

Media Think Tank: Enabling Public Sharing of Post-Print Intellectual Products

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Currently, China is experiencing a wave of think tank construction, wherein media think tanks have demonstrated exemplary and pioneering roles in the development of new-type think tanks, necessitating research and analysis of this specific type. [Methods/Process] This paper examines the operational experience of Zijin Media Think Tank, which embodies the “media + think tank” gene, to explore the inevitability of media think tanks’ emergence and their potential development pathways. [Results/Conclusion] It argues that media think tanks should not be confined to content production alone, but should rather assume the responsibility of generating ideas, disseminating them to the public, and enabling public sharing of intellectual products, ultimately achieving the goal of promoting social governance.

Full Text

Media Think Tanks: Getting the Public Involved in Sharing Intellectual Products

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Abstract: [Purpose/significance] Now China is setting off a boom of think tank development, during which media think tanks have become one of benchmarks for pioneers in constructing new-type think tanks in the country. It is thus essentially necessary to analyze and study this new type of think tanks. [Method/process] This paper, based on the analysis of the experience in operating Zijin Media Think Tank, revealed the inevitability of the emergence of media think tanks in China and explored how they may evolve and develop in the future. [Result/conclusion] This paper argues that media think tanks should do more than just producing contents, but dedicate to developing intel-

lectual products and promoting the general public' s awareness and initiatives in learning and sharing them.

Keywords: media think tank; “medialization” of think tank; intellectual product

Classification Number: C932

Since January last year when the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council issued the “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics,” China has witnessed a surge in think tank development. Universities, research institutes, and media organizations have been actively establishing think tanks. According to the “Global Think Tank Report 2015” published by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, by the end of 2015, there were 6,846 think tanks worldwide, with China possessing 435—making it the world’ s second-largest think tank nation. Among these, media think tanks have emerged as a particularly prominent category in this new wave of think tank construction.

Throughout the history of global think tanks, numerous media outlets have developed think tank functions beyond news reporting. For instance, Reuters Research (RR) within Reuters’ financial products provides financial research findings to investors worldwide, while the Press Association offers public relations and investment information specifically for British and Canadian enterprises. However, it must be acknowledged that media think tanks have not been particularly prominent among the various types of think tanks worldwide. In China, however, media think tanks have already demonstrated benchmark and pioneering significance in the construction of new-type think tanks. In June 2013, Xinhua News Agency established the “Liaowang Think Tank” research institution; in March 2014, Xinhua Net launched the think tank platform “Sike” ; in early 2015, the Guangming Daily established the “Think Tank Research and Release Center” ; in July 2015, Hu Shuli, editor-in-chief of Caixin Media, announced the launch of a think tank platform to develop high-end financial consulting and data services alongside news operations; and in September 2015, the Economic Daily established the China Economic Trends Research Institute to publish research findings such as the China Economic Index, China Agricultural Index, and Wealth Index. Additionally, media organizations such as Southern Metropolis Daily and Phoenix Media have also established think tanks.

Established amidst this trend, Zijin Media Think Tank has, within its first year of operation, released a series of influential reports including the “2015 Mid-term Report on the Chinese Stock Market Trend Survey,” “Evaluation and Governance Innovation Report on China’ s New-Type Think Tank Construction,” “China Public Economic Confidence Index Report (2015-2016),” the “Nostalgia and Rural Reconstruction Series Report,” “Consulting Report on Pension Security and Occupational Annuities under Supply-Side Reform,” and the “2016 Innovation Index Report of China’ s A-Share Listed Companies.” These publications have

generated considerable impact among political, media, and academic circles, establishing Zijin Media Think Tank as one of China's emerging media think tanks.

1. The Era Calls for Media Think Tanks

The convergence of media and think tanks in China stems from two primary factors. On one hand, media organizations possess substantial resources, and in an era where traditional media urgently need transformation, leveraging these resources to transition toward think tanks represents a viable path for exploration and innovation. On the other hand, the complexity of contemporary society and the times themselves call for the emergence of media think tanks.

1.1. Prominent Social Issues and Insufficient Social Construction Require Media Think Tanks to Influence Policy and the Public

Nearly four decades of reform and opening up have brought rapid economic development to China, but various social problems have also become increasingly prominent. When addressing these complex social issues, government authorities increasingly rely on professional intellectual teams to provide precise policy recommendations. Compared with other types of think tanks, media think tanks possess unique advantages in voice and dissemination. While world-class think tanks attach great importance to expanding their influence through media, they typically only control two communication channels: irregular research reports and regularly published academic journals, and their voices must depend on external media. Once think tanks fail to effectively utilize media, their products struggle to play their proper role, resulting in wasted resources. Media think tanks effectively solve this problem. On one hand, they can utilize existing “reference reports” or “internal references” to establish direct upward channels to government departments, influencing policy decisions. On the other hand, media think tanks themselves possess authoritative publishing platforms that can flexibly and promptly release think tank achievements to the public, influencing broader social groups and responding to social issues in a timely manner.

1.2. Think Tank Transformation Can Become One Path for Traditional Media's Transition and Development

In the Internet era, where everyone can be a self-media operator, traditional media can no longer meet public expectations by relying solely on information sources or content production. Media organizations have been exploring transformation paths, and think tank transformation may serve as one such route. Many traditional media organizations have long developed in-depth reporting and special coverage to counter the light news, fast-food journalism, and speed-over-quality approaches of Internet media. These in-depth reports require journalists to conduct long-term investigations and interview experts from multiple fields, ultimately forming well-developed perspectives and content. If systemati-

cally organized, such content can fully align with and transform into government decision-making.

1.3. Media Think Tanks Can Serve as a Bridge Connecting Experts and Scholars with the General Public

In China's current think tank landscape, most researchers are university professors or institutional researchers. For these academics residing in ivory towers, although basic disciplinary research and applied disciplinary innovation are important, their research findings—whether in terms of language system or content structure—remain somewhat distant from general public comprehension. How to enable academic ideas to truly influence society presents a challenge that media think tanks are uniquely positioned to address. On one hand, media think tanks can integrate journalism and academic research, producing think tank achievements that fall between fragmented, fast-paced news reports and decade-long academic research projects. On the other hand, their publishing platforms ensure that think tank achievements can reach audiences immediately, while audience feedback through media terminals further influences subsequent intellectual production. Consequently, the trend toward media think tank-ization and the “medialization” of think tanks has become inevitable in China's new economic and social development pattern. Media think tank-ization means that media organizations or groups, in attempting to establish authority and credibility in the Internet era, must pursue a path of depth, transforming themselves into think tanks to influence government and the public. The “medialization” of think tanks means that think tanks must disseminate their research findings to influence policy-making and public opinion, thereby expanding their influence.

2. Development Paths for Media Think Tanks

Whether media think tanks are endogenously established within media groups or exogenously formed like Zijin Media Think Tank—which is funded by four major media groups, possesses partial media genes, but is actually jointly established by Nanjing University's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, School of Journalism and Communication, School of Information Management, School of Government, and School of Law—they must all seek common ground in development strategies and visions to reach this new “high ground” of media think tanks. Future development requires joint planning, and specifically, the following five potential development paths warrant exploration.

2.1. From Content Production to Intellectual Production

For most Chinese think tanks, whether official or non-governmental, current work primarily focuses on researching specific issues or projects to produce research results or propose solutions—this can be regarded as content production. In the West, media is called the “fourth estate,” while think tanks are considered the “fifth estate” beyond the legislature, executive, judiciary, and media. The

combination of the “fourth” and “fifth” estates in media think tanks should meet higher standards: producing better intellectual products and bearing the responsibility of cultivating public engagement in sharing these products. First, through the dissemination of intellectual products, new topics should emerge through interaction with audiences, helping think tanks understand public concerns and continue providing relevant products. Second, think tank intellectual products should be transformed into public policy, allowing more people to witness the power of ideas—only by seeing this power can interest and reverence for ideas develop. Third, think tank products should serve as bridges for public interaction and communication, conveying public thoughts to government through think tanks while also informing the public about government perspectives, enabling mutual exchange and gradual understanding.

2.2. From Text-Based Reading to Data-Based Reading

Think tanks’ ability to provide recommendations and feasible solutions for government is built upon extensive foundational research. After establishing media think tanks, scientific, objective, and quantitative research methods can be introduced to transform traditional media’ s purely textual expression into more rigorous data-based expression. Zijin Media Think Tank has developed two core products: the “China Public Economic Confidence Index” released annually at year-end and the “China A-Share Listed Companies Innovation Index” released mid-year—both are research findings based on data. These data represent the integration of scholars’ long-term foundational research and think tank applied research, and unlike textual expression, data can present more objective and scientific results. For example, the “China Public Economic Confidence Index Report (2015-2016)” represents an annual achievement by dozens of experts and scholars from Zijin Media Think Tank after months of investigating and researching online and offline big data. Through surveys and analysis of 5,300 urban and rural residents across 13 cities—including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, Tieling, Zhengzhou, Luoyang, Chengdu, Yibin, Nanjing, Suzhou, Xuzhou, Shenzhen, and Dongguan—the report examines public evaluations of current conditions and future trends in four areas: national economic development, employment situation, personal income, and consumption willingness. The “China A-Share Listed Companies Innovation Index,” developed over eight months by a team led by Professor Sun Jianjun, Dean of Nanjing University’ s School of Information Management, collects, mines, and organizes innovation data and foundational data from nearly 3,000 Chinese A-share listed companies to form evaluation indices for innovation performance, innovation resources, innovation activities, and comprehensive innovation, thereby scientifically and rigorously assessing listed companies’ innovation capabilities.

2.3. From Institutional Constraints to Mechanism Innovation

Institutional constraints refer to the academic operation systems of universities and the voice mechanisms of traditional media. China’ s media think tank

construction coincides with the information and globalization era. Without mechanism innovation in think tank operations, there can be no truly sustainable think tank development, nor genuine international dialogue for think tanks. Zijin Media Think Tank is based at Nanjing University as one of its research institutions, and on August 26, 2015, it was established as an independent legal entity—a non-profit civil organization—implementing a dean responsibility system under the leadership of a board of directors, while also establishing an academic committee and an administrative committee, initiating a “revolving door” mechanism, and setting up a postdoctoral workstation. Unlike institutional entities, new-type think tanks under corporate governance make major decisions through the board of directors, while daily operations are managed by research institutes or centers under the board. Corporate governance also means financial independence and acceptance of publicly transparent financial and tax management systems, placing these new-type think tanks on a standardized and sound operational track from the very beginning. In terms of institutional setup, talent recruitment, compensation, decision-making mechanisms, achievement transformation, and external communication, the corporate model forms a governance framework with vertical checks and balances, mutual supervision, and layered accountability, offering numerous advantages over traditional top-down administrative management models.

2.4. From Talent Drain to Expert Gathering

Talent drain represents one of the major challenges currently facing traditional media. Through think tank transformation, media organizations can build new highlands that attract experts, addressing talent drain issues through mechanisms such as brain trusts, online expert teams, and academic committees. Social problems typically arise from comprehensive factors across social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions, and corresponding public policy recommendations must also be comprehensive and diverse. This requires think tanks to have either generalist experts or collaborative efforts among experts from various disciplines. Media itself covers an extremely broad range with virtually no industry research restrictions. If transformed into media think tanks, they can invite experts from all walks of life to join research teams, leveraging the advantages of intellectual integration and using collective wisdom from experts and scholars across different fields to serve decision-making. For instance, the expert network established by Xinhua News Agency’s Reference News Editorial Department and the Xinhua News Agency Special Economic Analyst System constructed by its Information Department represent beneficial explorations in this regard. Media organizations can also transform internally by converting editorial staff into think tank researchers. Compared with university experts, journalists may lack research depth, but their advantage lies in accessing first-hand, fresh data and materials from society, and their language system is closer to think tank discourse, making research findings more applicable and operational. With proper academic training, editorial staff can effectively bridge academic research and public policy recommendations, becoming the researchers needed

by think tanks.

2.5. From Single-Point Dissemination to Integrated Communication

Traditional media basically sells at below-cost prices, relying solely on advertising revenue to support entire media operations, establishing a business model of “content is king—attracting audiences—expanding distribution—winning advertising.” However, with the continuous development of new media forms and increasingly fragmented media trends, the communication power of the Internet and mobile terminals has been widely recognized, rendering traditional media business models largely ineffective. Since the 1990s, traditional media has successively established websites, and in recent years, Weibo and WeChat platforms, but such media transformation has only represented effective expansion of traditional content distribution channels rather than genuine platform transformation. For thorough transformation, an “integrated marketing platform” must be built, and think tanks may become one form of such platforms. On this platform, content, advertising, planning, and activities can be unified into coordinated action. Marketing objects can also be diversified, forming three-dimensional communication targeting government and the public, domestic and international audiences, and industry insiders and outsiders alike. For example, the People’s Forum, supervised and sponsored by People’s Daily, can be regarded as a case of “integrated marketing” centered around “think tanks.” People’s Forum is currently forming a multi-format, all-media development pattern comprising three journals, three websites, one survey company, one evaluation center, and research, book publishing, forums, conferences, and Weibo/WeChat clients, advancing toward a think tank-oriented political commentary media group.

3. Media Think Tanks’ Role in Social Governance

As one of the representatives of new-type think tanks, if media think tanks can successfully advance along the five development paths outlined above, they will have already undertaken another important responsibility while enabling the public to share intellectual products—namely, participating in social governance. Since the 18th National Congress proposed “strengthening and innovating social management,” the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee has continued to “promote the modernization of the national governance system and governance capabilities” and “improve social governance methods.” In November 2015, the “Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China for Formulating the 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development” stated the need to “promote refined social governance and build a social governance pattern of joint construction and sharing by all citizens.” Throughout this process, the central government has clearly identified social governance as a theoretical innovation and practical guideline for comprehensively deepening reform. The concept of social governance advocates multi-party participation, emphasizing interactive response,

resource integration, and decision-making optimization. Only legitimate actors with sufficient professional capabilities, participatory wisdom, and cooperative spirit can become regular participants and honored guests in social governance. Media think tanks, which combine media's communication capabilities with think tanks' professional expertise, possess three advantages in participating in social governance.

3.1. Media Think Tanks Can Aggregate Multiple Precise and In-Depth Voices When Participating in Social Governance

Compared with social management, social governance more prominently emphasizes "encouraging and supporting participation from all quarters" and better leveraging the role of social forces rather than government control. Therefore, social governance needs to listen to multiple voices. Media institutions serve as excellent platforms for aggregating diverse voices. In the self-media era, this platform has virtually no threshold, aggregating massive yet heterogeneous voices that must be effectively screened to determine which can promote social governance. Through careful selection of research topics, adoption of research methodologies, and emphasis on research depth, media think tanks aggregate voices that are not only broad but also in-depth, making them more precise for social governance purposes.

3.2. Media Think Tanks Can Better Facilitate Interactive Response in Social Governance

In addition to emphasizing multi-party participation, social governance requires response and interaction. The media think tanks that have emerged in recent years were almost all born under the prosperous conditions of new media and Internet media. Therefore, media think tanks have attached great importance to the application of new media from their inception, and interactivity and responsiveness constitute key characteristics of new media. Compared with traditional media limited by technology to unilateral voices, and traditional think tanks that may take a year or more to publish findings, media think tanks can skillfully employ new media tools to not only voice opinions promptly but also respond rapidly through mobile Internet platforms—a characteristic highly compatible with social governance.

3.3. Media Think Tanks Can Appropriately Avoid Potential Inefficiency in Social Governance

The potential inefficiency caused by listening to multiple voices represents one of the dilemmas of social governance. Compared with other organizations participating in social governance, media think tanks better balance credibility and communication reach and effectiveness. When embedded in social governance, media think tanks can to some extent avoid the inefficiency that organizations or institutions may encounter when adopting social governance approaches. On one hand, compared with

traditional media products whose credibility has been declining, media think tanks' intellectual products, having undergone foundational research, data analysis, and in-depth content examination, are more persuasive to the public, particularly the middle-class "audience" group. On the other hand, compared with traditional Chinese think tanks represented by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which have broad dissemination within professional and academic circles but weak reach to the general public, media think tanks' media genes make them attach great importance to communicating their voices to the public, striving to be accessible in agenda-setting, discourse systems, and visual presentation, enabling think tank voices to spread faster and more effectively.

Media think tanks should not merely serve as government think tanks but as government' s capable assistants that share concerns and reduce pressure, blazing trails for good social governance and becoming think tanks that drive society forward. Media think tanks can employ "Internet Plus" innovative thinking and big data analysis technology to track public opinion in real time, diagnose social problems by analyzing social mentality, provide early warnings for social risks, and offer recommendations for government decision-making. They face the public and society, prioritizing public enlightenment and driving social governance. If such think tanks can voice opinions at scale, continuously and professionally, their power to drive society forward should not be underestimated.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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