

# Discreet Diplomacy

## Practices of Secrecy in Transnational Think Tanks

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### Abstract

This article aims to expand both the analytical gaze of diplomacy studies and anthropological interests in the field of transnational think tanks, advocacy and policy advice. Drawing on ethnographic data from three such organisations, it investigates secrecy practices, focussing on how such practices amount to discreet diplomatic efforts. In a variety of ways, secrecy is utilised as a resource in foreign relations and diplomacy; it is a means to leverage status and influence. Although outwardly striving for transparency, think tanks use secrecy practices in their effort to establish themselves as actors of consequence in foreign relations and diplomatic circles. The practices of secrecy are part and parcel of the power games such organisations play, in which all participants learn and master what to discuss and what to keep silent about. These practices, however, pose a clear challenge to matters of accountability and transparency.

**Keywords:** diplomacy, ethnography, power, secrecy, transnational think tanks

In the midst of world power reconfigurations, planetary crises, digitalisation and declining confidence in and performance by world governance institutions, diplomacy is undergoing rapid changes and diplomats are tasked with assisting their countries in navigating ‘the perils of globalisation’ (Heine 2013: 60). To grapple with these large-scale transformations, a new repertoire of diplomatic practices is being invented. New terms exemplify these novelties: ‘paradiplomacy’, ‘counterinsurgency diplomacy’, ‘irregular diplomacy’, ‘public diplomacy’ and ‘quiet diplomacy’. These terms indicate a perceived urgent need and innovative attempts to characterise the ways in which various actors may enter into exchanges and negotiations with each other, inside, outside and above state levels. It also indicates that diplomacy is no longer the preserve of the state, ‘but now involves the participation of non-state actors’ (Conley Tyler et al. 2017: 22). Nevertheless, analytically within anthropology and the social sciences at large, diplomacy still seems to fit into and reinforce the notion of the transnational as a ‘patchwork of states’ (Kuus 2015: 370). In the

expanding and transforming realm of actors and practices of stateless diplomacy, the transnational think tank is of specific interest given its capacity to eclipse national borders, thus being ideally suited to act as interlocutor and bridgehead for non-state-driven diplomacy. Yet, transnational think tanks have hitherto received limited scholarly interest as spaces for and as actors in diplomatic undertakings. In this article, we analyse these actors, active in the midst of global political dynamics, by focussing on how they make use of secrecy as a resource in foreign relations and diplomacy. We show how these think tanks partake in games of power, in shaping foreign relations, by engaging in diplomatic activities that are secretive in character and of which the public is not aware. Either the public is not meant to be aware of such activities and is therefore being deprived of knowledge, or the public is informed about them happening but not about their actual content. Secrecy is for these actors not an exception, but a regularly drawn upon resource for leveraging status and influence. In so doing, these think tanks come forth as lacking accountability and transparency, thereby misusing the public trust that they depend on. We aim to expand both the analytical gaze of diplomacy studies and anthropological interests in the field of transnational think tanks, advocacy and policy advice.

Transnational think tanks generally invest in knowledge-gathering and dissemination, and advocate certain policy issues, perspectives and solutions. They tend to be attuned to issues of a broader, more international concern when compared to their domestic counterparts. Their transnational character paves the way for foreign policy, diplomacy and intelligence. They may also use their subsidiaries as bridgeheads for the headquarter organisation and for the state of the mother country, and may thus intervene in the foreign relations and foreign policy of other countries. The Brookings Institution, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), Club of Rome, RAND Corporation, European Council of Foreign Relations and World Economic Forum are examples of such transnational organisations. Although there is great variation in the manner in which these organisations work and in whose interest they are established, we claim that they conduct diplomacy in their day-to-day activities at their own discretion. They are diplomats on behalf of some agent's interest, building long-term relationships through strategic communications that create an enabling environment for the policies they advocate (cf. Nye 2008: 101). While certainly a far cry from the world of protocol and ambassadors, these non-state, private actors engage in foreign policy in relation to states and international organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN).

Diplomacy may be seen as a form of mediated exchange amongst polities and state and non-state actors, aiming at getting one's way, promoting someone's interests and influencing others to do what they would not otherwise do (Neumann 2012). It can thus be understood as an ensemble of practices, power struggles and truth contestations that develop into a shared problematisation of the state of affairs and a preferred way of dealing with it (Constantinou 1996). Mindful of the fact that our research was conducted in and amongst think tanks, and not primarily in state agencies or international governmental organisations charged with diplomatic

affairs, we suggest the term ‘discreet diplomacy’. By this term, we want to highlight the dynamic interplay of secrecy and openness that characterises the diplomatic practices of transnational think tanks. Conceptually, discreet diplomacy covers a wide spectrum of positions—from less-formalised forms like the backchannel diplomacy adjunct to front-channel negotiations on the one hand, to highly deniable methods like the clandestine diplomacy conducted by secret intelligence services on the other hand (Bjola 2014: 86; Klieman 1988). Diplomatic activities by transnational think tanks primarily concern negotiation, communication, information-gathering and the cultivation of friendly relations (cf. Conley Tyler et al. 2017: 26). Essential to discreet diplomacy are practices based on the discretion of the convening actor, often drawing on secrecy in various formats as a resource for gaining leverage. These activities do not usually transform the think tanks and their staff into diplomats, however, as the term is generally understood under the Vienna Convention of 1961 (Conley Tyler et al. 2017: 25).

We begin by accounting for transnational think tanks and how they may resemble state diplomacy in style and practice. In this section, we also introduce our data and some methodological considerations. In the next section, we position our research in the broader context of anthropological studies of secrecy and more specifically with respect to organisational settings and diplomacy. The main body of the article is devoted to discussing how think tanks in foreign countries make use of secrecy, as they aim to be of importance in foreign policies, while analysing the social consequences of secrecy. The article concludes by discussing the larger implications of these activities with respect to accountability and democracy.

## **Researching Transnational Think Tanks**

Paralleling the globally increasing number of think tanks (McGann 2021), scholarly interest has also risen. As a concept, however, the think tank is inherently contested both amongst scholars and practitioners. There exists no common definition that may demarcate a think tank from, for instance, a lobbying group or a public relations firm. Following Thomas Medvetz (2012b), we conceive of think tanks as boundary-spanning organisations that occupy a space in-between and intersecting with the fields of knowledge production, economy, government and media. In this space, think tanks can draw upon and combine various forms of capital such as money, academic legitimacy, contacts and – we would add – secrecy. The power they may accrue is to be understood in terms of social relations (Medvetz 2012a: 35). In this space, think tanks generally combine a research component with activities aimed at influencing public policies (Jeziarska and Sörbom 2020: 5).

Historically, the transnational think tank was established as a nationally based organisation, foremost in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. New quarters were subsequently, often after several decades, opened in other countries. For instance, the CEIP was inaugurated in 1910 and opened its first non-US-based office in 1993, whereas the originally UK-based organisation Chatham House (founded in 1920) initiated its transnationalising ambitions in 2007 by the

launching of a new office in Angola. Together these expansions form part of a globalisation of politics, where the same organisation ‘travels’ to new countries, which reflects a perceived need to keep in touch with political developments in regions defined as of increasing consequence. It is in this context that we consider it of importance to understand the ways in which these relatively newly established organisations work, unveiling their sometimes-misleading rhetoric of transparency.

Fundamental to all think tank activity is that they work to influence decision-making in other organisations via relationship-building and communication. Building on their networks, their credibility and their status, they communicate policy ideas, thereby mobilising others to move ahead with the ideas. Most importantly, think tanks must signal connectedness and give the appearance of being in the know (cf. Medvetz 2012a). As knowledge entails the capacity to act and set things in motion (Marian and Stehr 2017: 2), the actor that successfully organises at least the appearance of being knowledgeable or that succeeds in diffusing ideas that are used by others is potentially taken to be a noteworthy actor of consequence.

We have conducted eight years of on-and-off ethnographic research at a number of transnational think tanks. In this article, we focus on three of them. For reasons of confidentiality, we have renamed them to read Xpand, Re-Brand and Collateral. Two of them originated in the United States and one originated in Europe, at various points during the twentieth century. Their funding base ranges from corporate, through state, to philanthropic donations. This range also illustrates their varying degrees of association with the state in which they were initially established, with Xpand having historically tight relations with its government of origin and Re-Brand having a stronger reliance on corporations. Irrespective of this variation, all three regularly collaborate with the governments and politicians of the national contexts into which they are transnationalising. In these positions, they commonly need to prove that they are not bringing in foreign capital; they must prove themselves as not being ‘foreign agents’, that is, acting undercover in the interest of an alien country. At the same time, hosting governments may at times make use of the ‘foreigners’ as bridgeheads to their countries of origin. Our ethnographic insights into these organisations are based on some 120 days of fieldwork, during which we participated in many of their events (lectures, seminars, social gatherings), visited their offices in major cities around the globe (Africa, Asia, Eurasia, Europe and North America) and talked to staff, participants, funders, founders and hang-arounds. We also interviewed directors, senior staff members, and analysts/experts at these think tanks. For this article, some forty conversations and interviews at the headquarter offices and at subsidiary offices are of key interest.<sup>1</sup>

Evidently, the study of policy work pertaining to foreign relations and diplomacy is a challenging task. Although the effects of policy may be easily observable, its conception is much less discernible (Kuus 2013: 116). Even now, some fifty years after Laura Nader’s (1974) call to ‘study up’ there is still a relative lack of in-depth, sensitising ethnographic work in state agencies, international governmental organisations, think tanks and other powerful and large-scale organisations largely due to the exclusionary character of such organisations (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013). They

are designed to guard information and do so explicitly with limited or strategic concession made to transparency. Information and individuals are sequestered in terms of their access to information as well as to physical space, with security guards and surveillance technology making sure this is the case (Kuus 2013: 118). Therefore, practices related to diplomacy and secrecy at the upper echelons of secretive organisations require methodological approaches beyond the conventional (e.g. Billaud and Cowan 2020; González 2012; Gusterson 2008; Verdery 2014). The methodological challenges also accentuate the power relations in the field, where the self-confidence of 'policy professionals' (Svallfors 2021), backed up by network entanglements and access to financial and media resources, endows them with relative power over the ethnographer (Garsten and Sörbom 2018).

We experienced first-hand the process of going through the many layers of scrutiny involved in entering the premises of the think tanks, which comprises identity checks, body scanning and passing check-points with armed guards. And apart from polite explanations for denial of entrance, we have also been met with straight denials and white lies to protect something that apparently was meant to be kept secret from outsiders. At times, we have been chased away from think tank compounds by armed guards. Also, once inside the office or meeting grounds, we were often accompanied by an assistant, who directed us to a particular office or waiting area. Thus, 'deep hanging out' (Clifford 1996) was rarely the norm, but it occurred situationally and often in unexpected circumstances. Importantly, our degree of participation at events varied greatly across think tanks and depending on the situation. Although we were often met with evasive talk, deceptions and determent, our interlocutors just as often revealed views of a personal or critical nature, seemingly unaffected by the knowledge that we might publish their disclosures. Many of them provided their personalised narrative of the organisation that employed them, its way of functioning and how it would discreetly be active in what was referred to as 'private diplomacy'. Furthermore, we were repeatedly able to observe this form of discreet diplomacy in action – at arranged think tank events in which heads of states, high-level representatives of international organisations, and a broad range of actors met in secrecy behind closed doors to discuss matters such as the legal standing of the Arctic, global governance transparency and European market regulation. In combination with interviews and conversations at think tanks, these observations form the basis of our analysis.

As we came to learn, the communication and public relations departments of think tanks are well prepared for processing the press and the occasional investigating researcher. Staff are generally trained to give interviews that do not reveal information but feed public relations talking points.<sup>2</sup> They excel in the use of diplomatic lingo, abbreviations, and shorthand expressions, whose deeper meaning is at first inaccessible to an outsider, displaying the 'diplomatic style' and discernible suaveness common to diplomacy (cf. Kuus 2015: 372–373), and 'the easy social ways of the naturally superior' (Neumann 2012: 11). For us to engage in the field, we had to learn at least parts of the language. Once we were able to pass, we experienced how the language also worked to entrap us in an echo chamber of policy talk. Our

conversations were thus a constant balancing act of engaging with their language (risking entrapment) and striving to keep a distance (risking trust and access). As frustrating as this was, we would, over time, interpret the hindering encounters as more than negative responses to our attempts at gaining access; they were constitutive expressions of the phenomenon we were studying (cf. Taussig 1999: 2). Thus, the experience of exclusion, of being denied access to secret information would also be a powerful source of ethnographic insight (Hultin 2013; Jones 2014; Masco 2006, 2010), and prove to be epistemologically generative (Gusterson 2008) as the very exclusion may be part of the performance of secrecy (de Jong 2007: 19).

## **Secrecy as a Resource**

All organisations have a secret side. It is either in internal relations, where knowledge and information may be partitioned and secluded, or more generally, when some aspects of an organisation's activities are not meant to be public (Costas and Grey 2014). It is a crucial dimension of how most organisations work, whether through informal and private meetings, backchannels, off-the-record remarks or whitewashing. Secrecy is also commonly accepted in politics (Rittberger and Goetz 2018), and in spite of increased demands for transparency in diplomatic practices, secrecy is still a long-standing diplomatic tool (Bjola 2016), with avenues for secrecy built into the United Nations Charter and domestic legislation (Donaldson 2017: 576; cf. Bjola 2014). What is particular, and highly problematic, for transnational think tanks is their ambition to wage their influence in matters of diplomacy, thus exerting power that is not formally and legally accrued to them. Most often, they are set up as foundations, private research institutes and other private enterprises with a 'murky' relation to the official sphere of policy and diplomacy (cf. Medvetz 2012b).

Political secrecy is a classic and well-established phenomenon both within nation states and between states and international organisations. Until recently, however, scholarly interest in political secrecy has been confined to relatively narrow social-science subfields, most notably amongst intelligence researchers with an overarching interest in transparency, as witnessed by the literature on public policy and administration (Rittberger and Goetz 2018: 826). Previous research on diplomacy has certainly made key contributions to diplomatic secrecy, primarily challenging ideas of ever-increasing transparency in the field (Donaldson 2017) in and around international organisations (Roberts 2004) and focussing on the potential of secrecy as an effective tool (Kurizaki 2007). Significant contributions have also been made in studies of the creation and shaping of diplomacy in and by practices (e.g., Neumann 2002; Pouliot 2016), including the study of everyday diplomacy through ethnography (Marsden et al. 2016).

From our vantage point, secrecy is not a universal category but is rather constructed and performed varyingly across time and place in different socio-historical settings. Different settings develop their specific versions of secrecy, which again is continuously under negotiation and an object of power struggle. Secrecy work in



think tanks reflects the unique circumstances of policy and political interests and stakes at a particular point in time. As a basic premise, secrecy is constructed in and through social interactions (Costas and Grey 2014: 1424). Virtually any information can be a secret, and secrecy is best understood as a method for handling concealed information (Bellman 1981). Georg Simmel aptly described the essence of human interaction as ‘conditioned by the capacity to speak’ but ‘shaped by the capacity to be silent’ ([1908] 2009: 340). By knowing when to speak, when not to speak and when to keep a secret, actors can manipulate and even dominate their relationships. In the case of think tanks, the interplay between the open and the closed forms part of a play with silence and speech, at times arranging smokescreens (cf. Taussig 1999: 6) for what is not to be seen by the public. However, secrecy needs to be performed in a public fashion in order to exist (Herzfeld 2009: 135). As a paradox, this performativity entails that what is done openly may be simultaneously used for secret acts. Revealing something that is also – partly – concealed ‘is a way of socially mobilising the secret as a form of sociocultural capital without dispersing restricted knowledge’ (Jones 2014: 55). As Hugh Gusterson reminds us, ‘not all secrets are alike’ (2013). There are secrets that are not meant to be known, such as military secrets, and there is the public secret, ‘something that is known by everyone, but not easily articulable’ (Taussig 1999: 216). Aligned with the secret that is commonly known is the politics of secrecy, which is apparent in Joseph Masco’s (2010) analysis of the interplay between secrecy and publicity. Although the state needs to project the power of the atomic bomb, thus becoming subject to its own forms of publicity, it also needs to be protected by secrecy (2010: 438). This duality is reminiscent of the ‘dual use policy’ of the US space program (Cloud and Clarke 1999), during which national security officials learnt to rely on ‘the open secret’ (Brodie 2011: 644). While doing something in the open, like attempting to go to the moon, actors can simultaneously engage in less overt activities, such as the so-called ‘CORONA programme’, which was intended for reconnaissance satellites (Brodie 2011: 644). Secrecy is something else than a wish to uphold privacy, as the former contains concealment. This discrepancy between the concepts of privacy and secrecy brings about a difference in moral content, as privacy is consensual where secrecy is not; that is, there is a ‘right to privacy’ but no equivalent ‘right to secrecy’ (Warren and Laslett 1977: 43). In the case of a political actor such as the transnational think tank, which for the purpose of promoting the interest of the organisation – or any higher good – conceals information to which the public has no opportunity to consent, it is acting secretly and misusing the public trust it ultimately depends on.

That secrecy and, more to the point, the dynamics of concealing and revealing may be key elements in power games and dispute settlements was clearly established by Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) studies in Hagen, New Guinea, with respect to the period of the colonial regime. This lens was also used in her writings on contemporary Western social practices of audit, quality assurance and accountability in British higher education in the 1990s. In this context, Strathern shows how ‘visibility as a conduit for knowledge is elided with visibility as an instrument for control’ (2000: 309), a strategic resource used by higher education authorities for

regulating and governing the actions and priorities of academics. In acts of visibility and revelation, or under the label of ‘transparency,’ knowledge is knowingly eclipsed.<sup>3</sup> Central aspects of the real workings of the social organisation get lost. The relevant question, Strathern maintains, with regard to both the Melanesian and the Western context is: ‘What does visibility conceal?’ (2000: 310). We may here be reminded of Fredrik Barth’s proposition that the meanings given to an object in ritual performances in inner New Guinea are statements of particular associations and connections – or disjunctures: ‘They are given special importance by the meta-premise of the secret cult: that things are not as they appear on the surface’ ([1987] 1995: 70). Mahmoud (2014), in her studies of Freemason sisters in Italian Masonic lodges, also showed how the exclusionary practices of the initiated served to forge fraternal and ritual bonds between the initiates, bonds that were hierarchically ordered. Although the settings are considerably different, we take the point that secrecy and revelation are integral to initiation into exclusive circles, that they connote power negotiations and the establishment of hierarchies while also eclipsing knowledge that is relevant for our understanding of the workings of transnational think tanks.

Constructing some piece of information as secret has, undoubtedly, social consequences. We make use here of Eva Horn’s discussion of the three different logics of secrecy: *distinguishing*, whereby secrets exclude, segregate and divide between the known and the unknown and between actors who are and are not in the know; *arcantum*, which ‘emphasises withdrawal from communication and knowledge by locking something away’ (2011: 109); and *mysterium*, according to which if something is organised or appears as a secret, it has an aura of mystery that can ‘elicit awe’ (Luhmann 1989: 138). Together, these three logics provide the central, generic defining characteristic of secrecy as being ‘the methods used to conceal . . . and the practices of concealment’ (Bok 1982: 6). Secrets and secrecy are interrelated but not identical: secrecy refers to the process of keeping secrets, whereas secrets refer to the content – that which is hidden (Costas and Grey 2014: 1426). Thus, we see secrecy in the context of transnational think tanks as intentional, allowing these organisations to engage in deceptive activities, hide and conceal actions and results, and even lie to others at times in order to protect secrets. Transnational think tanks have no fundamentally different ways of practising secrecy, compared to other types of organisations, and, as most organisations, they construct ‘hidden architectures’ (Costas and Grey 2014). However, we direct our interest to the ways in which transnational think tanks may use secrecy as a way to promote their views, making governments, state agencies and others pick up on them.

It is not uncommon to accuse think tanks of being secluded spaces from which actors can operate inconspicuously. As is indicated by Stanley Kubrick’s black comedy, *Dr Strangelove* (1964), whose main character was allegedly based partly on RAND strategist Herman Kahn, think tanks may trigger these types of speculations. Speculations may be understandable in the RAND case, as secret work undertaken for the Pentagon was important for the organisation (Brodie 2011: 647; Higgott and Stone 1994: 20). Yet, we maintain, an inside–outside perspective is



reductive and fails to catch the dynamic character of how think tanks work. Rather, think tanks could be seen in light of Cloud and Clarke's (1999) term 'shuttered boxes', that is, as organisations that coordinate the opening and closing of their shutters at distinct times to select groups of actors. From the outside, the think tank may look open and transparent in a continual supply of ideas, reports and comments. In practice, what is shown and communicated outwards forms part of a strategy of opening only when seen as relevant for the issue at hand, in a deliberately planned fashion, to some chosen and often very specific others. Moreover, this is a form of proficiency in dealing with secrecy which may include attempts at increasing the interest of the intended audience in certain topics, so as to prevent them from looking more carefully into other matters (cf. Garsten and Hernes 2008). But the secret should not be left in the dark altogether. As Piliavsky argues, 'a secret perfectly kept dies in its circle of initiates' (2011: 290). Its seduction lies precisely in its revelation: 'Most things said to be hidden are in fact nurtured through the processes of calculated concealment, allusion, and revelation, the secrets propagating themselves through circles of conspiracy, rumour, and gossip' (2011: 290). The very dynamics of disguise and disclosure, closing and opening, is intrinsic to power (Canetti 1962; Simmel [1908] 2009), and think tank professionals are adept at seductively orchestrating this interplay.

## **Practices of Secrecy**

### *Maintaining Secrecy / Hiding Knowledge*

The management of secrecy by transnational think tanks entails intentionally preventing some of the strategies, interests and activities from becoming publicly known (cf. Bellman 1981), thus maintaining secrecy to the effect that few outsiders would know that they also are active as diplomats at their own discretion. Transnational think tanks commonly organise closed meetings in diplomatic efforts. This is how Tam Bowles, a European working at Collateral in the United States as a senior analyst, explains her job: 'The aim of working at a think tank is to affect policy: in my case, to affect US foreign policy. This is done behind the scenes. I understood that when I got here'. She goes on to describe how she invited the Austrian Minister of Defence when he visited the United States. 'My work is to be a platform for European and American politicians', Ms. Bowles explains. 'I see myself as an unofficial representative for the European Union'. Continuing to describe her diplomatic efforts, she provides her visit to Berlin as an example:

I was in Berlin last week. I was invited by N.N., but I also had a number of other meetings, for example with the German Federal Foreign Office. For them, it means they get unfiltered views from Washington. What kind of policy should we as a country pursue? They simply want gossip, insights. At the same time, I get information from them on how they think. It is give and take.

Her colleague in Europe, Peter Matthews, describes in some detail what a behind-the-scenes and effectively hidden activity could look like by explaining how the organisation worked to get its message across to the European Commission when the EU was shifting leadership. Collateral contacted actors that ‘could champion this’, and a minister of foreign affairs of a European country came onboard with Collateral’s ideas:

We then had six months before the new EU leadership took office. We gathered a diverse group of think tank people, media and university scholars. It may have been seen as unbalanced by others. But that was our mission being fulfilled – impact. We met with the new leadership on her first day of office. We presented our memo. I’d like to think that it was important!

These voices indicate how a transnational think tank can operate in relation to other significant players. It may open its doors to others in secret, construing themselves as an unofficial platform in diplomatic matters, as information brokers, or as extensions and proxies for state agents. In doing so, they choose their interlocutors at their own discretion, pursuing a particular interest. As Peter Matthews said, this ‘may be seen as unbalanced by others’, indicating that it departs from general norms of openness and representativity, but to Collateral that was ‘impact’.

We observed a similar form of secrecy practice when participating at a Re-Brand lunch discussion held at a European hotel outside the site of a broader event. It was an invitation-only lunch, not announced in the official programme and known only to invitees and staff. The lunch offered an opportunity for a small number of persons to meet and discuss the question of ‘what to do with the Arctic’ – the context being the Arctic ice melt, which provides business opportunities for logistics and oil companies, amongst others. Yet, uncertainty in relation to the legal standing of the Arctic area made investments risky.

Participating at the lunch were a Nordic prime minister, a few members of the Arctic Council, one scientist and CEOs or top managers from several corporations interested in the Arctic. A few participants were offered the opportunity of introducing their views on the topic while the others were eating. In this closed setting, the attending prime minister told the corporate leaders that they were welcome to the Arctic, as long as they followed existing regulations, whereas the CEO of a European oil company talked about the challenges and importance of establishing corporate guidelines.

In instances such as these, think tanks efficiently hide knowledge and maintain the secret as long they see it as strategically convenient to do so. Think tanks invite participants, set the agenda and control the discursive process. By closing their doors and inviting select actors to engage in a conversation outside of the public limelight, they may get a message across and steer policymaking in ways that would not be possible when acting in full light.

However, as these are think tanks that have established themselves outside their respective countries of origin, they must exercise caution, so as not to spark

suspicions that they are working for foreign interests. At the US headquarters of Xpand, Associate Director Raoul Parotti describes how the organisation must be careful with the kinds of activities it engages in, as it is not uncommon for staff members around the world to be considered spies. Thus, Xpand also attempts to engage in less politically sensitive projects, like education or the labour market, in order to attract less attention. Still, as Mr Smith, President of Xpand Europe maintains, the secrecy of some significant projects may in the think tank's view be legitimated by the intention of doing good. In his words, they are 'helping them [clients] make the world a better place'.

Transnational think tanks sometimes exercise secrecy, they maintain and hide knowledge, in their diplomatic efforts. In so doing, they may intervene behind the scenes in foreign policy matters and in issues of global diplomatic interest, such as the Arctic ice melt. In contrast to the organisation of secret events, however, is the strategic display of secrecy, which aims to increase the actor's status.

### *Displaying Secrets*

Knowledge is commonly recognised as a source of power. Knowing something that others do not potentially means being in control of a valuable resource. Secret knowledge thus has the capacity to differentiate actors from one another. Knowledge may also be intentionally exhibited in the interest of status and dominance over others. Simmel (1950) suggested that the pronounced exclusion of outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession amongst those who are in the know, as it were. And as Tanya Marie Luhrmann noted, the concealment of something creates 'property, something that is possessed' (1989: 136). If acknowledged by others, having this knowledge may contribute to hierarchisation, 'wherein secrecy cedes social power to those who control the flow of treasured information' (Simmel 1950: 332). Hence, the concealment of certain activities may generate more than the mere advancement of policy – or 'the making of a better world', to quote Mr Smith from Xpand. They also form part of a process of status performance, demonstrating the organiser as the possessor of a secret that could be of value to others. The verb 'possess' or the preposition 'inside' should not be taken to indicate that the secret knowledge shaped within these organisations marks the end of a process. Rather, the construction of secrecy involves a constant negotiation of status and dominance, as possession of knowledge in these cases is fluid and continuously contested.

When we first attempted to gain access to Re-Brand, top-level director Humphrey Gluck told us that 'we [Re-Brand] have the privilege of being private', indicating that it could close its doors to outsiders as it saw fit. In the following years, we would observe this privilege practised on many occasions, often pondering Re-Brand's need for secrecy, albeit dressed up as privacy: concealing its doings, keeping the public in the unknown, while calling them 'private'. On many occasions, we were denied entrance as we tried to join events which were publicly known but only open for special invitees. We could only speculate about the think tank's rationale and justifications for this. Why would they not let two researchers

in, not even to events that were publicised? Over time, we became aware of this simultaneous display of openness to the public and restrictiveness as an organisational strategy in which secrecy was practised in ways that could increase its status. It could gain leverage not only by possessing knowledge of interest to others, but also because it could set the boundaries between those in the know and those outside. This strategy was later commented upon by Mr Gluck, who told us that these large public events are used as 'flagships' which are 'showcased'. This way, he said, Re-Brand gains attraction from the 'right people', who may then become interested in participating in the other, even more restricted events.

Think tanks can thus fashion an alluring status of mysteriousness by showing to the world that an event is taking place, yet conspicuously closing its doors, merely inviting a selected few. The mystery makes the organiser appear opaque and impermeable. Although the secrecy surrounding such activities is routinely disclaimed by transnational think tanks, which declare themselves transparent, their logic postulates a certain level of secrecy as acceptable. As the Security Manager at Re-Brand, Vitalo Peruso, explained to us, Re-Brand must protect its high-level participants; they would not come if doors were not closed. Even if this argument is well-motivated and rational, the consequence of publicly protecting secrets is that a mysterious aura of something unknowable to outsiders emerges.

The use of secrecy to increase a transnational think tank's status must, however, be undertaken with discretion and according to context. Displaying secrecy does not work everywhere. Rob Parson, a high-ranking manager at Xpand in an authoritarian-leaning regime echoes his US colleague: 'We are American, and we are often thought of as spies. People are claiming: 'You are the CIA!' Therefore, Xpand needs to be seen as open, constantly proving not to be what it is accused of being. When we met Parson, he argued against our intention not to mention his name or the name of the think tank: 'There is nothing I could say that would be secret'. There are several possible interpretations of this statement, especially given that the security agency of the state in which this particular Xpand operates is known to respect neither secrecy nor privacy. In his world, apparently, too much secrecy can be a liability, and secrecy is a resource that needs to be handled with the utmost discretion.

### *Hiding in the Shadows*

In the shadow of the public event, think tanks may stage and perform a more clandestine game of influence. In this case, the think tank may use the shadow of the public event to communicate something non-public. The emblematic form of public communication is the panel discussion. There is the little podium and the proclaimed experts lined up in comfortable chairs with the think tank logo splashed repeatedly across the wall behind them. Attending events such as these is at first bewildering, because they may look like all talk. Think tank staff make it clear, however, that such events are part of a larger strategy of self-presentation as a consequential actor in foreign relations and diplomatic interest. Thus, the idea is not merely to share insights, but primarily to communicate that the think tank

is able to attract the *right* expertise and the *right* public, that it is 'in-the-know'. In the transnational version, this often plays out as a form of indirect and discreet diplomacy (cf. Nye 2008: 105) by which values are displayed and the organisation demonstrates with whom it is interested in having a dialogue.

We met Peter Matthews, Deputy Director of Collateral, at his offices in a European city, where he elaborated on the theme of shadowed activities and how they may be discreetly drawn upon for diplomatic interests. He told us that the mandate of Collateral in Europe is not primarily to do its own research or advocate for any specific issues, which is what is commonly communicated as the main purpose of Collateral, but to function as 'Collateral's embassy in Europe' and to reach out and 'engage with its audiences' on matters which will often relate to foreign relations. To this end, it often arranges panel discussions, events which are both open and secluded. The interested public may join, but what is not communicated is that the event is aimed at the 'exact right constituency', as Matthews had it: if they attend, the panel is successful. Other participants convey a nice image of Collateral as popular, but they are not important for the direct influence that the think tank aims for. Giving the example of Iran, Matthews explained that 'we have distilled the constituency in this matter to a list of ten politicians that we want to read our policy briefs'. Bringing these ten into a panel or an audience at a public event is key to communicating Collateral's ideas on this matter. The other participants are practically redundant, but that is self-evidently not communicated to them. The key message sent from the panel is in practice intelligible only by those initiated, those in the target group with whom Collateral intends to communicate. Thus, in the shadow of the most open event there is a semi-secret part, a communication between the think tank and what is deemed the target group. It is part of a double-layered game played in the field, meaning that only key participants know how to interpret Collateral's message. This contributes to what we might perceive as 'secretion' practices (Zempléni 1996). While communicating on a topic, the think tank exhibits signs of secrets without disclosing them.

Showcased public events may also be used to direct attention away from activities that are intentionally kept secret. Events at Re-Brand, for instance, are usually by invitation only, but a select few are broadcast online for the public to follow. As we observed first-hand, what the public can follow online directs attention away from, and by implication conceals, the many non-public meetings, which you cannot follow online or read about in the programme. In fact, these obscured meetings are often of the highest significance. For instance, as Mr Gluck explained, at the private meetings arranged alongside public events, companies may negotiate a new telecom programme with some trusted partners, or heads of state may discuss what to do with the Arctic. Thus, although Re-Brand claims that it is open to the public, its open activities are few and concealing the numerous closed meetings, which are hidden to the public.

Shadowing is part of a power play with two key resources involved: the keeping of secrets and the management of an image of openness and seclusion. As Beryl Bellman (1981) shows in her analysis of secrecy as a phenomenon, it is character-

ised by the way communication is controlled rather than the content. Presenting and talking about knowledge that is partly kept secret while at the same time coming forth as open and transparent is a way of practising secrecy.

### **Encapsulating Knowledge into Secrecy**

Secrecy may do magic for a transnational think tank (cf. Luhmann 1989). As Hannah Arendt famously wrote: 'Real power begins where secrecy begins' (1951: 386). Yet, the usage of secrecy is highly ambivalent. Secrecy should be seen not as the opposite of transparency, but rather as a complement and precondition for openness. Secrecy and transparency exist as socially embedded practices in a dynamic relationship (cf. Birchall 2011; Cronin 2020), opening up and closing off in the interest of the organiser (cf. Strathern 2000). This paradox holds true for the transnational think tanks examined in this article. They work as shutter boxes, opening up certain parts at certain times while simultaneously closing others.

To understand the social and political consequences of these shuttering practices, we propose that transnational think tanks are actively attempting to seal knowledge about part of their activities into a time capsule that they can activate at their discretion. As Niklas Luhmann (1997) explains, the arcane aspects of secrecy centre on time; what is not communicated externally is still in the hands of the organiser and may provide the advantage of knowing what others do not. This knowledge can be drawn upon in the interest of gaining leverage relative to other actors who may want it too – or at least, others cannot know what they do not know. When the time is right, according to the organiser's judgement, only then will the content be revealed. Hiding knowledge, making it arcane, thus creates future possibilities (Horn 2011: 108).

Knowledge publicly made secret is also a resource, since the mysterious aura constructed around the publicly unknown often works to the advantage of the think tank. As Jacques Derrida describes, actors can construct value by keeping secrets based upon speculation 'of the capital secret or on the capital of the secret' (1994: 245). Successfully constructing such capital thus confers an advantage onto the organiser. In practice, there need not be anything specific hidden for the effect of secrecy to come into play. A threat of something being revealed may suffice. The Re-Brand events, for example, were all proclaimed as following the Chatham House Rule, which, according to the organiser, is meant to safeguard the event as a 'safe space' for participants. Disciplinary actions may be taken against people who break the rule – they might not be allowed to return, for example. Agreeing on silence, however, implies secrecy and the threat that someone would reveal what has been said.

The dynamic and strategic deployment of secrecy by transnational think tanks constitutes an integral part of a power game, since they are deliberately attempting to shape policy. As Horn writes: 'The secret functions as an organising principle of social relations: states of knowledge, positions of power, bonds of allegiance or intentions of betrayal' (2011: 110). Concealment constructs property of certain



knowledge that others do not have as ‘something that is possessed’ (Luhmann 1989: 136). Actors hold onto that knowledge, cherishing it as being of particular importance. In fact, we maintain with Luhmann that concealing knowledge can reinforce the belief in its claims.

## **Conclusion: The Soft Power of Secrecy Practices**

The contribution of this article is to provide insight into how transnational think tanks both create and use secrecy as a resource for gaining leverage as discreet non-state diplomatic actors with a potential to play significant roles as soft-power actors in foreign and transnational relations. Secrecy practices comprise a critical part of the soft power of public diplomacy (cf. Nye 2008) as constructed by transnational think tanks. We term these activities ‘discreet diplomacy’ – ‘discreet’ because they are not supposed to be (fully) public, and ‘diplomacy’ because the issues in which think tanks engage are interstate issues. Even the most public of their activities may have a shadowed or hidden aspect. They unfold as an intricate interplay of hiding, shadowing and showing off, in which think tanks actively prevent, restrict and alter what is to be known by the public. It is a game of power, wherein those involved take part in shaping policies in foreign and transnational relations. As a consequence, think tanks and their funders may get access to policymaking, access which is closed off to the general public. The extent to which they succeed is impossible to measure, partly because these would-be victories and the processes behind them are primarily secret and partly because the issues they activate and participate in are both long-term and messy. It is a challenging task to discover, for instance, which actor specifically made an impact on the process leading up to decisions taken by the Arctic Council on the ice melt. But these transnational think tanks are there. Both the think tanks and their invitees participate in a heuristic set of secrecy practices that, while effectively concealing important knowledge, also make it possible for that knowledge to be shared with a selected group. In turn, it is the ability to participate in these secrecy practices that confirms the experience of belonging in the group that renders an aura of prestige and appeal to the semi-secret events.

None of this comes as a surprise to those in the game. As Michael Taussig’s (1999) retelling of ‘the law of silence’ in the Colombian drug wars demonstrated, everyone living in the area was initiated: ‘We all “knew” this, and they “knew” what we “knew”, but there was no way that could be easily articulated’ (1999: 6). Knowing what not to tell is what must be known to be a player in the game. Importantly, knowing this rule is essential to the soft power of secrecy practices. In the circles around transnational think tanks, the game around secrecy is common knowledge. The active not-knowing fuels the soft power of discreet diplomacy.

We submit that the power game we have identified is typical not only of the organisations we have studied empirically, but more broadly to the expanding sphere of organisations such as the Trilateral Commission; CEIP; International Chamber of Commerce; European Round Table of Trade; World Economic Forum; the Bilderberg Group; RAND; St Petersburg International Economic Forum; and,

recently, Brilliant Minds and Google Camp. Such global governance actors may be able to construct a situation in which they have vast degrees of freedom to decide what should be done in a situation without referring to protocol. Heralding the norm of transparency makes them legitimate, and closing doors makes high-level people interested in coming to deliberate behind those doors. From this position, these organisations can choose freely whom to invite into their communities, whom to be guests at their meetings, or whom to be members of their boards, and they can determine what to negotiate and what to make public. Secluded and mysterious organisational practices are pivotal in maintaining the allure and seductive capacity of these organisations.

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## **Notes**

1. Note that all characters that figure in the ethnographic excerpts have been anonymised, and the location, gender, age and specific policy area renamed to protect the individuals' and the organisations' anonymity (and secrecy). Most of our interlocutors did not ask for anonymity, but some did. In addition, some observations were undertaken under the Chatham House Rule: what is said within the room stays within the room. Thus, in order to give an account of some of the events, we have made a number of alterations so that no statements can be traced back to individuals or to the organisations for which they work.
2. The challenges of doing fieldwork in high-level organisational settings in the field of diplomacy, policy and foreign relations have been described by, amongst others, Goldman (2005); Roy (2010); Kuus (2013); Neumann (2012); and Garsten and Sörbom (2018).
3. Anthropological literature on transparency and visibility as part of contemporary governance structures is now sizeable. See, for example, Garsten and Montoya (2008); Moors (2019); and West and Sanders (1994).

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