



WHAT IS A THINK TANK?

History, roles, models and state of the sector.

Enrique Mendizabal, On Think Tanks



THINK WHAT?

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR?

“ I do a lot of work with policymakers, but how much effect am I having? It’s like they’re coming in and saying to you, **‘I’m going to drive my car off a cliff. Should I or should I not wear a seatbelt?’**”

And you say, **‘I don’t think you should drive your car off the cliff.’**

And they say, **‘No, no, that bit’s already been decided—the question is whether to wear a seatbelt.’**

And you say, **‘Well, you might as well wear a seatbelt.’** And then they say, **‘We’ve consulted with policy expert Rory Stewart and he says . . .’**”

WHAT IS A THINK TANK?

What is a think tank?

Thinktanker's answers

**When I say
'Think Tank'
what's the first thing
you think of?**

The "public's" answers

THINK TANK - WHAT IS IN THE LABEL?

Think Tank
Research Centre
Public Policy Research Institute
Idea Factory
University Research Centre
Investigation Centre
Laboratory of Ideas

...

WHAT IS YOUR LABEL OF CHOICE?

- What are think tanks called in your country?
- Would the average voter know what a think tank is?

Answer in Menti with the code **9297 5448**

FROM NORMATIVE DEFINITIONS

At one extreme, the definition is written into law:

United States' legal code says: 501 (c)(3) organisations are non-for-profit, non-partisan, and organised for educational, religious, charitable and scientific purposes (Harvard Law Review, 2002).

More common, however:

Non-profit, independent of the state and dedicated to communicating research findings to policymakers. (Some now accept the presence of state-funded think tanks or state-own think tanks).

TOWARDS MORE FUNCTIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

“Viewed collectively, think tanks [...] are organizations that **generate** policy-oriented research, analysis, and **advice** on domestic and international issues in an effort to enable policymakers and the public to make informed decisions about public policy issues” (McGann 2006)


“Independent (and usually private) policy research institutes containing people involved in **studying** a particular policy area or a broad range of policy issues, actively **seeking to educate or advise** policy makers and the public through a number of channels.”
(Buldioski 2012)

DIFFICULT TO PIN-POINT

- The common definition describes [‘think tanks’] as a distinctive class of organisations – different and separate from universities, markets, and the state
- However, these think tanks only exist in the imaginary of those who idealized the Brookings and Chatham Houses of this world.
- Most think tanks exist on the boundaries with others.

SELF-LABELLING EXERCISE

- Tom Medvetz argues that the act of labelling is a **political act** – this is the art of forging an identity – John Schwartz calls it an intellectual territory
- The label is adopted and rejected with equal passion by organisations wishing to join or set themselves apart from the think tank community.
- Calls attention to the boundaries of the definition:



Might be more useful to
ask what do they do

Answer in Menti with the code **9297 5448**

FUNCTIONS INCLUDE

- They generate research and knowledge
- They can advance and promote policy ideas and solutions;
- They can provide legitimacy to policies and politicians (whether it is ex-ante or ex-post)
- They are advisors in policy issues, but also on implementation;
- They can act as spaces for debate and deliberation –even as a sounding board for policymakers and opinion leaders. In some context they provide a safe house for intellectuals and their ideas;
- They can provide a financing channel for political parties and other policy interest groups;
- They attempt to influence the way the policy process works;
- They are providers of cadres of experts and policymakers for political parties and governments;
- They act as auditor or social monitors; etc.

THEY SHARE MUCH WITH OTHERS

Source: Stephen Yeo

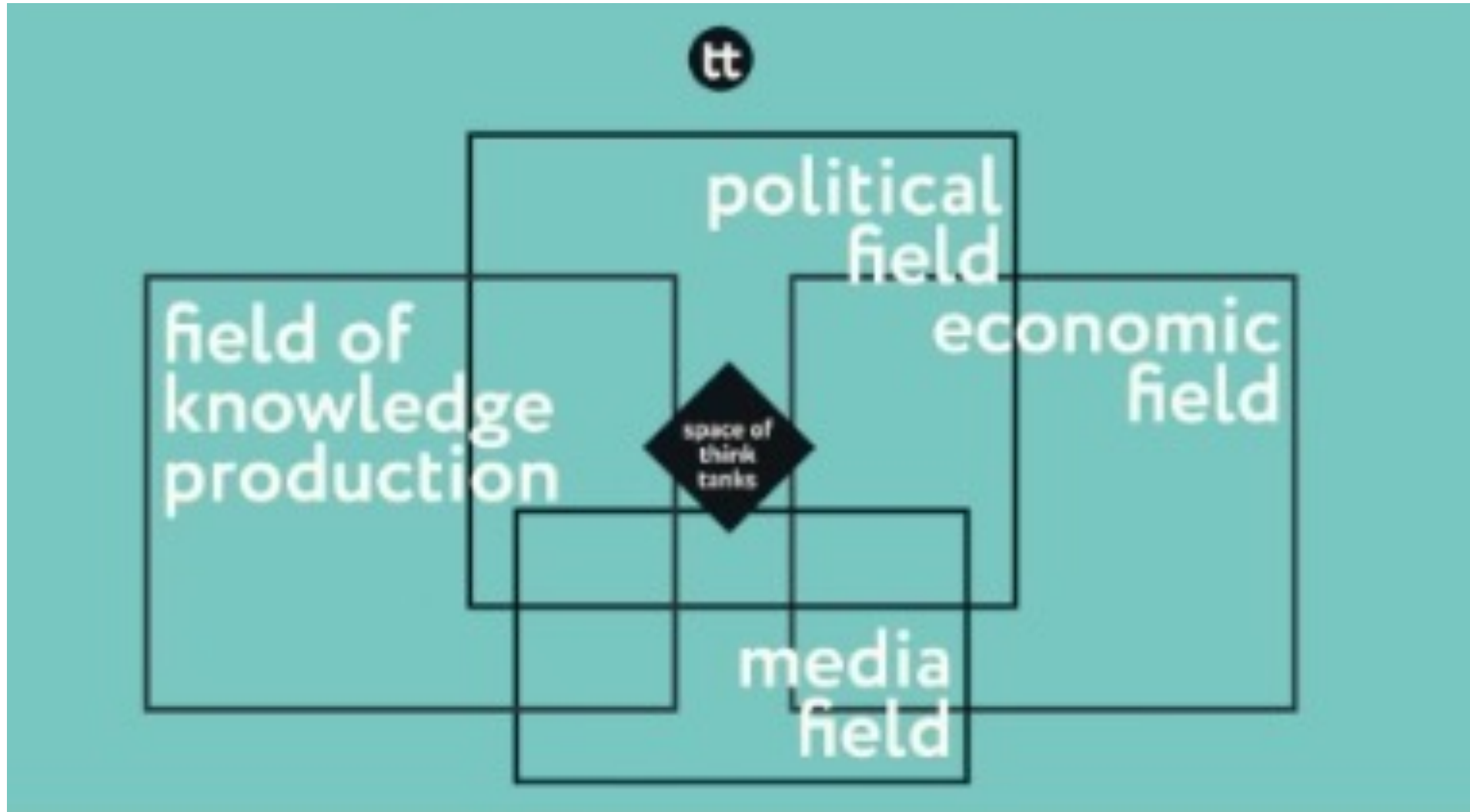
Message based on	Ideology, values or interests	Applied, empirical or synthesis research	Theoretical or academic research
Mode of work			
Independent research	Editorial Media		“Oxbridge”
Consultancy/contract	Internal think tanks Ideological centres Interest groups NGOs Lobbies		Applied research centres in universities
Influence/advocacy	Political Parties		Chief scientific advisors, Academic/Opinion leaders

WHEN DOES AN ORGANISATION STOP BEING ...

- a think tank that generates some of its income through consultancy and become just a **consultancy**?
- an academic think tank, based in a university, and focused on a range of fairly broad and theoretical issues, and become just an **academic research centre**?
- an advocacy think tank with strong ideological arguments to become just an **activist organisation**?
- a think tank with a strong covering power to become simply a **commission or network**?
- a think tank with a strong media presence to become a not-for-profit (or for profit even) **media outfit**?
- a publicly funded and managed think tank based in a ministry or another public body to become a **policymaking body** itself?

THE SPACE OF THINK TANKS

Source: Thomas Medvetz



THIS HAS AN IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION ITSELF

Depending on which boundary they are on, we could argue that they need to have people and teams with skills to:

- Appreciate and undertake research (boundary with academia);
- Communicate effectively to boarder audiences and the public (boundary with the media);
- Undertake analysis and deliver solutions (boundary with consultancy);
- Analyse policy and provide actionable recommendations (boundary with policy and politics); and
- Work with citizens to develop new ideas and solutions (boundary with NGOs).

THINK TANKS “GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY”

- The State
- Political Parties
- The Private Sector and Private Advocates
- International development agencies

*“Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody” (Bob Dylan)*

CONTEXT MATTERS

Further complicated by the effects that the context can have on the formation and development of think tanks

- Political context –can be a driver and a constraint for their formation
- Economic context –can define who are the main funders
- Legal context –can determine the business models chosen
- Education policy/state of higher education –focus of think tanks

...

THE CONSEQUENCE IS AN INCREASINGLY MESSY COMMUNITY

- There are regional and national traditions – and waves of formation
- National and sectoral particularities
- New and ever-changing business models that buck the trend
- Greater competition
- And less trust in experts and expertise thus a strategic rejection of the label



HISTORY MATTERS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN THINK TANKS

- Provides a case study to consider the evolution of think tanks in our own countries
- Draws attention to the power of narratives in the formation and development of think tanks
- And the changing nature of the label, think tanks and the community

FROM MEDICINE TO MARKETING

The history of think tanks in the US is marked by a series of **waves of development** which explain the great heterogeneity in the current landscape.

They are partly driven by the changing role that science, the state, the private sector and civil society are assumed to play in society.

SOCIETY AS THE PATIENT

- American Association of Economics (1885)
- Bureau of Economic Research (1899)
- National Civil Federation (1900)
- American Bureau of Industrial Research (1904)
- Chicago Civil Federation (1894)
 - Experts, funders, citizens, and policymakers came together
 - Treated the symptoms and (later) the causes of social “maladies”
- Russell Sage Foundation (1907)
 - Marks the beginning of a new “professional cadre” of policy researchers

EFFICIENCY AND VALUE FOR MONEY

- Twentieth Century Fund
- National Bureau of Economic Research
- New York Bureau of Municipal Research (1907)
- Institute for Government Research (1916 – then Brookings)
 - Sought to influence policy from the outside
 - Focused on improvements in government processes
 - Flourished thanks to professional philanthropy

CRISIS AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The Great Depression and the First World War changed the focus towards reflecting upon and explaining what had happened

- Twentieth Century Fund (1922)
- Committee for Economic Development (1942)
- RAND Corporation (1948)
 - Recommendations
 - Plans for long term results
 - Plans including implementation
 - Is this where the label was coined?

SALOMON'S HOUSE AND THE REVOLVING DOOR

After the Second World War, Brookings, Russell Sage Foundation and NBER offer advice and moved to DC to serve agencies under pressure to deliver the complex New Deal

- Council of Economic Advisers (1946)
 - Thinktankers take on “boundary roles”

Such was the extend of the “revolving door” that The Economist described Brookings’ researchers as [President] Kennedy’s *experts on tap*. And RAND was the main recruiting ground for the Department of Defence.

THE IDEOLOGICAL MARKETPLACE

- The Hudson Institute (1961)
- The Heritage Foundation (1973)
- The Cato Institute (1977)
 - Explicitly ideological
 - Funding increasingly partisan and private (foundations reduced their role)
 - Set up by people already in politics
 - Think tanks adopt new corporate practices and marketing approaches

THE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUND

- Heritage has founded Heritage Action for America
- Think tanks in Washington DC and London have to worry about being hacked
- Think tanks in the Western Balkans are subject to State surveillance
- Think tanks across the world are subject to defamation laws
- Think tanks (and thinktankers) are increasingly and explicitly siding with parties and political leaders

SIMILAR WAVES ELSEWHERE

In Chile, China, Russia, etc.

These are defined by the growth of certain ideas, political or economic shocks, institutional reforms, etc.



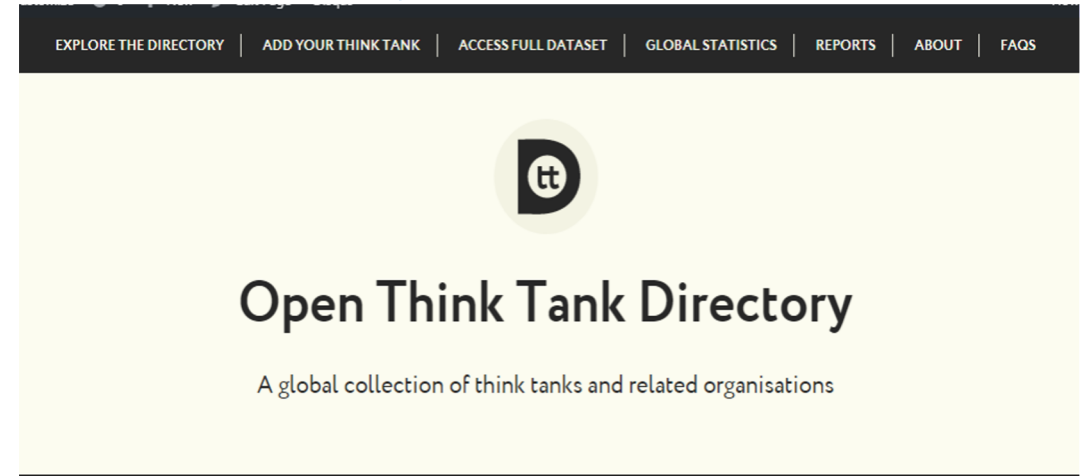
Can you recognise any “waves” in your country?



THE THINK TANK SECTOR WORLDWIDE

The Open Think Tank Directory

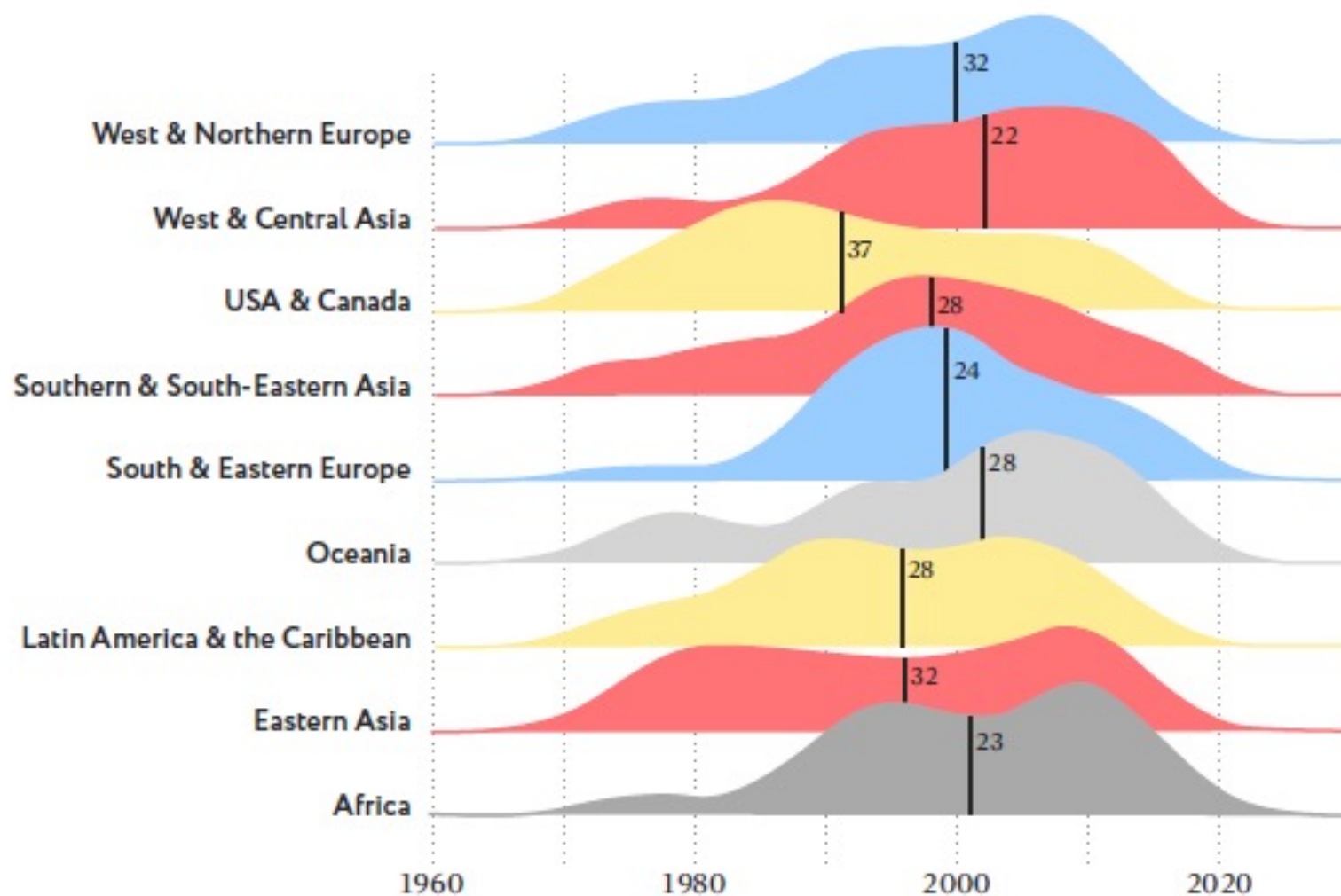
- Public global collection of think tanks and related organisations
- More than 50 [variables](#) (some yearly data collected since 2016)
- Yearly update and think tank consultation
- Organisation's profiles, world stats and downloadable database
- Consultancies help in development and maintenance: UNICEF, BOSCH stiftung, USAID-Grupo Faro



The screenshot shows an Airtable interface with a public link to the Open Think Tank Directory data. The table has the following columns: ottid_id, tt_name_vo, tt_name_en, tt_init, and website. The data is as follows:

ottid_id	tt_name_vo	tt_name_en	tt_init	website
1	N-AS-1654	المعهد الأفغاني للدراسات الإستراتيجية	AISS	https://www.aiss.af
2	AS-1146	مؤسسة عدالت افغانستان	AJO	http://www.afj.org
3	U-AS-1637	شبكة تحليلگران افغانستان	AAN_AF	https://www.afc.af
4	U-AS-1630	Afghanistan Center for Training and Development	ACTD	http://www.actd.af
5	N-AS-1661	مؤسسة مطالعات اقتصادی و حقوقی افغانستان	AELSO	https://aelso.org
6	AS-1519	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit	AREU	https://areu.org
7	U-AS-1638	ATR Consulting (Assess Transform Reach)	ATR	https://atr-cons.org
8	U-AS-1634	Health Protection and Research Organization	HPRO	http://www.hpro.af
9	N-AS-1664	د کوه تحقيق او مطالعاتو مرکز	KUBHA	http://www.kubha.af
10	U-AS-1633	Organization for Sustainable Development & Research	OSDR	http://www.osdr.af
11	U-AS-1631	Sayara LS Research CSC	Sayara LS Research CSC	http://sayararesearch.org
12	U-AS-1629	Silk Route Training and Research Organization	SRTRO	https://www.srtro.af
13	N-AS-1661	The Aga Khan Foundation		https://www.akf.org

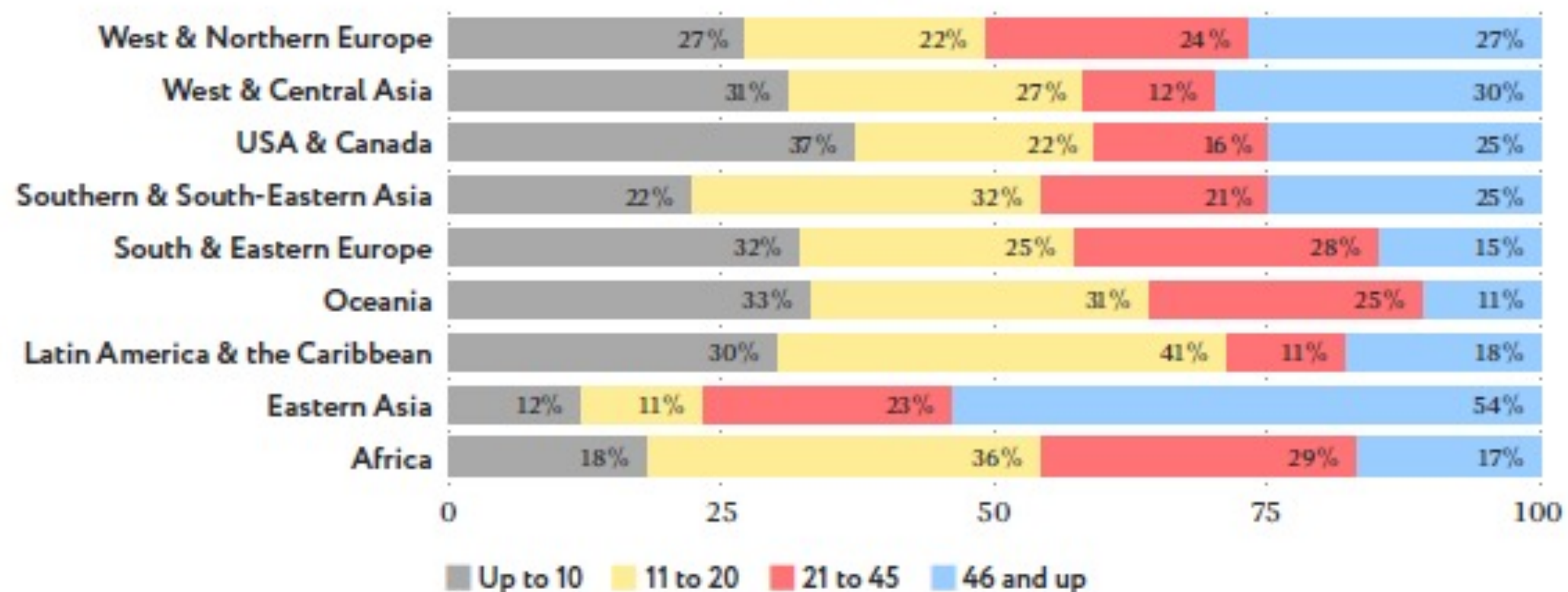
Think tank foundation date and average age by region



n: 2,470

Note: The line shows when half the think tanks in each region have been founded. The number is the average age of think tanks in the region. Date range starts in the 1960s for comparison purposes.

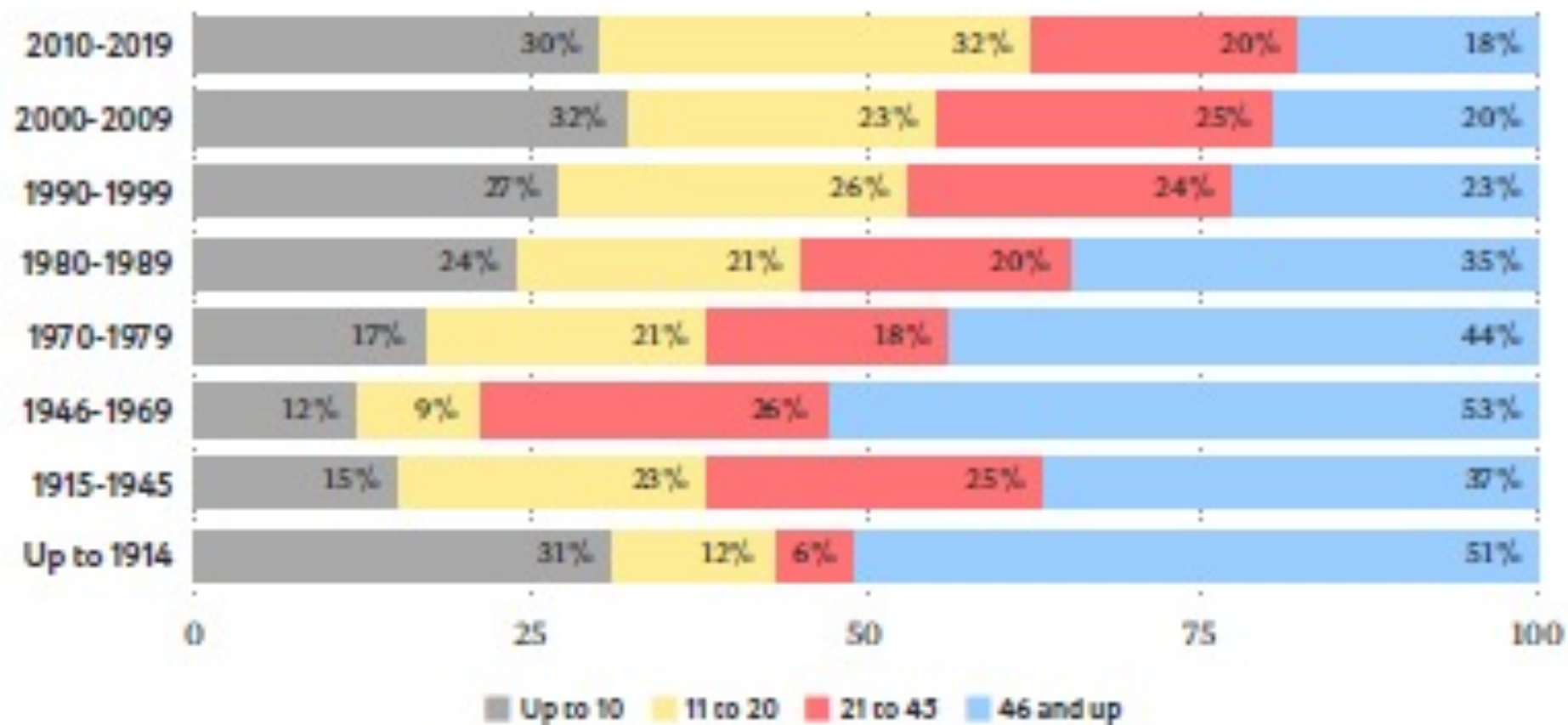
Staff size by region



n: 1,430

Note: Percentages have been rounded and might not add up to a 100.

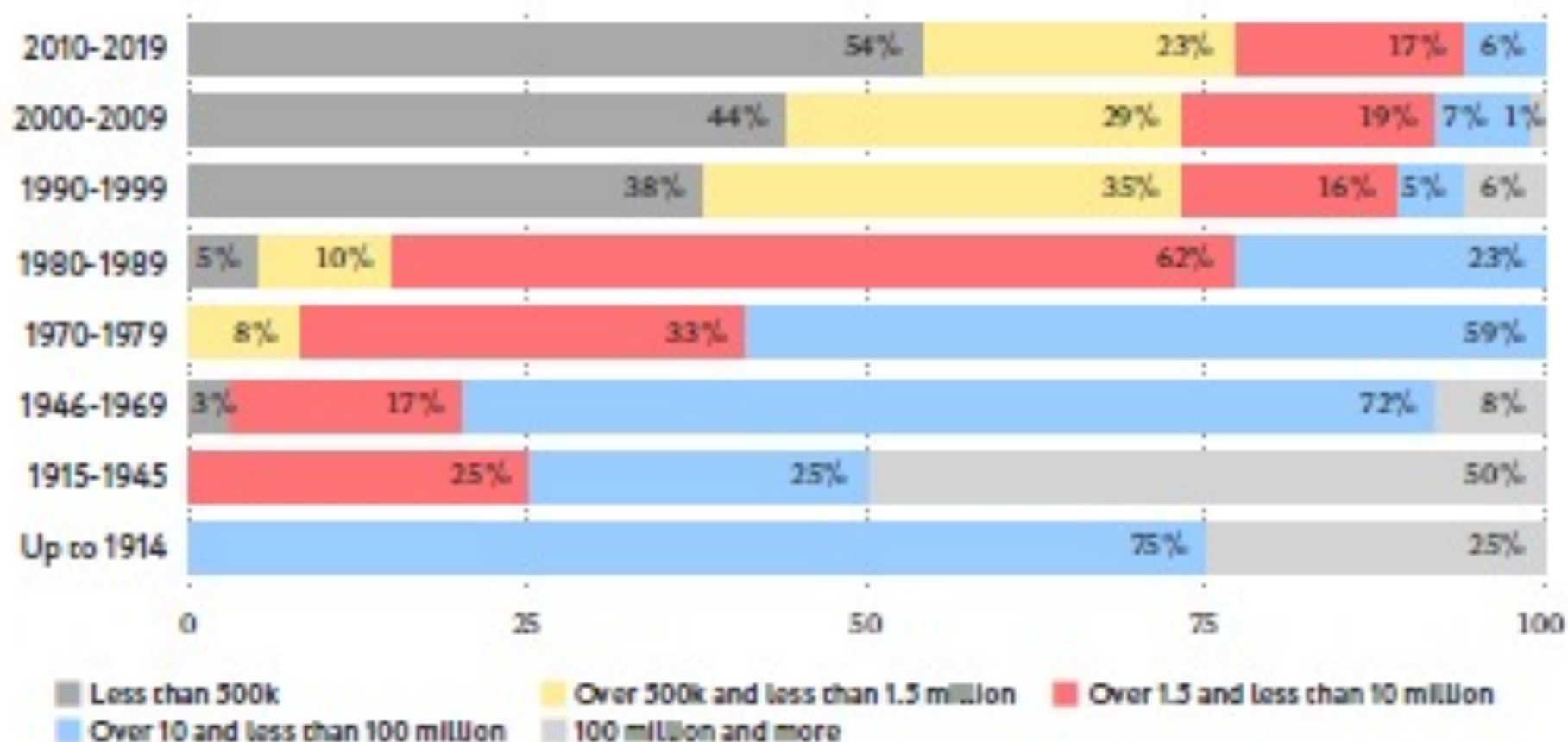
Date founded by staff size



n: 1,248

Note: Percentages have been rounded and might not add up to a 100.

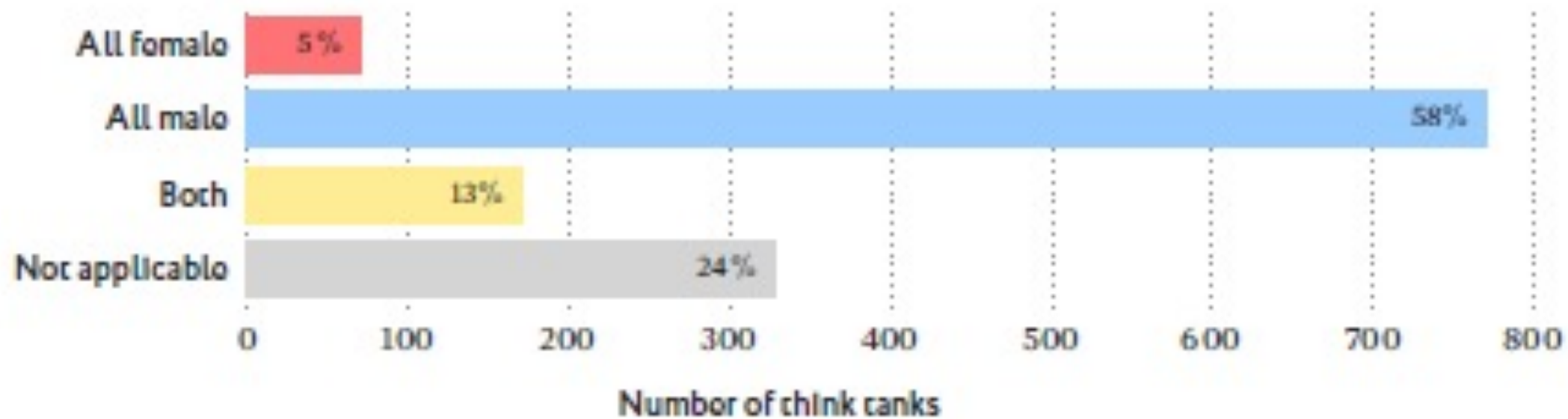
Turnover by date founded



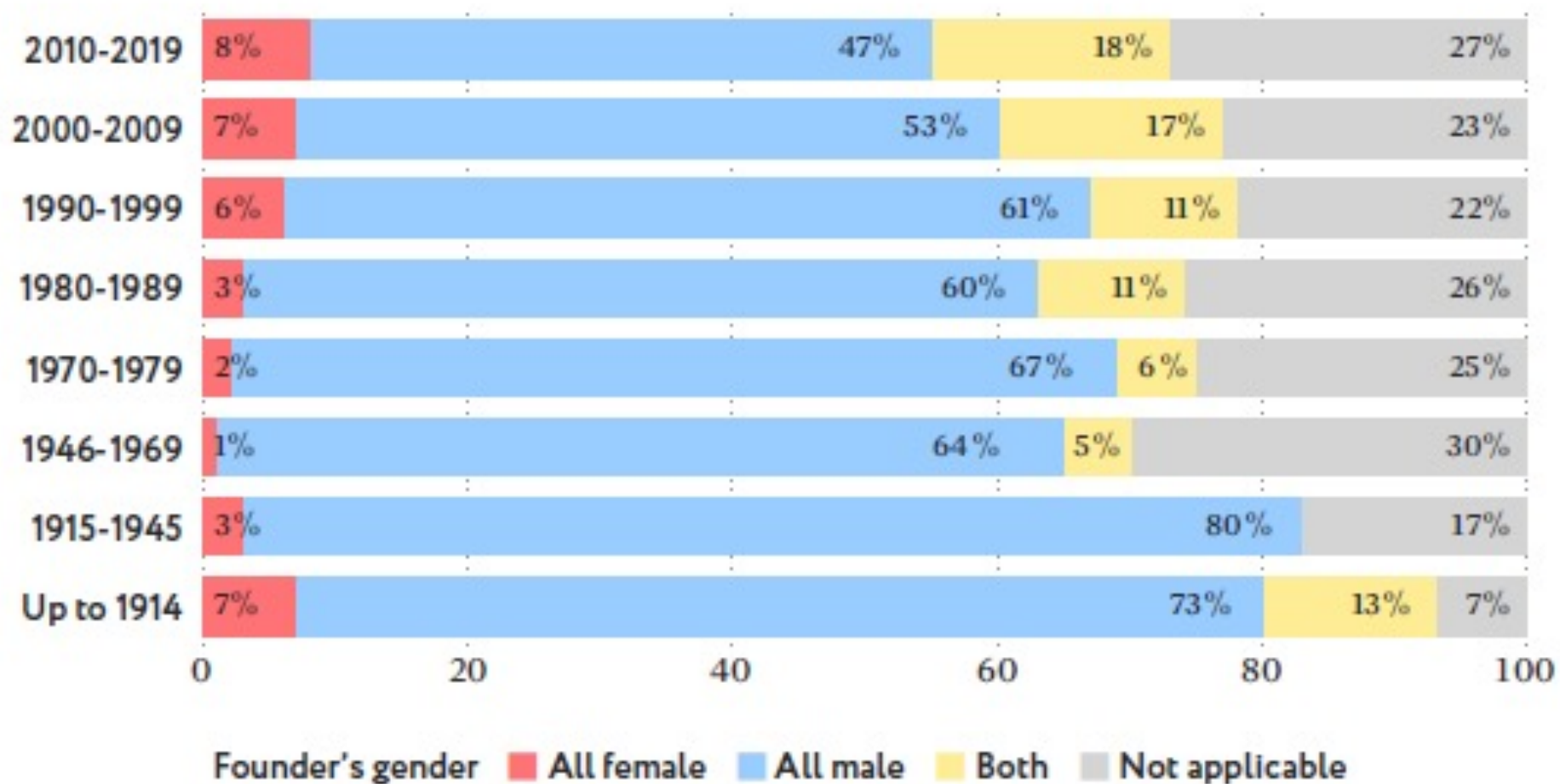
n: 201

Note: Percentages have been rounded and might not add up to a 100.

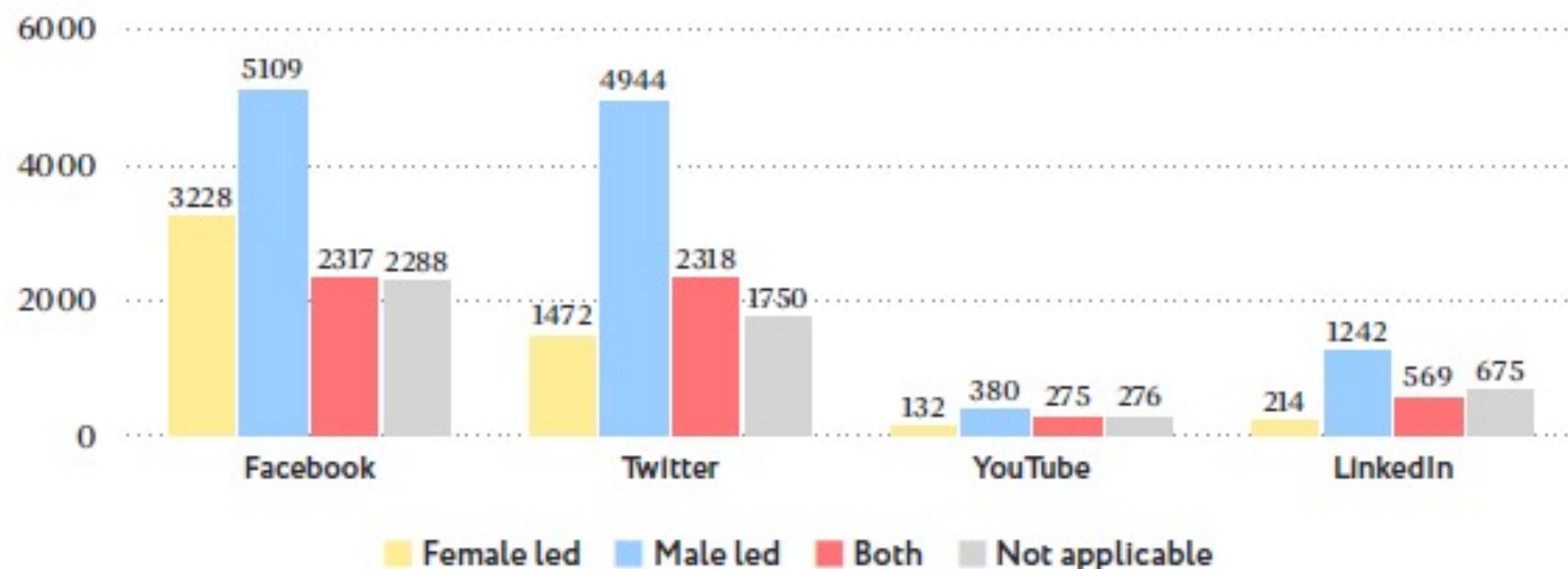
Gender of think tank founders



Proportion of founder's gender by date founded

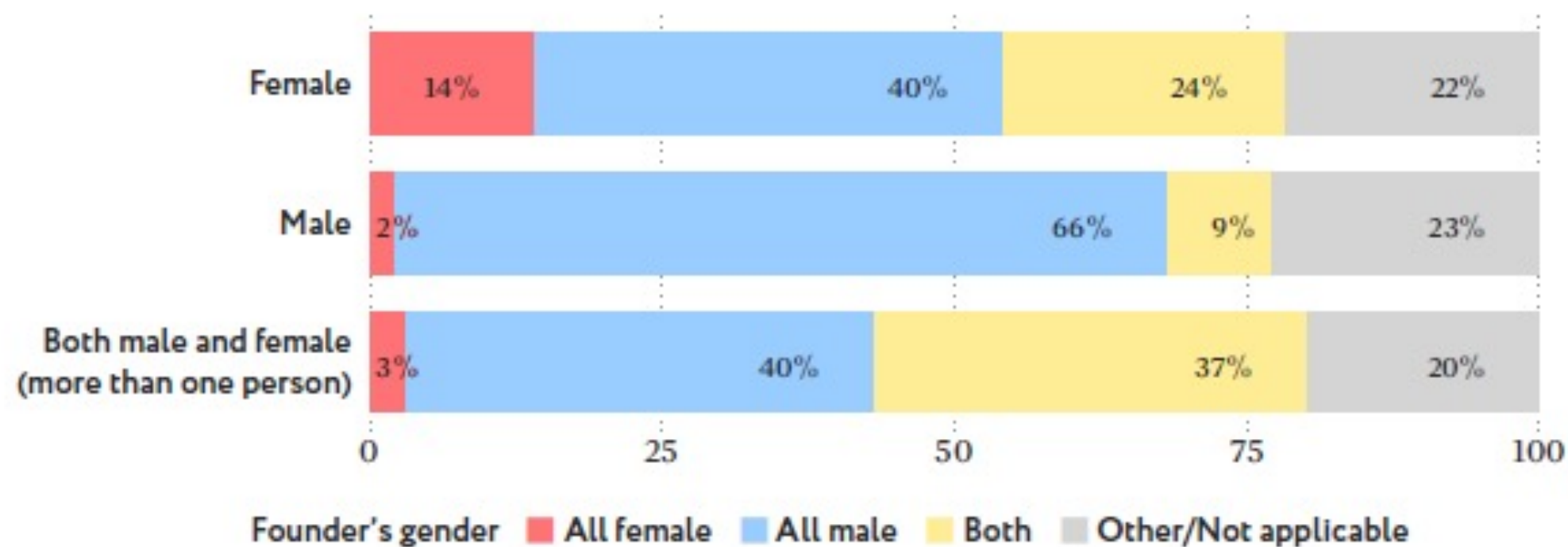


Median social media followers by gender of founder



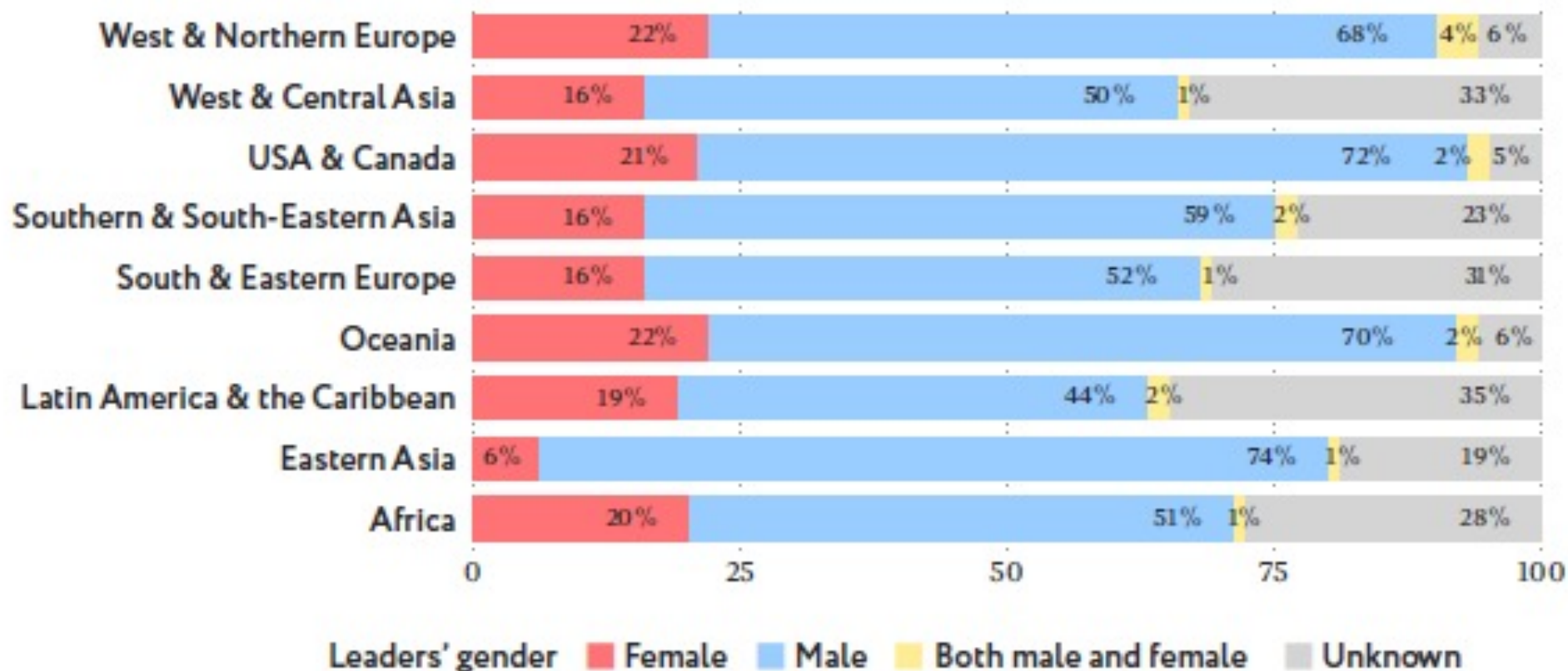
n: Twitter 944, Facebook 1,008, YouTube 674, LinkedIn 1,027

Percentage of think tanks by leader's gender and founder's gender



n: 1,168

Percentage of think tanks in each region by gender of leader

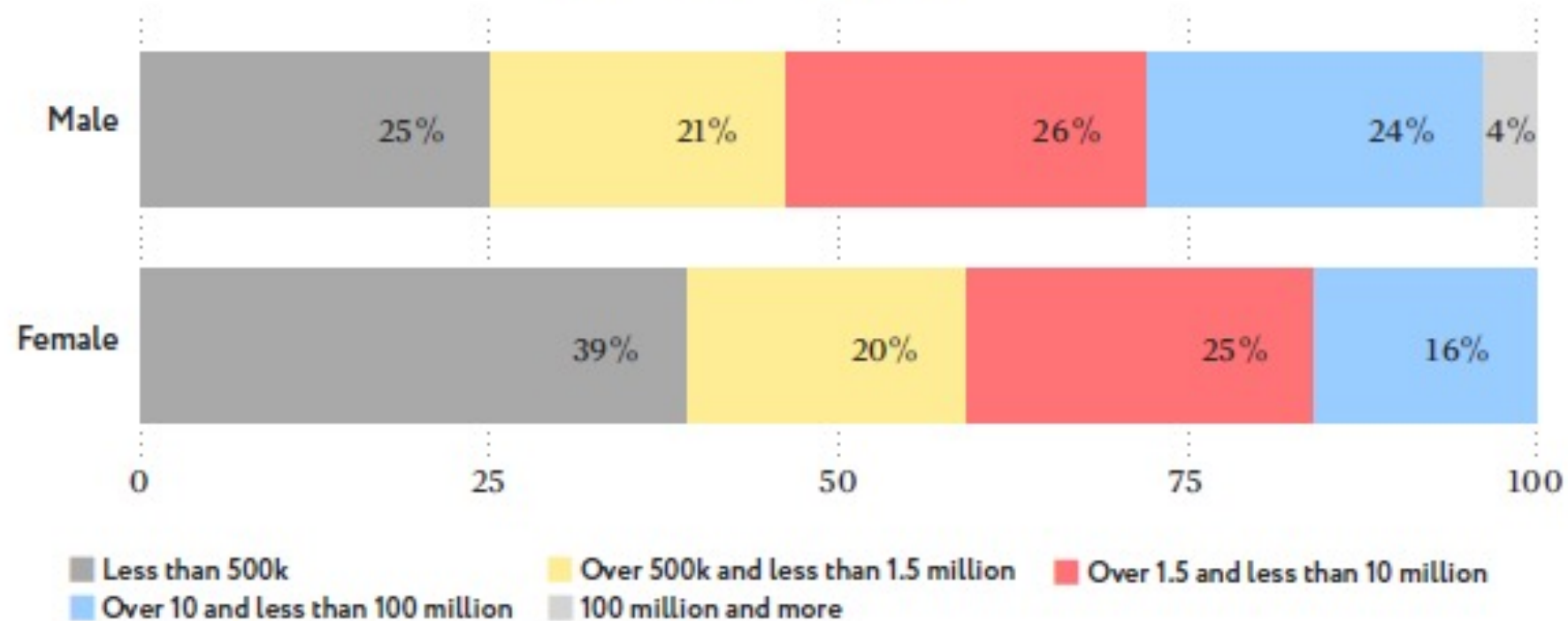


n: 2, 268

Note: 55 think tanks are led by both men and women, 494 by women, and 1,714 by men. There are 539 think tanks with no information on the gender of the leader.

Percentages have been rounded and might not add up to a 100.

Gender leader by turnover



n: 217

Note: Median male-led: USD 2,063,479.50, median female-led: USD 2,049,159. There were eight cases for both male and female leaders (median 138,724) and they are not shown as the groups broke up the data too much. Percentages have been rounded and might not add up to a 100.

REMMEMBER

- No think tank is exactly the same as others, and each context is different.
- There are lessons to be learned from all experiences
- Policy making is a messy process and there are many factors that build into it



Thank you!

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