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Postprint of Research on the Operational Mechanism of New-Type Think Tanks Based on Government Decision-Making Information Needs

Authors: Liu Yongmei, Wu Hongwei

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Abstract

[Objective/Significance] From the perspective of information user theory, this study investigates the information needs of government decision-making and proposes strategies for the operational mechanisms of new-type think tanks.

[Methodology] Employing the literature research method, this paper analyzes the information needs of government decision-making from the dimensions of intrinsic drivers, characteristics, structure, and types, and offers recommendations for think tank operational mechanisms.

[Results/Conclusion] In accordance with the process of government decision-making information needs, the paper proposes recommendations for the mechanism construction of new-type think tanks from four aspects: information resources, topic selection mechanisms, quality monitoring systems, and communication mechanisms, with the aim of providing a novel perspective and theoretical foundation for the construction of new-type think tanks.

Full Text

Study on the Operating Mechanism of New-Type Think Tanks Based on Government Decision-Making Information Demand

Liu Yongmei^{1,2}, Wu Hongwei²

¹School of Information Management, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210023

²Huaibei Normal University, Huaibei 235000

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] From the perspective of information user theory, this study examines government decision-making information demand and proposes strategies for the operating mechanisms of new-type think tanks. **[Method/Process]** Using literature research methods, the paper analyzes the internal drivers, characteristics, structure, and types of government decision-making information demand, and subsequently offers recommendations for think tank operating mechanisms. **[Result/Conclusion]** Following the general process of government decision-making information demand analysis, the paper puts forward recommendations for constructing new-type think tank mechanisms from four aspects: information resources, topic selection mechanisms, quality monitoring systems, and communication mechanisms, aiming to provide a new perspective and theoretical foundation for new-type think tank construction.

Keywords: government information demand; think tank; operating mechanism

1 Introduction

On January 20, 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” [1], which defined new-type think tanks as non-profit research and consulting institutions that focus on strategic issues and public policy, serving the purpose of supporting scientific, democratic, and law-based decision-making by the Party and government. This definition reveals that new-type think tanks are service organizations that serve the Party and government, conduct policy research and consulting, and provide innovative research outputs (including proposals, reports, policies, seminars, articles, and publications). There exists a natural connection between think tank operating mechanisms and intelligence work. Li Yang [2] and colleagues have elaborated on the intelligence functions of think tanks, while Zhang Jiannian [3] and Yuan Jianxia [4] argue that intelligence research constitutes the foundation of think tank operating mechanisms. Wu Yuliang [5] contends that intelligence agencies play a front-end supporting role in think tank services, suggesting that theories and practices from intelligence research can provide crucial support for effective think tank operations.

Information user theory, which holds an important position in intelligence research, posits that every information user can consciously assess their information needs based on their complex context and construct their own knowledge [6]. Dervin and Nilan established a “cognitive perspective” user needs theory that emphasizes attention to the inherent regularities of user needs. User information needs determine the content and form of information services and guide the organizational structure and resource development plans of information service organizations. According to information user theory, new-type think tank construction should begin with analyzing the decision-making information

needs of its users (government departments), clarifying the content, structure, and characteristics of these needs, and building organizational structures and operating mechanisms oriented toward satisfying government decision-making information demands to provide valuable intellectual products for public policy formulation. Government decision-making information demand, think tank operating mechanisms, and the forms of think tank service products are mutually influential and interdependent.

This paper aims to analyze the characteristics, structure, and types of government decision-making information demand from the perspective of the drivers behind government decision-making information services, outline the general process of government decision-making information demand, and subsequently propose several recommendations for new-type think tank operating mechanisms.

2 Drivers of Government Decision-Making Information Demand

Chinese intelligence scientist Yan Yimin [7] proposed from the perspective of decision-making behavior that “the difference between the knowledge required for decision-making and the subjective knowledge of decision-makers is the cause of intelligence demand,” defining the generation mechanism of intelligence demand as: $K(I) = K(D) - K(S)$, where $K(I)$ represents the quantity of intelligence demand, $K(D)$ represents the quantity of knowledge required for decision-making (dependent on the decision-making model), and $K(S)$ represents the quantity of subjective knowledge related to decision-making. When $K(S) < K(D)$, it indicates that for a particular decision problem, the decision-maker’s subjective knowledge is less than the knowledge required for decision-making, thereby generating intelligence demand.

The Chinese government’s demand for policy decision-making information primarily stems from the transformation of government administrative decision-making models and the complexity of policy decision-making knowledge.

2.1 Transformation Demand of Administrative Decision-Making Models

China’s administrative decision-making model has undergone a transformation “from managerialism to participatory governance” [8]. Under the managerialism model, government decision-making was dominated by political elites within the administrative system who monopolized decision-making resources and power [9], with agenda-setting led by administrative organs and public interest demands difficult to satisfy. As economic system reform progresses, economic activities become increasingly complex, research fields more specialized, and social interest groups more diversified, the managerialism model has gradually revealed its drawbacks. Policy agenda-setting urgently needs to develop toward “scientification” and “democratization.” The foundation of scientific decision-

making lies in large amounts of valuable information. For policymakers, formulating policies requires not only mastering professional knowledge across various fields but also understanding the distribution and dynamics of diverse interests. In a network information environment filled with massive information, relying solely on the autonomous information collection methods of the managerialism model can no longer accomplish this task. How to widely collect and analyze valuable information using new technologies and methods in the new information technology environment has become an arduous task facing government departments.

2.2 Complexity of Policy Decision-Making Knowledge

Knowledge complexity refers to the extent to which policymakers lack professional knowledge relative to relevant experts during the policy formulation process [10]. In the policy agenda-setting process, the complexity of knowledge required for decision-making is determined by multiple factors, including both the intellectual and experiential limitations of policymakers in understanding relevant policy issues (determined by their education, training, and experience) and external factors such as constantly changing policy tools and decision-making environments.

For policy issues in natural sciences, engineering technology, and theoretically strong economic management and law, it is necessary to introduce relevant professional knowledge backgrounds. When numerous or unclear policy tool alternatives exist in the policy formulation process, evaluating the costs and benefits of different options also requires professional participation. As China's international status changes and numerous related issues emerge, large amounts of comprehensive research and analysis are urgently needed. The continuous increase in international affairs and exchanges between nations requires government departments to master relevant knowledge for handling global affairs. All these factors exceed the information processing capacity of existing government institutions, generating substantial new demands for information services.

3 Content and Utility of Government Decision-Making Information Demand

Government decision-making information encompasses political, economic, social, cultural, and other aspects across different temporal and spatial domains needed by government decision-makers during public decision-making processes, characterized by comprehensiveness, accuracy, timeliness, and systematicity. It can be elaborated from two dimensions: content composition and utility measurement.

3.1 Content Composition of Government Decision-Making Information Demand

The content composition of government decision-making information demand mainly includes needs for information, information sources, and information acquisition and dissemination methods [11]. Government decision-making information demand features comprehensive coverage, diverse forms, and extensive source ranges.

Government information needs primarily include both content and form. Information content covers all aspects required for decision-making, such as overall socio-economic operation information, national natural resources, human resources, and information resources, as well as social realities and public will that must be considered when formulating laws and regulations, including public demands and information on interest balance among stakeholders related to policy formulation. In terms of information scope, it involves both domestic economic development, public construction, and various other aspects, as well as international diplomatic affairs. Information demand forms tend toward diversification, including research reports, briefings, papers, technical reports, books, monographs, and other formats.

Information source needs mainly involve the scope of sources. Government decision-making information sources are extensive, encompassing traditional media such as books, newspapers, journals, radio, and television, new media networks, and user-generated content (UGC) on social media that requires attention. For think tanks, emphasis should be placed on the authority of information sources to ensure accuracy. The RAND Corporation, recognized as America's first true "think tank" renowned for research on advanced military technology and major strategies, values authoritative public materials in its China military research, such as research reports, conference materials, leadership speeches, and official documents [12].

Information acquisition and dissemination methods include both formal and informal channels. Formal channels include information retrieval, obtaining information through specialized information services, or releasing information through press conferences. Informal channels involve information exchange and dissemination through meetings and social media. How to obtain and release appropriate information at the right time, in the right place, and through the right methods is a question that think tank managers must consider when satisfying government information needs.

3.2 Utility Measurement of Government Decision-Making Information Demand

Utility evaluates the degree of satisfaction of government information demand and measures the services and information provided by think tanks. Utility can be assessed from several aspects: value, timeliness, systematicity, and convenience. Value is the most important criterion for satisfying information needs.

When generating decision-making information demand, the government always hopes to obtain the most valuable information conducive to making correct decisions and quickly transform it into relevant policies serving the public. Value assessment should follow the “satisficing principle” rather than the “optimal principle,” as the latter is based on “complete information” that is difficult to achieve in reality. Timeliness is a major characteristic of the information society. With accelerated information update rhythms, only timely content delivery and demand satisfaction can enable information to play its proper role in government decision-making, while lagging information may delay opportunities. Changes in the decision-making environment have also deepened systematicity requirements, necessitating understanding of decision problems, their causes, possible outcomes, and corresponding measures. Convenience is reflected in information presentation forms. Government decision-makers’ usage habits also follow Moore’s Law. Clarifying government decision-making processes and understanding government document formats, and adopting technologies and document forms that conform to their usage habits when providing think tank services and products can better attract their attention and interest, making the satisfaction of government information needs more effective.

The comprehensiveness of government decision-making information demand content and the characteristics of utility—accuracy, timeliness, and systematicity—impose high requirements on information source selection, information collection, transmission, processing, and analysis.

4 Construction of New-Type Think Tank Operating Mechanisms Based on Government Decision-Making Information Demand Analysis

Clearly understanding and grasping government decision-making information demand is the prerequisite for new-type think tanks to provide effective services to government departments. The degree of demand satisfaction influences decision-makers’ adoption and implementation of think tank policy recommendations, thereby affecting the status and future development prospects of new-type think tanks. The general process of government decision-making information demand analysis can be divided into four stages: demand investigation, demand confirmation, demand supply, and demand tracking, as illustrated in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper].

Figure 1 The Flow Chart of Government’s Decision Information Demand Analysis

In different stages of demand analysis, think tanks need to accomplish different tasks, and their operating mechanisms also vary accordingly. Based on the content and characteristics of government decision-making information demand and proceeding from the process of government decision-making information demand analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for the construction of new-type think tank operating mechanisms:

4.1 Demand Investigation: Collect Basic Materials and Establish Information Databases

Demand investigation aims to identify government decision-making information demand, which is also the primary task of new-type think tanks. Think tanks must utilize various research methods to establish formal and informal information acquisition channels, gather comprehensive and accurate information resources, and subsequently form detailed information databases. Emphasis should be placed on establishing information collection channels, creating specialized intelligence information networks, employing dedicated information analysts, obtaining original or specialized materials through these departments and personnel, and organizing, storing, and effectively analyzing and researching the collected materials [13] to comprehensively understand the government's functional scope and work priorities, clarify the themes and scope of information needed for government decision-making, and determine the actual information needs of the government.

Establishing information databases not only helps identify and determine government decision-making information demand but also accumulates and organizes various information resources from multiple channels. Through the organization, storage, and processing of this information, think tanks can build their own databases, strengthen the integration of think tank products, service information, case information, and practical experience of think tank staff, and subsequently establish think tank knowledge bases, ultimately forming platform tools that support researchers in grasping the forward-looking and strategic nature of research issues and conducting product development and consulting services.

Foreign think tanks attach great importance to information resource collection and organization. Many think tanks possess libraries and archives of varying scales. For example, Japan's Institute of Developing Economies (IDE) has established Japan's largest library on developing countries [14], housing numerous academic books, statistical materials, government bulletins, newspapers, magazines, maps, and reports from international organizations, with a collection of approximately 600,000 volumes and over 3,400 periodicals, making it a world-class specialized library. The Hoover Institution, a renowned American university-affiliated think tank [15], possesses its own library and archives covering a large amount of precious historical and political materials from the 20th century, which has played an important role in its function as a major think tank in U.S. public and foreign policy.

4.2 Government Decision-Making Information Demand Confirmation: Accurately Grasp Policy Issues

Government decision-making demand confirmation is a process of controlling government decision-making demand and also the policy topic selection process for think tanks themselves. The comprehensiveness of government decision-

making information demand determines that a single think tank cannot cover all aspects of national policy formulation. Therefore, in this process, think tanks should target serving national strategic policies, leverage internal and external advantages based on their own professional research fields, select appropriate decision-making issues, and provide high-quality think tank products to achieve think tank construction goals.

In Western countries, almost every authoritative think tank has its own main research expertise and professional direction, forming recognized authority within the industry. For instance, the RAND Corporation excels in military development and national defense strategy, the Brookings Institution in Middle East issues, and the Hoover Institution specializes in U.S.-Russia relations and former Soviet Union and Eastern European issues. The Adam Smith Institute in the UK is authoritative on market economy, and the French Institute of International Relations on European development and EU member relations [16]. These represent the most authoritative and professional think tanks in their respective fields.

China's new-type think tanks similarly need to accurately position themselves based on research expertise and capabilities to ensure the quality of policy research products and enhance think tank influence. For different types of domestic think tanks, different strategies can be adopted. University-affiliated think tanks can fully leverage the advantages of high-level disciplinary expertise and professional research talent in higher education institutions, utilize strong internal research capabilities, and provide rigorous definitions and reports based on empirical data and accumulated professional knowledge, becoming more academic "ink-tanks" [17]. Private think tanks can establish "think-and-do tanks" with activist characteristics, engaging in relatively less research work and providing decision-making services by recycling existing research findings from external experts in industry fields.

For think tanks, only with accurate positioning, providing specialized and in-depth services and products, and grasping the "theme" selection of policy information can they "cater to interests, solve difficulties, and meet needs" [18], attract the attention of decision-makers, and achieve think tank construction goals.

4.3 Government Decision-Making Information Demand Supply: Construct Quality Monitoring Systems to Ensure Effectiveness of Intellectual Products

Government decision-making demand supply refers to the process where think tanks, based on policy topic content, utilize relevant tool models, methodological systems, and expert wisdom to collect, process, and analyze relevant information resources, forming effective viewpoints and opinions and presenting them to the government in appropriate output forms to satisfy its needs. The degree of government demand satisfaction depends on the quality of intellectual products

provided by think tanks.

Providing high-quality intellectual products is the foundation of a think tank's good reputation and the guarantee for satisfying government decision-making information demand. High-quality proposals require the operation of multiple mechanisms, such as reliable information sources, high-quality research personnel, and strict research outcome review mechanisms. Therefore, constructing a comprehensive quality monitoring system is an effective means for think tanks to ensure product quality, which can not only guarantee research outcome quality but also improve researchers' professional competence.

A comprehensive quality monitoring system includes establishing strict review systems, setting review standards for various services and products, and implementing reasonable review methods and strict review processes. When constructing quality monitoring systems, different review methods can be adopted for different think tank products, including internal review mechanisms, external expert review, or a combination of both. Foreign think tanks attach great importance to research outcome review. For example, Russia's Institute for Urban Economics (IUE) [19] conducts internal review for all products, while the Viitorul Foundation appoints more external experts to review research reports, ensuring that the reports and documents provided are applicable to government decision-making.

4.4 Government Decision-Making Information Demand Tracking: Improve Communication Mechanisms and Create Collaborative Innovation Service Systems

Government decision-making demand tracking runs through the entire process from demand investigation to demand supply, aiming to ensure the consistency and integrity of decision-making information demand throughout this process, adjust product relevance and quality according to changes in the decision-making environment and government demand trends, and guarantee the implementation effectiveness of think tank products.

To this end, think tanks should improve communication mechanisms. First, they must establish good communication mechanisms with government decision-making departments. Communication with government departments is manifested in clarifying government needs, obtaining government information resources to support their own information database construction and research, and the ability to deliver research results to government decision-making authorities. Second, attention should be paid to establishing information exchange channels with mass media, the public, and other think tanks to ensure smooth information flow and achieve interaction, exchange, and cooperation among all parties. This includes understanding public sentiment and opinions through various media, collecting public thoughts, understanding public needs, and the ability to transmit think tank ideas and products to the public through media and other effective means.

Currently, China's three types of think tanks all have deficiencies in communication management. Official think tanks have advantages in communicating with government departments, can conveniently access various official data, are familiar with the operational procedures of government departments, and have perfect "upward delivery" mechanisms. However, they have poor communication with the public and sometimes filter certain public opinions due to their "official" nature. University-affiliated think tanks lack effective communication in both aspects, lacking effective communication with government departments and failing to fundamentally absorb opinions from ordinary citizens, with research results often being "self-entertainment" types. Private think tanks are rooted among the people, understand the suffering of the grassroots, but due to their status, connections, and capabilities, find it difficult to obtain important information that can support their research, making their research quality incomparable to official think tanks. Moreover, due to the lack of effective organization and upward delivery channels, they cannot transform research results into productivity. The communication mechanism deficiencies of these three types of think tanks make it difficult for think tank services and products to achieve ideal effectiveness.

Think tank managers should adopt various methods to strengthen exchanges with decision-making departments, such as adopting the Western "revolving door" talent mechanism; regularly or irregularly inviting administrative department personnel to give lectures at think tanks on the implementation of major policies and guidelines; inviting government officials to participate in major research projects at think tanks; and fully leveraging government officials' familiarity with national conditions and policies, encouraging and attracting them to participate in think tank work and contribute to the construction of channels for making suggestions.

Strengthening exchanges and interactions with the public involves establishing corresponding information platform mechanisms, interpreting and analyzing public policies in language and forms familiar to the public, enabling them to understand and encouraging them to speak freely, collecting, organizing, and analyzing this data to form reports that improve policy adoption and implementation efficiency.

Attention should also be paid to cooperation and exchange with other think tanks. In the era of globalization, new-type think tank construction should not be limited to domestic issues but should have discourse power on major international issues. Increasing exchanges and cooperation with internationally renowned think tanks, focusing on building think tank reputation and influence, and conducting various international project cooperation can enhance international exchange and cooperation.

5 Conclusion

For new-type think tanks to enhance their influence on government decision-making processes, the most fundamental and important work is to conduct government decision-making information demand analysis. The accuracy of demand analysis determines and influences the quality, value, and significance of think tank information products. Clear, accurate, and appropriately specialized demand can guide think tank institutions to provide targeted and valuable intellectual products for government departments, offering decision-making references for government public policy formulation and implementation and improving governance capabilities. This paper explores the drivers of government information demand, examines the content and utility measurement of government information demand, analyzes the process of government decision-making information demand, and subsequently proposes recommendations for constructing new-type think tank operating mechanisms, thereby enriching the theoretical system of government information demand and think tank services.

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