Content management on YouTube by Spanish think tanks

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The growing need for think tanks to effectively manage their communication in order to reach their stakeholders has forced them to implement communication strategies that go beyond offline media. The opportunities offered by social media are being exploited by these think tanks, which have found YouTube to be a suitable platform for sharing meaningful messages to their communities. This study uses quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine how these think tanks manage this social network, with the aim of determining whether there are common patterns or whether each think tank has different strategies. To this end, a sample of 190 videos was analyzed, corresponding to the top 10 most viewed videos of 19 Spanish think tanks listed in the *2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*. The results show similarities in certain parameters, such as video length and language used, but significant differences in others, such as content themes and types. In conclusion, Spanish think tanks have considerable room for improvement in managing their content on YouTube, which could enable them to reach a larger audience. Increasing the level of interaction with users or adding subtitles in a language other than the one used would contribute positively to achieving this objective.

1 Introduction

The role of think tanks as political actors in the contemporary political landscape is evident, as is their increasing impact on the global political agenda and public opinion (Abelson et al., 2016; Castillero-Ostio et al., 2024; Castillero-Ostio et al., 2025a,b; García, 2010; McGann, 2016; Santillán Buelna, 2019; Smolak-Lozano and Castillo-Esparcia, 2018; Stahl, 2016; Stefanic and Delgado, 1996; Xifra, 2005). These research institutes have a long history and are well known in Western countries. However, more recently, there has been research on the role of such organisations in the rest of the world and in societies with less consolidated democracies or authoritarian regimes (see Figari Barberis, 2024; Gahramanova, 2020; Makiko, 2017; McGann, 2019).

Setting aside debates on the difficulty of achieving a unified conceptualization of these entities —while acknowledging the valuable and numerous contributions from the academic field (Abelson, 2002; Castillo-Esparcia, 2002, 2009; Gaffney, 1991; Hames and Feasey, 1994; McGann and Weaver, 2000; Rich, 2004; Smith, 1991; Stone, 1996; Thompson, 1994; Xifra, 2008) and recognizing the classification efforts into different typologies of think tanks provided by Weaver (1989)— the objective of this research is to examine the communication strategies employed by these institutions.

In this regard, the relevance of organizational or corporate communication has already been well established in studies such as those by Almansa Martínez (2005), Capriotti (1999), and Chiang (2012), which emphasize that organizations cannot exist without communication

and without engaging with their audiences; two issues that think tanks, as organizations, cannot evade. Both Xifra (2005) and Castillo-Esparcia (2009) focus on the communicative function of think tanks, underscoring the significance of communication and public relations in the activities of these centers of thought. Santillán Buelna (2019) refers to these as "communicative actors," highlighting their pivotal role in introducing social demands into public discourse and in influencing the public sphere.

As research organizations, think tanks have a particular interest in disseminating their knowledge and the resulting products to their stakeholders; and they perceive communication as a significant opportunity, developing strategies and communication actions to diffuse their activities, proposals, and results to their various audiences (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; Castillero-Ostio et al., 2024).

In this communicative context, social media has become the most effective medium for sharing ideas in the online world (Akçay and Qingye, 2020). Its importance has grown significantly in contemporary society across all domains, particularly in the political sphere, where the presence of various actors has notably increased in recent years. These actors have adapted their communication strategies to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by social media for reaching new generations that engage minimally with offline media (Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas and Gil-Ramírez, 2020). This is also an effort that think tanks have been compelled to undertake, leveraging the expansive outreach potential of social media (Tchubykalo et al., 2019), adapting their communication strategies to align with the unique characteristics of these platforms (González Enríquez, 2018), and employing them to disseminate information, share their work, and facilitate discourse (Merke and Pauselli, 2015). In the Asian context, Zhang (2021) points to the use of a strategy called 'multilevel layout' by Chinese think tanks, whereby think tanks use as many social media platforms as possible to reach their audiences.

In the academic context, interest in this field is currently limited, although it is gradually increasing. A significant corpus of research is beginning to emerge that explores the communicative dimension of think tanks related to the Internet and social media. This literature is particularly focused on the analysis of their websites (Castillero-Ostio et al., 2024; Castillero-Ostio et al., 2025a,b; García, 2010; Castillo-Esparcia and Smolak-Lozano, 2017; Guerra Heredia, 2015; Quintana Pujalte and Castillo-Esparcia, 2019); studies that focus on how think tanks worldwide use social media (Castillo-Esparcia and Smolak-Lozano, 2016; Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2015; Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; Moreno-Cabanillas et al., 2024; Serna-Ortega, 2024; Smolak-Lozano and Castillo-Esparcia, 2018; Zhao and Zhu, 2023); and more recently, studies that take a comprehensive look at public communication (from official bulletins, research reports or the press to blogs, podcasts or YouTube) and the capacity of think tanks to influence through it (Hagland, 2023; Haney, 2025).

Among these, YouTube has been regarded as an important tool for spreading the activities organized by these think tanks, facilitating the dissemination of the reflections and opinions of their experts while also serving as a platform for gauging citizen opinions on current issues (Castillo-Esparcia and Smolak-Lozano, 2016). Although there are few studies that focus exclusively on the communication produced and shared by think tanks on YouTube, previous research that has examined the overall use of social media by these organizations has provided significant data that serves as a foundation for this investigation centered on the video platform.

Castillo-Esparcia and Smolak-Lozano (2016) emphasize that YouTube is utilized by 80% of Spanish think tanks. However, subsequent reports (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020) indicate a decline in the prominence of YouTube, while Twitter and Facebook remain as the dominant social media platforms, relegating the video platform to fourth place, even behind LinkedIn, with a usage rate of 62.5% among the most influential Spanish think tanks. The latest data also indicate a low level of activity and infrequent content updates by Spanish think tanks on YouTube (2–3 entries per month). The platform is primarily used for broadcasting events (such as book/report/project presentations and award ceremonies) and disseminating studies (supported by talks and interventions from experts), interviews, or documentaries (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020).

Outside the Spanish context, Merke and Pauselli (2015) also identify the use of YouTube channels by three prominent Latin American think tanks—CARI (Argentina), CEBRI (Brazil), and COMEXI (Mexico)—. These think tanks utilize YouTube to broadcast live public events, share recordings of public activities, and conduct interviews.

Finally, with respect to Eastern Europe, Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2015) emphasize that Twitter and Facebook are the most frequently utilized social networks by think tanks. Additionally, the authors indicate that YouTube exhibits a low frequency of updates and limited interactivity with published content. It is noteworthy that this research highlights the significant role of local languages in the communication strategies of think tanks on social media. In this regard, research by Manfredi-Sánchez et al. (2015) indicates that, in the European environment, the languages used by think tanks' social networks are, preferably, English and French.

These preceding studies offer some insights into the level of use and the type of formats employed by think tanks for their YouTube videos. However, none of these studies adopt a comprehensive perspective on the potential of this social network for strategic communication management, which is the objective of the present research. To date, the specific analysis of the type of communication produced and consumed on YouTube has been predominantly linked to the specific examination of political communication (Berrocal et al., 2014; Berrocal Gonzalo et al., 2012; Gil Ramírez and Gómez de Travesedo-Rojas, 2020; Gil-Ramírez et al., 2019, 2021; Medrana Morales and Araneda Delgado, 2020; Vázquez Sande, 2016). There is a notable absence of academic studies that intersect the field of think tanks with the strategic management of this digital communication channel. In this context, the contributions of Pineda et al. (2019) and Rivera López and Flores Muro (2024) are particularly noteworthy. Both studies focus on the communication on YouTube of a single research center, employing an ideological analysis perspective.

In their analysis of 204 YouTube videos produced by the Spanish think tank FAES, Pineda et al. (2019) offer a valuable contribution to the discourse on the key topics addressed in the videos. They identify politics (at the national, international, and general levels) as the primary focus (60.29%), followed by economics (37.25%) and, to a lesser extent, terrorism, social issues, the media, the environment, religion, and other subjects.

Rivera López and Flores Muro (2024) seek to examine discourses from an ideological perspective, focusing on the context of Latin America. They use the YouTube channel of Fundación Nueva Mente, a Chilean think tank.

However, these contributions present a certain bias by focusing on a single think tank, which limits the possibility of making comparisons and establishing performance standards. Therefore, this study—which aims to initiate a line of research that helps address the existing gap—proposes to analyze how Spanish think tanks manage the content they publish on YouTube. The objective is to determine whether common patterns exist or if, on the contrary, these think tanks follow distinct strategies in their decisions regarding the videos they publish and their interaction with users.

2 Method

The sample consists of a total of 190 videos, specifically the 10 most-viewed videos from each of the official YouTube accounts of the 19[1] Spanish think tanks listed in the 2020 Go To Think Tank Index Report[2], prepared by the University of Pennsylvania (McGann, 2021). This report identifies the most important and influential think tanks in the world and has been utilized in previous research (Castillero-Ostio et al., 2024; Castillo-Esparcia and Smolak-Lozano, 2017; Smolak-Lozano and Castillo-Esparcia, 2018).

The sample collection is carried out through the search panel on YouTube.com. In order to select the specific audiovisual pieces to be analyzed, which amount to over 57 h of video, only two of the filters provided by YouTube are applied in order to define the sample. Initially, the entirety of the content from each selected think tank account is considered, irrespective of publication date, video length, or other characteristics. However, the selection is made based on typology, choosing "video" and discarding "playlist," "channel," or "movie"; and based on relevance. The relevance criterion is based on the number of views, which is a measure of the content's popularity. Other options such as "upload date" or "rating" are not considered. This approach aims to consider both the most common format ("video") and the content that has received the highest and most positive response from the channel's users.

Following the application of the previously described filters, the decision was taken to restrict the scope of the analysis to ten units per think tank account. This decision is partly motivated by the observation that one of the think tanks (Navarra Center for International Development) has only 11 pieces of content published as of the date on which the sample was collected (July 1, 2024). A larger corpus would have necessitated the exclusion of this think tank from the comparison. Accordingly, the final sample of 190 videos, covering the period from 2008 to 2020, is deemed to be sufficiently representative.

The principal aim of this research is to identify the communication strategies employed by Spanish think tanks on YouTube in order to evaluate the existence of any common patterns of behavior. To address

this aim, a mixed-methods approach is employed, based on content analysis (Krippendorff, 1990) of the videos in the sample, which is implemented both quantitatively and qualitatively. A data collection and coding sheet was developed to facilitate the analysis of the main descriptive characteristics of each content piece (Table 2).

Given the lack of prior research addressing the specificity of this analysis (think tank-YouTube), a unique, customized tool was developed for data collection and analysis. However, in the construction of the variables "topic" and "content format," the conclusions of Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2020) and Pineda et al. (2019) were taken into consideration as a point of reference.

Two coders (MG and RG) independently reviewed and analyzed each item in the sample. Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to assess inter-rater reliability, yielding a result of $k = 0.89$.

3 Results

Prior to presenting the principal findings regarding the content management of YouTube by Spanish think tanks, it is essential to evaluate the present status of their channels on this social network. This evaluation will be based on the observation of certain fundamental data (see Table 1).

The general data indicate that the date of channel creation is not a significant factor in the other observed parameters, and that these parameters do not always exhibit a correlation with one another. It is noteworthy that the figures for the think tank Instituto Juan de Mariana are significantly higher than those of the others across all levels. In light of these observations, we may posit that the data set can be divided into three categories based on the numbers of subscribers, published videos, and views. The first category includes think tanks whose YouTube channels exhibit a low average (below one thousand) (BC3, RIBEI, EuroMeSCo, Navarra Center for International Development and FEDEA). A second group comprises think tanks whose channels demonstrate an intermediate average (below twenty thousand) (Fundación Alternativa, Institución Futuro, CCHS, GRAIN, CIBOD, Elcano Royal Institute, IEmed, Fundación Carolina, Fundación Innovación Bankinter, FIL and FAES). Finally, a third, smaller group represents think tanks with a high average, above twenty thousand, which presents a favorable starting position (CREAF, ISGlobal and Instituto Juan de Mariana).

This study examines the ways in which Spanish think tanks utilize the communicative opportunities presented by YouTube. It reveals significant similarities in certain aspects while also identifying notable differences in others.

3.1 Common patterns in content management

The management of user interaction with content on YouTube represents an area where Spanish think tanks currently exhibit the greatest potential for improvement. In this regard, a generalized pattern emerges, indicating a neglectful approach with respect to the parameters of "likes" and comments. In comparison to the overall average of 47,887 views across the sample, the mean number of likes was 878, while the mean number of comments was 40.5. It is notable that nearly 70% (68.42%) of the most popular

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1 Of the 22 think tanks identified as Spanish in the report, three were excluded from further consideration because they did not meet the sample selection criteria: (1) self-identification as a think tank, (2) establishment in Spain and/or headquarters in the country, (3) possession of an official YouTube channel. The think tanks that were excluded from the study were Action Against Hunger, Millennium Project, and EsadeEcPol.

2 The list of selected think tanks can be found in Table 1 in the results section.

TABLE 1 Current status of the channel.

Think tank	Year of channel creation	Number of subscribers	Number of videos	Number of views
BC3 – Basque Centre for Climate Change	2020	90	64	5,696
CCHS – Instituto de Bienes y Políticas Públicas	2010	3,140	840	490,099
CIDOB – Barcelona Centre for International Affairs	2014	3,370	557	305,168
CREAF – Centre for Ecological Research and Forestry Applications	2011	8,830	260	1,215,529
Elcano Royal Institute	2009	7,080	687	660,645
EuroMeSCo – Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission	2020	231	190	16,879
FAES – Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales	2010	4,460	1,017	863,019
FEDEA – Fundación de Estudios de Economía Aplicada	2010	636	251	77,433
FIL – Fundación Internacional para la Libertad	2017	4,610	164	348,245
Fundación Alternativas	2016	2,160	385	193,033
Fundación Carolina	2009	5,660	664	453,759
Fundación Innovación Bankinter	2010	3,930	1,036	748,764
GRAIN	2008	876	58	171,016
IEmed – Institut Europeu de la Mediterrània	2009	2,420	853	390,265
Institución Futuro	2008	1,420	289	364,646
Instituto Juan de Mariana	2013	107,000	1,790	16,238,151
ISGlobal – Barcelona Institute for Global Health	2011	7,130	337	2,422,238
Navarra Center for International Development	2012	21	11	7,784
RIBEI – Red Iberoamericana de Estudios Internacionales	2013	49	57	8,545

Think tanks in alphabetical order. Henceforth, the acronyms enumerated in the following table shall be employed to designate the corresponding think tanks. Data Collection Date: July 1, 2024. Source: prepared by the authors based on data obtained from YouTube.com.

videos from Spanish think tanks do not reach 300 'likes,' despite being viewed thousands of times. Only three think tanks (Juan de Mariana, ISGlobal, and CREAF) have exceeded an average of one thousand "likes" on their ten most viewed pieces of content, with Juan de Mariana having the highest average at 11,280 "likes." The management of comments presents an even more troubling scenario. Approximately 14.74% of the content has the user interaction feature disabled and when it is enabled, 54.74% of the videos receive fewer than 10 comments. These figures are particularly noteworthy when considered in relation to the number of views. It is once again notable that the Juan de Mariana think tank is the only one that does not conform to this trend, with an average of 1,445 comments per video.

On the other hand, with regard to the duration of the content, the prevailing trend indicates the utilization of short videos (less than 10 min), which represent 62.63% of the total sample. With the exception of Juan de Mariana, all think tanks feature content of relatively short duration among the ten most frequently viewed videos on their respective channels. The use of audiovisual materials with a duration of less than 1 h is also common (26.84%), with this option present in the content of 16 out of the 19 think tanks analyzed. Nevertheless, only half of the think tanks include videos longer than 1 h among their most frequently viewed content (10.53%), indicating that this represents a minority choice overall. Consequently, a discernible pattern emerges concerning the decisions made by Spanish think tanks regarding the duration of the content they upload to their channels, indicating a pronounced proclivity for brief videos.

The management of language in which content is published, as well as decisions regarding the provision of subtitles, exhibit common characteristics across the majority of think tanks analyzed.

In 15 of the 19 think tanks examined, the predominant language in the most frequently viewed videos is Spanish, making it the most widely used language overall (61.05%), and establishing a clear pattern with respect to this parameter. English is utilized by slightly more than half of the Spanish think tanks, representing only 24.74% of the total sample. This indicates that there are constraints in fully exploiting the potential for content dissemination due to language-based limitations. The use of languages other than Spanish or English is minimal (7.89%). French, Portuguese, and more specific languages such as Basque or Catalan are used on an occasional basis in some content.

With regard to the use of subtitles, which are primarily employed for the purpose of translating the original language of the content, the prevailing trend is evident: in 93.16% of the videos, subtitles are absent. This indicates suboptimal management, as the inclusion of subtitles could expand the reach of the content to a larger subscriber base. Less than half of the Spanish think tanks elect to provide translation through subtitles, and in any case, it remains an uncommon practice (6.84%).

Finally, another prevalent pattern is observed in the management of YouTube content by Spanish think tanks, which pertains to the participation of members from these think tanks in their most-viewed content. The trend indicates a strong preference for featuring external individuals as key content contributors (64.21%), primarily experts from academic and political spheres, with less frequent inclusion of figures from the media or business sectors. Nevertheless, among the Spanish think tanks that elect to include representatives of their own

TABLE 2 Analysis sheet.

Identifying data	
Think tank owning the account	
YouTube account name	
Analysis variables	
1. Publication date	
2. Number of views	
3. Number of likes	Fewer than 300
	Between 301 and 1,000
	More than 1,000
4. Comments	Disabled
	Fewer than 100
	Between 101 and 1,000
	More than 1,000
5. Video duration	Fewer than 10 min
	Between 11 and 60 min
	More than 60 min
6. Video language	Spanish
	English
	French
	Other (specify which)
7. Subtitles	Yes
	No
8. Topic	Politics
	Economics
	Environment
	Health
	Education
	Self-promotion
	Mix of topics
	Other (specify which)
9. Content format	Interview
	Report
	Debate/Roundtable
	Press conference
	Congress/Conference/Seminar
	Forum/Lecture
	Documentary
	Expert opinion
	News/Informative
	Promotional
	Other (specify which)
10. Presence of experts	Yes
	No
11. Affiliation of the experts to the think tank itself	Yes
	No
Observations	

Source: own elaboration.

organizations in certain content, five stand out (ISGlobal, Fundación Innovación Bankinter, CREAF, CCHS, and FIL) for a more self-referential approach. In their videos, any individuals featured are consistently affiliated with the think tank itself.

3.2 Specific management strategies

This analysis identifies two parameters that exhibit unique strategies in the management of YouTube content. These are the topics covered by the most-viewed videos on the Spanish think tanks' channels and the formats they adopt.

In consideration of the topic areas addressed by the examined think tanks, the observed diversity is to be expected, given the extensive range of categories to which they adhere. However, an analysis of the most-watched videos offers insight into consumption preferences based on recurring themes. In this regard, the category of politics is the most prevalent, followed by that of the environment. Three aspects merit particular attention. First, it is notable that a considerable number of videos address a wide range of disparate topics, which are collectively labeled as "other." While these topics are less prevalent, they deviate from the central thematic axes and encompass issues such as inequality, feminism, history, and even the potential outcomes of soccer matches. Secondly, the most-viewed content includes videos that are purely corporate or self-promotional in nature, which pertain to the activities of the think tanks (see Figure 1 for the topic content of videos produced by Spanish think tanks). Finally, the thematic "exclusivity" is evident, as very few videos address more than one theme. When topics are combined, the pairing of politics and economics is the most frequent.

In regard to the formats utilized by the most-watched audiovisual content on the channels of Spanish think tanks, diversification is the prevailing trend (see content format in Figure 2). The predominant types of content within a set that includes a wide range of formats, from promotional or informational videos to documentaries, reports, and excerpts from press conferences, are those that feature excerpts from congresses, conferences, seminars, or interviews. The category "other" encompasses anecdotal cases that do not fit into any other category, such as a university lesson, a holiday greeting, or podcasts.

4 Discussion

The limited existing research that exclusively focuses on the communication produced and disseminated by think tanks on YouTube constrains the scope for an extensive discussion of the obtained results. Nevertheless, this research establishes a basis for pursuing a new line of inquiry aimed at understanding and evaluating the communicative management of such organizations on this social network and its evolution. In any case, certain aspects of previous research related to the overall use of social media by think tanks, and occasionally specifically regarding YouTube, allow for a discussion of the resulting figures on certain variables.

The insufficient levels of interaction demonstrated by Spanish think tanks identified in this study, as evidenced by the "likes" and comments enabled by YouTube, align with the trend previously observed by Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2015) concerning think tanks in Eastern Europe and the limited interactivity they exhibited in the content published.
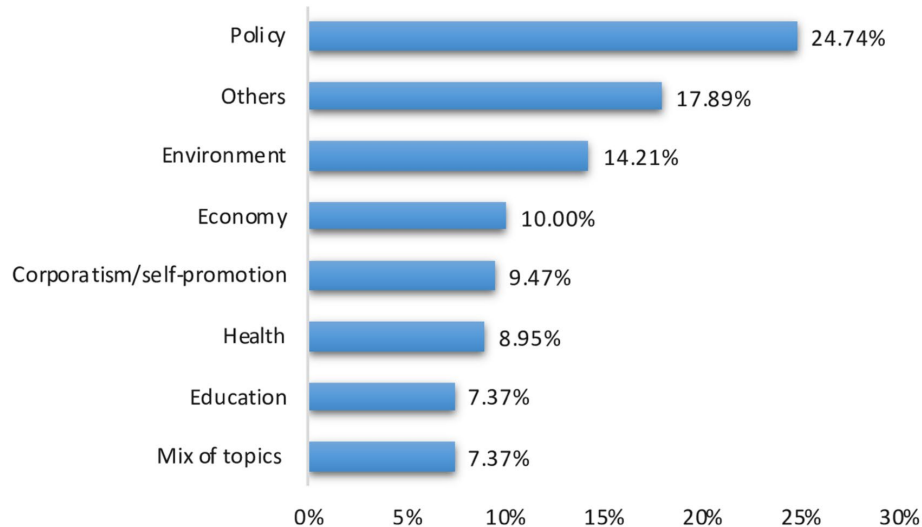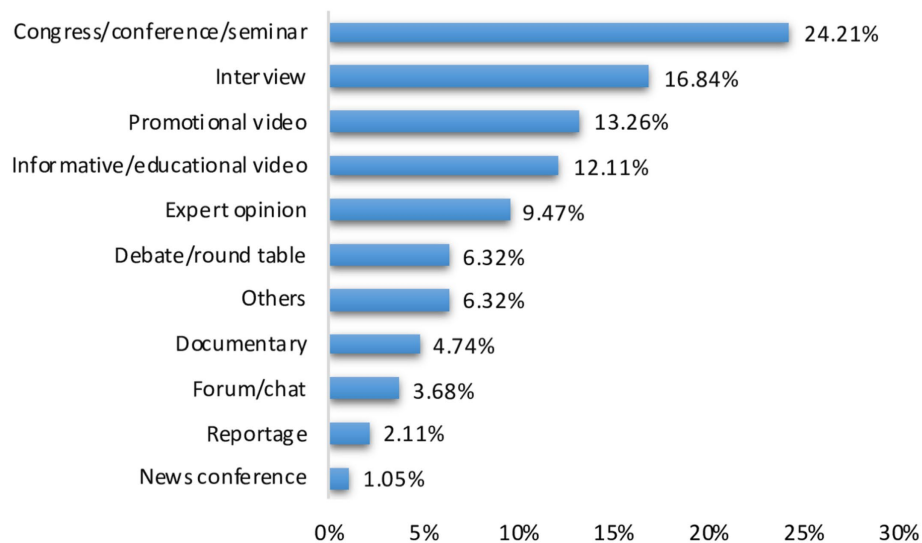
FIGURE 1
Content topic.

FIGURE 2
Content format.

These authors (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2015) emphasized a significant point that is corroborated by the present study: the preponderant role of local languages in the communication of think tanks, in this case from Eastern Europe. This phenomenon is also observed in the Spanish context addressed by this study, where Spanish is the predominant language in the most viewed content of Spanish think tanks. Although Spanish is one of the most influential languages globally, being widely used as an official language in more than twenty countries and constituting the second most used language in the world by native speakers, the lack of subtitles that translate the content into English is an obstacle to the internalisation of the research and products of these think tanks.

Furthermore, the topics covered in the videos are in accordance with the findings of Pineda et al. (2019), which identified politics as the most significant issue. However, it should be noted that this comparison is subject to certain limitations, as Pineda et al. (2019) refer to a single think tank (FAES).

The diversification of formats in which the content uploaded by think tanks to their channels is presented, as noted in this analysis, is a consistent finding in previous research (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; Merke and Pauselli, 2015); however, there are contradictions in the predominant formats among existing analyses. While this study identifies content derived from purely academic events, such as conferences, workshops, or seminars, Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2020) indicate a prevalence of disseminating events of a more diverse nature,

including book presentations, reports, projects, or award ceremonies. Additionally, Merke and Pauselli (2015) highlight live broadcasts of public events as the most pervasive format.

In addition to the aforementioned discussion, this research provides unpublished data that reveal a definite pattern with respect to the management that Spanish think tanks carry out of the contents of their channels. The data suggests a preference for short-duration videos and a reliance on external experts as endorsers of the information presented in these videos.

It is notable that the utilization of user interaction tools is limited by YouTube and that decisions regarding language and the use of subtitles for translation are deficient, Issues that are limiting the possibilities for the internationalization of content and, consequently, the growth and development of think tanks. These factors, in addition to representing significant room for improvement, have been identified as constants in the management of Spanish think tanks on this social network.

However, the dependence of this study on the videos with the highest number of views of the think tanks analysed that make up the sample and the time period they cover (2008–2020) may limit the results obtained, so further research is needed to contribute to further information on emerging trends in relation to the most current strategies developed by think tanks on the YouTube social network.

Data availability statement

The datasets analyzed for this study can be found in the Harvard Dataverse Repository (https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/S0BGLG).

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human data in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was not required, for either participation in the study or for the publication of potentially/indirectly identifying information, in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The social media data was accessed and analyzed in accordance with the platform's terms of use and all relevant institutional/national regulations.

Author contributions

RT-R: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MG-R: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Generative AI statement

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