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## Postprint: Value Creation Activities of Corporate Think Tanks

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] To establish an analysis and design framework—the value loop—for corporate think tanks to conduct various activities/tasks, aiming to enhance their value contribution, i.e., contribution to the realization of strategic positioning. [Method/Process] This paper adopts a modeling approach, drawing upon the value chain model in business administration to construct a value loop model for think tank activities; employs a typological analysis method to collect and collate relevant materials on corporate think tanks, describing the specific operations of different types of value creation activities; and utilizes an expert discussion method to analyze the main operational issues of the corporate think tank value loop and their solutions. [Result/Conclusion] It is feasible to apply the value loop model to analyze the value creation activities of corporate think tanks. The degree of connection and integration among research/communication/dissemination is positively correlated with the value contribution of corporate think tanks: high connection and integration yield high value contribution, while low connection and integration yield low value contribution.

### Full Text

#### Value Creation Activities of Enterprise Think Tanks

Ke Yinbin<sup>1</sup>, Ma Yan<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** [Purpose/Significance] This paper establishes an analytical and design framework—the value ring model—for enterprise think tank activities and operations, aiming to enhance the value contribution of enterprise think tanks, that is, their contribution to the realization of strategic positioning. [Method/Process] This paper employs a modeling approach, drawing on the value chain model from business administration to construct a value ring model for think tank activities. It uses typological analysis to collect and organize relevant information on enterprise think tanks, describing the specific operations of different types of value creation activities. Additionally, it utilizes expert discussion methods to analyze the main problems in the operation of enterprise think tank value rings and their solutions. [Result/Conclusion] It is feasible to analyze the value creation activities of enterprise think tanks using the value ring model. The degree of connection and integration among research, exchange, and dissemination is positively correlated with the value contribution of enterprise think tanks: higher connection and integration lead to greater value contribution, while lower connection and integration result in smaller value contribution.

**Keywords:** enterprise think tank; value creation; value ring model

**Classification:** C931

Enterprise think tanks are non-profit research and consulting institutions established by enterprises that possess think tank functions, typically bearing the enterprise's name as the think tank's name, regardless of whether they adopt the legal form of a corporate entity [1].

The essential criteria for defining enterprise think tanks are (see ): (1) whether the founder is an enterprise; (2) whether it has think tank functions; and (3) whether it is a non-profit institution.

Table 1: Classification of Research Consultancies

To achieve their strategic positioning [2], enterprise think tanks must carry out corresponding activities or work to create value. The contribution of these value creation activities to strategic positioning constitutes their value contribution. Enterprise think tanks can utilize the value ring model to enhance value contribution, and other types of think tanks can also apply this model.

## 1 The “Value Ring” Model

Michael Porter’s enterprise value chain model [3] provides an effective approach and method for analyzing think tank value creation activities. Although enterprises are profit-oriented institutions while think tanks are non-profit, they share a commonality: both create value through specific activities. Therefore, the value chain model used to analyze enterprise activities can be tentatively applied to think tank activities.

Drawing on the value chain model and incorporating the characteristics of think tank activities, this paper proposes the value ring model as an analytical framework and method for think tank value creation activities and their contributions.

### 1.1 Enterprise Value Chain

The enterprise value chain views a firm as a collection of value-creating activities including design, production, sales, and delivery. Value activities are divided into two categories: primary activities and support activities (as shown in [Figure 1: see original paper]). Primary activities encompass all activities involved in designing, producing, and delivering products or services, spanning the entire process of product/service formation and operation, including pre-production preparation, production, post-production preparation, marketing, and service. Support activities provide support for primary activities, including procurement, research and development, human resources, and administrative management.

[Figure 1: see original paper] Figure 1: The Enterprise Value Chain

Value chain theory posits that a firm’s competitive advantage is embedded in various specific value activities, and competition among enterprises is essentially competition among their value chains.

### 1.2 Think Tank Value Ring

Think tanks are also collections of value-creating activities. Think tank value creation activities can be divided into two categories: first, basic value activities, including research, exchange, and dissemination (specific definitions are provided below); and second, resource allocation activities, including fundraising, human resource development, and knowledge management. This paper focuses specifically on the former, while the latter will be addressed separately.

The basic value activities of think tanks form a ring structure (see [Figure 2: see original paper]), which differs from the chain structure of the enterprise value chain.

[Figure 2: see original paper] Figure 2: The Think Tank Value Ring

Based on the value ring model, we can categorize think tank activities into three types:

First, independent basic activities (labeled (1) in [Figure 2: see original paper]), including research, exchange, and dissemination (research  $\cup$  exchange  $\cup$  dissemination, where  $\cup$  is the mathematical symbol for “union”). Research activities consist of stages such as project initiation, team formation, research process, and outcome evaluation. Exchange activities include, in terms of content, both topic-specific and non-topic-specific exchanges, and in terms of mode, both interpersonal and organizational exchanges. Dissemination activities include, in terms of channels, both self-media and other-media dissemination, and in terms of content, both research outcome dissemination and think tank brand dissemination.

Second, “two-in-one” value activities (labeled (2) in [Figure 2: see original paper]): including research  $\cap$  exchange, research  $\cap$  dissemination, and exchange  $\cap$  dissemination (where  $\cap$  is the mathematical symbol for “intersection”). When an activity comprises two basic activities or involves connections between them, it simultaneously creates value in two aspects, hence termed “two-in-one.” For example, research  $\cap$  exchange refers to exchange activities related to research topics and outcomes, including external exchange and cooperation by team members and internal release of research findings. Research  $\cap$  dissemination refers to dissemination activities related to research topics and outcomes, such as inviting target audiences to join the research team and disseminating interim research results through media while soliciting feedback. Exchange  $\cap$  dissemination refers to external dissemination based on exchange activities and outcomes, including the convening and dissemination of brand conferences.

Third, “three-in-one” value activities (labeled (3) in [Figure 2: see original paper]): research  $\cap$  exchange  $\cap$  dissemination. When an activity comprises all three basic activities or involves connections among them, it simultaneously creates value in three aspects, hence termed “three-in-one.”

### 1.3 Diagnosis and Design: Application of the Value Ring

Think tank managers can use the value ring model to diagnose or design think tank activities, with the goal of enhancing the value contribution of these activities.

Diagnosis takes completed individual activities as its object, analyzing which basic activities they comprise and what components constitute these basic activities. It examines methods and effects at three levels—components, basic activities, and individual activities—to identify reasons for good, average, or poor performance, thereby providing improvement plans for future similar activities.

Design involves developing specific plans for proposed activities based on the value ring model and lessons learned from past activities. Preliminary design significantly impacts an activity’s value contribution, yet Chinese think tanks have not paid sufficient attention to this aspect. Many activities continue to follow past patterns, lacking innovation and remaining at low-level repetition. The value ring model can provide innovative ideas and methods for activity

design, with the key lying in the connections between basic activities.

## 2 Typological Analysis

To provide practical and feasible ideas and methods, we describe and analyze each of the three types of think tank activities in detail, from which solutions suitable for Chinese enterprise think tanks can be identified.

### 2.1.1 Research Activities

Think tanks are producers of knowledge products, and research is the production process of these products, playing a fundamental and leading role. The fundamental nature means that research outcomes form the basis for exchange and dissemination activities; without research support, think tanks would degenerate into ordinary non-profit institutions. The leading role means that research themes guide agenda-setting; without this guiding function, a think tank would be merely an ordinary think tank rather than an excellent and influential one.

The main stages of research activities include: project initiation, team formation, research implementation, and outcome evaluation.

#### (1) Project Initiation

- **Assigned Projects:** Typically, the founding enterprise determines the topic and requirements and assigns it to the enterprise think tank for completion. This method does not provide special project funding and is common in internal institutional enterprise think tanks. For example, the China Minsheng Bank Research Institute's research project on "China Minsheng Bank's Medium and Long-term Development Strategy" was assigned by the bank's board of directors, with outcomes including a main report, a set of strategy maps, and 14 special reports.
- **Commissioned Projects:** The commissioning party determines the topic and requirements, and the enterprise think tank completes it through a commissioned research contract. This is common in independent legal entity enterprise think tanks. The commissioning parties range widely, including member enterprises of the group, clients of the founding enterprise, other enterprises, relevant central government ministries, local governments, and international organizations (both intergovernmental and non-governmental). Enterprise think tanks undertaking commissioned projects face competition from similar think tanks, other think tanks, research institutions, or consulting firms. When formulating five-year development plans, Chinese governments at all levels typically commission think tanks and other institutions to conduct related research. For instance, Ali Research Institute undertook research on information economy development for China's 13th Five-Year Plan from the National Development and Reform Commission.

- **Self-initiated Projects:** The enterprise think tank independently determines research topics, typically decided by an academic/expert committee, with major topics decided by the board of trustees, usually following a set of relevant systems and procedures. These projects can be internal or external. Internal projects are completed by the think tank's own researchers, while external projects are completed by researchers from other think tanks or research institutions. External project initiation has two approaches: first, the enterprise think tank publishes a catalog of topics, applicants select and apply from it, and the think tank decides on project approval. Ali Research Institute's "Living Water Plan," established in 2009, aims to build an online platform connecting "online merchants + researchers," explore the value of Ali platform cases and data, support the growth of outstanding young researchers, and promote the improvement of China's e-commerce research level. The sixth phase of the Living Water Plan opened research fields including agricultural e-commerce, regional e-commerce, innovation and entrepreneurship, and e-commerce logistics. Applicants could either directly claim sub-topics published by Ali Research Institute or submit self-proposed topics. Second, the think tank defines a scope, applicants propose topics, and the think tank decides on project approval. Tencent Cloud Think Tank's Young Scholars Program, Independent Author Program, and Global Research Open Program all define scopes by Tencent Cloud Think Tank. For example, the Young Scholars Program announced in December 2016 had research topics including new network ethics and norms, social networks and health, human-machine relationships, and network social governance, targeting researchers from universities or research institutions for a one-year period, with Tencent providing data and financial support, and outcomes could be papers, research reports, or professional books.
- **Collaborative Projects:** Both or all parties jointly determine the research topic and complete it together. Typically, one party acts as the proposer (usually the initiator and leader of the collaborative project), and all parties discuss the proposal before finally deciding on project initiation. Collaborative parties sign cooperation agreements and complete the research project according to the agreement.

## (2) Team Formation

Based on personnel sources, there are typically three approaches: internal, external, and internal-external combination. The relationship between team formation methods and project sources is shown in .

Table 2: Research Subjects and Team Formation

Whether to absorb external personnel into the team also depends on the research topic and the capabilities of internal staff. Generally, projects where internal staff lack capacity must invite external personnel. When external personnel are more excellent even though internal staff are competent, external personnel may

also be considered, which provides a learning and improvement opportunity for internal staff.

### **(3) Research Implementation**

The research team conducts research activities according to project task documents, research agreements, work memoranda, and other documents. They select research methods suitable for the topic and requirements, such as literature analysis, surveys, case studies, historical methods, logical methods, and big data methods. They engage in exchanges and communication not only within the team but also with external experts and scholars.

Key factors in this stage include: objectivity and comprehensiveness of research materials, applicability and effectiveness of research methods, diversity of ideas and perspectives, and communication-targeted compilation of outcomes.

### **(4) Outcome Evaluation**

Generally, the party that decides on project initiation is also the evaluator of research outcomes. Enterprise think tanks typically need to establish corresponding outcome evaluation systems, procedures, and methods, hiring external experts when necessary. Japanese enterprise think tanks typically adopt a combined internal-external approach for research outcome evaluation, conducting it semi-annually over two days, during which all researchers present their outcomes, each for thirty minutes, followed by questions from evaluators. Evaluators include external experts, company executives (chairman, general manager, heads of various departments), and colleagues, with everyone scoring on evaluation forms.

#### **2.1.2 Exchange Activities**

Exchange is the act of information exchange, flow, and communication between people. Enterprise think tank exchange activities can be described across multiple dimensions: first, exchange subjects, including domestic and international exchanges; second, exchange content, including topic-specific and non-topic-specific exchanges; third, exchange modes, including interpersonal exchanges and conference exchanges (attending conferences, hosting or co-hosting conferences); and fourth, exchange locations, including domestic and international venues.

Exchange is an important activity for enterprise think tanks, which can be an extension of research activities or regarded as interpersonal and organizational communication in dissemination activities. Among these, the most important exchange activities are international exchanges and brand conferences.

For example, in 2016, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) Economics & Technology Research Institute held more than five large-scale international academic exchange activities, participated in more than ten high-end international academic conferences, hosted more than 40 visiting delegations, and

sent out more than 30 overseas delegations, maintaining more than 20 strategic partners. Major international conferences included the World Oil and Gas Development Symposium, Asian Natural Gas Market Forum, ETRI-KEEI China-Korea Joint Research Symposium, China-Japan Academic Exchange Symposium, and hosting multiple forums for the National Energy Administration and the International Energy Agency.

“Inviting celebrities and hosting forums” is President Xi Jinping’ s criticism of the formalistic style of Chinese think tank exchange activities. This is indeed an issue worthy of attention. Exchanges should have clear purposes and specific content, requiring innovation in methods and evaluation of effectiveness.

Furthermore, collaborative exchange is an important mode of think tank exchange activities, and its status and role will become increasingly significant. The success of collaborative exchange mainly depends on the selection of partners and the management of cooperative relationships.

### 2.1.3 Dissemination Activities

The meaning of dissemination is very broad. For think tanks, we understand dissemination as the process and act of delivering research outcomes to service objects. Based on the specificity of service objects, dissemination can be divided into interpersonal and organizational communication for specific service objects, and media communication for non-specific objects. The former includes delivering research outcomes to assigning or commissioning parties, submitting research outcomes to relevant government departments, and conference releases of research outcomes. This paper mainly discusses the latter.

Media communication activities for non-specific objects include, in terms of target audience, domestic and international dissemination. As China receives increasing international attention, international dissemination should be included in the agenda of Chinese think tanks as a form of think tank public diplomacy. In terms of channels, it includes self-media and other-media dissemination, with self-media including newspapers, books, websites, Weibo, and WeChat, and other-media including traditional and online media. In terms of content, it includes research outcome dissemination and think tank brand dissemination, with outcome dissemination being fundamental and brand dissemination being an extension. In terms of methods, it includes information provision, conference hosting, and strategic cooperation.

Overall, compared with research and exchange activities, the dissemination activities of Chinese enterprise think tanks are relatively weak. They perform relatively well in traditional journal dissemination but poorly in online media. Nearly half of enterprise think tanks (mainly state-owned enterprise think tanks) do not even have official websites, and their WeChat and Weibo dissemination power is inferior to other types of think tanks.

In terms of international influence, enterprise think tanks lag even further be-

hind other types. On January 9, 2017, the Nanjing University Chinese Think Tank Research and Evaluation Center and the Guangming Daily Think Tank Research and Release Center jointly released the “New Think Tank International Influence Research and Evaluation Report” [4]. Using indicators such as external experts, overseas branches, international exchanges, hosting international conferences, foreign-language websites, foreign-language journals, and Google News results, the evaluation results showed that no Chinese enterprise think tank entered the ranking list.

Collaborative dissemination is an important mode of dissemination activities, mainly referring to the establishment, maintenance, and enhancement of cooperative relationships between enterprise think tanks and media institutions. Generally, this cooperative relationship has four levels: first, the enterprise think tank serves as content provider and the media institution as distribution channel; second, both parties jointly determine research themes, the think tank completes the research, and the media releases the outcomes; third, both parties co-host large-scale conferences, with the think tank responsible for content and the media responsible for dissemination; and fourth, both parties establish a strategic cooperative relationship, comprehensively and deeply integrating into each other’s work for common development.

## **2.2 Research Exchange, Research Dissemination, Exchange Dissemination**

Research, exchange, and dissemination are basic activities of think tanks that can also be conducted independently. When two of these activities are connected and overlap, their contribution to value creation is greater than when conducted independently.

### **2.2.1 Research Exchange**

This mainly has two subtypes: exchange activities within research and research activities within exchange, with the basic characteristic that the topics of research and exchange are the same or similar, and participants are primarily research team members. The former improves research through exchange, while the latter improves exchange through research.

Exchange activities within research include exchanges among research project team members and exchanges between team members and external institutions and individuals. Internal team exchanges run through all three stages of initiation, implementation, and evaluation. The purpose of exchanges during the initiation stage is to identify a valuable and potentially influential topic. The purpose of exchanges during the implementation stage is to pool the knowledge and wisdom of all researchers. The purpose of exchanges during the evaluation stage is to reduce or eliminate factual, judgmental, and logical errors in research outcomes. External exchanges mainly occur during the implementation stage, with the primary purpose of listening to and absorbing the knowledge and wisdom of external experts and scholars.

Research activities within exchange include two different types: topic-related and exchange-related. The former refers to the external exchange activities mentioned above, while the latter refers to the analysis and research of exchange activities themselves, aiming to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of exchange activities. It has been observed that Chinese think tanks almost never conduct research on exchange activities, as people usually consider exchange activities to be mainly transactional work requiring attention to details and execution. However, exchange, as an important human activity, has already generated substantial research outcomes. If we apply these to specific exchange activities, we can significantly improve exchange efficiency and effectiveness.

### 2.2.2 Research Dissemination

This mainly has two subtypes: dissemination of research outcomes and research on dissemination work. According to preliminary surveys [5], Chinese enterprise think tanks produce abundant research outcomes, but their dissemination work is ineffective. Whether through self-media or other-media dissemination, the result is a lack of social influence, which in turn leads the think tank research community to overlook the existence of enterprise think tanks.

Dissemination of research outcomes is an important activity for think tanks. To improve dissemination effectiveness and influence, Chinese enterprise think tanks can make efforts in both research and dissemination: first, absorb specific audiences into the research team, such as inviting government officials and media executives to participate in research activities. The result is that these specific audiences will actively and positively promote and disseminate the outcomes of research activities in which they participated. Second, learn and apply theories and methods of communication studies. Chinese think tanks generally lack research on dissemination work. Communication studies is a relatively mature discipline, and its theories and methods can help improve think tank dissemination capabilities. Because we rarely learn and apply this knowledge, the dissemination activities of Chinese think tanks have been repeating at a low level, especially for enterprise think tanks.

### 2.2.3 Exchange Dissemination

“Exchange Dissemination” mainly refers to enterprise think tanks hosting brand conferences and their dissemination. Ali Research Institute’s “2017 New Economy Think Tank Conference” is a case worth sharing. The conference theme “Vision 2046” aligned with Ali Research Institute’s strategic positioning of “new economy, new governance, new think tank.” The conference agenda was quite innovative, featuring keynote speeches, report releases, and dialogues. Keynote speakers were all senior researchers, with topics closely related to the theme. The release of four research reports (“Digital Economy 2.0,” “Internet Economy Governance Handbook,” etc.) integrated research, exchange, and dissemination. Four dialogue sessions showcased more researchers’ thoughts and perspectives. The result was that research outcomes were widely disseminated, on-site audi-

ences gained substantially, and media coverage was focused and well-informed. Strangely, this successful conference had no coverage at all on Ali Research Institute' s official website.

### 2.3 Research Exchange Dissemination

Cases that connect and integrate all three basic activities of research, exchange, and dissemination are rare. The corporate think tank of French company VINCI –The Fabrique de la Cité—is one such example.

Founded in 2010, The Fabrique de la Cité has as its purpose and mission “creating the city of the future.” To this end, its main research areas are: sustainable transportation, urban planning, and urban life and social spaces. The Fabrique de la Cité also studies the challenges and uses of data in future cities against the backdrop of big data, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things.

The Fabrique de la Cité mainly adopts a collaborative approach to conduct research. It has more than ten research projects annually, each conducted in collaboration with other institutions. For example, it collaborates with Sciences Po Paris on urbanization research, setting different research themes each year, with professors guiding students in research and establishing master' s programs. It collaborates with MIT to establish the “Millennial Lifestyle” workshop, aiming to observe the behavioral preferences of millennials in large cities and their impact on modern transportation, media, and cities, ultimately forming comprehensive and insightful reports. The research method combines interviews with new technologies and integrates wisdom from other disciplines such as media and design. The research goal is to show what kind of group and market millennials represent and to propose some practical solutions. The research team is led by MIT and composed of members from various disciplines.

The Fabrique de la Cité' s exchange and dissemination activities are closely tied to research themes. The specific approach is: co-hosting large-scale conferences with other institutions, where researchers present viewpoints and collect participants' opinions, then compile exchange outcomes into publications during or after the conference, and disseminate conference content through video. For example, on January 29, 2016, it held a thematic seminar “How to Optimize Urban Development with Data—Examples from Nancy, Amsterdam, and Helsinki,” discussing the impact of big data on modern urban life and how to improve urban living standards and public services through big data. From June 6-8, 2016, it held a symposium on “New Urban Trends” in Boston, USA, after which it edited multiple publications and produced three videos.

## 3 Enhancing the Contribution of Value Creation Activities

Based on practical experience and drawing on the enterprise value chain, the proposed think tank value ring model can be used for diagnosing and designing think tank value creation activities, with the goal of enhancing the contribution of these activities to think tank influence.

Based on experience and observation, this paper presents a preliminary conclusion (which requires further empirical research to confirm or refute): the degree of connection and integration among research, exchange, and dissemination is positively correlated with the value contribution of enterprise think tanks. That is, higher connection and integration lead to greater value contribution, while lower connection and integration result in smaller value contribution.

Connection refers to the relevance of topics between two activities, which can be the same, similar, or related topics. Research topics themselves have logical structures, with several sub-topics under a topic and parent topics above it. Topics being similar or related means that the topics of two activities have a “parent-child” relationship at different levels.

Integration refers to the relevance of personnel between two activities based on topic relevance, meaning that research personnel, exchange personnel, and dissemination personnel are essentially the same team and collaborators.

Value contribution refers to the contribution of think tank value creation activities to think tank influence. Enterprise think tank influence can be categorized according to its service objects into industry influence, government influence, social influence, and international influence. The requirements of each type of influence for value creation activity types, or the contribution of value creation activity types to each type of influence, are shown in .

Table 3: Value Creation Activities and Contribution to Influence

Industry influence and social influence require: “three-in-one” activities are most important, “two-in-one” activities are secondary, and independent activities are least important. This is because in enhancing industry and social influence, both specific and non-specific audiences exist simultaneously, with the latter being larger than the former, making mass communication crucial. The key factor is agenda-setting, which requires research and exchange quality to reach a considerable level.

Government influence and international influence require: “two-in-one” activities are most important, “three-in-one” activities are secondary, and independent activities are least important. This is because in enhancing government and international influence, specific audiences (government departments and international organizations) are the key factor. Mass communication is only a supplementary means, influencing public policy decision-making by shaping and guiding public opinion.

Therefore, Chinese enterprise think tanks should determine the service object and influence type for each project and adopt corresponding value creation activities according to requirements. In conducting value creation activities, resources should be allocated based on priority types to pursue cost-effectiveness ratios—either achieving better results at the same cost or achieving the same results at lower cost.

#### **Author Contributions:**

Ke Yinbin: Research design, paper writing, revision and finalization;  
Ma Yan: Data collection and organization, paper writing, English writing.

### The Value Creation Activities of Enterprise Think Tanks

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**Abstract:** [Purpose/significance] This paper establishes an analysis and design framework—the value ring model—for enterprise think tank activities and operations, so as to enhance value contribution of enterprise think tanks, which contributes to the strategy position realization. [Method/process] In this paper, the value chain model in business administration was referenced to establish a value ring model for think tank activities. The type analysis method was used to collect relevant information of enterprise think tanks and describe the specific operation of different types of value creation activities. The expert discussion method was used to analyze the main problems and solutions of enterprise think tank value ring operation. [Result/conclusion] It is feasible to analyze the value creation activities of enterprise think tanks with the value ring model. The connection and bonding degree of research/exchange/dissemination is positively associated with the value contribution of enterprise think tanks: the higher the connection and bonding degree is, the greater the value contribution is. The lower the connection and bonding degree is, the smaller the value contribution is.

**Keywords:** enterprise think tank; value creation; value ring model

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