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DISSEMINATING AND ADAPTING SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE
American think tanks' blogs

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Abstract – The present study aims to characterize the ways in which specialized knowledge is disseminated and adapted in the discourse of American think tanks whose specificity lies in their objective to influence public policy. It offers a comparative rhetorical analysis of an exploratory corpus composed of blog posts and their corresponding expert reports published by six think tanks between 2014 and 2017. The following hypothesis is explored: blog posts are characterized by distinctive rhetorical strategies in the discursive space of think tanks and may thus be seen as a means for these organizations to carry out their programmatic aim. Results show that the format of the genre, as evidenced by the use of journalistic techniques such as titles and hooks, is particularly tailored to meet the needs and draw the attention of a wide audience on experts' work. An analysis of argumentative choices and hedging in the corpus further suggests that blogs may also represent a way for think tank experts to position themselves in the political arena. These overlapping communicative purposes more generally testify to the specialized nature of a new genre in think tanks' outreach strategy.

Keywords: blogs; think tanks; United States; programmatic aim; rhetorical strategies; genre analysis.

1. Introduction

Think tanks are one of the many actors involved in the decision-making process in modern-day US society, as their specificity lies in their desire to influence public policy by disseminating concrete advice based on rigorous research. The way they advertise and adapt their message to key actors, ranging from other experts, policymakers, journalists to ordinary citizens, is therefore a central component of their strategy.

This paper seeks to understand the ways in which specialized knowledge is disseminated and adapted in the discourse of American think tanks depending on the audience they are trying to convince. Although think tanks may use different modes of communication—from reports to social media – to advertise their research, the focus is on their blogs. Indeed, they constitute a widely accessible format and often draw on more extensive expert publications such as reports and policy briefs. It is argued that they are also a means for think tanks to carry out their programmatic aim in US society, since they are characterized by distinctive rhetorical strategies.

For think tanks, using blog posts to disseminate their expertise is still a fairly recent phenomenon. This implies that only a limited exploratory study could be conducted. The present study offers a comparative analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in two corpora composed of blog posts, on the one hand, and their corresponding expert reports, on the other hand. The objective is to shed light on a specialized community's multimodal discursive strategies by studying the way it adapts its rhetoric depending on its target audience. Considering that both blog posts and reports are designed according to their audience's needs, time availability and degree of expertise, they may be seen as serving different communicative functions in the discursive space of think tanks.

The paper has been structured as follows: section 2 offers a brief overview of think tanks' use of blogs to disseminate their research and the extent to which the latter medium conforms to the traditional features of blogs as identified by researchers. Section 3 introduces the two corpora as well as the methodology used to investigate the rhetorical strategies adopted by experts to fulfill their programmatic aim. Section 4 presents some preliminary results yielded by the study. Titles, hooks, rhetorical structure and hedging in both corpora are successively analyzed to highlight the different communicative functions of both genres, as expert voices meet, compete and adapt to the different readers they seek to influence. Section 5 offers concluding remarks.

2. An overview of think tanks' blogs

In a 2011 report to the *LSP Journal*, Rowley-Jolivet and Campagna (2011) present the Web 2.0 as a new medium to which specialized communities have had to adjust their discourse. This is particularly the case of blogs. Since they have multiplied over the last decades, new interpretative frameworks have had to be developed for their investigation. This section suggests that think tanks' blogs may constitute a genre on its own as they fulfill the milieu's specific objective.

2.1. Blogs and the notion of genre

The recent multiplication of blogs has led researchers to provide several typologies based on content (Herring *et al*. 2005), linguistic features (Grieve *et al*. 2011) or the rhetorical action they accomplish (Miller, Sheperd 2009). Miller and Sheperd (2009) thus distinguish the personal blog from the 'public affairs blog' depending on their social contexts and the corresponding rhetorical objectives of individual authors. Mauranen (2013) identifies two types of blogs, the 'personal' and the 'thematic'. The task of defining blogs as one genre is all the more difficult as they do not arise out of one discursive community whose members would be clearly identified. Their genre status has thus been questioned:

> Beyond the basic definition of blogging as the reverse-chronological posting of individually authored entries that include the capacity to provide hypertext links and often allow comment-based responses from readers, then, the term 'blog' now has little meaning unless a descriptive qualifier can be attached. (Bruns, Jacobs 2007, pp. 2-3)

It may therefore be more relevant "to talk about several blog genres rather than one" (Mauranen 2013), since they each emerge in specific communicative contexts to further individual or institutional objectives. In this respect, blogs appear to constitute more a medium with a set of technical possibilities rather than a full-fledged generic category defined by the recurrent social situation in which it occurs and by identified communicative purposes. Miller and Sheperd (2009, p. 273) identify the 'public-affairs blog' as a genre on its own because it arose in a post-09/11 era of distrust for mainstream media and participatory journalism. The technical capabilities of the medium met with a recurrent social need to provide alternative information, hence the emergence of a new blog genre.

Contrary to more traditional blogs created by one individual author for a community of anonymous readers and contributors, American think tanks' blogs are institutional products to which various experts in the organization contribute. Given their need to disseminate their expertise as widely as possible, think tanks first started to use blogs in the 2000s. The Heritage Foundation, often considered at the forefront of marketing techniques, created its own policy weblog in 2004. Older organizations soon followed.[1]

Though think tanks first used blogs mostly to circulate the op-eds and newspaper articles that their experts tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to publish in US magazines, they have now expanded their uses of blogs, and today fully exploit the capabilities of the medium to disseminate their opinions. Blogs indeed "allow contributions such as reflective and controversial analysis which would rarely find their way on opinion pages" (Bahnisch 2007, p. 144), since newspapers often impose too many constraints

[1] One of the oldest think tanks in Washington DC, the Brookings Institution, has today more than seven different blogs, each of them dedicated to a specific theme dealt with by its experts.

on their contributors. They also allow for "making a sustained argument over time in a way that mainstream media rarely do" (Bahnisch 2007, p. 145) and thus enable think tanks to reach a wider audience, including ordinary citizens, who may never read their work otherwise. Because of their short and interactive format, they also respond to the evolving habits and needs of readers, all the more so as their target audiences, especially decision-makers, often lack time to sift through an ever-increasing quantity of information. As such, they fit into think tanks' need for a segmented outreach strategy to convince different types of audiences (Selee 2013, p. 51).

Following Miller and Sheperd's arguments (2009, p. 282-283), think tanks' blogs thus epitomize the convergence between the milieu's aim to influence and the technical affordances of a new medium, namely its user-friendliness and accessibility. To that extent, think tanks' blogs may be envisaged as a genre on its own, emanating from the evolving communicative objectives of the producer community. The goal of this paper is to determine how the textual and digital features of the genre may serve the milieu's objectives.

2.2. Characteristics of think tanks' blogs

Although they respond to the specific needs of a specialized community, think tanks' blogs are characterized by a set of features which for the most part conform to the characteristics identified by Bruns and Jacobs (2007, pp. 2-3) for the medium (see section 2.1.). Indeed, most of them are thematic; posts are organized in a reverse chronological order and classified according to the themes dealt with by experts. In the same way as the personalization of discourse has been identified as a feature of internet genres (Rowley-Jolivet, Campagna 2011, p. 48), think tanks' blog posts are characterized by the use of the auctorial "I" and the names, contact details and portraits of the authors in the form of hypertext links. Surprisingly, the collaborative dimension (Bruns, Jacobs 2007, pp. 2-3; Rowley-Jolivet, Campagna 2011, p. 46) is not specific to the genre, for only one of the six think tanks' blogs analyzed for this paper has a comment section.

What does seem specific to the genre however is the use of posts alongside longer publications. In addition to their initial commenting function similar to that of a newspaper opinion piece and which is actually quite common in blogs (Bondi, Seidenari 2015, p. 18), posts have increasingly been used by think tank experts to broadcast the results of their research. In a short period of time, ranging from a few days to a few months, an individual author may publish a report intended for expert readers and policymakers' staffs and a blog post designed for a wider audience on the exact same topic with similar conclusions. Repackaging the research in different modes of communication is indeed part of the institutional strategy:

> The same research can well be the basis for outreach to members of Congress, business leaders, journalists and the public at large, but the way it is packaged is likely to change to suit the particular needs of each group and how they consume information. (Selee 2013, p. 51)

Authors can thus convey their message more efficiently and to a variety of readers, by providing concurrent media of different lengths or reading modes. Although the identity of blog readers is not clear, two types of readers have nonetheless been identified thanks to interviews[2] conducted with a number of think tank members. The first and most important group of readers consists of key members of the policy community in which they work; policymakers, journalists and other experts or opinion leaders are therefore the primary target. A second, larger and fuzzier category of readers is composed of well-educated and probably politically-aware citizens.

Because they address two different types of readers with varying degrees of expertise, blog posts are not so much considered by think tank members as a way to popularize their expertise, especially as they do not fulfill an informative or didactic purpose (Gotti 2003, p. 293). As evidenced by the absence of comment sections, the objective is not to interact with or answer the questions of readers. Indeed, there are very few instances of reformulation, explanation or de-terminologization processes typically associated with popularization (Mortureux 1985; Beacco, Moirand 1995; Gotti 2014) in blog posts.

Though they may consequently be seen as a mere summary of a more extensive piece of research in a more accessible format, blog posts are used by think tanks in a very specific way, with a view to serving their programmatic aim; in this respect, blog posts can be said to fulfill a distinctive communicative strategy. The following hypothesis is therefore explored: being designed according to the needs, time availability and degree of expertise of a heterogeneous community of readers, think tanks' blog posts are characterized by specific argumentative strategies. These rhetorical features may be considered as clues to the specific communicative function of blogs in the discursive space of think tanks.

The corpus and methodology adopted for the study are presented in the next section.

[2] I have conducted these ethnographic interviews in the context of my doctoral research on American think tanks' discourse between January 2016 and July 2017. More than 15 think tank members from various organizations and disciplinary backgrounds accepted to answer questions on the conditions of production of their discourse.

3. Corpus and methodology

3.1. Corpus

A small corpus was assembled to determine how think tank experts adapt their discourse to their target audiences. It is composed of six pairs of reports and blog posts written by six different authors in six American think tanks between 2014 and 2017. Though the corpus may seem small,[3] it was meant to serve the purpose of an exploratory analysis aiming to shed light on some of the multimodal discursive strategies used by think tanks: it also allows to account for the contexts in which each text was produced. The comparative analysis of both genres was expected to provide clues to and highlight blogs' distinctive communicative purpose.

The six pairs were selected to account for the variety of cases in which blog posts may be associated with longer reports. Different types of reports and orders of publication[4] for each pair were chosen – blog posts are published before, after or at the same time as reports. Various topics and types of think tanks were also selected, as shown in Table 1.

[3] The two corpora consist of 5, 255 and 45, 593 words respectively.

[4] Although the chronology may have seemed important at the beginning of the analysis, interviews with think tank members showed that most reports had often already been written when blog posts were published; the reason for some apparent delays lie in discrepancies in editing processes for the different types of text.

Blog	Type of report	Publication order	Topic	Think Tank	Type of think tank
Up Front	Policy Brief	Simultaneous (August 2014)[5]	Poverty Global Development	Brookings Institution	Academic[6] think tank Unidentified ideology Washington DC
Cato @ Liberty	Policy Analysis	Blog– Report (June – July 2017)	Flood Insurance	Cato Institute	Academic think tank Libertarian ideology Washington DC
Next New Deal: The Blog of the Roosevelt Institute	Report	Simultaneous (August 2017)	Environment Social Inequality	Roosevelt Institute	Advocacy tank Progressive ideology New York
The RAND blog	Report	Report – Blog (July – August 2017)	Education	RAND Corporation	Contract-research organization Unidentified ideology Santa Monica, California
The Mackinac Center's Blog	Report	Report-Blog (Dec 2016 – Feb 2017)	Cigarette taxes	Mackinac Center	Advocacy tank Conservative ideology Midland, Michigan
RFF blog	Report	Simultaneous (June 2017)	Car gas emissions	Resources for the Future	Academic think tank Unidentified ideology Washington DC

Table 1
Blog posts and reports selected for the corpus.

3.2. Methodology

Due to the small size of both sub-corpora and the resulting difficulty of obtaining meaningful quantitative results, a qualitative comparative approach was chosen to assess the various rhetorical strategies used by think tank experts to convince their different target audiences.

Titles and hooks were first examined, as they pertain to the way an author attracts his or her audience's attention and invites them to read on. Although hooks are mostly used by journalists, think tank members are acutely aware of the need for "an engaging hook that responds to the

[5] This first 2014 pair was selected as a first exploratory step based on an interview with its author in April 2016. As more blog posts and reports were selected for the corpus, no significant discrepancies were noted between the 2014 pair and the 2017 pairs, hence its presence in the final corpus.

[6] The different types of organizations identified in the table are based on Weaver's 1989 typology of think tanks depending on their institutional forms and objectives.

audience's need to know something about the issue at hand" (Selee 2013, p. 60) in their publications. Hooks therefore usually appear at the beginning of opinion pieces, reports or policy briefs and are particularly important in the case of blogs since the first lines of the posts come out directly on the blog homepage and are immediately visible to the reader. The ways in which these hooks, as well as titles, are tailored to the readers of reports and blogs were thus carefully compared.

Differences in the rhetorical structure of both genres were also analyzed through a study of rhetorical moves. Each move may be seen as serving a communicative intention and their distinctive combination testifies to the overall communicative purpose of the genre (Bhatia 1993, p. 23). They might thus constitute clues as to the differing communicative purposes of both reports and blogs. A secondary level of analysis was included with a comparison of the types of arguments used by authors in both genres.

Finally, attention was given to the discursive markers of authorial subjectivity through a study of hedging in the corpus. As think tank members aim to influence the political debate, their credibility as experts is particularly important to strengthen the validity of their claims, especially when writing for demanding readers such as other experts or policymakers. As Hyland (1994, p. 241) notes, "in persuasive writing, hedges are important means of both supporting the writer's position and building writer-reader relationships". The way authors present their research, convince readers of its soundness and interact with them both in blog posts and reports is therefore particularly crucial. Though the term "hedge" was first introduced by Lakoff (1972, p. 195) as a primarily semantic concept to designate words or phrases "whose job it is to make things fuzzier", a pragmatic conception of hedging was preferred. According to Fraser (2010, p. 201), hedging is indeed a fundamentally rhetorical strategy used to mitigate the strength or truth-validity of certain claims and, as such, may take many forms, including lexical items, text organisation or even prosody. Therefore, it is impossible to draw clear-cut lists of hedges in that "no linguistic items are inherently hedges but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text" (Clemen 1997, p. 6). For the purpose of this paper, a broader approach to hedging was adopted. Of course, traditional hedges such as modals, impersonal forms or rhetorical questions were examined but features pertaining to the way a text or a paragraph is structured were also included in the analysis.

The digital dimension of blog posts also needs to be accounted for. As opposed to reports which are posted as PDF files on think tanks' websites, blog posts constitute a full-fledged web genre "where the text, due to its media constraints, becomes an interaction medium, used actively to navigate the website" (Askehave, Nielsen 2005, p. 127). Therefore, elements associated with blogs' "navigating mode" such as hypertext links[7] or the digital location of the post on the website were taken into account in the analysis.

As specialized discourse is produced by disciplinary or professional communities and is thus constrained by their specific objectives, values and conventions, it is believed that these various elements can only be explained by taking into account their contexts of production, their authors' objectives and readers' expectations. Therefore, a context-driven approach, based on interviews conducted as part of previous research with various members of the think tank community (see endnote 1), was adopted to further the analysis.

The following section is devoted to the results yielded by the comparative study of rhetorical strategies in both sub-corpora.

4. Results

4.1. Titles and hooks: attracting readers' attention

To shed light on the way think tanks adapt their programmatic discourse to their target audiences, readers' expectations and reading modes first need to be accounted for. Compared to readers of extensive reports who look for concrete solutions to a policy problem, most blog readers may only be interested in reading a short piece of information or analysis. Blog posts are accessible to all whereas reports are distributed to key stakeholders. Though both genres seek to be enticing to readers, these differences make it even more important for the information in blogs to be presented in such a way that it will catch the reader's eye almost immediately, hence the need for relevant titles and hooks.

4.1.1. Titles

According to interviews with members and editors of think tanks, an efficient title either in blogs or policy papers, just as for newspaper articles, is one that will not only summarize the content of the author's message clearly but might also slightly overplay it, thus arousing readers' curiosity and, in the case of blogs, inviting them to click on the post. However, they differ in terms of the specificity of the information they provide, which reflects the differing needs of their target audiences. Table 2 presents the titles in both sub-corpora.

[7] In italics in the examples developed in the next sections.

Think Tank	Report	Blog Post
Brookings Institution	How Poor are America's Poorest? U.S. $2 a Day Poverty in a Global Context	U.S. $2 a Day Poverty in a Global Context: Five Questions Answered
Cato Institute	Reforming the National Flood Insurance Program Toward Private Flood Insurance	Toward Private Flood Insurance
Roosevelt Institute	Boiling Points: The Inextricable Links Between Inequality and Climate Change	Inequality is Toxic: How Economic and Social Disparities Drive Climate Change
RAND Corporation	Observations and Guidance on Implementing Personalized Learning	What Emerging Research Says about the Promise of Personalized Learning
Mackinac Center	Cigarette Taxes and Smuggling: a 2016 Update	Cigarette Taxes and Smuggling: an update through 2015 *Original title: Do cigarette tax hikes make people kick the habit? Not necessarily.*
Resources For the Future	How Much Do Consumers Value Fuel Economy and Performance? Evidence from Technology Adoption	Do Consumers Benefit from Automobile Fuel Economy and Greenhouse Gas Standards?

Table 2
Comparison of titles in reports and blog posts.

Contrary to what might have been expected from shorter pieces, blog posts' titles are not necessarily catchier than those of reports. Nevertheless, while reports' titles provide general information on their content, authors' analyses or opinions in blog posts tend to be directly put to the fore, as may be seen with the play on the word "toxic" in the Roosevelt Institute's blog post, the transition from an open to a yes/no question in Resources For the Future (RFF)'s pair or the preposition "toward" in the Cato Institute's. The subtitle of the Cato report is here promoted as a title in the blog post even though the latter was published beforehand to coincide with the holding of a House Committee on flood insurance. By advocating his or her take on a timely issue from the title, the author can catch the eye of an informed audience who may have heard about the debate – in this case probably policymakers and journalists.

Blog posts' titles may also use words echoing current and possibly controversial issues. This is the case of the RFF post on the potential benefits of fuel economy and greenhouse gas standards for cars; actually, its release coincided with the US withdrawal from the Paris agreement on climate change. The key words "automobile" and "greenhouse gas" link the blog post to the current context and make it all the more clickable. Although the report was released at the same time, its title does not align with current public concerns but with academic matters.

Blogs also contribute to maintain a community of regular readers (Mauranen 2013) and titles can be tailored accordingly. This is particularly striking in the case of the Michigander Mackinac Center's post which was initially published in a Washington DC political magazine *The Hill* under a catchier and more news-worthy title to promote the results of an annual study on cigarette taxes. When reproduced on the Mackinac Center's local blog, the new title "An update through 2015" might have been deemed more appropriate to draw the attention of regular readers who might have read the previous reports.

4.1.2. Hooks

Just as titles in blog posts seem designed to attract their intended audience's attention by using key words or putting forward authors' opinions, hooks are tailored to respond to public concerns. Indeed, although most think tanks' publications start with this journalistic technique, "each may have slightly different hooks depending on the intended audience" (Selee 2013, p.60). Those are presented in Table 3.

Think Tank	Report	Blog Post
Brookings Institution	Shocking findings of economists Schaeffer and Edin's recent study	*Editor's note*: recent studies by Piketty and others
Cato Institute	A problematic program on flood insurance set to expire at the end of September	A bill on flood insurance examined the following day by a House Committee
Roosevelt Institute	The discrepancy between the absence of conversation on climate change as opposed to the one on inequality	The People's Climate March in April
RAND Corporation	Little research done on a recent phenomenon (personalized learning)	The discrepancy between the author's 2015 research and his newer research on personalized learning
Mackinac Center	Unforeseen consequences in policy making	*Editor's note*: A piece published in a DC newspaper The discrepancy between common belief on how taxes may change behavior and results of recent research
Resources For the Future	The objectives of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a background for the study	The approaching deadline for EPA to finalize fuel economy and greenhouse gas emissions standards

Table 3
Comparison of hooks in reports and blog posts.

In reports, hooks tend to rest on the identification of a problem that has been on the target audience's mind. Usually, this audience consists of other experts or stakeholders looking for an applicable solution to a policy issue. Hooks in reports may therefore point out gaps (RAND Corporation, Roosevelt Institute) or surprising findings (Brookings Institution) in applied policy research, or else remind readers of an upcoming or on-going policy discussion (Resources For the Future; Cato Institute). They thus refer to shared knowledge: most experts in global development have for instance heard about the Edin and Schaeffer study (Brookings Institution) or are aware of a policy issue in their field of expertise.

While blog posts' structure rests on the same rhetorical strategy (i.e. the identification of a policy problem) as will be shown in the next sub-section, their hooks are linked to a wider audience's concerns. Those may be news hooks such as upcoming deadlines (Cato Institute; Resources For the Future), recent events (Roosevelt Institute) or people most readers of the blog have heard about (Brookings Institution). The role of editor's notes should also be considered as they are part of the think tank's strategy to draw attention to their experts' work. Well-known economist Thomas Piketty is mentioned right at the beginning of the Brookings post even though he is actually quoted only once in the conclusion of the corresponding report. An editor's note is also added to the Mackinac blog post to remind its readers that the piece has been published in a Washington DC magazine, thereby valorizing the organization's reputation at the national level and indirectly attracting local readers.

By tailoring the titles and first lines of their blog posts to a wide audience's concerns, think tank experts hope to attract readers' attention and invite them to read their proposals. While reports seem to be rooted in long-term discussions involving mostly experts and stakeholders, titles and hooks contribute to set blogs in current, day-to-day policy debates likely to resonate in many informed readers' minds. Blogs thus fulfill their primary objective, that of disseminating the contents of the think tank's work. A secondary and more distinctive communicative intention for the genre may be identified through a comparison of argumentative strategies in both reports and blogs.

4.2. Rhetorical moves: highlighting results and analysis

While each rhetorical move may serve a communicative intention in a given text, it is their unique combination which allows for the identification of the text's communicative purpose and consequently its affiliation to a specific genre. The report genre is to that extent easily identified, since it is characterized by a set of recurrent rhetorical moves designed to meet the expectations of demanding readers looking for concrete solutions to a policy issue. On the contrary, apart from the aforementioned hooks, blog posts have no fixed structure and generally follow reports' lines of argumentation. Contrasting their argumentative content with that of their corresponding reports might nonetheless shed light on their distinctive communicative purpose.

Argumentation in reports usually rests on the identification of a policy issue where a discrepancy between what is and what should be is pointed out. Not only can the author thus justify the relevance of his or her research and therefore of the present report, but he or she can also propose a series of concrete recommendations for policymakers to consider. In the case of the Brookings Institution report, the aim of the author is to show how current methods to measure poverty at a global level, as those used by organizations such as the World Bank, are not relevant because they cannot be applied meaningfully across diverse settings including the United States. Having identified the limits of such measures, the report then exhibits the following moves: a detailed analysis of current methods to measure poverty first in the US, then in the world, is offered, followed by a presentation of potential alternative methods, and recommendations for international organizations to consider. Regarding the blog post, its argumentative structure rests on the same policy issue but is organized following five rhetorical questions a wide audience may have on poverty in the US and the world. Nevertheless, each answer corresponds to summaries or to the final analysis of each part of the report. The research background for the study, the methodology that may have been used and the recommendations which are discussed extensively in the report are almost absent in the blog post as shown in Figure 1.

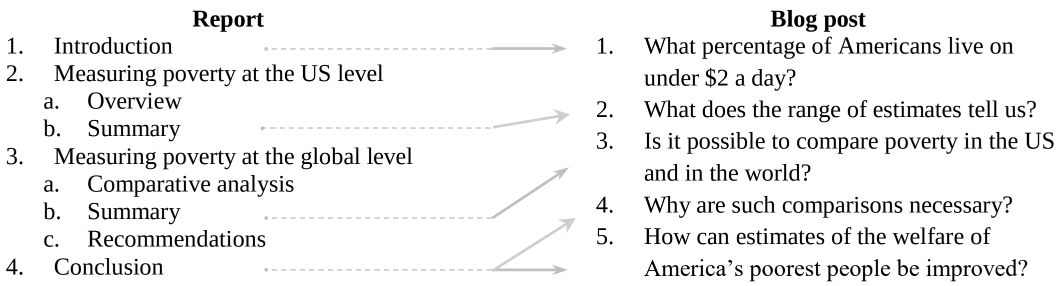

Figure 1
Comparison between rhetorical moves[8] in the Brookings Institution's report and blog post.

The same phenomenon may be observed for the Mackinac Center's report and blog post on the unintended consequences of cigarette taxes on smuggling in the United States. Whereas the background for the study, its method, results, and policy recommendations are successively introduced in the report, only a few elements of methodology and results remain in the post. In the same way, all anecdotes on the negative impacts of cigarette taxes on smuggling used in the report to provide talking points for policymakers are surprisingly absent in the post.

[8] The moves identified for the Brookings blog post correspond to the subtitles used by the author. The subtitles used in the report do not correspond exactly to its rhetorical moves and therefore have been adapted in Figure 1.

Of course, such transition from reports to blogs may simply be due to the format of posts which only allow for about 800 words. However, the emphasis on personal analysis and results may also be interpreted as a way for authors, not only to summarize the content of their research but also to strongly voice their claims, justify their relevance and draw the attention of busy readers who often have to sift through hundreds of similar posts and articles every day. The way these claims are brought about provides further clues to blogs' specific communicative intent in the discursive space of think tanks.

Interestingly, arguments in blog posts seem to have been specifically selected for their rhetorical strength in the eyes of a wide audience. Although the Roosevelt Institute report studies the links between climate change and inequality, its corresponding post focuses on its most striking finding, that is that inequality is a cause of climate change. Besides, only examples drawn from studies on the United States or by famous economists such as James Boyce remain in the post. These are indeed the most telling for a community of mostly American well-informed left-leaning readers.

Readers' political beliefs may actually be a key criterion in the way advocacy think tank experts, such as the Roosevelt Institute's or the Cato Institute's, adapt their message in blog posts. This can be seen in the following example comparing the libertarian Cato Institute's report with the blog post:

(1)	**Report**	**Blog post**
	The Biggert-Waters backlash demonstrates the applicability of core public choice insights about public policy in modern democratic states to the NFIP. Public choice would say that policy often concentrates benefits on a small, vocal interest group while spreading corresponding costs across society as a whole. The combination of concentrated benefits and diffused costs makes rolling back policy much more difficult than enacting it […]. (Cato Institute, 2017)	For instance, in 2012 Congress passed the *Biggert-Waters Flood Insurance Reform Act*, which required the NFIP to end subsidies and to begin including a catastrophe loading surcharge. However, due to interest group pressure, Congress *reversed itself* just two years later, halting some reforms and getting rid of others outright. The quick backtrack was a classic example of government failing to act in the public interest due to *concentrated benefits and diffused costs*. (Cato Institute, 2017)

In the report, as suggested by the modal "would", public choice theory is presented as one among several potential interpretations of Congress's step back on the bill – even though it is the author's favourite interpretation. In the blog post, on the other hand, the argument is framed as another example of the failure of government intervention – a recurring theme in libertarian ideology and a view which is probably shared by readers of the Cato Institute blog. While reports seek to convince demanding readers and therefore need to be built on objective evidence, blog posts may be aimed at regular readers of the think tank's work who often share their political opinion. Presented with arguments they are familiar with or feel strongly about, blog readers are more likely to react and want to know more.

Paradoxically, the removal of details such as recommendations in blog posts may prompt certain readers of the blog such as decision-makers or opinion leaders to want to know more and read the full report. Hypertext links to the report on which the post is based or to the profile of the author, his or her other publications and contact information enable interested decision-makers to read the report or, more probably, ask for a private briefing on the issue at hand.

As their arguments are aligned with the needs and concerns of a wide audience, blog posts seem to be characterized by different rhetorical strategies from those of reports. The emphasis on personal analysis and results with a view to catching the attention of a variety of readers may indeed testify to blogs' specific rhetorical function for think tanks – that of a stage from which think tank experts may position themselves in a crowded marketplace of ideas.

4.3. Hedging: finding a voice in a crowded political arena

With an estimated number of 1, 835 think tanks in the United States seeking to influence public policy, about a quarter of which are located in Washington DC (Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program 2018), think tank experts have to compete with a multitude of different voices. New media have actually contributed to the phenomenon:

> The advent of social media including blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, has vastly increased the opportunities for outreach, but these new technologies have also created a more crowded marketplace for ideas that organizations have to contend with. (Selee 2013, p. 13)

The way experts put forward and frame their claims, but also position themselves and hedge their arguments – especially in blog posts where such marketplace is bigger and more heterogeneous – is therefore crucial. Although the corpus is too small to draw any definitive conclusion about hedging in both genres on a quantitative level, it is believed that a qualitative comparison of the way think tank experts hedge their claims may provide further clues as to their stakes.

While in reports readers look for rigorous analysis based on evidence to decide on a course of action, blog readers have no need for action and may lack expertise. Authors' scientific credibility is therefore less at stake in blogs than in reports. As a consequence, think tank experts seem to use fewer traditional hedges in blogs when it comes to presenting their personal analysis as the following examples illustrate:

	Report	Blog post
(2)	Yet the results of this study suggest that personalized learning has positive effects. (RAND Corporation, 2017)	Personalized learning continues to look promising because positive effects were evident in the 2017 study despite these hurdles. (RAND Corporation, 2017)

	Report	Blog post
(3)	From the heat islands of U.S. cities to rural farming communities, the poorest groups in America, many of them communities of color**,** will likely experience the worst effects of climate change but have the least ability to cope with and adapt to it. (Roosevelt Institute, 2017)	In inner cities, Native reservations, and rural farming communities, the poorest groups in America, many of color**,** are experiencing the worst effects of climate change but have the least ability to cope with and adapt to it. (Roosevelt Institute, 2017)

Not only do think tank experts tend to be more assertive but they are also more likely to simplify their arguments:

	Report	Blog post
(4)	Wealthier households benefit disproportionately from the reduced average cost of flood insurance brought about by government intervention. Of course, not all NFIP-insured properties are high value, but insured homes are on average more valuable than noninsured homes. (Cato Institute, 2017)	Because the average home in the NFIP is much more valuable than an average American home, the program is regressive on the whole. (Cato Institute, 2017)

Although authors use fewer traditional hedges in blogs posts when making their claims, a pragmatic approach to hedging actually shows that this does not mean that they do not protect their own faces as rigorous experts. As evidenced in examples (1) and (5), hypertext links in italics, when referring to external research studies or government websites, may fulfill a hedging function. When interviewed on her use of links in blog posts, one member of the Cato Institute noted:

> [T]he reason I do that is obviously because it provides additional evidence to people who are questioning or may not take what I'm saying at face value. If they want to investigate a claim that I'm making in the article, then there is an ability to do that. (Interview TT-11, Cato Institute, 30th June 2017)

In her view, hypertext links support her credibility as an expert in her own field, which by extension allows her to take a stance in the marketplace of ideas.

Considering that the political arena is wider and more heterogeneous in the case of blogs, authors may actually be driven to hedge against misguided interpretation and boost their claims. For example, RFF research shows that consumers do not benefit from tighter standards on fuel economy since the benefits of fuel economy are wasted in the loss of vehicle performance. In their blog post, the authors insist however on the fact that such results should not be misinterpreted by climate change skeptics as tighter standards may still have an impact on the environment. Such caveat is not put forward as much in the report and is in fact part of a larger section dedicated to the limitations of the study:

(5)	**Report**	**Blog post**
	This conclusion is subject to the caveats we discuss in Section 5.2, and we note that standards may increase social welfare after accounting for the energy security and climate benefits. (Resources For the Future, 2017)	We emphasize that these results do not mean that the tighter standards have harmed the public. […] Given the possibility that the energy security benefits of lower oil consumption *may be lower now than they used to be*, our results suggest that the chief benefits of tighter standards may be to reduce US greenhouse gas emissions and help lay a foundation for international efforts to reduce the costs of climate change. (Resources For the Future, 2017)

What may explain such rhetorical precautions in the post is the fact that it was published at a time when President Trump was considering withdrawing from the Paris agreement on climate change. While other experts possess the necessary background to understand what the results of a study in their field may or may not suggest, blog readers are not necessarily as informed on the subject and have to make up their own minds on an extremely controversial issue based on the limited information they have.

Think tank experts contend with more numerous and consequently more divergent voices in blog posts. They face the risk of being criticized on scientific but also – and mostly – on political grounds, hence the need to explain what the study is exactly about or, more generally to put forward their personal analysis from the title and boost their claims. In example (2), a RAND expert discusses his research on personalized learning, the results of which were actually not as conclusive as expected. This may explain why he felt the need to insist on its relevance in the post through boosters such as "evident" which allows him to mark his certainty in what is being said or a more explicit title (see Table 1). This may have been all the more necessary as it was also published on a Brookings Institution's blog dedicated to education and therefore directly targeted towards the education community.

Since they are published within a short time-frame determined by news and current events, blogs are particularly suited to experts' needs to position themselves. When questioned about her manager ([TT-4])'s uses of blogs, a research assistant at the Brookings Institution explains:

> Blog posts are also opportunistic as some things will come up that apply to the things we're doing…[TT-4] is positioning herself as an expert in her field and so if something really big happens, she wants to be…or should be the source for quality information on that topic. She'll write a blog post so that's responding to the big things that are happening in this area. (Interview TT-3, Brookings Institution, 26th April 2016)

While reports allow think tank members to position themselves in an expert community where scientific rigor and objectivity are paramount, blogs appear as a means to take a stance in the political arena. Think tank experts may hedge that stance either by putting forward the results of their analyses and/or defending their strength in the face of potential criticism. Political relevance is thus a distinctive stake for blogs.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to shed light on some of American think tanks' multimodal strategies to disseminate their expertise in order to fulfill their programmatic objective. Resulting from a convergence between the technical capabilities of an accessible medium and a specialized community's need for outreach, think tanks' blogs have been identified as one of the milieu's preferred genres to distribute its research to a wide, though heterogeneous, community of readers. Yet, think tanks' blogs do not constitute a mere summary of expert publications but rather fulfill think tanks' goal to influence the decision-making process as their format, timeliness and content are tailored to the needs of their target audience.

The comparative analysis of rhetorical features in both reports and blogs has highlighted a distinctive and "complexly layered set" of communicative purposes for the genre (Askehave, Swales 2001, p. 199).

Journalistic techniques such as titles and hooks designed to address readers' concerns allow authors to draw attention to their work while justifying its relevance in day-to-day political debates. Argumentative choices are framed to resonate with a well-informed and, in some cases, politically-aware audience and therefore reflect the genre's specific programmatic aim. The emphasis on personal analysis, as highlighted through a pragmatic approach to hedging in both corpora, may be seen as a way for authors to take a stance in a crowded political arena where they compete and/or contend with similar actors. Blogs may thus constitute a means for think tank experts to position themselves, either by advocating for new ideas or reacting to potential criticisms. More generally, they represent a window into the organization's work, thereby contributing to the institutional image as having an impact on the policy process.

Although this would require further research with a larger corpus, these overlapping communicative purposes set blogs as a distinctive genre in think tanks' outreach strategy to influence the decision-making process and testify to the specialized nature of the genre. Finally, the importance of a context-driven approach to specialized discourse should be underlined, since it has allowed to shed light on new practices as communities adapt to evolving social contexts.

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