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Public and Private Think Tank Visibility in the Danish Parliament and Media

Jesper Dahl Kelstrup & Mark Blach-Ørsten

Introduction

The development of a less formal relationship between the state and interest groups, also known as de-corporativisation (Arter 2006, 120-122; Blach-Ørsten, Willig & Pedersen 2017), has contributed to the opening up of spaces for think tanks in the Nordic countries. Beginning in the 2000s, the number of privately funded think tanks in the Danish think tank landscape has increased. While the Danish term for think tank, 'tænketank', has become part of the political vocabulary in Denmark, the rise of think tanks and the roles they play in public policy have only recently begun to be addressed in the literature (Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen 2016a; Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen 2016b; Kelstrup 2016b; Kelstrup 2018). The article explores how and why the mentions of private and public think tanks in the parliamentary and media arenas have developed from 2005 to 2018. Although the administrative arena constitutes an important arena for direct influence (Christiansen & Nørgaard 2003), direct influence is explored in the parliamentary arena, because this arena has become more important in recent decades and because systematic data are available here for the period under investigation (Rommetvedt et al. 2013; Binderkrantz, Christiansen & Pedersen 2014). Building on insights from previous studies of think tanks, publicly funded think tanks are expected to achieve more parliamentary attention than private think tanks, because they are more heavily influenced by institutionalized norms to target actors within the parliament (Campbell & Pedersen 2014). By contrast, privately funded think tanks achieve more media mentions compared to publicly funded think tanks, because they are policymaking outsiders and emphasize public advocacy over direct influence (Kinderman 2017). The article begins by presenting consensual and

advocacy perspectives on think tank influence. It then considers how to track mentions of 13 selected think tanks in parliament and newspapers in the period from 2005 to 2018.

The analysis indicates that the number of parliamentary mentions of publicly funded think tanks exhibits a declining trend and converges with the mentions of private think tanks over time. Privately funded think tanks gradually increased their media mentions after 2005 but their mentions decreased after 2015. This has made differences between the visibility of publicly and privately less pronounced than was the case earlier in the period. The article concludes that public or private funding cannot fully explain changes in think tank visibility in the two arenas over time. Media and parliamentary mentions are driven by a handful of think tanks while most think tanks struggle to achieve and maintain parliamentary and media visibility over time.

Two Theoretical Perspectives on Think Tank Influence

The think tank literature agrees on one thing: To the extent that think tanks influence public policy, they do so based on ideas rather than material resources. Nevertheless, what think tanks do with their ideas and advice in relation to policymakers and the policy process as well as how influential they are is disputed in the literature (Campbell & Pedersen 2014; Kelstrup 2016b; Medvetz 2012). One reason is that think tanks can steer their production of policy advice, evidence and ideas and use them to influence political decision-making in different ways (Stone 2007). In the following, two propositions for think tank influence in Denmark are advanced. The first, consensual perspective, expects publicly funded think tanks to focus on direct influence, as voicing alternative or confrontational views in the media might cost them influence and insider-status in the policy process, particularly in a country like Denmark, which has lengthy traditions for corporate policymaking (Berry 1977; Campbell & Pedersen 2014, Chapter 5). The second perspective argues that private think tanks tend to use quickly produced evidence to gain visibility and to set agendas through the media (Rich & Weaver 2000). One reason is that the media demands timely, relevant information when producing news and that think tanks can deliver analyses and evidence at a high pace. Private think tanks, which lack institutionalized access to ministries, are therefore likely to target the media to showcase ideas to policymakers as well as larger policy communities (Kinderman 2017).

A Consensual Perspective on Think Tanks and Direct Influence in Denmark

Think tanks are commonly viewed in the Anglo-American literature as policymaking outsiders, as most think tanks depend almost exclusively on private funding. Consequently, seminal US understandings of think tanks define them narrowly as private actors forming non-governmental organizations (McGann & Weaver 2000, 5; cf. introduction). This understanding has also informed studies of how transnational processes, including globalization, mediatization and increased digitalization, have worked as important drivers for the spread of private think tanks despite different barriers at the national level, including a lack of funding, the intellectual environment and an existing think tank environment (Stone 2013; McGann 2016; McGann 2017; McGann & Weaver 2000, 13ff).

Studies of think tanks in Europe have challenged this exclusive focus on private think tanks for decades (Stone, Denham & Garnet 1998; Stone & Denham 2004; Thunert 2006; Kelstrup 2016). One key line of argument is that it makes little sense to restrict studies of think tanks to private actors in countries such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and the Nordics, where the state has historically played a strong role in funding policy research organizations that have worked as think tanks. Following the introduction to the special issue think tanks are defined as: ‘Organisations which claim autonomy and attempt to influence public policy by mobilising research’ (Kelstrup 2016:10) and five criteria relating to organisational setup, autonomy, influence, expert knowledge and visibility are used to identify think tanks analytically (cf. introduction to the special issue). Influence is understood broadly and includes explicit attempts to influence decisions as well as policy advice.

Lending to its publicly funded research organizations, Denmark has a longer think tank heritage than as suggested by a narrow definition of think tanks as non-governmental organizations (McGann & Weaver 2000, 5). In the late 1950s and 1960s, the Danish economy and state services expanded. In this time, the government created sector research institutes that focused on policy areas that were considered of societal importance, such as *Forskningscenter Risø* in the energy sector (established in 1955), and *Socialforskningsinstituttet* (1958), working with social policy. Although focusing on applied research, such centers fall under the think tank definition used in this issue, as they claim autonomy and attempt to influence public policy by producing research (cf. introduction to the special issue). Their roles were compatible with the institutionalized form of policymaking under corporatism, where a prevailing logic among interest groups as well as sectoral research was to deliver knowledge to support different opposing

views that were then mitigated in the corporate system and subject to negotiations (Öberg 2015). Despite the decline in corporatist policymaking beginning in the 1970s, Campbell and Pedersen (2014) argue that corporate modes in policymaking have been institutionalized so that the production of policy ideas maintains its distinct national characteristics. In the Danish case, this means that ‘...competition is muted by the fact that policymaking is still embedded in an institutionalized and very much taken-for-granted system of consensus-oriented negotiations’ (Campbell & Pedersen 2014, 210). Further underpinning a consensual perspective on think tanks, Johannes Lindvall (2009) has argued that expert ideas are more likely to influence policy instruments rather than policy objectives, as there are more constraints on the broader (normative) discussions of policy objectives than on instruments. The argument is that expert-based ideas are likely to gain attention and influence decision-makers, who want to hear alternative suggestions for how they might successfully adopt and implement the goals that have already been set. Such a logic resonates with the role of a number of actors operating in the corporative system in the Nordic countries (Öberg 2015).

The Direct Impact of Publicly Funded Think Tanks

Think tanks are commonly assumed to act as ‘knowledge brokers’ aiming to bridge the supply of ideas from knowledge producers (e.g. universities) with demand among policymakers (Craft & Howlett 2012, 82). Particularly those think tanks depending on public funding have incentives to emphasize working with insiders, both because their funding comes from the state and because they have access to policymakers. In Denmark, publicly funded research organizations continue to have direct access to policymaking in the sense that ministries can commission reports, present them in parliamentary committees and use them as the basis for political decision-making. This gives publicly funded think tanks better access to parliament than their private counterparts. We therefore expect such think tanks to present their work in parliament, where suggestions for alternative policy options are continuously debated in committees and plenary sessions. This is in line with the argument that the parliamentary arena has become more important for interest representation in the Nordic countries (Rommetvedt et al. 2013).

This is not to say that private think tanks are uninterested in the parliamentary arena. Studies of think tanks in the US have demonstrated how they combine outside strategies with appearances in

Congressional hearings and that they target political parties (McCright & Dunlap 2000; 2003; Bertelli & Wenger 2009). In Denmark, Blach-Ørsten and Kristensen (2016a) have shown how ECLM, one of the oldest think tanks in the country, draws on an extensive network to access policymakers. Nevertheless, private think tanks lack the institutionalized access to ministries and direct access to present their research in parliament. As argued below, they are therefore more likely to pursue indirect influence through the media.

An Advocacy Perspective on Think Tanks and the Media in Denmark

Despite few legal barriers to the development of private think tanks, such organizations first gained prominence in Denmark in the 2000s, which is decades later than in Sweden and Norway (cf. contributions to this special issue). One explanation of the relatively late arrival of privately funded think tanks is that Denmark's long-standing corporate policymaking traditions have provided privileged positions to interest organizations in policymaking (Christiansen & Nørgaard 2003). Interest organizations have populated Danish politics for decades and arguably been skeptical towards the need for think tanks. More generally, the widespread perception that Denmark has a strong, well-organized civil society and public sector might act as a barrier to 'new types' of organizations, including think tanks (Campbell & Pedersen 2014).

The consensual view of think tank influence presented above is contrasted by studies revealing that think tanks do not confine themselves to direct influence. In the United States, think tanks have been shown to campaign and advocate for change or to sustain broad policy objectives. Think tanks have campaigned to deny climate change (McCright & Dunlap 2003) and to stop the regulation of tobacco (Smith et al. 2016). Similar tendencies have been observed in the Nordic context, where it has been argued that neo-liberal think tanks have challenged Swedish corporatism since the mid-1970s and in the 2000s (Öberg 2015, 673; Kinderman 2017).

Privately Funded Think Tanks in the Media

One of the key arguments underpinning the study of think tanks as advocacy organizations is that they do more than merely provide 'brokerage' between actors for the purpose of reaching agreement. Think tanks might also pursue a 'leverage' function intended to set new agendas and to influence public policy

debates in particular directions (Osborne 2004, 434). The media arena, which has become more important to interest representation in Denmark over time, is well suited for advocacy (Binderkrantz, Christiansen & Pedersen 2014). Consequently, media mentions have become an important goal for many private and non-governmental groups and privately funded think tanks, which seek to influence public opinion simply because it is an easy way to address policymakers, who are known to follow the news media closely (Rich & Weaver 2000, 81). As Bjerke (2016) has pointed out in his study of Norwegian think tanks, news media and think tanks have developed a co-dependent relationship whereby the news media, due to financial cut backs, need the analysis and debate created by think tanks as a way to produce ‘cheap’ news, and private think tanks need the public exposure as a venue to present their ideas and show efficiency (see also Rich & Weaver 2000). Both Bjerke (2016) and Blach-Ørsten and Kristensen (2016) suggest that an important explanation of the ability of some think tanks to attain high news media mentions is their ability to live up to the journalistic criteria that guide news selection in the media. Privately funded advocacy think tanks lacking institutionalized access to decision-makers can cast themselves in the role of new and provocative voices that often argue against the status quo and, as such, manage to be perceived as ideal sources for the news media. Moreover, even though advocacy think tanks are partisan news sources from a formal point of view, the news media often present them as neutral expert sources in Denmark and Norway (Bjerke 2016; Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen 2016, Laursen & Trapp 2019), thus endowing the think tanks with extra credibility in the eyes of both the public and policymakers. Building on the above perspectives we expect that:

1. Publicly funded think tanks will achieve more parliamentary mentions compared to private think tanks because they are more heavily influenced by institutionalized norms to target inside actors through parliament.
2. By contrast, privately funded think tanks will achieve more media mentions than public think tanks because they are policymaking outsiders and emphasize public advocacy over direct influence.

In order to test these complimentary propositions, think tank mentions in *Folketinget* (Parliament) and nine national newspapers are compared. In the following, data mentions of think tanks in *Folketinget* and data pertaining to the mentions of think tanks in national newspapers are used to indicate and compare the mentions of public and private think tanks in Denmark.

Methods

In order to address the above expectations, think tank mentions in parliament and the media are captured over a 14-year period running from 2005 to 2018. The intention is to capture not only how frequently public and private think tanks are mentioned in the two arenas but also how their mentions have developed over time.

Comparing Newspaper and Parliamentary Mentions

Studying visibility in arenas has been done in different ways. A previous research project on interest groups in Denmark relied on data from two vintage newspaper (Politiken and Jyllands-Posten) to study media influence and group presentations to Parliamentary committees and calendars of parliamentarians to study access to Parliament (INTERARENA 2011-2014). This study uses a broader but more comprehensive approach, which collects data from media databases over 14 years. This has the advantage of identifying more mentions, but as the data on mentions is more inclusive, the data are less reliable as indicators of actual access to policy-makers. Mentions in Danish media were searched in nine national newspapers.¹ Mentions were found using the Infomedia search platform in the period 2005 to 2018 using the names of think tanks and, in cases where these names also generated other hits, also with the Danish term ‘tænketank’. Mentions in Folketinget were found in the parliamentary document database (ft.dk) in the parliamentary assemblies from 2005–2006 to 2018–2019 using search words similar to those used in the Infomedia search. The database covers documents produced in parliamentary decision-making, including parliamentary commissions and hearings and from parliament’s control with the government (Folketinget 2019). Searches in the parliamentary documents were restricted to document headings and resumés in order to avoid capturing mentions of think tanks, some of which frequently appear on hearing lists without responding to the hearings. The mentions of each of the think tanks in the Infomedia and parliament database searches yield a measure for media and parliament activity. By calculating the mean number of mentions of each think tank in each arena from 2005–2018, the mean presence of individual think tanks in the two arenas can also be compared.

¹ *Berlingske Tidende, Børsen, BT, Ekstra Bladet, Information, Jyllands-Posten, Kristeligt Dagblad, Politiken and Weekendavisen.*

Selecting Publicly and Privately Funded Think Tanks

Ideally, the study would be based on the full population of Danish think tanks or on a random sample e.g. drawn from indexes of think tanks. Unfortunately as definitions of think tanks vary indexes differ in their criteria for inclusion and in how many think tanks they include. While one option would be to use the Global Go To Think Tank Index, which lists as many as 51 think tanks in Denmark in 2018 (McGann 2019, 38), this index is not up to date in some instances, and the selection criteria for the think tanks listed in them vary or are not specified. Many entries are therefore invalid because think tanks no longer exist. In addition, as the criteria for inclusion are not explicit, the directory includes think tanks with very limited activity. This is problematic, as the inclusion of inactive think tanks risks over-representing the number of think tanks and consequently under-estimating their average output and impact, as measured by events, publications and newspaper mentions. In simple terms, the average think tank appears less active and important for policymaking if inactive think tanks are included in the sample. Nevertheless, the think tanks mentioned in the index were used as a starting point for selecting think tanks (McGann 2019) but were supplemented with other think tanks, such as the ECLM, that are well-known in Denmark and have featured in other studies (Campbell and Pedersen 2014; Kelstrup 2016b, 2018) but are not ranked in the index. Think tanks from the index were sought out, and 13 think tanks scoring both mentions in Danish newspapers and in Folketinget in the period under investigation were included in the study. By selecting on the basis on activity (the dependent variable) the selected sample is not representative of the whole population of think tanks.

Although Danish think tanks are generally not transparent in terms of their main sources of funding, the annual reports of publicly funded research institutes such as VIVE reveal that their research is sponsored mainly by public authorities through a mixture of core funding and contracted research (e.g., VIVE 2019). Other think tanks, such as CEPOS, depend exclusively on private funding (CEPOS 2019).

Table 1: The 13 Think Tanks Included in the Study.

Publicly funded think tanks	Privately funded think tanks
The Danish Economics Councils (DEC) (1962)	The Economic Council of the Labour Movement (ECLM) (1936)
The Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) (2003)	Mandag Morgen (MM) (1989)
The Danish Center for Social Science Research (VIVE) (2017)	Rockwool Foundation Research Unit (RFRU) (1995)
	Centre for Political Studies (CEPOS) (2004)
	Cevea (2008)
	Concito (2008)
	Kraka (2011)
	DEA (2011)
	Think Tank Europa (2014)
	Justitia (2014)

The 13 selected think tanks include three think tanks with public funding and ten think tanks that are mainly privately funded. Although this might create a bias toward private think tanks, this bias is at least partly offset by the fact that public think tanks have substantially more full-time staff than private think tanks.

Analysis

In the following, we address the extent to which the evolving mentions of public and private think tanks lend support to the two propositions. On that basis, we discuss how the theoretical expectations to public and private think tanks resonate with the development of think tank mentions in the Danish context over time.

Comparing the Development of Think Tank Mentions in Parliament over Time

As mentioned, the first proposition expects publicly funded think tanks to achieve more parliamentary mentions than private think tanks, because they are influenced by institutionalized norms to target inside actors via the parliament. Figure 1 confirms that publicly funded think tanks have generally achieved more mentions in Folketinget than privately funded think tanks from the parliamentary assemblies in the period running from the parliamentary assemblies 2005–2006 to 2018–2019. Nevertheless, public think

tank mentions have declined over time, and the mentions of public and private think tanks seem to converge toward a low level of mentions.

Figure 1: Mentions of Publicly and Privately Funded Danish Think Tanks in the Danish Parliament (Folketinget) from the 2005–2006 Assembly to the 2018–2019 Assembly

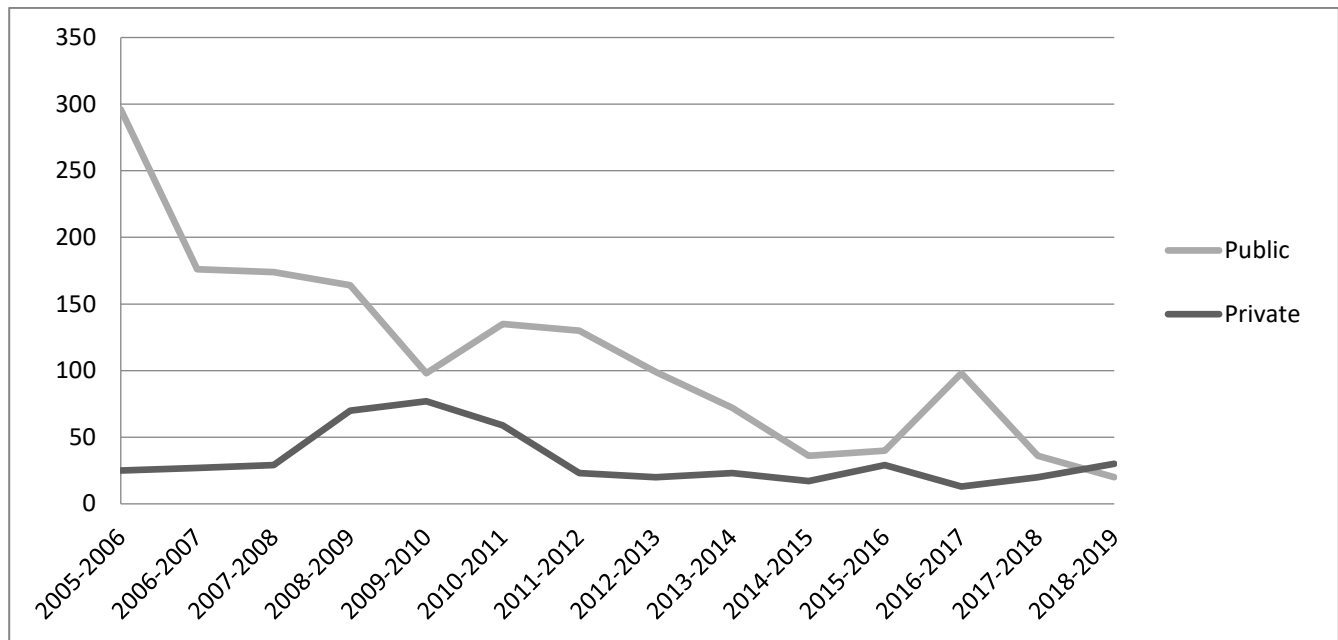
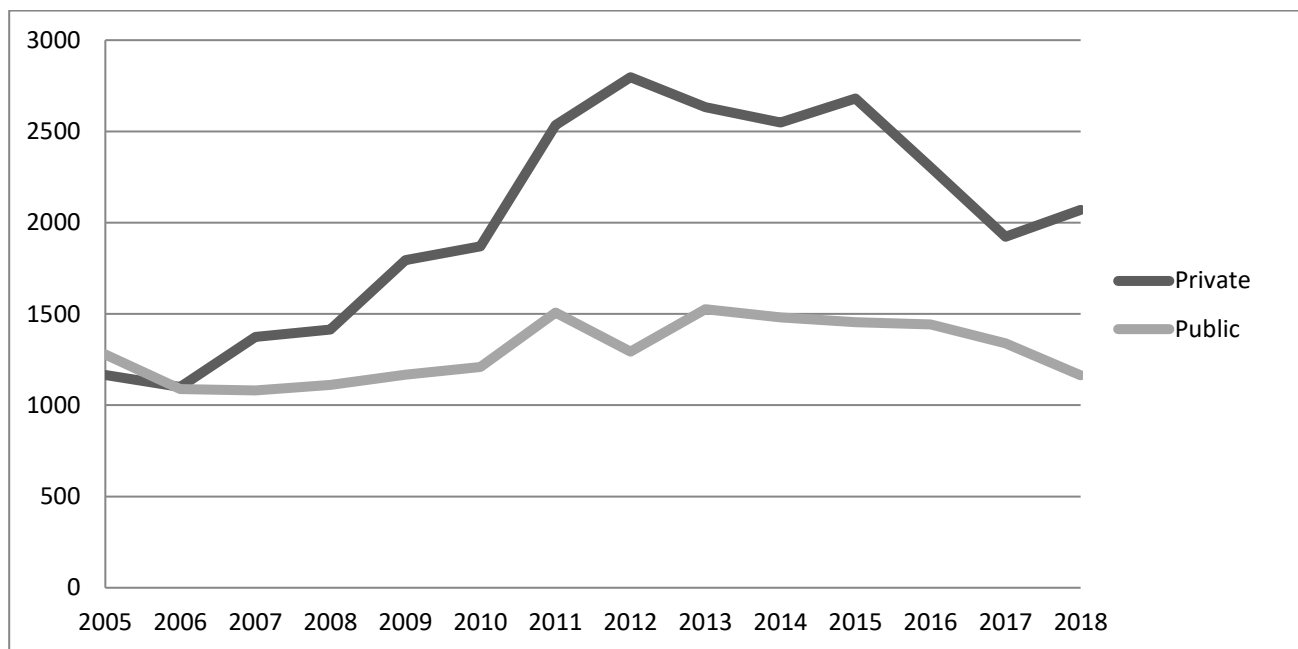


Figure 1 asks questions regarding the ability of think tanks to maintain parliamentary visibility and relevance over time, which challenges the expectation that public think tanks have better access to parliament. Context and time-dependent factors influence the number of mentions in different years and to shape the extent to which the resourceful publicly think tanks are able to translate their research production and analysis into parliamentary mentions. The substantial parliamentary debate over a DIIS report on Denmark’s policy in the later phases of the Cold War (*Koldkrigsudredningen*) published in 2005, drives mentions of public think tanks around that time. Similarly, the debate about the fusion of SFI and KORA to form VIVE triggered some debate and mentions in the period 2016–2017. The continuous decline in mentions does not appear to be influenced by cyclical factors such as results of general elections in 2005, 2011 or 2015 or the resulting changes in government power in 2011 and 2015. Broader explanations, such as a decline in core funding and the merger of publicly funded think tanks as well as changes in parliamentary demand are possible factors in accounting for the decline in mentions over time.

The Development of Think Tank Mentions in Danish Newspapers

Privately funded think tanks were expected to achieve more media mentions compared to publicly funded think tanks because they are policymaking outsiders and emphasize public contestation over direct influence. Figure 2 confirms that privately funded think tanks have generally achieved more mentions in the newspapers than public think tanks, albeit with some variation in the 2005–2018 period. In particular, it took some time for private think tanks to gain prominence early in the period and notable, private think tank mentions also drop toward the end of this period.

Figure 2: Mentions of Public and Private Think Tanks in Selected Danish National Newspapers from January 1, 2005 to December 31, 2018



Part of the explanation for the increase in the mentions of private think tanks after 2006 resides in the creation of new think tanks, such as Cevea (2008), Concito (2008), Kraka (2011) and DEA (2011). Interestingly, however, increasing numbers of private think tanks do not lead to stable, high levels of aggregate mentions over time. On the contrary, the mentions drop after 2015 despite the increased number of think tanks in Denmark. This indicates that media impact is not a simple function of the number of think tanks; rather, individual think tank strategies and their success seem to influence media mentions. CEPOS, a liberal think tank established in 2004, has had a profound media impact over time, perhaps leading to its ambition to challenge the consensual culture in Denmark (Kelstrup 2016a). The

success of CEPOS inspired the ECLM, a labor movement council operating since 1936, to redefine itself as a think tank, as well as the creation of Cevea, a center-left think tank, in 2007 (Kelstrup 2018). Interestingly, party-affiliated think tanks, which have formal relationships with and are funded by political parties, are absent from the contemporary Danish think tank scene. Historically, the ECLM, through its links to the labor movement, has had strong ties to the Social Democratic Party, but the relationship between the two has become looser over time. Policy think tanks, which do not explicitly challenge consensus but which champion policy innovation by thinking across policy silos across public, private and third sectors, have also emerged, including Concito (2008), Kraka (2011), DEA (2011), Think Tank Europa (2014) and Justitia (2014).

Accounting for Public and Private Think Tank Mentions in the Two Arenas

The analysis of aggregate numbers of mentions in parliament and the media lends some support to the expectations that publicly funded think tanks emphasize parliament, while private think tanks target the media, although mentions have changed substantially over the period. A more nuanced picture can be drawn from observations of how individual think tanks are mentioned in the two arenas. Figure 3 below indicates that mean parliamentary and newspaper mentions among the 13 think tanks are significantly correlated over the period (Pearson's $r = 0.56$; $P < 0.05$), possibly indicating synergy or spill-over between the mentions in the two arenas. The figure also reveals, however, that some think tanks occupy positions further from the general trend line than others.

Figure 3: Mean Parliament (Assemblies 2005–2006 to 2018–2019) and Newspaper (2005–2018) Mentions per Year for 13 Danish Think Tanks.

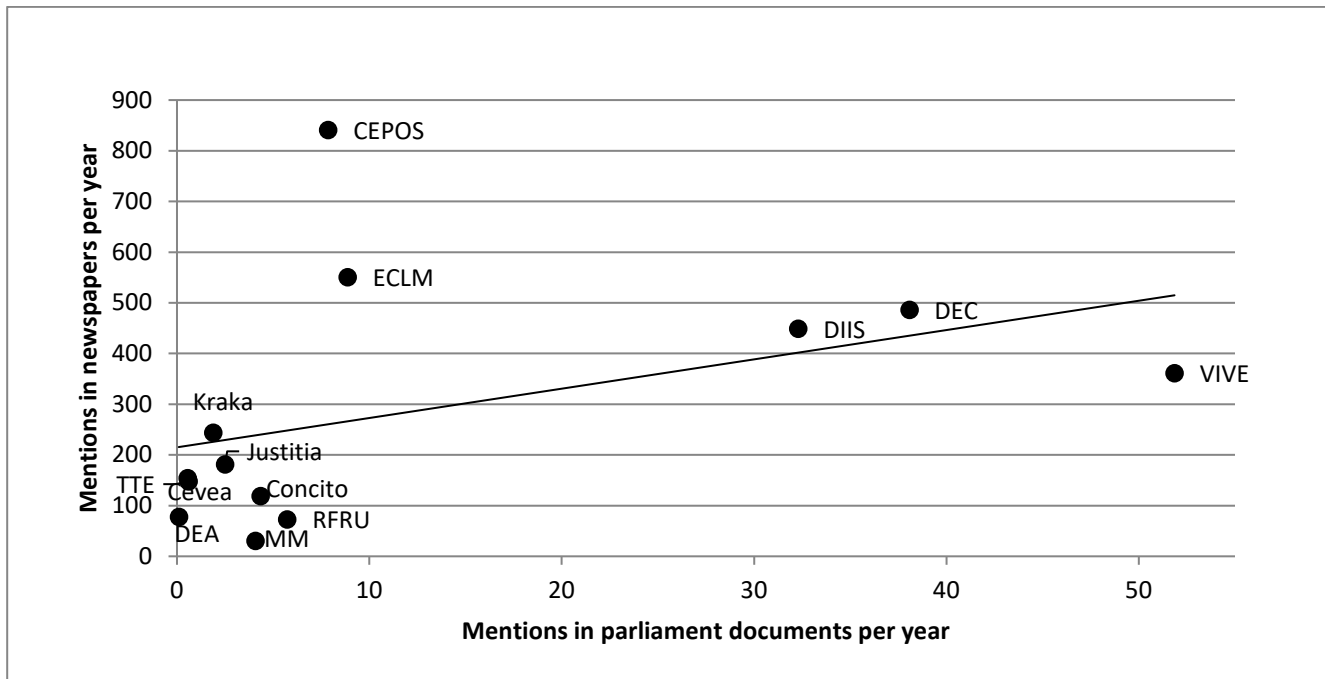


Figure 3 indicates that think tanks cluster around different mean levels of mentions in the parliament and media. The publicly funded research institutes, including VIVE, DIIS and the DEC, are mentioned more frequently in parliamentary documents compared to the other think tanks, arguably because their analyses and reports are frequently referred to in documents presented to the parliamentary commissions. They receive comparatively few mentions in the media compared to the advocacy think tanks, possibly because they are hesitant to push ideas that might spark public controversy and sacrifice insider influence, as argued by Berry (1977). Advocacy think tank CEPOS and the ECLM are more visible in the national newspapers and have a lower mean level of mentions in the Folketinget. This could be explained through their willingness to set agendas, possibly without having to sacrifice credibility. Previous research has found that that Danish think tanks were referred to as expert sources in 50 percent of the news reported in seven Danish newspapers from 2006–2013 and only as partisan sources in 22 percent of the news (Blach-Ørsten & Kristensen 2016a, 32). The remaining think tanks (including the advocacy think tank Cevea) achieve modest mentions per year in both the parliament and newspapers.

Overall, the analytical results lend support to the proposition that publicly funded think tanks are influenced by institutionalized norms to target inside-actors via the parliament (Campbell and Pedersen, 2014) and that private think tanks outside the policymaking process, which emphasizes public contestation over direct influence (Kinderman, 2017). The analysis, however, also helps to nuance these claims: There has been a decline in parliamentary mentions for publicly funded think tanks and an increase in media mentions for both types of think tanks, albeit with a decline toward the end of the period. These trends are likely to be informed by a number of factors including debates of selected think tank studies and fusions of think tanks as well as the arrival of more think tanks, which changes the think tank landscape. Cyclical factors such as general elections and changes in government power do not appear to influence the mentions in either of the arenas systematically.

CEPOS has been the most mentioned think tank in newspapers, where they are associated with opposing views on issues related to taxation, public services and equality. The attention given to CEPOS is in line with the finding that neo-liberal think tanks, such as *Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft* in Germany and *Timbro* in Sweden, have also assumed adversarial positions (Kinderman, 2017). Importantly, however, the ECLM has also had a high mean media impact, which raises questions regarding the notion that adversarial roles are the prerogative of neo-liberal think tanks. A substantial group of policy think tanks achieves modest mentions in both arenas, which could be either a result of limited resources, failed strategies or strategy emphasizing influence in policy niches, which are not captured by the above analysis.

Conclusions

In order to provide more knowledge about the visibility of think tanks in political arenas in Denmark, the article explored how and why the mentions of private and public think tanks in the parliamentary and media arena have developed from 2005 to 2018. Building on insights from previous studies of think tanks, publicly funded think tanks were expected to achieve more parliamentary mentions than private think tanks, because they are more heavily influenced by institutionalized norms to target inside actors through the parliament (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014). Conversely, privately funded think tanks were expected to achieve more media mentions than public think tanks because they are policymaking outsiders and emphasize public advocacy over direct influence (Kinderman, 2017). The analysis of parliamentary and newspaper mentions lends some support to both expectations but also shows that they

fail to account for the development of mentions over time. Publicly funded think tanks have had more mentions in parliament than have private think tanks, but their level of mentions of level decreased after 2005. This is unrelated to general elections (2005, 2011, 2015) or to resulting changes in government power (2011, 2015) in the period under investigation. For privately funded think tanks media mentions increased after 2005 but declined after 2015. The article therefore concludes that differences in public or private funding cannot explain variation in think tank visibility in the two arenas over time. Instead media and parliamentary mentions are driven by a handful of think tanks while most think tanks struggle to achieve and maintain parliamentary and media visibility over time. Alternative explanations such as shifts in strategy towards policy niches by some think tanks, changes in political demand and in the funding available to think tanks should be addressed in future studies to provide more precise accounts of changes in think tank visibility.

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