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Think tank output as media input: a case study of transnational climate obstructionism

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Abstract

Transnational networks of neoliberal think tanks have invested time and resources in creating cross-country strategy mobility to oppose climate action. Building on strategy mobility research directed against renewable energy policy, we ask how think tank studies circulate in media outlets both within and across borders, and what role the media plays in the effort to shape the energy transition. We examine the role of a US-based think tank, the Institute for Energy Research (IER), which financed studies in several countries in an attempt to make the case that public investment in renewables was not efficient or effective, and used them to counter green policies in other countries, particularly in the USA. By examining 115 articles in media outlets in five countries (Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, the USA), we show that these studies gained considerable transnational media traction in the USA and played an important role in creating opposition to President Obama's climate policies in 2008–2009. In all but one country (Denmark), most media reporting amplified the studies' messages. In line with recent research on the increasing transnational fragmentation of the public sphere, we find that right-wing media in particular presented a favorable treatment of the studies and generally did not question their methods or funding. By focusing on the transnational nexus between think tanks and media presence, we

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make an original contribution to the existing literature on critical policy mobility research, and show that climate obstructionism, in this manifestation of policy skepticism, was already very active in the 2000s.

Keywords

climate obstructionism, environmental politics, fossil fuels, international media, think tanks, transnational strategy

Introduction

Think tanks, which we define as organizations involved in policy-related research and consulting, have been subject to an increasing amount of research due to their relevance in influencing policy in their country of location.¹ In the specific field of opposition to domestic climate action, the role of neoliberal think tanks has been extensive in the USA² and Europe.³ In the USA for example, they were prominent in opposing the implementation of a carbon tax proposed by President Clinton in the 1990s,⁴ the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in the late 1990s,⁵ and Obama's climate policies in the late 2000s, which is the focus of our media study. Although neoliberal ideas⁶ can serve to underpin regulatory approaches to climate action including carbon taxes and emission trading,⁷ the alignment of pro fossil energy groups and neoliberal opposition to state intervention has sustained radical and reactionary campaigns against climate mitigation.⁸ Such campaigns have been carried out both within and across borders.

Think tanks have also leveraged their funding and international connections to use research carried out in one country to question policies in another. For example, the global network of Atlas think tanks, which was set up in the 1980s to coordinate think tank activity across borders, has devoted considerable energy across the world to disputing the claims of a 'double dividend' generated by public investment in the energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources, that is, global warming mitigation and creating green jobs. In 2008–2009, the US-based Institute for Energy Research (IER), which has links to the Atlas network,⁹ pursued a campaign designed to undermine Obama's energy transition in the USA. Two major counter-arguments were made in opposition to renewable energy policy: firstly, the policy claims of job creation were erroneous (the 'green job myth'), and secondly, the climate policy claims of the effectiveness of renewable energy were misleading.¹⁰

Central to the IER strategy was to use studies carried out in other countries to influence policies in the USA, to reinforce opposition to renewables in the countries where the studies were procured, and to a lesser extent to support such opposition in third countries. One of its main tactics was to seek media attention for these studies and their authors as a way of creating a hostile policy environment in the period 2008–2011. So, in this study, we focus on the way in which think tanks in Spain, Germany, Denmark and Italy published reports putting forward such counter-arguments which were picked up in their own and other countries' media, as part of the transnational opposition strategy mobility of a global think tank network.¹¹ While economic arguments against climate change involving consulting firms (Charles River Associates) and think tanks (the Atlas

network affiliated George C. Marshall Institute) have been subject to historical research on the climate policy opposition in the United States,¹² the mobilization against green jobs and the cost of energy transition has operated on a much wider geographic scale.

By focusing on the media visibility of the campaign against green jobs, we offer a historical case study of the nexus between climate policy, transnational think tank activity, and international media impact. In line with findings of recent research on the transformation of the public sphere, which points to the increasing relevance of transnational fragmentation and transnational subject positions (particularly in terms of common narratives found in media representations),¹³ we show that partly as a result of right-wing media coverage, the IER's strategy and tactics were undoubtedly successful in helping to challenge if not to undermine Obama's and other political leaders' efforts to create a different economic future than one based on extensive fossil fuel extraction. Building on policy conflict and opposition strategy research in international policy mobility studies,¹⁴ we direct attention to the ways in which the media impact needs to be considered in greater depth in order to grasp the full extent to which think tanks commission research and then use it to lobby for policy change across borders.

Literature review and context

Think tanks and transnational strategy mobilization

Although think tanks are still more prominent – and better researched – in the USA than elsewhere,¹⁵ their involvement in policymaking has become the norm around the world.¹⁶ In addition to the comparative literature on think tanks in different countries,¹⁷ scholars have observed the presence of international think tank networks, which at times can boast a global reach.¹⁸ While they frequently claim independence and a commitment to science, research has clarified the extent to which many of them in fact often follow government and elite agendas, which in turn has prompted researchers to focus more on their nexus of interests and ideas.¹⁹ In this sense, like-minded think tanks tend to be part of transnational networks that provide them with knowledge flows and patterns of action both within Europe and with North America.²⁰ This not only happens at the organizational level, but people who participate in a think tank themselves tend to be part of others of similar nature, as has been shown in the case of European climate obstructionist think tanks.²¹

In addition, stakeholders with interests opposed to climate action find on the internet a transnational space in which to disseminate and gain knowledge of other similar organizations, as shown in a study on the hyperlink structure of obstructionist climate organizations.²² A key element in this networking and transnational spread of climate contrarianism has been ideology. In particular, support for deregulation and market non-intervention has been the ideological context for the transnational spread of the climate countermovement, especially from the US to Europe.²³

The proliferation of think tanks and networks among them is taking place in a context of globalization, digitalization, and popularization of these organizations as instruments for policymaking in different policy spaces.²⁴ The inquiry into their international activities has primarily focused on the role of their expertise in (global) governance networks,²⁵

but more recently growing attention has been paid to think tank involvement in policy and lobby campaigns. These approaches are based on a critical understanding of the work of think tanks which, far from being neutral contributors to democratic plurality, can be transmitters of discourses akin to, and promoted by, political and economic power.²⁶ Indeed, think tanks, in general, encounter a paradox: while what gives them prestige and credibility is their claim to independent expertise, what provides them with funding and stability is their dependence on interested stakeholders.²⁷

Research has also shown how organizations like the Heartland Institute, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the George C. Marshall Institute (before its closure in 2015) have coordinated policy interventions through the global Atlas think tank network.²⁸ For example, Plehwe²⁹ has traced the promotion of currency boards installed to stabilize currencies in Hong Kong, Bulgaria and Argentina by neoliberal networks and think tanks linked to the Mont Pèlerin Society and the Atlas network. The close observation by US Atlas think tank partners of tobacco corporations in public health-related campaigns³⁰ has parallels with the work of the Epicenter network of Atlas-related think tanks in Europe, which has introduced a 'nanny state index'³¹ to observe and oppose what they call 'sin taxes'. More recently, Oreskes and Conway³² have identified the continuing influence of the neoliberal paradigm following the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. This, they argue, is the result of an alliance between business elites, trade associations, wealthy powerbrokers, and media allies being built up since the early 20th century to establish the orthodoxy of unfettered markets and a small state.

The media, think tanks, and climate policy

News media are essential for individuals, policy makers and society in general to understand, critically evaluate, and act on tackling climate change.³³ Despite the advance of social media, legacy media have been and still are the most important sources of information about climate change for many members of the public.³⁴ However, in many countries climate information remains contested, which contributes to the polarization of beliefs and values about climate change science and the need to take action.³⁵ Right-wing think tanks and organized climate skeptical groups have been successful in promoting climate obstructionist views, particularly via right-leaning media outlets, in several countries including the USA,³⁶ the UK,³⁷ Spain,³⁸ and throughout many countries of Europe.³⁹ Previous research has highlighted the crucial role influential conservative pundits play in the US media in amplifying skeptical messages to a broad segment of the American public,⁴⁰ and particularly via Fox News which is known to be very influential amongst Republican members of the US Congress.⁴¹

Research suggests that whereas in the past, the media in several countries gave prominence to climate skeptics who denied the science, more space is now being given to questioning the advisability of proposed solutions to the problem, in a turn toward what others have called 'response skepticism', 'discourses of delay',⁴² or 'climate obstructionism'. This last concept is understood as the 'actions and efforts to slow or block policies on climate change that are commensurate with the current scientific consensus' (p. 6),⁴³ and has different dimensions, including denial of the existence of climate change, rejection of the implementation of measures, or the implementation of ineffective measures

and greenwashing.⁴⁴ This obstruction of climate action has deep cultural, social and psychological roots, and it is in the political and cultural realm where most opposition exists.⁴⁵ The organized skeptical movement, particularly in the USA, has long combined efforts to undermine climate science and policy with arguments that solutions would be expensive and/or ineffective.⁴⁶

Research also shows that the media can have an important agenda-setting effect in determining the amount of attention climate change (and other topics) receive and therefore its effect on audiences, that is, the more attention an issue gets, the more likely it is to seem important to the audience.⁴⁷ In other words, media coverage of an issue can have an important impact on what issues audiences choose to think about, and can affect levels of awareness,⁴⁸ although it may not alter what views they hold on that subject, which is more linked to their values and world views.⁴⁹

Less is known about the impact of media coverage on attention from political elites or specific policy outcomes about climate change, mainly because the relationship between media content and its effects on policymakers is not straightforward or linear. There are multiple influences over policy formulation or obstructionism beyond media presence. Liu et al.⁵⁰ found that there was no long-term inter-agenda spillover effect between media attention and congressional attention in the USA to climate change during the period 1969–2005.

In the specific case of think tanks and the media, Abelson⁵¹ argues that the impact of think tanks, in general, is conditional on their media presence. However, while media presence can trigger a think tank's political impact, media presence does not automatically equate to political influence; or in other words, media presence is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for political impact. Research by Pardo⁵² on US think tanks and their portrayal of the Spanish economy in the US media found that think tanks tried to set the media agenda, but they did so not by influencing what issues to address but how to address them. In other words, think tanks had influence at the second level of agenda setting theory, namely the framing of issues already in the agenda, and not the selection of issues themselves. In particular, Pardo's study shows the flow between think tank content as media content, demonstrating that leading US think tanks 'played a significant role in shaping the media agenda regarding the Spanish economy in the most influential newspapers in the United States in financial news' (p. 541).

Another notable case is that of the climate skeptic Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF), which during the late 2000s and 2010s sought influence on UK climate policy via close relationships with the right-wing press in the UK.⁵³ One study involving 45 interviews in 2012/13 with UK policymakers and other stakeholders concluded that 60% of respondents felt that skeptical voices, and particularly the GWPF, had had a direct impact on government decision-making, and 27% suggested that they had had an indirect impact.⁵⁴

In general, despite the communicational potential of think tanks, their role as influencers of the media agenda has not been extensively explored. One exception to this is research which addressed the press impact of the main European climate obstructionist think tanks,⁵⁵ and showed that media coverage of obstructionist messages was more extensive and favorable in the UK than in Spain or Germany. It also pointed to a lack of transnational coverage of think tank-generated content. This was due, in particular, to the

fact that the content was created in the languages of the countries in which they were located and did not seek an international reach. In this way, our case study takes on special relevance, given that the transnational media impact of think tank content has not been previously studied in a systematic way.

Obama, green jobs, and the international campaign against them

The debate on promoting employment in sustainability-related sectors emerged strongly in the 2000s in the US regarding energy security, job generation, and climate change mitigation.⁵⁶ Evidence suggests that even before Barack Obama came to power in 2009, clean energy policy tools and local climate action measures positively affected job creation.⁵⁷ Yet it was undoubtedly from Obama's 2008 presidential campaign onwards that the green jobs issue definitively leapt into the public debate, having been ignored by previous presidential campaigns.⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, key actors of the fossil business spectrum perceived the new Obama strategy as a threat to their interests and campaigned against it.

Outside of the USA, ambitious renewable energy programs in many countries, including Spain and Germany, became subject to growing controversy around the time of the global financial crisis. In the USA, presidential candidate Obama included the clean energy and green jobs model in his 2008 campaign, pointing to the example of Spain, Japan and Germany as countries worth emulating.⁵⁹ Obama promised to create five million green jobs over ten years. Once in power, his administration promoted one of the major economic initiatives in this respect at the federal level, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.⁶⁰ The package aimed to promote clean and competitive business and industry, creating green jobs as one of the central claims.

In 2008–2009, the IER, which received funds from the Koch Industries network,⁶¹ pursued a campaign to undermine the growing public support for the energy transition in the USA. A crucial part of this strategy was the creation of ad hoc reports to question the effectiveness of the public funding stimulus given to green jobs. One of the first such reports was published by the IER itself in January 2009.⁶² Subsequently, several think tanks in European countries were commissioned by the IER to publish reports of a similar nature and purpose.⁶³ The Abstracts of these can be found in the first section of the Supplemental Material (SM).

In particular, the IER promoted studies that aimed to show that the examples of initiatives taken by some European governments in renewable energy were ineffective and/or expensive. These were carried out first in Spain, and published by the think tank Instituto Juan de Mariana (IJM) in March 2009⁶⁴; Denmark, published by the Center for Politiske Studier (CEPOS) in September 2009⁶⁵; and Germany, published by the Rheinisch-Westfälisches Institut (RWI) in November 2009.⁶⁶ IJM and CEPOS are free-market right-wing think tanks and part of the Atlas network. The RWI is different in that it belongs to Germany's academic elite institute of the Leibniz-Society, which is jointly funded at the state level and by the federal government. One of the RWI researchers, however, has been involved in free market movement and climate denial circles, and RWI had published several studies previously, all stressing the alleged inefficiency of photovoltaics and state subsidies.⁶⁷

All three studies were financed by the IER, according to Buchmann,⁶⁸ Greenpeace,⁶⁹ and media outlets.⁷⁰ In the Spanish case, the lead author and the founder and director of the IJM, Gabriel Calzada Álvarez, denied that the study had been financed by Koch Industries and stated that it had been sponsored by the IJM, the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos and the IER.⁷¹ As the IER⁷² itself explains on its website, it sponsored the IJM report because of Obama's interest in the Spanish case. According to Buchmann,⁷³ the IER acted as a 'Koch front group', that is, organizing campaigns to further the company's fossil interests but avoiding having them attributed to it.

It is important to note that different researchers and organizations have called into question the assumptions, methods and results of the Spanish study,⁷⁴ the Danish study,⁷⁵ and the German study.⁷⁶ For example, the German study calculated 'subsidies' for renewables at €64 billion, but its methodological approach was strongly criticized in the German media and from energy policy experts for its failure to include the price lowering impact of the rising share of renewables, and the cheaper technological costs due to growing economies of scale.⁷⁷

A fourth study focused on Italy was funded by the Gas Intensive Soc. Consortile a.r.l., Milano, a gas industry association. It was published in May 2010 by another neoliberal think tank of the Atlas network, the Istituto Bruno Leoni (IBL).⁷⁸ It was again designed to cast serious doubt on green job investments, using a similar methodology to the Spanish study. All four European studies were written in English, suggesting the intention to have an international impact, especially in the USA. Finally, in March 2012, the IER supported a group of US academics affiliated with the University of Illinois, the Mercatus Center of the George Mason University, and the Property and Environment Research Center, a free-market environment-focused think tank and Atlas network member, in their publication of a paper called 'Green Jobs Myths'.⁷⁹

The particular importance of the ad hoc Spanish study in influencing the political debate on green jobs in the USA has been laid out in previous research.⁸⁰ The key argument used in the study was that for every green job created in Spain by government subsidies, 2.2 jobs were lost (because, the study argued, the cost of the subsidies at €29bn would have generated more than twice as many jobs in the private sector, a claim strongly questioned by the US economists Lantz and Tegen).⁸¹ By September 2009, the IER was boasting on its website that President Obama was no longer citing Spain as an example to follow.⁸² Instead, he started to quote the Danish and German examples.⁸³ Obama's green agenda faded after the mid-term elections in 2010 led to the Democrats losing their majority in the House of Representatives, which effectively ended the federal renewable and green jobs program.⁸⁴ Buchmann⁸⁵ argued that this outcome was partly due to the funding of the studies and the propagation of their results across the North American and European public sphere.

Buchmann also pointed out the relevance of the media impact of the reports commissioned by the IER: 'While this deception was to be expected from FoxNews, it was clearer that Spain, science and activists had lost the narrative when CNN and the Washington Post featured the study as reason against climate change legislation in June 2009' (p. 239). However, despite the importance of this media visibility for the IER campaign, Buchmann's study does not elaborate further, nor has other research on the IER-funded studies⁸⁶ addressed this aspect in detail. Thus, this paper fills this gap in the

literature on the role of international media coverage for this case in particular, but also for knowledge about think tanks' outputs as media inputs in general.

Research questions

The above review of existing literature shows firstly, the importance of the internationalization of think tanks in general, and their interest in challenging climate policy specifically both within their own borders but also beyond them, and secondly the importance of the media as a target of their research outputs in order to have an impact on the policy debates. However, a major gap in the literature is mapping and assessing the media visibility of such think tank research transnationally. So, we take as our case study the transnational strategy mobility of think tanks affiliated to the Atlas network, and specifically the campaign launched by the IER. We assess the extent to which the different studies financed by the IER casting doubt on green job initiatives in Europe were picked up in the US and other countries' media in the period 2008–2011. We chose this period to coincide with the dates in which the IER was campaigning against Obama's green job strategy, and to coincide with the publication of the four studies mentioned above. With this context in mind, we formulated the following research questions:

1. How frequently and how strongly are the studies originating in the USA, Germany, Denmark, Spain, and Italy cited as source material in media articles outside of their own country?
2. Are there country differences in terms of the visibility of the studies in other countries' media?
3. Are there country differences in terms of a) the political leaning of the media outlets where the studies gain most visibility and b) the sentiment analysis toward the studies?

Materials and method

We chose five countries for our analysis. These were the USA, Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Spain. The five were chosen because they were the country of origin for the five studies we describe above.

For our selection of media outlets, in the USA we chose five news online sites which regularly appear in the Reuters Institute's Digital News Reports' lists of most popular sites,⁸⁷ and supplemented them with important prestige publications and specialist finance/business news outlets. Our initial selection included the New York Times, the Washington Post, Fox News, CNN, and USA Today, but we then added the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Times. We also included Fox News television, as being particularly influential over Republican policy makers. We used the search engine Factiva in the first instance, backed up by Google site searches. We used Factiva's search categories of 'All titles' in Spanish, Italian, Danish, and German. The search terms for the different studies can be found in the SM, Section 2. For all searches we looked for articles in the period 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2011.

We classified each of the media outlets into right-leaning or business/financial, center, and left-leaning. We recognize that this labeling of media titles can be contested as the criteria for such labels can include a wide variety of metrics such as story treatments, editorials and opinion pieces, ownership, support for governments or political parties/individuals, support for policy options, and viewership or readership profiles, newsroom ideologies, particularly across different countries. Moreover, ‘right-leaning’ covers a wide range of right-wing outlets – Freie Welt for example is considerably to the right of other right-wing publications in Germany, as is Fox News in the USA. However, we feel that our labeling gives a simplified but sufficiently robust picture of the spread of different leanings in our media titles.

Having established the sample set after cleaning out irrelevant articles, duplicates etc., we then manually coded the articles for five classes of variables:

- The type of article (straight report, opinion piece or editorial, other)
- The strength of presence of one or more of the four studies (0, 1, or 2 sentences; 3–5 sentences; more than five sentences)
- Which study or studies were cited as sources (US, Spanish, German, Italian, Danish)
- The sentiment of the report toward the study or studies (strongly in favor, balanced, strongly against, unclear). The lead researcher coded the articles for the USA, Germany, Spain, and Italy; a second researcher coded the Danish sample. Nine articles from the Danish sample were coded by the lead researcher to ensure coder reliability. Only one discrepancy was observed in the coding of the mention of the Danish study’s links to fossil fuel companies, which was resolved after discussion.

A major limitation of this study is that for most countries, we did not include in our sample all the articles (including several opinion pieces by the authors of the studies) on green jobs where similar arguments found in the studies against renewable energy may have been deployed without citing the studies as sources. If we had, then the presence in the media of the studies and their influence would probably have been greater. This was particularly true of opinion pieces written by Gabriel Calzada in Spain and Manuel Frondel in Germany. Another limitation is that we did not include countries such as the UK, where the debate about green jobs was a growing issue and where skeptical lobby groups are particularly active, and Canada, where a campaign was conducted against renewable energy conversion and the Green Energy Act of Ontario, which drew on some of the same studies.⁸⁸

Results

Presence of studies in media in five countries

After screening for repeats and irrelevant articles, the search methods gave us a total of 115 articles to code and analyze over the period in question. Spain had the most (41)

Table 1. Number of articles where studies appeared, by country and political leaning.

Number of articles per country		Right-leaning or business	Left-leaning	Center
Denmark	27	15	6	6
Germany	18	10	8	0
Italy	9	6	2	1
Spain	41	30	11	0
USA	20	16	4	0
Total	115	77	31	7

Table 2. Number of articles broken down by strength of presence.

Number of articles by country	Brief mention	Medium presence	Strong presence
Danish media	0	6	21
German media	4	5	9
Italian media	0	3	6
Spanish media	9	9	23
US media	3	4	13
Total	16	27	72

followed by Denmark (27), USA (20), Germany (18), and Italy (9) (See Table 1). The largest category was right-leaning/business (77), followed by left-leaning (31) and center (7). More details of how these break down by country and media title can be found in Tables S1 to S5 in the SM, Section 3.

Apart from the volume of coverage measured by the number of articles mentioning the studies, another useful metric is to assess the extent of the discussion or mention of the study in each article. Table 2 shows that a large majority of the articles mentioning the studies went into considerable detail about the studies (i.e. more than five sentences). Seventy-two articles (i.e. 63% of the sample) across the five countries fell into this category, which is a strong indication of the impact these studies had – that is, they seldom received just a passing mention of one or two sentences (16 articles – 14%). 27 (23%) had medium coverage (i.e. 2– 5 sentences). In the US sample, 13 of the 19 times the Spanish study was mentioned the articles discussed the study extensively.

Mentions in media by studies' country of origin

Table 3 shows the breakdown of the five studies as they appeared in the media of other countries and in their own. As can be seen, the stand-out result is that in the US media, there were 24 mentions of the studies written outside the USA, mostly the Spanish study (19 mentions) but also the German study (3 mentions) and the Italian study (2 mentions), and the Danish study not at all. Of the US media, Fox News was particularly notable for

Table 3. Number of mentions in media by studies’ country of origin.

Number of articles by country	Danish study	German study	Italian study	Spanish study	US study	Total mentions of foreign studies
Danish media	26	0	0	1	0	1
German media	0	16	1	2	0	3
Italian media	0	0	9	2	0	2
Spanish media	1	0	1	40	0	2
US media	0	3	2	19	0	24

giving prominence to the Spanish study, first in April when it was covered in three different programs, and then when the host Glen Beck interviewed Calzada in May, where Beck concluded that to follow the Spanish example would be a ‘catastrophe’ for the US.

In contrast, the media in the other four countries pay scant attention to the studies written outside of their borders, although unsurprisingly they cover the studies about the energy sector in their own countries extensively. The German media mentioned foreign studies three times, the Italian and Spanish media two times, and the Danish media once. The Spanish study was the most quoted in the media in the three European countries other than Spain, but only equivalent to a total of five times. A variety of search terms for the two US studies mentioned above did not yield any results in the media of the USA, nor in the four countries outside the USA (i.e. Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Spain).

Political leanings and sentiment analysis

Table 4 shows that there is a similar distribution of coverage of the studies in media groups by political leaning, when broken down by country. Two-thirds of the coverage occurs in right-leaning outlets (77 articles=69%), compared to 31 articles (=27%) in left-leaning media. This was particularly the case for the USA, Spain and Italy, but less so for Denmark and Germany where the distribution was more even. When the studies did appear in the left-leaning media in USA and Spain, they were much more likely to be criticized.

In general, a majority of the articles were strongly supportive of the studies (66=59%), compared to 27 critical (24%) and 19 (17%) balanced (3 were unclear in sentiment) (see Table 5). The clear exception to this trend was Denmark, where more articles were critical of the CEPOS Danish study than uncritical (15 vs 8, with 3 balanced). If we take out the Danish sample, then for the other four countries only 10 articles were critical of the studies.

Discussion and conclusions

This study set out to examine the transnational impact in the media of the five studies questioning the merits of investing heavily in renewable energy and creating green jobs. In answer to RQ1 and RQ2, it is clear that four of the studies had a particular impact in the USA for which they were probably mostly designed. Firstly, the 20 articles in the

Table 4. Presence of articles broken down by political leaning and country.

Number of articles by country	Right-leaning	Center	Left-leaning
Danish media	15	6	6
German media	10	0	8
Italian media	6	1	2
Spanish media	30	0	11
US media	16	0	4
Total	77	7	31

Table 5. Sentiment analysis by country.

Number of articles by country	Favorable toward studies	Critical toward studies	Balanced
Danish media	8	15	3
German media	10	3	5
Italian media	6	0	3
Spanish media	26	6	7
US media	16	3	1
Total	66	27	19

Three articles could not be coded as the sentiment was unclear.

media there, particularly in opinion pieces or programs in the right-leaning media outlets, were spread out between 1 February 2009 and 29 October 2010, and so fed the opposition to the policies in a sustained manner. Secondly, 20 articles over a 19-month period may not sound like a large number, but it compares ‘favourably’ to other media impacts of climate policy reports or think tanks. For example, the IPCC WGIII report of April 2022, which was probably the most important summary of climate policy options in recent years, was covered in ‘only’ 27 articles right across the US media.⁸⁹ Looking at the media impact of European think tanks over a much longer period, the Instituto Juan de Mariana (IJM) in Spain, one of the top five mentioned or quoted think tanks in the European media, received 180 mentions from 2005 to 2020 regarding climate issues in a search in 203 European newspapers, which equates to about 12 a year in multiple countries, many of which were only short mentions.⁹⁰

It is also worth pointing out that the four studies created interest amongst other think tanks in Europe, but particularly in the USA where 55 think tanks reported on them.⁹¹ It is hard to prove how influential a role the media coverage of the Spanish study played when compared to other factors, but it is also hard to deny that it was substantial in the success of the IER’s strategy. As mentioned above, toward the end of 2009 President Obama was no longer showcasing the Spanish example of green jobs. Hess et al. argue that in general, the dissemination of the four reports contributed to Obama losing the media battle both at the national and global level, but less so at the local level, where job creation success stories had more media impact.⁹²

But the importance of the four European studies did not end there. In February 2011 the AEI published an article making the case, in its view, that the Obama administration was seriously mistaken in championing the benefits of green technology and the creation of green jobs to alleviate unemployment, as in their words ‘Green jobs merely replace jobs in other sectors and actually contribute less to economic growth’, and ‘Experiments with renewable energy in Europe have led to job loss, higher energy prices, and corruption’.⁹³ To back up their case, the AEI article cited all four of the studies from Spain, Italy, Denmark, and Germany.

In Italy, Germany, Denmark, and Spain, the studies on their home energy sectors mostly received widespread coverage (considerable in Spain, a fair amount in Denmark and Germany, but a small amount in Italy⁹⁴). The studies from other countries only received mentions or longer discussion in a total of six articles, which would suggest that the impact within the European countries was not extensive (but perhaps again, these countries were not the target, and the studies were in English). For example, in Germany the IER-funded study was clearly more useful for the US policy debate than it was for the German debate, when several other studies in German also existed.

The lack of media impact of the US studies mentioned above is also significant. It may be that the difference lies in the character of these studies, as they did not focus so much on the renewable energy policy or labor market issue, but were more of a general literature review and consolidation of existing narratives, which would not be of much interest to the media (see Abstract in SM, Section 1).

Another of our key findings is that the right-wing media in particular gave a favorable treatment of the studies and did not in general question the methods or funding of the studies, which clearly could have discredited them (RQ3). As has been argued in the case of Germany, perhaps the ‘biggest flaw’ of the RWI study was ‘the failure to mention the sponsor of the research, the US think tank Institute for Energy Research (IER), funded by oil and coal corporations including the Koch family in the USA’.⁹⁵ A similar case could be made against much of the media coverage. The exception is Denmark, where the funding of the CEPOS study was highlighted.

Denmark also stood out for the much more balanced nature of its coverage of the CEPOS study, and the lack of a sharp division in treatment between left-leaning and right-leaning publications. Critical reporting of the CEPOS study in conservative newspapers may be due to the importance of the renewable sector in Denmark, Danish technology leadership in wind energy, and the strong consensus in support of renewable energy across the Danish political party spectrum. The lack of division stands in sharp contrast to our US sample, which is perhaps to be expected given the extensive previous research documenting the sharp polarization in the US media and wider public sphere in the coverage of climate change and other energy-related issues.⁹⁶ Our findings about the high percentage of opinion pieces in our sample support previous research highlighting the central role played by conservative opinion pieces in amplifying skeptical viewpoints.⁹⁷

Additional research is needed to establish if, and in which ways, the IER-funded research reinforced the opposition against renewable energy policies in Germany and Spain, where the programs have been strongly modified or cancelled, respectively. Similarly, further studies could identify whether the studies played a role in renewable policy controversies in the UK during the second half of the 2010s, and in the revival of

green jobs arguments in political campaigns elsewhere (e.g. in Canada in 2009–2010 and in the USA in 2020).

Our case study adds to the literature on climate obstructionism, in that it shows how this manifestation of policy or response skepticism, was very active in the period of our media content analysis, that is, 2008–2011. That is to say, the organized climate counter-movement may have shifted definitively from science or evidence skepticism to policy skepticism in later years,⁹⁸ but even in this period, it was already aggressively putting forward arguments and financing studies to delay or prevent any definitive moves away from a reliance on fossil fuels. These findings also help to fill a gap in the literature on climate obstructionism in Europe (and its transnational dimension), as until recently much of the academic research has focused on the USA.⁹⁹

Our findings are also consistent with previous research,¹⁰⁰ showing the importance of the second level of agenda setting theory, as it appears that the think tanks in this study aimed to influence the media treatment of green jobs, an issue that was already on the media agenda. In other words, it may have been too late for them to set the agenda. But the anti-renewable, anti-green job campaign was very successful in raising doubts about the claims made by its supporters and about the policy instruments that were used. In conclusion, this case study helps to fill an important gap in the literature by documenting the way the combination of transnational think tank activity and international media impact contributed to blocking climate action.

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Author contributions

JP: conceptualization; project administration; resources; content analysis; writing original draft; writing review and editing. **DP:** conceptualization; project administration; content analysis; writing review and editing. **JM:** content analysis, writing parts of analysis and results. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are presented in the Tables found in the main text and Supplemental Material.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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