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📅 Thu, 6/2 3:21PM ⌚ 57:26

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, tanks, policy, events, world, german marshall fund, convening, conversation, thinking, question, marshall plan, audience, transatlantic, ukraine, organizations, media, interested, community, washington, journalists

SPEAKERS

Outro, Andrew Kolb, Intro, Tony Kopetchny



Intro 00:02

Welcome to Engaging Ideas, the bi weekly podcast from Parsons TKO, bringing you conversations with mission driven leaders and luminaries to shift your perspective and challenge your assumptions on the art of the possible.



Tony Kopetchny 00:16

Hello, everybody. Welcome to another episode of engaging ideas, the podcast by Parsons TKO. As always, I'm your host, Tony Kopetchny, the CEO and co founder of Parsons TKO. We are the Engagement Architecture firm, doing consulting work for all kinds of organizations in the mission driven sector, from universities to think tanks to associations. And today, I am utterly delighted to be here with my friend Andrew Kolb, who's serving as the Director of Communications at the German Marshall Fund. Welcome manager.



Andrew Kolb 00:50

Thank you, Tony. And thank you for having me on. I am so looking forward to this conversation,



Tony Kopetchny 00:56

as am I my friend. So before we dive in, could you just let the audience know a little bit about the German Marshall Fund for anyone who might not be familiar,



Andrew Kolb 01:03

we are the successor organisation to the Marshall Plan. And the fund. I mean, we were originally set up as a grant making Foundation. And we've evolved from that into sort of three

originally set up as a grant making foundation. And we've evolved from that into sort of three headed monster, we still make grants, mostly in Balkans, the Black Sea region Belews, some very interesting parts of the world, we do leadership development, so creating opportunities for emerging leaders from both sides of the Atlantic to sort of experience the other side and experience it in a way that they develop their leadership practice. And we've had some amazing alumni of that of that program. In France, President Emmanuel Macron is an alum, here in the US, Stacey Abrams, the former Georgia gubernatorial candidate, so some really interesting people. And then there's the third head, which is what I think most people in Washington know us for, which is the think tank, we do all the sort of the ordinary Think Tank things you would expect the policy analysis, the convening the gathering of ideas, to shape the policy conversation. And that's sort of the bread and butter of what we do. And I sit in the middle of all that trying to take the various things that are happening in this very interesting transatlantic stew, and try to take that to the rest of the world to see if we can spark things.



Tony Kopetchny 02:38

Thank you for that. I just learned a lot about German Marshall Fund myself, I appreciate that I didn't realize that there was the sort of three tiered strategy there. And so like, yeah, like that would be confusing, good story to tell. So that really ties into my next question for you, though, you know, are the communication strategies that you're deploying? Are they targeted at a US base audience? And if so, how are you thinking about framing the international issues for the US audience? Or, you know, it was part of this? Yeah. What's your audience like in Europe?



Andrew Kolb 03:10

Yeah, it's such an interesting question for us right now. So we have what I think of as transatlantic audiences, although really global as well, we definitely have people tracking us in Australia, in Japan, surprisingly, in Korea, we found out through doing some data analysis and folks reading our newsletters, but really, it's the transatlantic community that we're targeting. And obviously, the US piece of that is particularly significant, and significant for us. Because we're fairly well known in Europe, in the Brussels policy community, we are very well known in the Berlin policy community. And so we've got important communications work to do there. But we're we're starting from a fairly high baseline of awareness and understanding of who we are, what we do and what we stand for. In the United States, even in Washington, and we're very much Washington institution, we are not comparably well known. And so my feeling is that the organization for the next few years is really going to need to focus on American audiences, not at the expense of our European communications, but to sort of bring it up to the same level. And it's sort of an interesting quandary, because DC is thick with think tanks. And I've done a sort of a competitive analysis. And the communications team at GMF is a quarter to a half the size of a lot of our larger peer institutions, peer institutions that are focused on Washington and on the united states that don't have to focus on Europe at the same time. And so that's sort of the the project that I and my team are going to be really focused on, especially this year. This year is GMF 50th anniversary, it's the 75th anniversary of the Marshall Plan. And so an important moment to take some of the heritage of that I was speaking about earlier. And to, to wave that flag and use that as a banner to try to really build a community around ourselves, or to build on the community that we already have. And that community is an interesting one. There are people in Washington and people who self described as Kranz Atlanta cysts, and they know us, the transatlantic community knows us. But that's a dwindling community. Right? There aren't a lot of people who self described as Atlanticist right now in the way that there

were during the Cold War. And foreign policy is no longer so Eurocentric as it was and that's a good thing, right? That's something that we GMF embrace. So we've got to figure out how do we, you know, tell the story of what we're doing, which is global affairs through a transatlantic lens, and, and make that relevant, and make that relevant, not just to the policy influencers, who are, you know, clearly the core of our audience, right. And as with any Think Tank, you're working in the policy realm, you want to be in touch with legislators, academics, the people who are shaping the policy conversation. But we also want to be in touch with the policy interested. And there are a lot of people out there who are following World Affairs, who are paying attention to what's happening in the news. It's such an interesting thing about community. And this gets into your digital communications and how you build online communities in ways that I don't think either the sort of the digital agency world that you're a part of Tony, or certainly the nonprofit or think tank world, have really digested. And it's partly because we use language, to build community. I mean, that American University ad was saying, Come here, we'll teach you to sound like these super smart people working at these Washington institutions. And if you speak the language that gives you the foot in the door, which is exactly right, right. I mean, that's a well targeted ad for the demographic of folks who want to go to American University and want to make a career in Washington. And there's nothing wrong with that. But it also can signal a closed door. If you don't speak the language, then you might not feel like you're invited into the conversation. One thing that's been really interesting to me. And this is sort of informal and anecdotal, I haven't had the time or the bandwidth to go deep on this as a data exercise. But I look at some of the people who are now joining our events on Zoom. And they're not necessarily the same people who were coming to our beautiful Dupont Circle boardroom for our policy conversations. There are people in Nevada, there was a bike mechanic, motorbike mechanic from Brussels. He left some really interesting things in the chat. Not all of them were things that I agreed with, let's put it that way. They were clearly the comments as someone who was tracking the news carefully. And so there's a whole different set of conversations you can have. Now, there's limited time and resources. And you can only create so much content, you can only convene so many events, you can only bring so many questions from the chat to the panel during those events. And so there's a balance you want to strike, right. I don't think think tanks should become populist organizations, I think they'll fail. And I don't I don't even know what success would look like there. But I do think that there's, there's an opportunity for us to have a broader conversation. And that's going to be fundamental to being relevant in the next 50 years.



Tony Kopetchny 09:08

Let's dive into that a little bit because you use the phrase policy interested? audience. So, you know, my question, one of my questions was, how do you go about defining audiences? And for a lot of think tanks, we work with a lot of think tanks there is I think it sums it up, right? It's legislative policymakers, it's academics that are working on it, but I think there is that as you phrase it, the policy interested crowd. But does that really mean because that feels generic at first. So when you're when you're rolling up your sleeves and you're diving in and you're thinking more people throughout the US should probably be getting this message, especially at a current moment here. We're recording this the end of February 2022. There's a lot of activity happening in Europe, with everything happening around Ukraine right now. So but I think you've made the point here. I think there are a lot of people here in the states that are hungry for where do I get some unbiased relief out full information. So yeah, how do you, let's talk about the policy interested crowd and

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Andrew Kolb 10:07

the outreach in first of all, Tony, I'm so flattered, you picked up on that phrase, because it's a phrase that I've been trying to sell internally within GMF for the last five years, and no one said they don't like it, but no one else has picked it up, either. And I've got this slide that shows up in a lot of my presentations, which is two concentric circles, the policy influencers surrounded by the policy interested. And it's a tricky question. So with the policy influencers, and we know who those are, sometimes we know them on a first name basis, right? In the think tank world, there's sort of a mantra that we roll our eyes at. But it's also got a grain of truth to it, that you don't need to worry about how many people are reading a paper, so long as the right five people at the State Department are reading it? And I think that is true. Although often, if you actually know who those five people are, it's easier to just go over to their office and have a conversation and deliver your ideas in verbal form. Now, the policy interesting, we don't know, comparably, well, I got examples of people that I've sort of cherry picked out of our Twitter following or out of our event registration. But I don't have confidence in my ability to paint a robust picture of who the policy interested are right now. And there's work to be done there. Right? If you ask me in three years, I might offer you a much smarter and more specific answer. But I also think to a degree, it's important for it to be self selecting. So, you know, obviously, there's a certain baseline of education that you need. There's a certain baseline of news awareness that you need, if you're really going to digest policy content. In a democracy, you want a citizenry that's actually aware of what's happening in the policy world, and can think intelligently about it and can ask smart questions about and I think there's a role for think tanks in delivering some of that. There's a really interesting Marshall Plan, anecdote about this. So you know, George Marshall was sort of the the name behind the Marshall Plan, obviously. And it's because he was a war hero, and just the Sterling character, I would really encourage your listeners to read a little bit about George Marshall, if they're interested in that, that period of time. Absolutely fascinating man. And the success of so much of what the United States did during World War Two and after is thanks to him and his character. But this wasn't his solo project. In some ways, it was Harry Truman's project Truman, Taft Marshall, because he wanted that reputation behind the European Recovery Act. And Marshall laid out certain parameters, but he had a bunch of really smart guys from Harvard and elsewhere, around him who filled in the details. And so these were the elite of the elite people like Dean Acheson. And what he did with those elites is he sent them out to places like Iowa corn exchanges, to explain to local people why this policy of this unprecedented, crazy, generous aid policy was in their enlightened self interest. And that's something that you don't see, you're a lot of rhetoric about that in Washington getting outside the Beltway, but you don't actually see many policy institutions, putting resources against that putting staff power against that, or strategizing around it even. So, this is something that I certainly have a lot of hope that GMF, you know, carrying on in that Marshall Plan heritage could do more with it's something I think that the think tank sector as a whole the policy sector as a whole would do well, to do more with I think, I mean, it's a little grandiose to think it could change the tenor of political conversation in our country, which is, you know, in a raw place right now, but it certainly couldn't hurt. And it would make the policy conversation connect to people's concerns to people's real lives in a way that it doesn't right now. And there is a politicians beat up on Washington all the time for have been out of touch with the American people. And I think it's unfair to a certain degree Sorry, but there's a grain of truth in that as well. And there could be some motion from the policy community from think tanks and institutions like ours to rectify that.

**Tony Kopetchny 15:13**

How much do you think using that example of a teenage son going out into Iowa that they were also I mean, there was a bill on the line they're trying to push money through. So it really did have to get the people who were going to vote, putting pressure on their members of Congress and the senators. The How much do you think think tanks and policy organizations that are DC based, are hoping to lean on legislative affairs groups to go back to their states? So if you get a hold of Tony from Texas, and then Tony from Texas, his group can go back and talk to local folks, then GMF doesn't have to worry about being a voice going directly out past the beltway? Did you know is there some, is there hope of amplification and in a digital transformed world we live in? Does that even make sense anymore?

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Andrew Kolb 16:03

I think that's absolutely the right question. I don't have a definitive answer. So that was completely the strategy. And it wasn't just people at the State Department like Atchison, you had senators like Arthur Vandenberg, who were instrumental and Arthur Vandenberg was a Republican, very much opposed to a lot of Harry Truman, a Democrats policies. But having him on board for the European Recovery Act for the Marshall Plan, was instrumental in it passing. And having constituent support was tremendously important. And not just for Vandenberg, but for other Republicans who were both ideologically and politically predisposed to not look kindly on this massive spending bill, where the money all left the United States. Now, can that be replicated today? I have heard people sitting senators, head to think tanks, say very clearly, you couldn't have a Marshall Plan today, America's politics wouldn't allow for it. And you know, that passes the smell test, right. And it required a degree of political imagination and bipartisanship that I think might be gone from the system. I hope I'm wrong about that. But all the evidence is that I'm right. So what do you do then? Who are the ambassadors? Who are the people who no wider swathes of the public are going to want to listen to around these things? And I don't have a good answer there. And I will say, on other issues. So I, before working in foreign policy, I was working in conservation and sustainability. And there, you got a lot of celebrity voices. And some of those celebrity voices are really effective and really effective at, among other things, moving the policy conversation. You know, if you're, if you're going for meetings on the hill, and you'd take a Leo DiCaprio with you to talk about climate change, you're gonna get a lot more doors open for you than if you're going up there with a couple of scientists. So, you know, there's there's definitely some good examples of sort of the intersection between pop culture and, and policy coming from other sectors in the foreign policy world, it's sort of an interesting question right now, because we're all it's we're recording this on February 23 2022. Putin announced yesterday that he is going to recognize these areas of Ukraine that he invaded back in 2014, recognize their independence from Ukraine. And, you know, we, you know, we feel like we're on the brink of war. When your listeners hear this, we may be at war, we may, we may have stepped back from the brink. And we will see, but the world is watching these foreign policy issues. And we're certainly getting our expert voices out there through traditional media. A lot of journalists are in touch with us right now. We're, I think, doing a good job of shedding light, giving historical context, explaining how to look at these things that can be very confusing, right. And in the diplomatic process, there's a lot a lot of subtle signals built into it. And I don't think the average US consumer is well well equipped to interpret them. And so we're doing a lot and I think we're being heard. But do I think our fellows are going to still be, you know, sort of front of mind. Once the once the smoke clears? Of course not. You know, I realized that there is a ceiling for recognition for Think Tank expertise. And so finding those people who are going to amplify the conversation and carry the comp perception

on an out to broader communities to their own communities is, I think really important if you want to reach wider publics or different publics. But I don't think we figured out the playbook yet for who that is, at least in, in the foreign policy corner of the nonprofit world.



Tony Kopetchny 20:22

Yeah, we certainly haven't figured that out yet. It's there's a conflation of things happening in my mind, as you're talking to all that one is. For anyone listening, who doesn't know, I've spent years working in the tech space in DC, before coming out and starting my own company.



Andrew Kolb 20:38

So I only escaped.



Tony Kopetchny 20:43

I thought about this for a long time. And I would argue with some folks that I worked with to, you know, the digital, eventually ended up eroding the Fourth Estate in ways where newspapers weren't able to keep up the same way financially, and it hid a lot more locally throughout the country than it did in the Big Blue Chip markets in New York Times. It's still the New York Times and they're fine. And they're popular in Wall Street Journal. But you know, the Iowa what's the the local Ionian is, are they still doing? All right? You know, a lot of these groups got hit pretty hard, because the just the economics of digital advertising. And so I always thought for think tanks to is there a way? I think it was last year, I read on a Deloitte or McKinsey like the top five trends in business, but number one was trust. I thought How interesting. The word trust is your number one trend, you got to believe in business. And I'm thinking there's something there. Social networks aren't a great place for trust, but there are a lot of eyeballs. But what's the role of a policy organization to be a little more direct to consumer, if you will, and maybe targeted beyond the beltway? Because it's under just a flood of information? I think you said haven't figured it out. Right. So how do I know where to look? Where should I look? Why would I look there? But you know, if I'm skipping and I don't have to get the German Marshall Fund, quote, from the New York Times, where I might feel the New York Times it's tainted, that I can go right to the source. So I've just like for think tanks, general work? How do we start getting all of what you do, which is a whole group of people who do nothing but focus on these transatlantic issues and things that are happening really relevant at the moment in the world, and get that just to everyone so they can consume it or think tanks? A lot of them take a non partisan approach. So they're, they're really not trying to throw biases politically into it. They're just trying to put good ideas out there. Yeah, I don't know if I could figure it out in this podcast, but I think there's something there for



Andrew Kolb 22:41

sure. Know, you're absolutely right. And think tanks aren't golden in this regard. I mean, there, there have been some cases of a funder influencing research and what have you. But I would say generally, they're pretty good when it comes to intellectual integrity, and certainly a GMF we've got a fairly rigorous set of safeguards in place to make sure that our our outputs are not

influenced by our funding model. The difference is awareness. And I don't I don't quite know what the right frame for thinking of this is. So with like a New York Times, they've got everybody knows the New York Times they've got 100% brand awareness. And a GMF. Has, if we did a baseline awareness survey of the American populace, I'm sure we would come back at 0%. Right. I am realistic about that.



Tony Kopetchny 23:42

You don't have a song about you know, there's no New York New York equivalent.



Andrew Kolb 23:47

That's That's right. No, no, Washington Post March, John Philip Sousa never put that to music. No. And so we're lacking the awareness. And it's sort of the question for me, should we be trying to build that awareness, that visibility? I mean, should we just put our, our entire communications budget for the year into drivetime radio ad buys? Which, actually our entire communications budget for the year if we did put it in drivetime radio, I think we would spend it in a week. But, you know, you know what I'm saying? What do you really, really focus on just, you know, doing marketing the way Pepsi does marketing? I don't think we have the resources. And I don't know that it would get us to what I'm talking about where we are sort of inviting this broader community of the policy interested into the conversation. There's a level at which I think, a GMF I'm not just to GMF but some of our, our more recognizable peers and Brookings, where the audience for that is always going to be self selecting, and maybe the right thing to do is to lean into that and say, No, I'm not going to try to chase down the consumer and make sure that they've heard of me and make sure that they have no awareness of what I'm talking about. And there's just too much noise in the marketplace of ideas to be successful doing that. But you do want the consumer, the news consumer, the ideas, consumer who's actively looking for interpretation, you know, this week, who's actively trying to make sense of this crisis that Russia has precipitated that you're visible to them. And we've actually had some luck in that regard, I will say. So, you know, we, we recently had a paper that happened to have a very catchy title, what does Putin want in Ukraine, and it got incredible traffic, oh, incredible traffic by Think Tank standards, very modest traffic by funny cat video standards. But it's probably had several 100,000 people, over 100,000 people look at it at this point. And looking at the time on page and looking at the scroll depth, etc. And the people who were reading it, were really reading it. So the people who were seeking out and answer this question, they said, Oh, here's a deep analysis, and they followed it through to the end, it was not a short piece, we are a think tank going short. It's not our strong suit, despite my best efforts. And for a while, if you Googled for about five days after we published that, if you Googled What does Putin want in Ukraine? Or why does Putin want Ukraine? Or why is Russia want Ukraine or any variation on that? We were at the top or in the top three of search rankings. And it was interesting, because after that, news organizations that are much better, SEO optimized, just have better traffic are always going to perform better and search. They ran similarly titled pieces, but we just happened to be first to market. And we got wonderful attention for that. And I think the user has benefited, right, I mean, the user, the reader or the consumer, really, based on the evidence that I have got it, what they were looking for from that. And so I think there's something in the content creation, making it more framed for what that policy interested community is going to be interested in meeting them where they are, there's no more art than science to that, at least for me right now. Making sure it's accessible. So we could have run the

same piece under a classic Think Tank headline that's 10 words with two punctuation marks, one of which is sure to be a colon. And it wouldn't have performed well in search. People who saw that headline would sort of instinctively know if they weren't coming from the policy community, Oh, this looks wonky, this might not be for me. And so actually, there might be in there some really easy answers, right? I mean, just hiring an amazing headline writers, this is not my gift. But I've worked with people who are phenomenal headline writers, you give them 1000 words, and they'll say, this is the right headline, and you hear a new Oh, yeah, that's the only possible headline. So maybe just bringing more of those people into the the world of Wong curry that we inhabit or that I inhabit that you've managed to achieve escape philosophy from maybe that would be, you know, sort of a staffing shift or a cultural shift that might actually move us closer to that same kind of space that traditional media organizations occupy. And you know, and obviously, they invest in this right. I mean, copy editors are trained to write headlines.



Tony Kopetchny 28:56

I mean, being free of it. On my side, I'll do my small rant. And I got some more questions to guide the podcast, I want to hear it. I, I really think coming through the pandemic digital transformation, the the opening up, have groups like think tanks, and I have some questions in here for you just about events in general, you know, where everyone in the world could come in and see, rather than just a small handful of people within the 25 mile radius, Washington DC, or New York or San Francisco, one of the major hubs here in the US can can partake in these events. And I think there has always been a lack of funding for communications, then God help us if we ever use the word marketing in the think tank space, especially because they have relied on newspapers and major journalistic outlets to pick them up and then amplify the message for them. And I think going forward, I just don't know if that's the right mix. If there's not a direct partnership with a newspaper that is just picking up according to all the time since and giving you revenue back because they're making money Have your comments and a lot of nonprofit, all these think tanks are nonprofit, and they're struggling to get funding in the door. So I think there's a mixture between the funding model, the outlets, and the access to those outlets and the access is open. It's just a matter of taking better advantage of what's out there. But I just wrote a few things down when you're talking to about the types of content. Miss if I was scrolling around, before we talked, and there's new report that came out from HubSpot, the 22 things to watch out in 2022 for social media or something, I forget the exact title, but it said, but you know, one of them was that snack size content. I love that now, it's not bite sized content, snack sized content, I don't know what the hell that means. A kid's got Lunchables in the fridge back there. And like, that's where my head goes. But snack size content, I think you're right. It's like what's quick, what's the bite size that I can get to get me into the rest of it? And if I want to go bigger, great. And if not, at least I got three points. And I feel smarter because now I trusted that organization to put it. I've just been thinking more and more like Marshall McLuhan over the last couple weeks, you know, the message is the medium. And I've been thinking about that. And in terms of events, like I said, I want to dive into with you is I think getting into the pandemic, everybody thought about events, and then they were patchworking and saying, Okay, well, we have webinars now, and it's an online event. And I think, personally, I don't, there's no going back, there's only coming through and going forward. And it's scary when we look forward, because the path isn't a sure shot laid in front of us. We don't know where it's going. But in terms of events, it I think it's time to start thinking about it as different content types, like a delivered webinars not the same as me talking to you and a few others in front of a room in DC with 25 people taking questions and streaming, it's the mediums are so different, but and then to go into your art and science. I think you're right in

the blend. But I'd like to talk a little bit about the science side and how you think about packaging your messaging and who you're reaching out to what role does data play? As you all start thinking about? I don't know, if you do an annual strategy, your quarterly? Or you're really looking at the numbers, how do they help you think about framing and changing? You know, your either your content type output? Or? Or how the channels you're on the put them out there to get to your audience. Tell us a bit about tell us about some of the science behind the art.

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Andrew Kolb 32:23

Yeah, good rent. Tony. Thanks, bye, there's, there's so much there that I want to respond to. And before I talk, I just want to go back to your point about media partnerships. Because to me, that's a very natural and obvious thing to do in the nonprofit world, is I mean, I know people in the in the philanthropy and development side of things that might challenge me on this, but the nonprofit world has stayed fairly healthy, despite the disruptions that have rocked the media world and media as a business, except for the very, very cream has, you know, has suffered. And you hear about the death of local journalism. And I don't think that's an exaggeration. I think we're seeing local journalism, as we knew it, you know, going through its death throes. And I would love to be wrong about that. And I do see some examples out there. But they're, you know, sort of the little points of light in, you know, what is a darkening field. It's been interesting, because obviously, think tanks and journalists have close relationships. We've got a lot of journalists, who turned particular experts regularly, or who just trust us to help connect them with the right expert, who will come to me or my team and say, Hey, I'm looking at this particular facet of this issue, do you have someone who's going to be helpful to me on that, and then we either make the connection, or we say, you know, we actually don't have someone. And I'm, I'm rigorous about making sure that if we're putting an expert forward, that they're going to be helpful. You know, if we don't, you know, if we don't go deep on Afghanistan, I'm not going to try to pretend that my my colleagues are going to be the right people to talk to, I make sure that we are helping journalists. And so as an institution, you know, we have built some really wonderful fruitful relationships that both help get our expertise out there. And, you know, a New York Times or Washington Post or politico has much greater reach to GMF does through our platforms or channels, but also really helps the journalists get to the right story, tell the story that needs to be told that needs to connect with their readers or listeners or viewers. Now, that's the journalist side. On the business side, I found it much much harder to cultivate those same kinds of relationships. And it's certainly possible when people are open to the conversation. But I think there's a very fundamental level of where people on The business side of media see themselves as competitors, with policy institutions, competitors with think tanks. And I think the competitive space has gotten smaller. So one of the fascinating things to watch about elite journalism or elite media institutions over the last decade is they've not all of them, but almost all have pivoted towards events as a revenue stream. And you go back 20 years, when the New York Times was not in the events business, the Atlantic was not the events business. And now they are all top tier conveners. And so they're trading in their brand recognition and their, their audience and the level of awareness out there to do events, many of which look like traditional Think Tank events, a panel discussion for experts talking to a journalist. And I've definitely had business conversations, I don't think I can go into the details here. But where there's a good idea on the table, and there might even be some enthusiasm for it in the media organization, with the journalists or with someone at a junior to mid level on the business side that have got shut down. Because somebody more senior says no, this is competitive. This is entering into our competitive space. I think that may be short sighted, I think what you're talking about if some visionary in the media business sees an opportunity to

partner with the right policy institution, and they actually do something that's transformative to use a much abused word, everyone will follow. But that hasn't happened yet. And I don't I don't know how easy it will be. So things could move in that direction. But they're, they're not. They're not moving. They're fast. Right now would be my observation. Now you asked about sort of the science



Tony Kopetchny 36:54

Oh, hold on now. Now I gotta keep



Andrew Kolb 36:57

you want to stay with that. circle back to science. later and talk media right now.



Tony Kopetchny 37:02

I'm going to read change the title of everything to where we're just talking



Andrew Kolb 37:04

about. Good sir used to



Tony Kopetchny 37:07

you let me go no easy use the word competition. And I hadn't before my conversations, and I think it's, I think you're right. I think on the business side, they do think of it that way. And too often in the nonprofit space. We, we think of it, but we it's like coopetition like we're cooperating and then we're there's competition for a little bit of mindshare competition for the grants competition. But then we all still sort of share a little bit differently. And on on the event side. Yeah, it was, I got into a conversation and I met him I was listening. Let's look at my LinkedIn profile. I wrote a piece about this. But it's included the things I'm looking at for 2022. And it was marquee events. And the reason I thought of a marquee event is World Economic Forum. Davos was always just an event, but now they're acting a lot like Think Tank, because it happens all year round. And they have thought pieces going out. And I think your your take there on the journalists and the New York Times getting into events, like how does a think tank partner with them where it is, it is transatlantic, the German Marshall Fund hosted by The New York Times. And if I could be honest on the scuttlebutt of in France, talking from outside of the beltway, deep in the heart of the country down here in Texas, this point, I mean, I think the biggest thing that's gonna get in the way is the egos, there's egos for the people who write on both sides of that, and they want to be able to own it, because they want to be the one who had the airport idea rather than ideas that we could share. I think you're onto something that I think for anyone listening, I think there's there's wide open opportunities, if we're willing to start embracing them. And I, as coming through this pandemic, I think it's proven two things. One is there is a ready willing, open and interested online audience that you can tap into. And there's going to be a strong hunger for people to do things in person again. So how do we

balance the two? And how do we, how do we get out there? And because your people have been stuck homes through newspapers, I think there is a huge interest in what the hell is happening in places like Ukraine? And where do I get that info, especially if my local newspapers been chopped to bits, and they've got two reporters trying to keep up with 10 sections? The best they can write and one editor, they have to get that information coming in from other places. Yeah, thanks.

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Andrew Kolb 39:25

Right. And there is, you can't quite define it yet. But you can see that there are these areas of excellence that are emerging in the media world that are emerging in the policy world that would complement each other really nicely. I mean, just thinking about thinking about snackable content. Everybody pivoted to video, what a decade plus ago, but video content is it's an amazing way of giving somebody an idea that's going to stick with them. Right and I love the written word I love Long Form writing, I love short form writing. But I see the promise of pairing that with strong video. Now very few think tanks have actually invested in video production, very few think tanks can make high quality video. And again, I came from the conservation world where, you know, there's a very high standard for video and for visuals, right. And if you're trying to show wildlife, you, you want to show it at the same level of quality as National Geographic does. But you can deliver policy ideas with similar visual polish and quality and imagination. And think tanks aren't going to be good at that. Now, media organizations would have invested in video right in the New York Times Lord knows how many video editors they have at this point for a newspaper. Right. And again, you go back 20 years and in that was still was the core product was a newspaper, which is not a platform that supports video, the they have amazing capabilities at this point. And if you could marry the policy ideas with that kind of visual imagination and technical prowess, you could make really interesting and really enlightening products. And I think you can only do that through partnership. It's not. It's not going to come from the media world alone. Now, I do think media organizations are run by business people, business people understand the value of brand. And they worry, I think, perhaps rightly about diluting their brand by partnership. But there are some examples. So for a long time, Aspen and the Atlantic were partnering on their convening. I think that's that dialed back or stopped. But you know, I'm sure your listeners will correct me if I'm wrong about that. But that's an example of the kind of partnership where Aspen brings a lot of intellectual firepower, and the Atlantic brings both is sort of a storied and trusted media brand. But also just production capabilities that don't always make sense for think tank to to create or to bring in house.



Tony Kopetchny 42:17

I wish on your last statement there. Yes, on the brand from the private sector place a private sector viewpoint not please state, there is a solid understanding of the value of it in terms of dollars that very few 501 C, three nonprofits think about. And I think in terms of that partnership, I think more of the nonprofits should be in the place of I don't want to dilute our brand by partnering with this news outlet, even though it's a marquee name, because it could dilute what I'm trying to do in different parts of the country because it isn't as well received. In certain places, there's there could be tainted both, you know, there's gonna be taint on that

side, too, that you don't want to get onto your 501 C three. But it's it's just such a point that money really is power. And if you feel like you're, you don't have the same financial standing, you know, I don't know, money talk

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Andrew Kolb 43:14

is such a, I think brand is such a wonderful mindset for doing communications. And I am, I suspect something in a minority of Think Tank comms directors in espousing that. But at least for the German Marshall Fund, we stand for something, we stand for the values of the Marshall Plan for that political imagination, that generosity of spirit and that radical pragmatism. And we should be going into the marketplace of ideas with a little bit of swagger, based on that. And I think that's true of our peers of Brookings of Carnegie of Aspen and we should be proud of what we stand for the Atlantic Council and each of these organizations have a history and a story and a set of ideas that they have brought into the world. And that's, you know, that should be both a source of pride. And it should be should be your calling card. You know, whatever, whatever you whatever values you bring, and then you if you marry that effectively with a media brand that has shared values, different competencies, different audiences, the chemistry there could be powerful. It's just a matter of figuring out yes or no what are the right elements to bring together to catalyze this



Tony Kopetchny 44:35

so what have like what lessons have you learned coming through the pandemic with running events? You know, I just in case there's anyone listening who isn't familiar as well with think tanks in the DC space like the events were just a recurring thing. I mean, everything tank probably had at least one a week that people would show up to and, yeah, they're always medium attendance, good attendance, but then a pandemic. Make up and in that entire model and industry how to flip on its head. And from conversations that I've had with people have seen as attendance has gone up by 300%. I mean registrations by 500%. And you can't unsee that right to go back and say I really just want to have them at my building again. So that what's your experience been? What have you learned? What are you hoping to retain from, you know, what you've picked up on through the pandemic?

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Andrew Kolb 45:30

Yeah, so TMF is a little unique, even among think tanks, because we have seven European offices, as well as our Washington headquarters, and they were all doing local events. And so across our network, there might have been 20 or 30 events a week, during a heavy week, heavy week. And then we have our big flagship conference Brussels forum that we did every year where we flew a lot of people from the US and Europe and around the world to Brussels for an intense three days in a room together three days and nights. This is a conference that went late into the evening. And we were really proud of this proud of our convening, it was something that we use to cultivate relationships to advance conversations. We did some convening that was publicly focused that anybody could come come to a lot that was sort of, you know, either Chatham House or off the record, bringing different people together for a conversation in a very safe space. Through the leadership development, we did convening that built these sort of cohorts of people who built real bonds with each other. So we had a wide

spectrum of convening, all of which screech to a halt in March of 2020. And like everybody else, we got on to zoom. And, and let me say, I did not think we were ready. I did not think we had the technical sophistication to get on to zoom. We had one woman in Connecticut, I think she was a doctor, so a medical doctor, so not a foreign policy person, she stopped receiving our event invitations. And she, she said a very grumpy note that showed up in our press inbox, and how come I'm not receiving these, I've watched dozens, maybe hundreds of hours of your events. And I've learned so much, and why am I no longer invited. And again, you know, it's anecdotal. It's one data point, but it tells you these people are out there who want to plug in. The one thing that I take some credit for, take some pride in is sort of the practice that we set in place around registration. So there was an instinct, that's a good instinct, let's just put this up on the internet where anybody can see it. So stream everything to YouTube, embed the YouTube on the, on the event page, scream at all, the Facebook Live or Twitter, let's just make it public in as many places as we possibly can. That was the instant. And I pumped the brakes hard on that. Because if you do that you are maybe showing people some things, but you're not bringing them into a community. And you've lost all opportunity to follow up with them. And so I insisted against strong institutional headwinds mean, including members of our executive team who were involved with some of these events. And you know, they wanted to maximize the eyeballs in the moment, I insisted on a registration policy, a very light registration policy, you know, give us your email. And the fruits of that are, our file of email of all constituents grew by 30%. And so I feel really vindicated in that. And it's been it's been a long time since anybody was grumpy with me about this policy because our audiences have grown and diversified. And it's made us a more interesting and robust organization. And I think we will continue to do so. I think there are other organizations that are following similar paths of using events, using online events as a new way of community building, which is what they always were when you were inviting people into your conference room. You were building a community, but it was a community of the 20 people who are free at 2pm on a Tuesday to talk about NATO.



Tony Kopetchny 49:16

And they really liked your coffee.



Andrew Kolb 49:19

They really well. We actually stopped doing events at lunchtime because there were some people who it was pretty clear that they were interested in Mediterranean security somewhat, but they were really interested in that sandwich. And I used to joke that you could probably eat pretty well just go into a different Think Tank event every every day at lunchtime. But that translates to online, but it also transforms. You get a whole different set of people different, different community that you can build. And it can be a shallower engagement, right, somebody might dip in for five minutes rather than sitting there for a full We'll hour, but they still signaled interest. And if you've captured their email and gotten their permission to start emailing them, then you can put your newsletter in front of them put your new publications in front of them. Over time, this is where your question about data practices gets really interesting. You can put together a pattern of, oh, this, this cohort is really interested in our Asia content. This cohort is really interested in our cities content, this cohort is really interested in both our leadership content and our city's content. And so you can start to put together sort of the patterns of affinity. And this requires, it doesn't require really deep data science, it requires that you be gathering the data, gathering the information, that you have some plan for

how you're going to use it, so that you can look at it intelligently. And that you take the time to do so. And that that's not a small thing, right. I mean, I've got a very small digital team, there's a big piece of me that wants to have all of their time focused on pumping things out into the world. But it's been really important to carve out that, you know, that not small amount of their time, it's 15 20%, that is focused on analyzing audience behavior, to understand what's working and what's not. And we've had some really good learning from that, you asked earlier about brevity, or Mita, give me a crack earlier about brevity. And this is something that think tanks have not always been good at. And my my mantra has been, we need to balance depth with brevity and brevity with depth, right? I mean, we need to give people the accessible entry point, that's going to give them sort of the top line of what they need to know out of this 20 page paper. But at the same time, we've got to make sure if we're putting something short out there, that it's serious that it actually conveys an idea completely and is shallow or off the cuff. And we are intellectually rigorous, and that is part of our integrity. And so those are the things you've got to balance. And we've done some cool things, an idea that I can't take credit for, that came recently from one of our experts dealing with this Russia crisis was just short, one to two sentence policy recommendations aimed at the various capitals where we work. And I thought it was a brilliant idea. And so we came up with a way of presenting that on our website using sort of an accordion fold. So here's the recommendation for Berlin, here's the recommendation for the European Council, here's the recommendation for the Biden administration. And you got to click on each one to unfold the accordion, and see the recommendation. And, you know, this didn't get, you know, traffic anywhere near the level of what the what is Putin wanting Ukraine peace that I mentioned earlier? I did respectively, but not, you know, not not through the roof the way that did. But what was interesting is that nearly 100% of the people who visited that page interacted with the accordion. So you know, which it's, you know, it's not really a barrier to the content, not making their experience of the page any harder. In some ways, the interaction might make just that little bit more pleasant, because you're not just looking at words on a screen. What was interesting, it was it was nearly universal. If you bothered to go to that page, you were probably interested in our policy recommendations. And people, you know, universally, looked to see what they were once they were there.



Tony Kopetchny 53:39

covered a lot of ground today.



Andrew Kolb 53:41

Yeah, I feel like I've thrown a stack of stuff at you, Tony. I don't know if it coheres. I don't know if it all makes sense.



Tony Kopetchny 53:49

This, we went through a lot of this is great. I think we set out to talk about how do you talk to us audiences about international policy. And I think we really got heavy into my one of my favorite topics is what is the business of think tanks?



A**Andrew Kolb 54:05**

Yeah, it would probably have been shorter and easier if I had just said, I don't know, in response to that. And if any of your listeners have a silver bullet on that, please have them get in touch with me because I want to figure it out. I think it's a really interesting question. How do you get out there at scale? So you're really affecting the conversation really accessible, really available to people who want to understand these things? Because I am firmly convinced I see ample evidence that there are people out there who want to hear from institutions like GMF who want to have that sort of conduit into the policy conversation or into the transatlantic conversation or the World Affairs Conversation. But how we put ourselves in front of them effectively, and and do it you know sort of at the at the scale that is needed, but with the resources that we have, I have not cracked that nut. So if somebody else has, or has the Nutcracker, that's going to help me do it. send them my way.

**Tony Kopetchny 55:12**

I think we I think we covered a lot of points today that hopefully, anyone's listening gives us some comments on and which one right? Is it partners with events? Is the partners for distribution? Is it partners? We talked a lot about that on the event side, I think just honing in on the events as you talked about, right? How do I now engage and get the email and put that back out and start that relationship building? And I think you're, I think you're spot on. It's relationship building, not just eyeballs, like, eyeballs are one thing, but you're not selling advertising your you need to get the message to the people. And the only way you're getting that is to get that email to get it back to them. So I've covered a lot of ground. I think there's a lot of great things in here. I do end every podcast, though, with the same question of all of my guests. And for anyone who's been a regular listener. Now you'll you'll know this is the we'll get a new song for a Spotify list out of this. So Andrew, what is your go to song when you need a boost? And why?

A**Andrew Kolb 56:09**

So this is the hardest question you've asked me you told me it's so much different music I turned to for slightly different boosts. The one I'm going to kind of go to and this is just because it's been true for so long. And it always works when I need to reset my energy is Jesus liquid swords.

**Tony Kopetchny 56:30**


I really appreciate it your time today. Thank you for coming and talking with us.

A**Andrew Kolb 56:36**

This was fun. Tony, thanks so much for having me on.

**Tony Kopetchny 56:39**

Absolutely. We'll need to do this again. I'll talk to you next time. And so all the audience out there again, please just leave us some comments or like, share, shoot us an email if you've got ideas for episodes. And we did put a lot of questions out here. So it'd be wonderful to get some feedback on whatever might have resonated with you today and tell the listeners Thank you always for your support and listening to us combined.

 **Outro 57:03**

Thank you for listening. Join us again for more engaging ideas with your host Parsons TKO CEO Tony Kopetchny. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a comment and share with your friends. Send us your feedback at [create change at Parsons tko.com](mailto:createchange@parsonstko.com).