact, they act jointly toward common aims. In all cases, they exhibit singular traits that are not tantamount to the austerity and climate denial discourses, given that they prompted a more—perhaps the most—pervasive narrative in human history (Harari, 2014; Nibert, 2013). However, the role of interest groups in the perpetuation of this narrative is similarly prominent, at least in the reviewed areas of food and health, and equally reflects a constellation of interest involved in a discourse coalition. The economic elites involved in this coalition are the ones exploiting nonhuman animals, whereas the political elites replicate the unhealthy relationship with economic interests as mentioned in the case of the austerity discourse. The role of academia in the perpetuation of the speciesist discourse is underresearched (an exception is Cole, 2008); however, it is important to remember that academics are involved in a large

segment of the animal testing industry, given that research involving animal testing is among the largest sources of funding for universities. The role of the media in the perpetuation of the speciesist message is starting to be researched (Almiron, Cole, & Freeman, 2016; Molloy, 2011; Stewart & Cole, 2009; Stibbe, 2012), including the political economy of it (the food and the pharmaceutical industries are among the largest advertising spenders for media), yet this role of the media still needs to be more connected to interest groups.

### **A Blind Spot in Media and Communication Studies**

In this article, I have reviewed three main areas where think tanks are promoting inequality by helping to manufacture consent in the media and public opinion that mostly favors the elites. However, further research is needed from a critical stance on think tanks as communication actors at least in the three topics reviewed.

First, in spite of the strong evidence of the role of U.S. think tanks in disseminating skeptical or contrarian messages regarding global warming and the anthropogenic causes since the 1990s, and in spite of the clear strong bias of U.S. media against anthropogenic causes of climate change during the same period (and still at present), critical research that directly connects both think tanks and media organizations is still generally missing in all regions—including Europe, where research on EU-based think tank networks and discourses on climate change is very scarce.

Second, regarding the austerity discourse, we know that policy makers and financial elites cooperate internationally, sharing a broad consensus in their choices and demonstrating that their agenda and storylines are consistent worldwide. This discursive consistency has already been proved to receive much support in the form of dissemination by the mainstream media, but further research is needed to understand how this discourse coalition works and how it influences the media everywhere.

Third, the speciesist discourse is the most important blind spot in critical media and communication studies of the three topics analyzed here. It includes an ethical challenge because of the cruelty of our treatment of other animals, which we have called here interspecies injustice. I argue that even scholars who do not accept this moral challenge should still be engaged with it because of its impact on human societies given its links with poverty, environmental justice, health justice, and food production (through hunger, pollution, diseases, and loss of food sovereignty). The role of interest groups in the spreading of an anthropocentric-speciesist discourse that triggers interspecies, social, and economic inequality is clearly underresearched, as is the media framing of it.

This literature review has gathered for the first time three different topics usually addressed in isolation. The primary significant conclusion we can draw from it is that conservative and business-oriented think tanks have a greater ability to build network coalitions and promote successful global discourse creation processes than progressive or non-profit-oriented knowledge organizations. At least this seems true for the discourses reviewed here.

This literature review also shows that critical communication research is, with few exceptions, virtually absent despite the necessity of a communication approach in analyses of think tanks, which are in themselves communication actors and exert influence on other communication actors, such as the media. The communication research gap is found at all levels: political economy, representation and discourse, and audiences and consumption.

As this article has tried to illustrate, think tanks deserve to be seriously considered by critical media and communication scholars not only because of the inequalities they may promote but also because they have become leading political communication actors with a worthy-of-study impact on policies, public opinion, and media.

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