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Development Characteristics and Recommendations for Chinese Media Think Tanks (Postprint)

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Abstract

Abstract: [Purpose/Significance] In recent years, media think tanks have emerged prominently. Although limited in number, their development is highly distinctive, exhibiting certain differences in resource endowments, management philosophy, and operational tactics compared to university think tanks, thus warranting a more nuanced analysis of their developmental characteristics. [Method/Process] This study combines literature analysis with examination of typical cases to conduct a more in-depth conceptual differentiation of media think tanks, trace their developmental trajectory, and analyze their primary functions, characteristics, and deficiencies. [Result/Conclusion] Media think tanks not only leverage communication platform advantages to serve decision-making, but also demonstrate high research capacity in specialized fields and exhibit considerable proficiency in commercial operational methods. Based on these findings, this paper proposes recommendations for their future development.

Full Text

The Development Features and Development Recommendations of Chinese Media Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In recent years, media think tanks have emerged as a distinctive force in China's intellectual landscape. Though relatively

few in number, their development has been remarkably dynamic, characterized by unique resource endowments, operational philosophies, and management approaches that differ significantly from those of university-affiliated think tanks. This necessitates a more nuanced analysis of their developmental features. **[Method/Process]** This paper combines literature analysis with case studies to provide a deeper conceptual clarification of media think tanks, trace their evolutionary trajectory, and examine their primary functions, distinctive characteristics, and existing limitations. **[Result/Conclusion]** Media think tanks not only leverage their communication platforms to serve decision-making processes but also demonstrate considerable research expertise in specialized fields and sophisticated commercial operational capabilities. Based on this analysis, the paper proposes recommendations for their future development.

Keywords: media think tanks; media transformation; think tank characteristics; development suggestions

Classification Number: G2

In recent years, amid the rise of self-media and the rapid development of new media technologies, traditional media outlets facing mounting pressure have embarked on transformation and upgrading paths, with the establishment of media think tanks representing a major exploratory direction. The “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” (hereinafter referred to as the “Two Offices’ Opinions”), jointly issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council in January 2015, served as a catalyst for this transformation and accelerated the development of media think tanks. As a new force in building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics, media think tanks—though limited in number—have developed distinctive features that enrich the connotation of think tank construction and deepen the multi-level development system, fostering a vibrant ecosystem of diverse and collaborative growth.

1.1 Conceptual Analysis of Media Think Tanks

Media think tanks, also known as media-type think tanks or media-affiliated think tanks, have attracted increasing scholarly attention due to their vigorous development in recent years. Wu Liang argues that media-type think tanks position media outlets as platforms for think tank dissemination and brand carriers, with media organizations producing journalistic products centered on think tank research topics. These topics can subsequently generate research circles, reports, forums, cover stories, and even new media ventures [1]. Yin Hang and colleagues contend that media think tanks transform traditional news production methods into resource platforms centered on in-depth research, focusing on shifting product philosophies—specifically, how to design information products around resource aggregation. They categorize the relationship between media and think tanks into four types: media-type think tanks, think tank-type media, integrated media-think tank entities, and think tank-media collaborations

[2]. Huang Chuxin and others define media think tanks as research and consulting institutions established and operated by media organizations or institutions, representing a combination of media and think tank functions [3].

Drawing on these scholarly perspectives and the Two Offices' Opinions' definition of new-type think tanks, this paper defines media think tanks as research and consulting institutions initiated and dominated by media organizations to provide decision-making consultation and research services for government and society. This definition emphasizes three key points: First, the think tank must be initiated and dominated by media organizations. Some institutions may involve media participation and include terms like “media” or “communication” in their names, but if they are led by universities or other institutions and are based on university campuses, they should be classified as university think tanks. Second, not every research institution established by media qualifies as a think tank; only those dedicated to providing decision-making consultation and research services for external entities such as government, society, and enterprises are genuine think tanks. Institutions positioned as internal research units serving only their parent media organizations cannot be considered think tanks. Third, think tanks are independent entities with a certain degree of autonomy. Ke Yinbin and colleagues (2017) distinguished between corporate think tanks and corporate-type think tanks: the former refers to non-profit research and consulting institutions founded by enterprises with think tank functions, while the latter refers to corporate legal persons specializing in policy research and consultation. Only think tanks founded by enterprises qualify as corporate think tanks, whereas corporate-type think tanks are not necessarily corporate think tanks [4]. Building on this conceptual clarification, this paper adopts the term “media think tank.”

A related concept is think tank media (also called think tank-type media), which refers to new media forms that use media as platforms and focus on developing policy and decision-making resources, specializing in information production, processing, and derivative product development. In some contexts, these two concepts are not strictly distinguished and are even used interchangeably. However, differences exist. Although media think tanks are initiated by media organizations and have overlapping personnel with their parent companies—often hiring managers, editors, and journalists from the parent media—and engage in similar activities such as hosting conferences, forums, and joint publications, and sometimes collaborate on specific topics, they maintain distinct functions. After hosting summit forums, think tank media primarily focus on follow-up reporting, in-depth coverage, and planning book publications to develop derivative products, while media think tanks concentrate on mining hot topics among participating officials and scholars, conducting research projects, publishing research reports, and proposing policy recommendations.

The main differences are summarized in the table below:

Table 1 Major Differences Between Media Think Tanks and Think Tank Media

Dimension	Media Think Tank	Think Tank Media
Nature	Research and consulting institution	Media platform
Core Function	Consultation and research	Media dissemination and production/distribution
Core Capability	Research capacity, actionable policy recommendations	News sensitivity, content production, communication power
Main Products	Research reports, policy recommendations, annual reports, etc.	Newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet media, and related derivative products
Platform Function	News, reporting, and results release platform	-

Hu Shuli, Editor-in-Chief of Caixin Media, described the relationship between Caixin Think Tank and Caixin Media as follows: “Caixin Think Tank is a high-end financial service platform built entirely outside the media organization. It is a commercial entity with a separate institutional design, independent yet complementary to the media business. Caixin hopes to achieve leapfrog growth through this model and establish a lasting foundation, ultimately developing into a comprehensive information group similar to ‘Bloomberg + The Economist.’” This pattern of mutual independence and overall complementarity represents the ideal developmental direction for media think tanks.

1.2 Development History of Media Think Tanks

The inception of media think tanks began with central-level media outlets. In 1983, Xinhua News Agency established the Xinhua News Research Institute, the earliest research institution affiliated with a central media organization since the founding of the People’s Republic of China [5]. Its primary missions included promoting national journalism research, studying new theories and issues in global journalism development, and providing teaching materials and faculty for training journalism professionals. It also hosted annual journalism academic conferences for the industry, conducted special surveys commissioned by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, and leveraged Xinhua’s internal reference reporting function. Thus, the Xinhua News Research Institute can be regarded as the precursor to Chinese media think tanks. In 1992, Xinhua established several additional research institutions, including the World Affairs Research Center, forming a preliminary think tank system. In 2002, *People’s Daily* established its News Research Center, proposing to study domestic and international media development to provide references for leadership decision-making. In 2007, the China Business News Research Institute was established under the Shanghai Media Group, representing an early local media think tank.

During this initial stage, media think tanks were few in number, mostly initiated by central media outlets, and their operational models remained exploratory.

After 2010, with the gradual rise of new media and the growing momentum of media convergence, the pace of media think tank establishment accelerated significantly, expanding from central to local media, particularly in economically and media-developed eastern coastal regions such as Guangzhou. In 2011, the *Beijing News* Media Research Institute was officially established. In 2012, the Nanfang Media Group established the Rural Affairs Research Institute. In June 2013, Xinhua decided to establish the Outlook Think Tank, one of the earlier media think tanks directly named “think tank.” In December of the same year, the Nanfang Media Group continued its vigorous efforts by establishing the Southern Defense Think Tank and, in 2014, the Southern Public Opinion Research Institute.

The year 2015 witnessed the birth of numerous media think tanks catalyzed by the Two Offices’ Opinions, including the Guangming Daily Think Tank Research and Release Center (later integrated into Guangming Think Tank), the *Nanfengchuang* Media Think Tank, Caixin Think Tank, 21st Century Economic Research Institute, Guangzhou Daily Data and Digitalization Research Institute, and the Yangtze River Think Tank. This year marked a “boom year” for media think tanks, with several prestigious institutions emerging. In December 2015, Xinhua was selected as one of the first 25 national high-end think tanks, signaling that media think tank construction had entered a higher stage. After 2016, the establishment of media think tanks continued unabated. In May 2016, the Cover Think Tank was jointly created by the Sichuan Daily Press Group and Alibaba Group, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative and Yangtze River Economic Belt research while exploring and advising on internet innovation and the sharing economy. Also in May 2016, the Shengjinghui Think Tank, initiated by the Shenyang Daily, was established, committed to becoming an intellectual resource for “Northeast Revitalization and Shenyang’s Decisive Victory.” In April 2017, the Guangming Daily integrated its research institutions to establish Guangming Think Tank, which has become an influential media think tank in the industry.

2. Unique Functions of Media Think Tanks

2.1 Publicity, Agenda-Setting, and Public Opinion Guidance

The parent companies of media think tanks are primarily central media outlets or well-resourced local media with long histories, strong authority, large circulations, and broad audiences. Moreover, media think tanks are well-versed in communication patterns and highly sensitive to market trends, making them more professional in publicity and agenda-setting than other types of think tanks. Leveraging their natural advantages in dissemination and communication platforms, media think tanks focus on central tasks and serve overall interests, using their media strengths to publicize, interpret, clarify, and advocate for

Party and government policies. With extensive social connections and strong resource mobilization and integration capabilities, they can collaborate with other think tanks to release research findings, elaborate theories, and promote renowned scholars, thereby enhancing mutual promotion and common development. Media think tanks possess professional research teams, making them more specialized and in-depth than ordinary media outlets in publicizing Party and state policies—both accessible and profound. They excel at setting public agendas and influencing the focus of public opinion, serving as a communication bridge between Party/government and society. Since its establishment, the Guangming Daily Think Tank Research and Release Center (later integrated into Guangming Think Tank) has focused on publicizing major national policies. It has jointly organized numerous research release events with institutions such as the Chinese Think Tank Research and Evaluation Center at Nanjing University, effectively promoting think tank research development. Through newspapers, websites, WeChat, conferences, and expert interviews, it has built a multi-dimensional publicity and public opinion guidance system, establishing itself as a leader among media think tanks in guiding social trends and enlightening the public.

2.2 Building an Integrated Think Tank-Media Development Platform

Chinese think tanks generally suffer from weak marketing and communication capabilities. Most collaborations between think tanks and media are event-based or temporary, sometimes merely individual expert initiatives, lacking effective institutionalized communication channels. In the future, integrated think tank-media development represents the general trend. Media think tanks, with their media communication channels, strong marketing capabilities, and understanding of think tank product characteristics and operational models, are ideal intermediaries to promote integrated development between think tanks and media. The Guangming Daily Think Tank Research and Release Center and the Chinese Think Tank Research and Evaluation Center at Nanjing University jointly released the “China Think Tank Network Influence Evaluation Report” and co-launched the “China Think Tank Index” (CTTI), generating widespread influence in the industry and exploring an effective cooperation model. The Southern Public Opinion Research Institute under the Nanfang Media Group has signed strategic cooperation agreements with multiple institutions, including the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology’s Electronic Information Industry Research Institute and the School of Government at Sun Yat-sen University. All partners have expressed that such cooperation facilitates resource integration and collaborative innovation for mutual benefit: the research institute can help scientific research institutions obtain first-hand information and data, while these institutions can provide intellectual support to the research institute. Unlike conventional think tanks that simply invite media to participate in results release events, media think tanks begin collaborating with think tanks from the early stages of product conceptualization and research and development, deeply engaging in the entire production process to achieve genuine

integrated development.

2.3 Enhancing Market-Oriented Research Capacity

Party and government think tanks and university think tanks in China primarily focus on basic research and government decision-making consultation, whereas media think tanks orient their products more toward industry and enterprise needs, positioning themselves closer to market demands. Simultaneously, through extensive talent recruitment and mergers, media think tanks have built professional research teams, significantly contributing to improving market-oriented professional research standards in China. In the financial field, for instance, media think tanks such as Caixin Think Tank, China Business News Research Institute, and 21st Century Economic Research Institute all possess considerable research capabilities and have developed unique competitive advantages in specialized research areas. Beyond macroeconomics, the China Business News Research Institute and 21st Century Economic Research Institute have published multiple research reports on specialized fields such as distributed natural gas and renewable energy, e-commerce consumption, and the RMB index, while maintaining professional databases in finance and industry to support research in these areas. Caixin Think Tank's "CEIC China Database" emphasizes field research, enhancing professionalism in macroeconomics, industry research, and corporate investigation through objective and professional analysis. At the end of 2016, CEIC China Database surveyed over 30 real estate developers in third-tier cities and concluded that the real estate market in China's third- and fourth-tier cities was not as pessimistic as imagined. At that time, while housing prices in first-tier and some second-tier cities were soaring, prices in third- and fourth-tier cities remained stagnant, and the market was pervaded by a sense that the third- and fourth-tier real estate markets were "finished." In the first quarter of 2017, the real estate market trends in third- and fourth-tier cities validated CEIC's assessment, with some cities like Wuhu, Huizhou, and Zhangjiakou experiencing price increases exceeding 40%.

2.4 Strengthening International Discourse Power

Telling China's story well, disseminating China's voice, and enhancing international discourse power constitute another important function of media think tanks. Media organizations, especially national-level media, have established extensive overseas branches to facilitate international news reporting and deploy special correspondents for long-term observation in key regions. Media think tanks can leverage their parent companies' overseas branches, personnel, and communication channels with local media to conveniently voice opinions internationally, disseminate research, or collaborate with overseas institutions and scholars—a unique advantage difficult for other think tanks to match. The Xinhua World Affairs Research Center, during leaders' foreign visits or major international events, showcases China's positions and influences international public opinion through articles and media interviews. Beyond fully utilizing me-

dia voice advantages, the center actively pilots joint forums or seminars overseas, establishing connections with foreign think tank experts and influential scholars across fields, recruiting some as visiting scholars or special experts to expand the breadth and depth of external publicity through enhanced international exchanges. The Center for International Communication Studies under the China International Publishing Group guides overseas attention and research on China and fosters a positive image of China by inviting domestic political and academic figures to participate in its international communication theory seminars and commissioned research projects. The center also strengthens external publicity and enhances discourse soft power by hosting international conferences such as the China Dream International Symposium and the World Translation Conference, as well as establishing joint research bases with Macquarie University in Australia.

2.5 Improving Commercial Operation Levels of Think Tanks

Most Chinese think tanks have evolved from in-house university, research institute, or Party/government policy research departments, resulting in a significant gap in operational capabilities compared to think tanks in the United States and other developed countries. Enhancing commercial operation capabilities constitutes an important aspect of China's think tank construction. Compared with Party/government and university think tanks, media think tanks have undergone greater market tempering, and market transformation pressures have forced them to face fierce competition. Consequently, many media think tanks have been meticulously planning market development since day one, providing references for other think tanks to improve their operational capabilities. Caixin Think Tank entered the financial database field by controlling an information technology company and established the "Caixin-CEIC" research platform through a controlling partnership with Monita (Shanghai) Investment Development Co., Ltd., laying out its financial information service business. The Cover Think Tank under the Sichuan Daily Press Group was established on May 4, 2016, and just five days later, it co-hosted the first "Cover Think Tank+" salon and expert seminar on economic landscape changes in provinces along the Yangtze River Economic Belt with the Development and Strategy Research Institute of Renmin University of China. On May 25, it held the first "Cover Lecture Hall." Subsequently, Cover Think Tank launched a five-in-one product matrix including research reports, "Cover Think Tank+" salons, Cover series forums, think tank interviews, and Cover Lecture Halls, building a political-business-academic circle, focusing on experts and scholars, providing advice for governments, and offering customized services for enterprises and institutions. The sophisticated capital operation techniques and meticulous product positioning and planning of media think tanks demonstrate their high-level capabilities in resource integration, commercial operation, and internet thinking—worthy of emulation by other types of think tanks.

3. Main Characteristics of Media Think Tanks

3.1 Broad Vision and Quick Response

Leveraging media organizations' extensive domestic and overseas branches, media think tanks can extend their reach to every corner of the globe. The news sensitivity inherent in their DNA further enhances their ability to respond promptly to events. In March 2017, when Chinese bike-sharing companies Mobike and ofo entered Singapore, Outlook Think Tank under Xinhua News Agency immediately noticed this development while most domestic think tanks had yet to pay attention. The think tank observed the Singaporean Ministry of Transport' s statement about close monitoring, and its special macro observer and transportation research expert Su Kui analyzed the overseas development of bike-sharing. The Xinhua World Affairs Research Center responds rapidly to major international events such as the North Korean nuclear crisis, Middle East issues, and global climate problems, providing timely support for central decision-making. In some cases, center researchers can form judgments and produce recommendations on the very day an event occurs [6].

3.2 Increasingly Professional Internal Management

Although most media think tanks have not been established for long and are still transitioning from “media thinking” to “think tank thinking” in terms of operational philosophy and organizational structure, many have gradually developed effective management models. The vast majority of current media think tanks are initiated by central media or well-resourced local media whose founders possess broad vision, innovative management concepts, and abundant organizational resources. These newly established think tanks have cleverly transformed their short history from a disadvantage into an advantage by breaking free from inertial dependence on old models and being born on a high starting point. Outlook Think Tank has established professional management models for research projects and decision-making services, collecting and forming research directions and project proposals through models such as “special researchers,” “policy and expert committees,” and series of professional “academic committees,” thereby building an open research platform. The think tank also rapidly initiates and discusses key topics by online integration of its special expert team, constructing an online expert interaction platform to provide systematic services tailored to different levels and needs in serving central decision-making requirements, effectively interpreting and disseminating central policies and decisions, and aggregating and spreading mainstream values. The Southern Public Opinion Research Institute has established a “full-time + collaborative” production model that embeds public opinion monitoring into the editorial process, employing a comprehensive approach of “big data technology + public opinion polling + academic research + professional training” to intervene early when events first emerge. This has fully leveraged its professional advantages in public opinion monitoring, guidance, and crisis response, establishing a strong reputation as a public decision-making consultant.

3.3 Emphasis on New Technology Application

Most media think tanks were established during an era when mobile internet and other new technologies have become deeply embedded in daily life. Facing challenges from new media in recent years, traditional print media have placed greater emphasis on integrated development across all media platforms. Under the influence of their parent companies, media think tanks have become more adept at applying new technologies. The Yangcheng Evening News Smart Information Research Center is a big data product and service institution jointly created by the Yangcheng Evening News Group and internet companies such as Baidu and Guoshuang Technology, providing government and enterprise industry solutions, customized digital services, public opinion monitoring, and industry indices. The Guangzhou Daily Data and Digitalization Research Institute focuses on data mining and analysis and digital news dissemination, aiming to become China's premier platform for big data analysis and digital news communication and to develop into an influential new-type think tank in southern China. The *Beijing News* Media Research Institute has launched new products including videos, audio programs, books, and courses, expanding its business areas through new media technologies. The Southern Public Opinion Research Institute recruits data analysts to deeply explore the potential of big data, uncover characteristics and patterns in public opinion data, and provide data support for public opinion reports. It is evident that new technology application permeates all aspects of media think tanks, whereas few technical personnel can be found among employees of other types of think tanks such as university and Party/government think tanks.

3.4 Emphasis on Flexible Talent Utilization

Evolving from news organizations, media think tanks generally lack the research capabilities and expert reserves of university and research institute-affiliated think tanks. To compensate for this talent shortfall, media think tanks place great emphasis on flexibly introducing external experts to strengthen their research capacity. The Southern Public Opinion Research Institute has recruited renowned scholars such as Yu Keping and Zheng Yongnian as members of its expert committee. The 21st Century Economic Research Institute has invited prominent experts including Gao Peiyong, Liu Shijin, Yu Xuejun, and Liu Shangxi to support its development and appointed Zhong Wei of Beijing Normal University as chief economist. The Southern Defense Think Tank under the Nanfang Media Group has invited former senior military officers such as General Li Qianyuan, former commander of the Lanzhou Military Region, to serve as advisors. As core resources of think tanks, the orderly and flexible utilization of talent will better facilitate the common development of various think tanks and improve the efficiency of intellectual resources in research institutes and universities.

3.5 Rise of Local Media Think Tanks

Driven by the demonstration effect of central-level media think tanks, many local media organizations have established think tanks as a powerful tool for transformation and upgrading in the new media era. Some local media think tanks have already gained reputations and established their brand images within the industry. For example, the Nanfang Media Group has successively established multiple think tanks, including the Southern Public Opinion Data Research Institute, Southern Defense Think Tank, 21st Century Economic Research Institute, Kaidi Data Research Center, and Rural Affairs Research Institute, demonstrating strong professional research and consulting capabilities. The China Business News Research Institute under the Shanghai Media Group has developed China's first "Commercial Bank Wealth Management Product Database" and "Sunshine Private Fund Database," among other databases, and has served as an independent review institution in some financial activities. The *Nanfengchuang* Media Think Tank under the Guangzhou Daily Press Group has built a reputation in the industry based on the magazine's accumulated credibility over the years. The Cover Think Tank under the Sichuan Daily Press Group was rated as one of the eight excellent think tanks for the Belt and Road Initiative in 2016 and was included in the China Think Tank Index (CTTI). It is evident that local media think tanks have become a formidable emerging force.

4. Shortcomings of Media Think Tanks

4.1 Insufficient Talent Accumulation

The nature of media organizations differs fundamentally from that of universities and research institutes, making it impossible to accumulate large numbers of research-oriented talents. Consequently, media think tanks' reserves of professional research talent are far less robust than those of university and research institute think tanks. Some media think tanks have built full-time research teams through recruitment. For instance, the China Business News Research Institute has established research centers in Shanghai and Beijing with dozens of researchers, representing a relatively large full-time research team among media think tanks, though still incomparable to university research teams. Regarding in-house personnel, media think tanks have transitioned from media organizations where staff previously worked as reporters and editors. The transition to research and analysis work poses considerable challenges. Even top-tier domestic media think tanks such as Outlook Think Tank have encountered talent bottlenecks. Xinhua News Agency once adjusted the institutional setup of "one publication (*China Economic Weekly*) and one think tank (Outlook Think Tank)," with some magazine staff moving into the think tank, though some journalists struggled to adapt to writing research reports. Issues such as foreign exchange and RMB internationalization are highly specialized and require expert analysis. Additionally, Outlook Think Tank has experienced the loss of high-end talent due to compensation issues [1]. Unlike in-house think tanks, media think tanks struggle to offer permanent positions to retain talent. The

Nanfengchuang Media Think Tank once considered registering as an independent legal entity during its incubation period to facilitate future shareholding restructuring and attract experts with equity incentives, though this was not implemented in the initial operation phase. Therefore, media think tanks typically adopt a “two-pronged approach” of recruiting full-time researchers and flexibly introducing external experts to compensate for deficiencies in talent quantity and structure. Furthermore, due to the relatively short transformation period, media think tanks also face a shortage of high-end talent in think tank management and operations.

4.2 Ambiguous Self-Positioning

Many media think tanks were born out of traditional media facing increasingly shrinking markets and intensifying competition, with some being entrusted with profit-making expectations for survival—somewhat distant from think tank ideals such as serving decision-making and enlightening the public. Media think tanks have substantial personnel and business overlaps with their parent companies, making it difficult to eliminate traditional media thinking completely in a short time. Their service concepts and models for government, society, and enterprises remain exploratory. Unlike relatively stable in-house think tanks, media think tanks experience stronger personnel mobility. Whether their long-term development can be guaranteed once founders or core teams depart remains uncertain. Moreover, while media think tanks’ core advantage lies in their control of media resources, they must seriously consider how to grasp future development positioning and reshape core competitive advantages amid rapid technological advances in mobile internet, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality; the sudden rise of self-media; the growing self-communication capabilities of think tanks and scholars; and the deepening trend of think tank mediatization.

4.3 Limited Growth Potential in Quantity

Media think tanks currently remain few in number, with limited growth potential in the long run, making it difficult for them to become the main force in building new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics. Despite the pressure of media transformation, not every media organization is suitable for establishing a think tank. Operating a media think tank requires high-quality management and research talent, as well as substantial resources including funding and social networks. Only media organizations with abundant human, financial, and material resources, extensive social connections, and strong resource integration capabilities can successfully establish think tanks. In terms of parent media composition, media think tanks are basically initiated by newspaper and magazine media, while television and radio media rarely establish think tanks, possibly because the personnel composition and expertise of print media are more aligned with think tank functions. This indicates that the growth of media think tanks is also constrained by media type. Due to financial support and convenient talent reserves, even small-scale universities and research institutions

can establish think tanks, whereas media organizations lack such advantages for quantitative growth.

5. Recommendations for Future Development

Despite significant progress, it should be recognized that China's media think tanks have not been established for long and their developmental experience requires further exploration. While some outstanding media think tanks have emerged at the forefront of China's think tank development, many still face issues requiring continuous improvement.

5.1 Develop Brand Products

Except for a few such as Outlook Think Tank and Guangming Think Tank, most media think tanks need to enhance their national visibility and lack flagship products. Some have high reputations in specialized fields but must still strive for greater decision-making and social impact. Some have not launched flagship annual research reports, while others have delayed releasing planned ranking products, limiting their influence enhancement. Products serve as vehicles for brand building and the foundation for self-sustaining operations. Facing competition from other think tanks, media think tanks should concentrate on developing core products, leveraging their parent companies' information collection capabilities, domestic and overseas networks, and social resource advantages. They should produce research reports with keen hot topic tracking, solid field investigations, and elegantly written texts to become flagship products. They should prioritize writing and submitting key policy recommendations to enhance decision-making influence, continue developing databases to become authoritative basic data providers with strong credibility, and utilize their media platform advantages to host high-quality forums and summits. Based on available resources, they should offer customized services such as training, consulting, exhibitions, and education to form a multi-tiered brand product system.

5.2 Strengthen Research Capacity

Due to the lack of accumulated professional research talent, insufficient research capacity represents a major shortcoming of media think tanks. It is neither realistic nor necessary for media organizations to accumulate a complete range and large quantity of research-oriented talents. Flexible talent introduction is currently the primary channel for media think tanks to enhance research capacity. Conditions should be created to facilitate personnel flow between universities, research institutes, retired officials, and media organizations, and relevant evaluation and incentive systems should be reformed to create better conditions for flexibly introducing talent into media think tanks. Media think tanks with adequate capacity should be supported in selecting and gathering talent in relevant research directions through project bidding, commissioning, and collaborative applications. Media think tanks should be granted equal status with universities

and research institutions in national and provincial social science fund projects and soft science projects to encourage their participation in project applications and research. In government bidding projects and policy consultations, media think tanks should be given equal rights to participate in bidding and expert consultation during project solicitation, bidding, and expert selection processes. Simultaneously, media think tanks should strengthen horizontal exchanges with relevant institutions. Taking public opinion research as an example, relevant media think tanks can enhance collaborative improvement with institutions such as the Public Opinion Research Department of the National Governance Research Think Tank at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the Communication and National Governance Research Center at Fudan University Development Institute, the Public Opinion Studies Institute at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and the China International Public Opinion Research Center at Shanghai International Studies University.

5.3 Balanced Development in Quantity and Structure

The overall number of media think tanks remains small, with only 11 included in the China Think Tank Index (CTTI), compared with 254 university think tanks during the same period, indicating a significantly low total volume. Additionally, structural problems exist in media think tank development, primarily manifested in severe regional imbalance between eastern and western China. The vast majority of media think tanks, especially high-quality ones, are concentrated in eastern regions centered on Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai, while media think tanks in central and western regions are scarce. Some think tanks initiated by western media have even been established in eastern regions, such as the Pan-Asia Think Tank International Consulting Center initiated by *Western Development* magazine from Xi'an but based in Beijing. Therefore, efforts should be made to accelerate the development of media think tanks, particularly in central and western regions. Integration of personnel, information, and funding between universities, research institutes, social organizations, financial institutions, and media should be promoted to support qualified media organizations in establishing think tanks. Media industry associations should organize exchange activities between eastern and western media think tanks to share experiences from developed regions and guide the vigorous development of media think tanks.

5.4 More Active Participation in Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy is an important function of media think tanks. With the implementation of strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative, media think tanks should undertake more responsibilities in public diplomacy. Except for the China Foreign Media Development Strategy Research Center established by the Xinhua News Research Institute, few other media think tanks have set up specialized entities to study media and public diplomacy. Media think tanks should more actively participate in topic design, multi-dimensional publicity,

and event planning for public diplomacy, accepting interviews from foreign media, publishing articles in foreign media, and releasing research findings during major international events and important professional conferences. Strong media think tanks should be encouraged to leverage their parent companies' network advantages to establish overseas branches and research bases, expanding external exchanges and publicity through releasing relevant research topics overseas and collaborating with foreign research institutions. Conditions should be created to support media think tank managers and experts in serving as officials, advisors, or special experts and judges in relevant international and industry organizations.

5.5 Strengthen Self-Communication Capacity Building

Surprisingly, some media think tanks lack independent official websites despite being media-affiliated think tanks. In the internet era, with their enormous communication platform advantages, some media think tanks have limited information available through search engines, making it difficult to showcase their image and capabilities to society and potential clients. Media think tanks should establish official websites, WeChat public accounts, and other channels to actively promote their image and products, thereby improving transparency and visibility. Beyond media industry forums, they should actively organize and participate in think tank forums and professional forums to enhance their reputation in broader fields. They should utilize media interviews, reports, and research opportunities to expose officials and experts to their think tanks, expanding their social resource networks. By hosting media think tank industry summits, they can build industry brands and increase government and societal awareness of media think tanks. Riding the wave of new media and integrated media development, they should leverage new technologies and channels such as mobile internet, big data, live streaming, and virtual reality to develop new products and expand communication methods.

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