

Analysis of the Core Competitiveness of American Think Tanks: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In the era of the knowledge economy, think tanks play a critical role in knowledge innovation and knowledge dissemination, serving as a driving force for national and social progress and development. Research on the core competitiveness of American think tanks can provide a valuable reference for the research and development of Chinese think tanks. [Method/Process] This paper adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, employing “intellectual capital” theory and “public policy opinion field” theory as a framework to analyze and demonstrate that the core competitiveness of American think tanks stems from their robust intellectual capital, which comprises three essential elements: human capital, communication capital, and institutional capital. Human capital constitutes the source and foundation of ideological innovation in American think tanks, communication capital serves as the pathway for think tanks to achieve influence, and institutional capital provides practical institutional guarantees for the realization of both. Institutional capital is divided into macro and micro components; the macro level refers to the policy environment in which think tanks operate, while the micro level primarily concerns the mechanisms through which think tanks maintain their independence. [Results/Conclusion] The flourishing development of American think tanks and the realization of their influence are attributable to their high-caliber talent, comprehensive communication strategies, and sound policy environment; it is precisely these factors that provide the soil, space, impetus, and foundation for their development.

Full Text

Analysis of the Core Competence of American Think Tanks

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] In the era of the knowledge economy, think tanks play a critical role in knowledge innovation and dissemination, serving as a driving force for national and social progress and development. Studying the core competence of American think tanks can provide valuable references for the research and development of Chinese think tanks.

[Method/Process] From an interdisciplinary perspective and under the theoretical framework of “intellectual capital” and “public policy opinion field,” this paper analyzes and argues that the core competence of American think tanks originates from their strong intellectual capital, which comprises three major elements: talent capital, communication capital, and institutional capital. Talent capital is the source and foundation of ideological innovation for American think tanks, communication capital is the pathway for think tanks to achieve influence, and institutional capital provides tangible institutional guarantees for the realization of both. Institutional capital is divided into macro and micro levels: the macro level refers to the policy environment in which think tanks operate, while the micro level mainly refers to the mechanisms for maintaining think tank independence.

[Result/Conclusion] The prosperity and influence of American think tanks are attributable to their high-quality talent, comprehensive communication strategies, and well-developed policy environment. These factors collectively provide the soil, space, impetus, and foundation for their development.

Keywords: think tank; core competency; intellectual capital

Introduction

Over the past decade, think tanks have experienced unprecedented global development, and think tank research has gradually emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field of study. In recent years, discussions on the core competitiveness of think tanks have become an important topic, currently focusing primarily on the identification and evaluation of influence manifestation forms, communication channels, and quantitative indicators. However, there is a notable lack of deeper interdisciplinary analysis. This paper integrates perspectives from economics, communication studies, and public administration, primarily employing the theoretical frameworks of “intellectual capital” and “public policy opinion field” to analyze American think tanks. It argues that the core competitiveness of American think tanks lies precisely in their intellectual capital, which occupies a dominant position in think tank development and innovation compared to general social organizations. The constituent elements mainly include: tal-

ent capital, institutional capital, and communication capital, which complement each other to jointly construct the core competitiveness of think tanks. Talent capital primarily refers to leadership and research talent within think tanks. Institutional capital mainly refers to the macro policy environment and micro operational mechanisms in which think tanks develop. Communication capital refers to the need for think tanks to utilize various relationships and communication networks to maximize influence in the process of affecting policymakers and public opinion.

1. Intellectual Capital and Its Element Analysis

Compared with think tanks in other countries worldwide, American think tanks not only have the earliest origin and largest number but also exert the greatest policy influence. The reasons for this are viewed differently by scholars and practitioners in the think tank community. Some scholars point out that the main factors determining the development level and influence of think tanks across countries include political system, civil society, freedom of expression, level of economic development, philanthropic culture, and the quantity and independence of universities [1]. John Thornton, Chairman of the Brookings Institution's Board of Trustees, believes that think tanks essentially gather collective wisdom, and innovative ideas constitute the core competitiveness of think tanks¹. From the perspective of public opinion studies, think tanks emerge within a certain political system, and the magnitude of their role and the space for their function are determined by the political and economic institutions of their host country. Without a certain degree of political democracy, the full development of think tanks is impossible. Think tank development first requires an environment of intellectual and academic freedom, and adequate funding is an important condition for their survival. The equal status and positive interaction between think tanks and government agencies, society, and particularly the media, determine whether they can produce quality research results and influence [2]. While these various perspectives analyze the foundations of American think tank influence from different angles, none clearly explain the core competitiveness of American think tanks and their constituent elements. The “intellectual capital” theory and “public policy opinion field” theory provide an effective analytical framework.

Intellectual capital theory is primarily built upon human capital theory and new economic growth theory. The concept of intellectual capital can be traced back to German economist Friedrich List's classic work *The National System of Political Economy*, in which he proposed the concept of “mental capital” corresponding to material capital, with both narrow and broad definitions. The narrow definition of “mental capital” is essentially consistent with the modern economic concept of “human capital,” while the broad definition includes human capital and all “externalized” mental stock, namely culture, arts, political

¹From the author's interview with Professor John Thornton in Beijing on September 22, 2014.

institutions, and so forth [3]. What List called “mental capital” constitutes the prototype of what modern academia terms intellectual capital [4]. Since the 1990s, scholars both domestically and internationally have proposed various concepts and element models of intellectual capital. Some scholars define intellectual capital as the sum of employee capital, organizational capital, and external relationship capital [5]. Others simply categorize intellectual capital as “the collective term for all intangible assets that enable a company to operate,” expressing its significance through a concise formula: “Enterprise = Tangible Assets + Intellectual Capital.” This specifically includes market assets, intellectual property assets, talent assets, and infrastructure assets [6]. Currently, the more widely accepted approach divides intellectual capital into three basic elements: human capital, structural capital, and relational capital [7]. Overall, existing research on intellectual capital theory has concentrated primarily at the enterprise level, with relatively few studies on its strategic role in non-profit organizations and at the national and regional levels. American think tanks, in terms of institutional attributes, are non-profit organizations composed primarily of intellectuals with higher education, whose main purpose is not profit-making but rather influencing public policy and public opinion, providing intellectual resources and ideological products to society as a whole. Under such circumstances, directly applying this framework to analyze the core competitiveness of American think tanks fails to provide clear elucidation. However, we can further develop this theoretical framework by combining the characteristics of think tanks themselves with other disciplinary theories.

The “public policy opinion field” theory is a theoretical framework established based on communication studies, public policy, and public opinion studies. This theory posits that under the American political system, the formation of public policy is a consensus reached through interaction among the government, think tanks, interest groups, mass media, and the public via various communication channels. The influence of American think tanks is formed precisely through interaction with these different opinion factors and is manifested through the specific functions undertaken by these factors. In the “public policy opinion field,” think tanks occupy the position of “opinion aggregation core.” On the one hand, think tanks serve as “factories” for public opinion production, attracting various viewpoints, propositions, and suggestions as magnetic fields and gathering places for collision and integration. On the other hand, think tank products constitute the core content of opinion dissemination, influencing other public opinions through various communication strategies and channels [8]. The “public policy opinion field” theory provides a clear theoretical fulcrum for understanding the generation of American think tank influence. The influence of American think tanks stems from both their capacity for ideological innovation and their powerful communication strength.

Based on the “intellectual capital” theory and “public policy opinion field” theory, combined with the characteristics of think tanks themselves, this paper argues that the core competitiveness of American think tanks lies precisely in their intellectual capital, which occupies a dominant position in think tank develop-

ment and innovation compared to general social organizations. The constituent elements mainly include: talent capital (human capital), institutional capital (structural capital), and communication capital (relational capital), which complement each other to jointly construct the core competitiveness of think tanks. Here, this paper does not adopt the three concepts of human capital, structural capital, and relational capital from the intellectual capital theoretical framework. Instead, it provides a new definition of the constituent elements of think tank intellectual capital by combining the recognition of the importance of think tank communication power from the “public policy opinion field” theory and the characteristics of think tanks themselves. Talent capital primarily refers to leadership and research talent within think tanks. Institutional capital mainly refers to the macro policy environment and micro operational mechanisms in which think tanks develop. Communication capital refers to the need for think tanks to utilize various relationships and communication networks to maximize influence in the process of affecting policymakers and public opinion. The following sections use this framework to conduct specific analysis of the three elements constituting American think tank intellectual capital.

2. Talent Capital as the Foundation of Think Tank Development

In the era of the knowledge economy, economic growth increasingly depends on knowledge-based intellectual capital. The dominant resources are no longer natural resources and tangible assets such as capital, equipment, and raw materials, but rather intellectual capital and intangible assets based primarily on human intelligence, knowledge, and information. As knowledge-intensive organizations, the value of think tanks lies in ideological innovation, making talent capital the primary element. The human capital of think tanks consists of two aspects: leadership talent and research talent. Leadership talent must possess political wisdom and policy acumen, think tank management and operational capabilities, as well as global awareness and communication consciousness. In the United States, such think tank leaders are also called policy entrepreneurs. Think tank research talent primarily refers to policy experts. Policy expert teams are typically composed of scholars, former government officials, and media and business elites, with scholars and former government officials forming the core of the policy expert team. The policy experts referred to in this paper mainly consist of these two types of talent. In the American think tank community, due to the existence of the “revolving door” mechanism, many policy experts possess diverse professional backgrounds, which ensures the possibility of conversion between ideological research and political practice.

A high-quality policy expert team constitutes the lifeblood of think tank survival and development. Policy experts in think tanks play multiple roles: they are intellectuals who uphold fundamental human values, authorities in policy domains, producers of policy concepts, and disseminators of ideas. Specifically, the qualities required of policy experts fall into three aspects: First, policy ex-

perts must possess solid research foundations, be experts in a particular field, and hold certain authority in policy research. Second, policy experts must have keen political sensitivity and rapid policy responsiveness, as well as relatively comprehensive understanding of national strategy and real-world politics. They must deeply care about all matters concerning public interests at the national, social, and even global levels, and this concern must transcend personal self-interest. Third, policy experts must possess excellent language expression and communication skills, be adept at dealing with the media, and actively market their ideas and guide public opinion. In addition to these three points, policy experts must bear moral responsibility, not only daring to fulfill their duty to speak out but also doing so wisely, considering and attending to the social impact and consequences of their statements and ideas. This moral responsibility of policy experts is somewhat similar to what Weber called the ethics of responsibility for politicians, which must consider and attend to the social consequences of their political decisions affecting numerous people.

The success of American think tanks is inseparable from their strong leaders. Ideally, the leader of a think tank needs to have experience in both academia and government, maintain good relationships with business and media, and be both an orator and a doer. Such individuals are referred to by American think tank researchers as “policy entrepreneurs.” Generally, in the organizational structure of think tanks, there are boards of trustees, presidents, vice presidents, and center directors who constitute the leadership. The board chair and president are the core leaders, and their personal vision and influence largely determine the development direction and scope of influence of a think tank. Taking the Brookings Institution as an example, the current co-chair of the board is John Thornton, former President and Chief Operating Officer of Goldman Sachs, currently Chairman of Barrick Gold Corporation, and concurrently a professor at Tsinghua University responsible for the “Global Leadership” program. Due to Thornton’s connections and influence on Wall Street and in the global business community, Brookings’ financial situation has maintained a strong momentum since he became board chair. Thornton’s strong interest in China and his desire to promote China-U.S. relations and global development directly led to the establishment of the Brookings Institution’s China Center and its Beijing office in 2003. Since 2015, as a major debate on China policy has unfolded in the American think tank community, scholars from Brookings’ China Center, represented by Jeffrey Bader and Li Cheng, have played an important role in rationally viewing China-U.S. relations and promoting their continued harmonious development amidst the cacophony of voices.

Edwin Feulner, President of the Heritage Foundation, can explain the power of leadership from another perspective. With an MBA degree, Feulner participated as a board member in founding the Heritage Foundation in 1973 and has served as its President since 1977. He believes the Heritage Foundation should not become an academic research institution but rather a commercially operated organization that employs various marketing mechanisms to maximize benefits. “Our role is to do our best to influence Washington’s public policy circle, specif-

ically, most importantly Congress, followed by the executive branch, and third, the national news media” [9]. Under this philosophy, the Heritage Foundation has grown from a small research institution with only nine people in 1977 to one of America’s most influential think tanks with 220 staff members today. In fact, the philosophy and influence of leaders can be seen running through the operations of every influential American think tank. The development and growth of American think tanks are closely related to their exceptional leaders.

Obviously, both leadership talent and policy experts constitute scarce resources, and American think tanks’ acquisition of talent capital depends on the “revolving door” mechanism. The “revolving door” mechanism is the most distinctive phenomenon of American think tanks, rooted in the American political system. With presidential elections every four years, many departing officials move to think tanks to engage in policy research, while many think tank researchers assume important government positions. This circulation between scholars and officials is the American “revolving door.” On the one hand, the revolving door mechanism makes think tanks a talent reservoir for government. On the other hand, it provides think tanks with abundant policy talent. The American executive branch is typical of “a new sovereign brings his own courtiers.” Senior cabinet members such as ministers are not produced from parliamentary party groups and rarely come from the civil service, but rather from elite think tanks—a situation quite different from European countries and China. Consequently, every four years, many scholars move from think tanks into government to become direct policymakers. In this regard, Kent Weaver believes that “the role of think tanks as suppliers of government talent is largely the result of the permeability of executive elites” [10]. Whenever a new president takes office, in addition to numerous think tank scholars entering government, many former government officials also enter think tanks to conduct research. For example, Henry Paulson, who served as Treasury Secretary in the Bush administration, entered Johns Hopkins University as a visiting researcher after leaving government and subsequently founded the Paulson Institute. Douglas Paal, who served as head of the American Institute in Taiwan from 2002-2006, is now Vice President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

3. Communication Capital Constructing Influence Networks

According to the “public policy opinion field” theory, the influence of American think tanks stems from both their capacity for ideological innovation and their all-round communication capacity. The reason American think tanks play an important ideological leading role globally is precisely built upon the foundation of their strong communication capital. After more than a century of development and evolution, American think tanks have formed a relatively mature information dissemination model and comprehensive information communication mechanism. Specifically, the main communication methods employed by American think tanks include interpersonal communication, organizational

communication, and mass communication. In most cases, these three communication modes are employed simultaneously, complementing and reinforcing each other. Interpersonal communication helps think tanks directly influence policymakers with their research results, while organizational and mass communication shoulder the responsibility of agenda-setting and shaping public opinion, thereby indirectly influencing policymakers.

The so-called interpersonal communication method primarily refers to think tanks relying on personal relationship networks to influence policy formulation during information dissemination, such as the interpersonal communication networks constructed by the “revolving door” and board of trustees networks. The criss-crossing interpersonal relationship network between government and think tanks built by the “revolving door” mechanism allows think tank influence to permeate all aspects of policy formulation. This is precisely what former U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz meant when he said that “bringing together prominent political figures and think tanks opens multiple channels for think tank experts”[11]. The highest decision-making and management body of American think tanks is the board of trustees, typically composed of prominent social elites from political, business, academic, and non-governmental organization circles. Because these board members themselves are renowned opinion leaders with close relationship networks across all sectors of society, the influence they bring through interpersonal communication is immeasurable.

Organizational communication refers to information dissemination activities conducted by organizations as the main body, representing an important channel for American think tanks to shape brand influence and institutional reputation. Through organizational communication, American think tanks build a platform for opinion exchange for the public, policymakers, and professionals, while also providing a base for foreign policy education for policymakers. In a sense, it is precisely because of this communication mode that American think tanks are called universities without students.

In modern society, mass communication is the primary creator of the information environment and a window through which humans perceive the external world and gain experience. Through mass production, replication, and widespread dissemination of information, mass communication can create universal public opinion momentum in a short period. In this regard, Donald Abelson points out that “providing clear-cut policy positions in congressional committees and publishing research reports on controversial domestic or international issues may attract attention in certain policy-making areas, but the influence generated may be far less than a single image on CBS Evening News or a commentary article in *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*” [11]. Major American think tanks actively encourage their scholars to accept interviews from radio and television media, with scholars analyzing current political situations and expounding their viewpoints to the public, thereby playing a role in guiding public opinion [12]. Among these diversified mass communication media, network media is particularly noteworthy. As globalization rapidly

approaches humanity in economic and political spheres, American think tank information dissemination has also entered a stage of global consciousness. Beginning around the mid-1990s, American think tanks have successively established their official websites and, using these as a foundation and blogs, podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, and various social media as nodes, built a rich, multi-form, two-way interactive think tank all-media communication network. New media communication activities possess advantages of openness, diversity, immediacy, and interactivity that traditional media cannot match, making them important media for expressing opinions, building identity, and shaping behavior. Taking the Brookings Institution as an example, its website continuously adjusts its new media communication strategy according to developments in information technology and changes in audience needs. In June 2013, the Brookings Institution website launched a digital feature similar to *The New York Times'* "Snow Fall" model, aiming to stimulate audience interest and discussion on important issues through integrated media communication methods. After the first issue was launched, webpage dwell time increased by 125%, with 72% of visitors being new users [13]. On the one hand, all-round information communication brings market competitiveness and influence to think tanks; on the other hand, it to some extent makes American think tanks increasingly commercialized. Although American think tanks are free-market competitors in the marketplace of ideas, they are essentially policy research institutions serving the public good. How to balance and manage the relationship between these two aspects represents a tremendous challenge currently facing American think tanks.

4. Institutional Capital Providing Mechanism Guarantees

Talent capital is the source and foundation of think tank ideological innovation, communication capital is the pathway for think tanks to realize influence, and institutions provide institutional guarantees for the realization of both. For think tanks, possessing talent capital is only the first step toward success; to realize think tank value, they must also emphasize the cultivation of institutional capital. American think tank institutional capital is divided into macro and micro levels. At the macro level, it primarily consists of complete decision consultation mechanisms and a sound tax system. At the micro level, it refers to comprehensive independence and commercialized operational mechanisms. Compared with other Western countries, the U.S. government relies more heavily on external consultation for decision-making. The extensive use of think tanks for external consultation and participation in decision-making is known as the "American phenomenon" [14]. The U.S. government treats consultation as a statutory procedure in the decision-making process, requiring different consultation reports at various stages including project demonstration, investment, operation, and completion [15]. The U.S. management of the decision consultation industry implements a mechanism of government macro-control and industry association micro-constraints. The government is responsible for overall planning, formulating decision consultation development plans, and relevant laws, policies, and standards, with corresponding regulations covering numerous aspects from the

introduction of government decisions to project bidding, operation, and qualification certification of consulting institutions. The U.S. decision consultation system, as a relatively mature institutional design, centers on the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) as its core and foundation. Established in 1972, the Act aims to ensure the objectivity of recommendations from various forms of expert advisory bodies and the public's right to know in the expert consultation process [16]. The United States passed the Federal Advisory Committee Act in 1972 to ensure the objectivity of recommendations from various forms of expert advisory bodies and the public's right to know in the expert consultation process. The Federal Advisory Committee Act ensures the proper functioning of the expert consultation system through three requirements: balance, openness, and functional singularity. The "balance requirement" can "neutralize" experts' tendencies in interests or viewpoints resulting from their professional backgrounds, ensuring that professional knowledge from various fields represented by experts can comprehensively enter decision-making. This helps overcome potential biases in advisory organizations due to limitations in professional knowledge, promoting the rational maximization of consultation effects. Simultaneously, the balance requirement effectively limits administrative agencies' interest tendencies in expert selection. The "openness requirement" stipulates that all documents and meetings involved in the expert consultation process should be unconditionally open to the public, except where legislatively exempted. "Functional singularity" prevents advisory committees from potentially exceeding their functional and authority scopes [17].

As non-profit institutions, American think tanks cannot survive and develop without stable financial support, and a sound tax exemption system provides tangible guarantees for think tank fundraising. Kent Weaver and Andrew Rich point out through quantitative analysis that "an important factor affecting American think tanks' media exposure rate is funding; the operating funds of the top five most influential American think tanks are no less than ten million U.S. dollars each" [18]. American think tank operating funds generally come from foundations, corporations, individual donations, and government contracts. Diversified funding sources avoid the drawbacks of excessive dependence on a single funding source and help maintain research independence and objectivity.

The above analysis addresses institutional capital at the macro level. At the micro level, American think tank institutional capital refers to their all-round independence and commercialized operational mechanisms. Most American think tanks claim to be non-partisan, non-governmental independent policy research institutions. Their independence includes intellectual independence, financial independence, and political independence. Intellectual independence refers to the independence of think tank experts' research, with scholars approaching their research projects with open minds and reaching conclusions through objective analysis of facts. Research independence ensures the high quality and innovativeness of think tank products. To guarantee intellectual independence, American think tanks are organizationally structured around researchers as the core, generally divided into two major blocks: policy research and administrative manage-

ment, with policy research as the core and administrative management serving policy research. Financial independence means that although think tanks accept funding from foundations, corporations, individuals, and government contract projects, their research is not influenced by funding sources. American think tanks mostly operate corporately and manage commercially. Funding sources directly determine and influence American think tanks' research agenda setting and research direction, and each think tank strives to ensure that its research process and conclusions are not affected by funding sources when accepting donations. However, the unavoidable reality is that money always more or less influences the direction of ideas. To ensure financial independence, American think tanks maintain as diversified funding sources as possible, including numerous public and private funders. Political independence means that American think tanks pursue independence from political parties, following objectivity and independence in research processes without being influenced by any partisan politics or interests. Regarding this point, many think tank researchers disagree, frequently categorizing think tank research tendencies and viewpoints according to conservatism, liberalism, and neutrality, and using this as a basis to judge the relationship between think tanks and political parties. Due to this bias rooted in American political tradition, it is difficult for American think tanks to produce absolutely objective and neutral ideas on specific issues. In fact, most American think tanks strive to ensure their research results are not affected by any political party or ideology. On the one hand, American think tanks all attempt to maintain the independence and high quality of their research results; on the other hand, the diversity and competitiveness of American think tanks allow different viewpoints and voices to be expressed, thereby compensating to some extent for the harm caused by this bias. The independence of American think tanks is only limited independence; they cannot be separated from the political, economic, and cultural soil in which they survive. Different think tanks will inevitably carry different tendencies and biases in research on specific issues.

Conclusion

In the era of the knowledge economy, think tanks undertake the critical role of knowledge innovation and knowledge dissemination, serving as the driving force for national and social progress and development. The prosperity of American think tanks and the realization of their influence are attributed to their high-quality talent, all-round communication strategies, and the cultural, economic, and political environment in which they operate, as well as their own operational mechanisms. It is precisely these intellectual capital factors that provide the soil, space, impetus, and foundation for their development. Studying the intellectual capital and its elements of American think tanks can provide valuable reference for the research and development of Chinese think tanks.

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