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Postprint: Implementation Challenges and Quality Improvement Pathways for Think Tank Research Outputs

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tanks serve as the “brain” of the nation and the “strategic advisory corps” assisting government decision-making, playing a crucial role in national long-term development. During the deep-water phase of social reform, the decision-making contexts confronted by the government are increasingly complex and volatile, imposing new demands on think tank research. Consequently, it is imperative to guide the continuous improvement of think tank research output quality.

[Method/Process] This paper primarily employs literature research and empirical research methods to articulate the evolving government decision-making contexts and the corresponding demands on think tank research, expounding that to satisfy these demands, think tank research must seize the opportune moment, transform its identity, and transition its style. In reality, the contradictions between ad-hoc decision-making and think tank lag, between the craving for effective information and the provision of ineffective information, between proper positioning and “trivialization and misalignment,” and between operational decision-making and “armchair strategizing” severely constrain the functional efficacy of think tanks.

[Result/Conclusion] To enhance the quality of think tank research outputs, improvements must be made in: correcting research attitudes and elevating the stature of outputs; maintaining vigilance on topic timeliness and accelerating submission speed; expanding the breadth of coverage and emphasizing intellectual depth; ensuring information credibility and consolidating content precision.

Full Text

Dilemmas of Implementation and Approaches to Quality Improvement in Think Tank Research

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Think tanks serve as the nation's "brain" and "strategic advisory group," playing a crucial role in long-term national development. During the deep-water period of social reform, governments face increasingly complex and volatile decision-making contexts, imposing new demands on think tank research and necessitating continuous quality improvement in think tank outputs.

[Method/Process] This paper employs literature research and empirical research methods to analyze evolving government decision-making contexts and corresponding think tank needs. It argues that to meet these demands, think tank research must grasp timing, transform identity, and transition style. In practice, four major contradictions severely limit think tank functionality: the conflict between timely decision-making and think tank lag, the clash between demand for valid information and supply of invalid information, the tension between proper positioning and "trivialization and misalignment," and the gap between practical decision-making and "armchair strategizing."

[Result/Conclusion] Improving think tank research quality requires elevating multiple dimensions: correcting research attitudes and raising strategic positioning; monitoring topic relevance and accelerating submission speed; broadening research scope and emphasizing intellectual depth; and ensuring information credibility while strengthening content precision.

Keywords: administrative decision-making; think tank research; decision support; improvement pathways

Think tanks, also known as "brain banks" or "idea banks," are interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral comprehensive decision-making consultative organizations composed of experts, scholars, and retired officials. They assist public sector agencies, particularly governments, by providing policy-relevant information to improve public policy quality. As strategic advisors to government, think tanks play a vital role in decision-making consultation, and building new types of think tanks has become a societal priority and emerging trend. In his report

to the 19th Party Congress, President Xi Jinping once again emphasized accelerating the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics. The intrinsic requirement of this endeavor is enhancing think tank quality to maximize their strategic advisory value through high productivity and high quality. Think tank research outputs represent concentrated expressions of scholarly perspectives, and transforming valuable academic research into implementable policies that generate social benefits represents the ultimate purpose of think tank research.

Currently, think tank research receives significant attention and investment from both government and academic circles in China, demonstrating strong development momentum. However, problems persist regarding the quality and effectiveness of think tank outputs. These issues warrant serious consideration and active improvement from scholars and government officials, as their resolution is crucial for enhancing think tank research quality and realizing its benefits.

1. Contemporary Characteristics of Administrative Decision-Making and Think Tank Needs

In modern society, unlike traditional contexts, social networks have become increasingly complex and interconnected, the pace of social activities continuously accelerates, decision-making cycles shorten, and policy update frequency increases. Particularly during periods of social transformation, the “hidden interweaving” across different social domains coexists with “specialized separation,” confronting government decision-making with unprecedented social contexts and imposing more severe decision-making risks. Erroneous decisions not only create cost pressures for government and society but also trigger negative impacts. To effectively manage decision-making risks and ensure scientific decision-making, the entire administrative decision-making process urgently demands participation from think tank “external brains.”

1.1 Need for Intelligence and Information

Information forms the foundation of decision-making, and comprehensive intelligence is the prerequisite for scientific decisions. Every decision undergoes a process of problem identification, understanding, and definition before proceeding toward goal-oriented decision-making and implementation. In identifying decision problems, relying solely on administrative organizations can no longer meet the needs of today’s rapidly developing and changing society. “Think tank institutions possess more sensitive intelligence awareness regarding major events.” More decision problems require think tank personnel to perceive and interpret them through professional lenses. Combining administrative practice with professional think tank cognition facilitates scientific judgment of problem causes, nature definition, impact scope clarification, and target specification. Comprehensive intelligence related to decision problems provides essential support for subsequent decision-making stages.

1.2 Need for Program Design and Selection

In decision-making contexts, uncertainty among influencing factors, varying degrees of impact on public problem development trends, ambiguous consensus on values, and potential conflicts in establishing unified value objectives all affect decision-making quality. To address multiple uncertainties, diverse program design becomes necessary, requiring think tank groups to design different action plans from their respective research perspectives using advanced scientific methods. Meanwhile, diverse programs enable decision-makers to analyze and compare alternatives, selectively applying them according to evolving decision contexts. This stage also requires think tank experts to perform program analysis, identification, comparison, and prediction of positive and negative impacts.

1.3 Need for Decision Modification and Feedback

Decision-making assisted by think tank external brains requires practical testing through implementation. During this process, re-decision-making or program modification may occur due to contextual changes. Such modifications demand think tank intelligence, professional knowledge, research techniques, and methods, as well as policy participation, program demonstration, rational debate, and technical cooperation among different experts. Through “transforming knowledge into wisdom,” think tanks compensate for the limitations of traditional experiential decision-making.

2. New Requirements for Think Tank Research from Decision Support

As vital components of government decision-making consultation systems, think tanks fulfill responsibilities of producing wisdom and assisting decision-making. The complex, unpredictable decision-making contexts of social transformation periods impose new requirements on think tanks.

2.1 Grasping Timing

With rapid technological advancement, complex and changing social environments, and increasingly difficult social reforms, many decision-making contexts emerge unpredictably and unexpectedly. This requires think tank external brains to grasp critical moments for policy advice. When problem, policy, and political streams converge, a “policy window” opens and issues are placed on the agenda. Serving decision-making requires think tank research to seize these critical “policy window” moments when presenting core viewpoints, increasing opportunities for attention and value realization. Particularly for policy advice on emergencies and public crises, timing awareness is essential. “Crisis” may represent either danger or opportunity, and the distinction depends largely on timing beyond advice quality. For instance, high-quality predictive advice on potential social risks enables effective preparedness; specialized responsive thinking on emergent public crises powerfully supports crisis management; and

follow-up advice on resolved social conflicts effectively mitigates residual social energy.

2.2 Transforming Identity

The social responsibility of decision-making service requires think tank groups to transition from professional scholars to external strategic brains. During this identity transformation, scholars develop more profound perspectives, select higher-level topics, and produce realistic, innovative work. Their vision shifts from narrow specialization to comprehensive oversight, academic research becomes more people-oriented, and research outputs connect closely with practical realities, becoming targeted, innovative, and actionable. For example, when submitting research to central leadership, considerations must be global and strategic, focusing on solving people's livelihood issues, breaking outdated patterns, and exploring new development paths. When submitting to local leadership, research should highlight regional characteristics and local features, adopting principles of "learning from all cases" (such as referencing innovative policies from other regions to promote local development) and "comprehensive prevention" (for instance, after a boy fell into a dry well and died in Baoding in November 2016, other regions should intensify safety hazard inspections of local dry wells to ensure public safety).

2.3 Transitioning Style

The identity transition from academic to practitioner necessarily requires style transformation. First, research paradigm shifts are needed. Think tank research must start from real problems and actual needs, grounded in theoretical support, utilizing advanced research methods and technical tools to conduct thorough program design and rigorous demonstration. Therefore, "it is necessary to break the original empirical research paradigm dominated by ideological expression and move toward establishing a large think tank form driven by objective facts." Think tank research writing must break from traditional academic formats, reduce theoretical tracing and analytical demonstration proportions, get straight to the point, and directly address application levels by extracting essential viewpoints and expressing wisdom through highly concise styles.

3. Contradictions Limiting Think Tank Function

3.1 The Contradiction Between Timely Decision-Making and Think Tank Lag

Handling major social issues requires seizing optimal timing. Decisions made at the right moment can effectively resolve problems at low cost and high benefit. However, limited by think tank capacity, policy advice often lags behind problem development, and the lack of forward-looking perspective causes missed opportunities and diminished decision-making effectiveness.

Think tanks serve as “idea factories” for modern social development, producing policy advice through timely “idea production and processing” based on new social situations and dynamics. This requires think tank advice to keep pace with social developments, responding immediately when new situations emerge or unexpected events surface. Well-timed think tank advice captures decision-maker attention and gains opportunities for value realization. Speed lag directly impacts value. For example, as World AIDS Day (December 1) approaches, experts in relevant fields who promptly submit evidence-based policy advice increase the likelihood of effective disease prevention and risk management.

3.2 The Contradiction Between Demand for Valid Information and Supply of Invalid Information

Decision support’s primary need from think tanks is valid information, yet current think tank advice suffers from invalid information provision. This contradiction hinders alignment between information supply and decision-making needs.

Realism and innovation constitute the primary principle of think tank advice. Invalid information manifests primarily in questionable authenticity, inappropriate content distribution, and insufficient depth differentiation. Problem identification is a critical stage in decision-making, yet without in-depth social investigation, authentic data, continuous event tracking, and rational academic analysis, think tank intelligence cannot guarantee objectivity and authenticity, severely diminishing decision support functions. Think tank advice requires extensive first-hand materials that must be organized and summarized to explore underlying patterns and mechanisms. Inadequate data analysis, insufficient pattern exploration, and poor content structuring affect information clarity and persuasiveness. Professional perspective analysis of real problems is the think tank research paradigm, and “specialization” is undoubtedly an advantage. However, failure to balance depth with accessibility can become a disadvantage. Many researchers approach problems from narrow professional perspectives with strong academic coloring, making relevant information increasingly incomprehensible, underlying mechanisms more obscure, and practical solutions less confident. These factors render advice ineffective for decision support.

3.3 The Contradiction Between Proper Positioning and “Trivialization and Misalignment”

Every public policy affects the entire population. More scientific policies expand public benefits and generate substantial welfare, while unscientific policies cause significant harm. The social function of decision assistance requires think tank advice to adopt a global perspective and people-oriented stance. However, think tank groups, rooted in citizen and scholar identities, often cannot detach from their original positions, bringing value biases or academic “ought-to-be” habits into policy advice, or even being “captured” by interest groups, resulting in “misalignment” and “trivialization.”

Positioning represents the cognitive starting point for problem identification, analysis, and resolution, encompassing both height and angle. Positioning height refers to whether think tank advice considers the overall situation, long-term interests, and sustainable development to produce high-strategy “products.” Positioning angle refers to whether advice can transcend identity-based value biases and professional boundaries, moving from academic “ought-to-be” to practical “as-is” to genuinely focus on people’s livelihoods. The “trivialization” and “misalignment” of think tank positioning contradicts the public nature of policy decision-making and undermines think tank functions.

3.4 The Contradiction Between Practical Decision-Making and “Armchair Strategizing”

Adoption of think tank outputs in public policy processes represents the fundamental pathway for research to “bloom on the ground.” For think tank outputs to achieve practical impact, they must meet the requirements of serving actual decision-making, avoiding detachment from reality and bookishness. Currently, this contradiction results in insufficient practical decision-making support and numerous theoretical achievements with unsatisfactory real-world utility.

Scholars long focused on academic research, particularly theoretical studies, may exhibit “empty talk” characteristics in their understanding, judgment, and advice on specific real problems, proposing measures with weak practicality that are difficult to implement or even impossible to execute. Think tank research differs from academic research—it is rooted in social problems and follows actual needs, yet takes academic research as its soul and foundation to provide basis and guidance for both current and long-term strategic decision-making. Based on existing academic theories tightly integrated with social needs, think tank advice should, at a basic level, propose actionable solutions for specific problems with immediate visible effects, and at an advanced level, provide theoretical guidance for profound and enduring strategic issues. Both levels must avoid the malady of “armchair strategizing,” grounding advice in reality and application effectiveness to provide wisdom and theoretical support for practical decision-making.

4. Pathways to Improve Think Tank Research Quality

As modernization advances and social reforms comprehensively deepen, accumulating uncertainties strengthen governments’ reliance on think tank research at all levels and raise quality requirements. However, contradictions between Chinese think tank research and decision-making services remain prominent, with research outputs failing to meet decision support needs or fulfill decision assistance functions. Based on the above analysis, we explore pathways to improve think tank research quality.

4.1 Correcting Research Attitudes and Elevating Strategic Positioning

Think tank research is pragmatic research—policy-oriented research concerning people’s actual interests based on social governance needs. Throughout history and across nations, from “retainers,” “strategists,” and “private advisors” to “staff officers” and “counselors,” intellectuals have consciously shouldered the historical mission of political participation, decision service, and public welfare creation. Whether think tank researchers possess the original aspiration of caring for the nation and people and adopt positioning oriented toward public interests and the overall situation determines research quality and utility nature.

Think tank research should be based on scholarly mission, representing an “upgraded version” of academic research that applies theory to practice to generate real impact. As think tank researchers, one must maintain national sentiment, regard advising government decision-making as a personal mission, combine personal interests with knowledge and research outcomes to provide decision support for solving real problems. In terms of positioning, think tank research must stand on overall considerations and emerge from the people. Analysis of social problems must adopt a global perspective rather than limited vision, with research outputs emphasizing long-term interests and sustainable development to produce high-quality, high-level results.

4.2 Monitoring Topic Relevance and Accelerating Submission Speed

Research topic selection determines think tank survival—it is both the “lifeblood” of think tank products and a true reflection of comprehensive institutional strength. Regarding topic relevance, think tank research must cultivate three awareness levels: sensitive information awareness, problem awareness, and learning awareness. Researchers must demonstrate sensitivity to hot issues, promptly detecting problem sources. Based on sensitive information, they should define research problems, conduct in-depth grassroots investigation to trace problems and causes, clarify problem nature and causal relationships, and draw lessons from international and domestic experiences to strengthen knowledge learning, innovation, and transformation. These three awareness levels build sequentially and progressively. For instance, after the “8·12” Tianjin Port explosion, think tanks could use this as an information sensitivity source to closely monitor port safety, investigate safety conditions at other Tianjin ports and coastal ports nationwide, use the Tianjin explosion as a lesson for safety hazard inspection, and propose targeted port safety recommendations adapted to different cities and port characteristics. Similarly, after Shenzhen launched its “Shared Shenzhen” initiative, Tianjin could analyze its own shared development situation, draw on Shenzhen’s experience, and create a “Shared Tianjin” program.

Regarding speed, think tank research must perceive quickly, react quickly, and deliver quickly. Rapid situation reporting and smooth submission channels are crucial for improving research quality. This requires: first, researchers must

possess high professional sensitivity, discern new development trends, predict future events based on evidence, and anticipate regular reporting needs; second, when sudden social events occur, researchers must combine theoretical perspectives with practical realities to immediately provide stable, decision-referential solutions, fulfilling the “strategist” role; third, establishing interaction mechanisms among think tank groups and communication mechanisms between think tanks and decision-making institutions enables “interaction, competition, and exchange among various think tank perspectives,” helping identify positive and negative impacts of different proposals and facilitating objective evaluation to select optimal solutions maximizing social welfare.

4.3 Broadening Research Scope and Emphasizing Intellectual Depth

Regarding scope, think tank research must break through narrow professional vision and promote collaboration and exchange among scholars from different fields with different viewpoints. Social problem complexity requires multi-force participation, multi-domain wisdom support, and multi-disciplinary innovation. Interdisciplinary integration has become a new trend—on one hand, experts from various fields expressing different views through dialogue, confrontation, and debate helps clarify problems, define objectives, and make optimal choices; on the other hand, different disciplines have respective strengths, and mutual learning among think tanks can powerfully reinforce advantages and compensate for weaknesses.

Regarding depth, think tank research must accumulate profound, solid foundational skills. Superficial, shallow results cannot withstand scrutiny. Decision advice to policymakers must be built upon in-depth practical investigation and deep academic accumulation. Practice yields genuine knowledge, and “practice is undoubtedly an organic component of the discourse system construction in Xi Jinping’s thought on new-type think tank construction with Chinese characteristics.” Deep theoretical guidance and academic reflection provide conditions for extracting wisdom from practice.

4.4 Ensuring Information Credibility and Strengthening Content Precision

The ancient adage “plan before acting” warns of the importance of strategy before action to avoid mistakes or failures from blind, rash moves. Strategy premises valuable intelligence. Information authenticity and objectivity constitute the foundation of think tank research and the basic criterion for judging output value. Obtaining authentic, objective intelligence requires researchers to go deep into reality and grassroots levels, examining social problems comprehensively from “branches and leaves” to “stems and roots.” It also requires overcoming habitual value tendencies and identity labels, resisting utilitarian temptations and fame-seeking pressures, and approaching social problems with neutral attitudes.

Regarding precision, think tank research must strengthen content accuracy. First, intelligence precision. The internet-driven information wave suffers from information overload, pollution, and suppression. Intelligence accuracy directly affects research output precision. Therefore, during foundational investigation, social problems must be accurately defined, key information grasped, and screening criteria established to promptly discard irrelevant, invalid, or valueless information that might interfere with research. Second, viewpoint precision. When expressing research results, levels must be distinguished, logic emphasized, and main viewpoints articulated through concise, accurate wording and sentence structures to shorten decision service cycles. Third, audience precision. When presenting think tank outputs, selective presentation is necessary, clarifying responsibility attribution for social problems and departmental affiliation of decision-makers, understanding submission channels and platforms to ensure “targeted” delivery of research results.

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

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