

The Transparify Think Tank Integrity Check

In early 2017, Transparify conducted a workshop for thinktankers on how to manage reputational risks. During the workshop, we asked participants how they would react in a range of scenarios that may (or may not) generate reputational risks.

In line with Transparify's commitment to building the credibility of the think tank sector as a whole, we now share these scenarios in the hope that they will help thinktankers to think through reputational risks and prevent reputational damage.

We suggest that thinktankers select (and possibly adapt) the scenarios most salient to their own institutional context, and then convene their senior management teams and/or boards for a discussion of how the think tank would manage each scenario.

TRANSPARIFY



THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK INTEGRITY CHECK

HOW TO USE THE TOOL?

We recommend the following process:

This workshop can be conducted within a think tank or involving several organizations in a country or city. If the workshop involves several organizations, formally adopting a confidentiality rule may be helpful. At least three groups of three or four individuals each would be advisable.

A two-hour session can be a good starting point. In preparation for the session, print out the the questions on page 3 and the final versions of the scenarios in pages 4-14; enough for each group to have a full set. You could provide a “reading list” of articles relating to think tanks reputational risks to inform the discussion.

Start the workshop by introducing the issue, reflecting on the Tranparify ratings of the organizations present, and highlighting a recent case in which a think tank’s reputation has been damaged.

Split the participants into groups of three or four, ideally reflecting different roles and perspectives.

Ask each group to review each scenario and attempt to place them on two stacks: “Yes, this is OK” or No, this is unacceptable”. For each case, they should attempt to address the following key questions:

Would you agree to do this – or not?
Could this compromise your organization’s intellectual independence and integrity?
Could this be perceived to compromise your organization’s intellectual independence and integrity, for example in the case of a hack or leak of emails to the media?
Do you have systems, safeguards and processes in place to mitigate, monitor and manage all associated risks?
Are your staff and other collaborators aware of these systems, safeguards and processes? Do they comply with them in practice?

When the groups have had time to go over all the scenarios (all groups should look at the same scenarios), identify, in plenary, those in which there have been clear differences and explore what is behind them. Ask the groups to share the discussions they had.

Finally, encourage participants to share and suggest approaches, mechanisms, tools, etc. to mitigate, monitor and manage the reputational risks that have emerged from the discussion.

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK INTEGRITY CHECK

WHAT SHOULD I THINK ABOUT WHEN RESPONDING TO THESE SCENARIOS?

Would you agree to do this – or not?

Could this compromise your organization's intellectual independence and integrity?

Could this be perceived to compromise your organization's intellectual independence and integrity, for example in the case of a hack or leak of emails to the media?

Do you have systems, safeguards and processes in place to mitigate, monitor and manage all associated risks?

Are your staff and other collaborators aware of these systems, safeguards and processes? Do they comply with them in practice?

YES, this is OK

Place scenario here

NO, this is unacceptable

Place scenario here



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 1

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder asks to see a study he funded one week in advance so that his media and government relations teams can fully prepare for the day you launch it.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 2

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder asks to see an early draft of a study he funded so that he can provide comments on it. The funder has expertise in the field and tells you that you can decide freely whether to integrate these comments or not.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 3

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You hired an expert to work part-time on a long-term research project on different regulatory options and state subsidy schemes for a specific economic sector. In her spare time, the expert earns substantial additional income by doing consulting work for large companies working in this economic sector.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 4

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Transparify rates your think tank as “highly opaque” because your website does not list your funders. All other think tanks in your country are rated at least 4-star, or “broadly transparent”, because they disclose on their websites who funds them and how much each of these funders gives them.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 5

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder funded a study but preliminary research shows that the study’s conclusions are unlikely to please the funder. The funder asks you to stop working on this study and instead conduct a study on a different, “more interesting” topic.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 6

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You are planning a conference. Your funder insists that you remove one of the speakers from the draft list, and suggests a different speaker to include in his place. Both potential speakers are equally respected academics, but one is a noted critic of the funder’s industry, while the other is supportive of the industry.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 7

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You are organizing a major international conference abroad and one of your funders in the region approaches you with concerns that the conference line-up contains too few people who actually matter. The funder suggests that including a few representatives from two relevant parliamentary committees would make the conference much more interesting, policy-relevant and impactful (you agree with this analysis). The funder suggests that you send invitations to all parliamentarians on the relevant committees; the funder will later reimburse you for parliamentarians' travel and accommodation costs.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 8

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

As part of your commitment to transparency, you have recently instituted conflict of interest forms for your research staff. The original plan, publicly announced in a blog, was to collate all these forms and post them online. However, the statements – to everyone's surprise – reveal that most of your senior research staff hold shares in companies working in the sectors they specialize in.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 9

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your institution has always disclosed who funded a particular study by including the funder's logo and the statement that "This study was funded by X" on the last page of the study. A long-standing funder now approaches you and asks you to not include his logo and the accompanying text on the next report. You already list that funder's contribution and its purpose on your funding page, as you do for all funders, so interested third parties can still discover who funded the report by going to your website.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 10

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder asks for your next project outputs to include at least two op-eds in national newspapers. The funder specifies that these op-eds should be written by your staff, but published under the names of independent experts (with their consent) without attribution to your think tank.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 11

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

One of your foreign funders who maintains communications with your senior staff throughout the year is appalled at how little your Executive Director earns. “How does he survive off this?” he asks. The funder insists that part of his next multi-year funding commitment goes towards raising your ED’s salary by 33%.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 12

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your research team reached conclusions the funder does not like. The funder politely requests that you abandon the planned high profile launch event and media outreach and instead just quietly put the new study up on your website. You are free to re-allocate the funds earmarked for the launch as you wish.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 13

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder asks you to delay publication of your study for two weeks because “that way it will integrate better into our broader plan for stakeholder engagement”.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 14

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You are organizing a major international conference abroad and one of your funders in the region approaches you with concerns that two of the local civil society representatives you invited are “rabble-rousers” who lack intellectual depth, have nothing constructive to contribute to debates, and at worst may embarrass you by disrupting conference proceedings. The funder suggests two other local civil society representatives who you could invite to come to the conference instead.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 15

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A funder offers to fund a 4-page policy briefing note, explaining that no additional research is required. Instead, the funder just wants you to re-package conclusions and policy prescriptions from your previous studies (which were methodologically solid and, incidentally, align with the funder’s vested interests) so that his government relations team can hand them out at a political party’s conference.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 16

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A major long-standing funder of your think tank phones you in a panic. The next day, a rival think tank will put out a study criticizing a certain policy. Your think tank has long been publicly committed to the policy, which is aligned with its long-standing ideological preferences; the fact that the policy also financially benefits your funder is incidental to you. The funder tells you that she has been approached by the media for some live-on-air radio and TV interviews, but her comms team have no experience with radio or TV. The funder asks whether it would be possible to refer these journalists to your think tank for interviews, because your comms people “are so good at this kind of thing”.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 17

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

One of your senior scholars accidentally copies you in on an email in which he is trying to negotiate a \$5,000 fee for giving a speech at a weekend industry conference. You were aware that the scholar frequently speaks at conferences using your think tank’s name, and your think tank openly discloses that as an institution, it receives funding from some players in this industry. It is unclear from the email whether the scholar was planning to use the think tank’s name during the conference.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 18

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder asks to see an early draft of a study he funded so that he can provide comments on it. The funder has expertise in the field and tells you that you can decide freely whether to integrate these comments or not. Later, after review of the draft, the funder suggests that you delete one of the five policy prescriptions you made but otherwise leave the text unchanged.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 19

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A government department currently under strong political fire approaches you to suggest that you conduct a study reviewing and summarizing all existing evidence attesting to the department's positive impact over the past five years, and launch it during a key point of the budgetary review process.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 20

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

In comments on a project proposal, your funder specifically requests that you amend your project design to add three workshops bringing together government officials, senior civil servants, and people from the funder's organization. The funder specifically (but only verbally) requests that the seats next to the most senior officials should be reserved for people working for the funder.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 21

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder likes four of the five policy options presented in your last study. He offers funding to deepen the analysis and policy recommendations for those four policy options in a separate paper, on condition that you do not explore or refer to the fifth option. The funder assures you that your researchers will have complete intellectual independence in exploring and presenting the four selected policy options, and based on your past experiences with this funder, you fully believe this promise.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 22

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A very senior industry figure with a PhD degree approaches you and enquires about the possibility of becoming an “adjunct scholar” at your think tank. The person explains that she is planning to write some op-eds related to the sector her company works in, and would like to publish these using the “adjunct scholar” title. The expert is willing to take on other adjunct scholar tasks as well, such as giving the occasional talk at your think tank. Her company is:

1. a major regular funder to your think tank
2. not a funder to your think tank, and does not appear to plan to become a funder in future



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 23

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

One of your adjunct scholars has been very active, making multiple media appearances over the past weeks, always identifying himself as a scholar of your think tank. The same person regularly takes on consulting work from clients who have vested interests in the issues discussed during these media appearances, and his media soundbites seem aligned with these clients’ interests. Your scholar now asks you for an additional 1,000 business cards bearing your think tank’s logo.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 24

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

One of your foreign policy scholars returns from a conference abroad with an expensive-looking silk carpet presented to him by host government officials, joking about local traditions of hospitality. It is now impossible to return this gift.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 25

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A funder asks whether you want to conduct a study on a topic of direct interest to the funder. The funder has already selected a lead author for the study who is a highly qualified academic; this choice is non-negotiable. However, the funder assures you verbally and in writing that your think tank will be free to conduct its usual internal peer review process and make any changes desired to the study before it is published.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 26

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your study's conclusions fully align with the vested interests of the funder who funded it, but you have full confidence in the high quality of your study, plus your think tank has been consistently arguing for the same policy for several years now. Your funder now offers the full assistance of his media team in launching your study. In particular, the media team will contact journalists, develop high quality visuals for sharing on social media, and make a considerable financial investment into promoting it on Facebook.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 27

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

Your funder likes the study you just published but is concerned that the chart on page 17 is “too confusing” and fails to support your (independently reached) policy recommendations with sufficient clarity. The funder suggests that you “improve” the chart by reducing the number of years it covers and switching from a logarithmic scale to a linear scale, and then Tweet out the reworked chart.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 28

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You just published a study urging your government to lift sanctions against a foreign country. You receive an email from a potential funder who explains that he really liked this study and would like to make a one-off donation of \$10,000 in unrestricted funding, no strings attached, adding that he “may wish to” provide you with additional support in future months and years. The funder is:

1. a local businessman whose company does business in that foreign country
2. a businessman who originally immigrated from that foreign country but now has your country’s nationality



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 29

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A long-standing funder who you have a strong and consistently constructive relationship with has recently been publicly criticized for seeking too much political influence. The funder explains that she can no longer directly fund you, and suggests that instead, she will route funding for you through a foundation. You can then publicly list the foundation as your funder.



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 30

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

You open the newspaper and discover that the fund containing your think tank’s financial reserves has heavily invested in:

1. a highly controversial company
2. a solar power company, buying its shares shortly before you published a report arguing for major state subsidies for solar power



Reputational risks

SCENARIO 31

THE TRANSPARIFY THINK TANK
INTEGRITY CHECK

A unit of the Ministry of Interior asks whether you are interested in designing and conducting an opinion survey among a minority group living in your capital city. The only conditions are that you do not publicly disclose that you are conducting this research, and that the research results will not be shared with any third parties.

