

# Developing Innovative Media Think Tanks to Serve the New Internet Economy: Postprint of a Three-Person Roundtable Forum on Innovative Media Think Tanks

**Authors:** Diao Yigang

**Date:** 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

## Abstract

Take the “Belt and Road” initiative as an example. During its three-plus years of development, social and civilian think tanks have played indispensable roles. The initiative’s proposal and implementation coincided almost precisely with the central leadership’s emphasis on think tank construction. In autumn 2013, the “Belt and Road” initiative was launched. Earlier that same year, in April, General Secretary Xi Jinping issued important instructions on building think tanks with Chinese characteri...

## Full Text

### Roundtable Discussion: Media Think Tanks and Internet New Economy

#### Preamble

The Central Deepening Reform Group’s 32nd meeting recently reviewed and adopted the “Opinions on the Healthy Development of Social Think Tanks,” drawing renewed attention to think tank operations. Think tank services have become not only a notable innovative business but also a crucial direction for Chinese media institutions’ strategic transformation and diversified operations. Since 2016, media organizations such as Cover Think Tank have pioneered this field by applying internet thinking to develop multiple business segments, achieving considerable popularity and performance. On the occasion of this policy initiative, *China Media Technology* magazine interviewed two authoritative experts: Professor Zhao Lei from the International Strategy Research Institute of the Central Party School and Director of the International Relations and Na-

tional Reunification Research Office, and Zhou Kaili, Vice President of Cover Media and Secretary-General of Cover Think Tank.

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## I. Policy Background and Think Tank Functions

**China Media Technology:** Professor Zhao, could you interpret this policy for us? What is the background and purpose of the Central Deepening Reform Group’s push to develop social and civilian think tanks?

**Zhao Lei:** Think tanks serve as important drivers and catalysts of social progress, ensuring scientific decision-making through the principle of “never deciding lightly without considering different opinions.” However, “different opinions” should not constitute grandstanding or unfounded criticisms, but rather genuine contributions to scientific policy-making and continuous improvement. In practice, think tanks compensate for the shortcomings of leading cadres, who tend to excel in execution but lack strategic and innovative thinking. The Central Deepening Reform Group’s promotion of social and civilian think tanks aims to make decision-making more grounded and responsive to real-world conditions.

Take the “Belt and Road” initiative as an example. During its three-plus years of development, social and civilian think tanks have played indispensable roles. The initiative’s proposal and implementation coincided almost precisely with the central leadership’s emphasis on think tank construction. In autumn 2013, the “Belt and Road” initiative was launched. Earlier that same year, in April, General Secretary Xi Jinping issued important instructions on building think tanks with Chinese characteristics. By November 2013, the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reform” explicitly proposed strengthening the construction of new-type think tanks with Chinese characteristics and establishing a sound decision-making consultation system—marking the first appearance of the term “think tank” in an official CPC Central Committee document. In January 2015, the milestone “Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of New-Type Think Tanks with Chinese Characteristics” was formally released. During this period, both the “Belt and Road” initiative and think tank construction entered a period of vibrant growth.

In essence, China’s peaceful development must effectively concentrate wisdom from all quarters and mobilize the broadest possible forces. Through specialized think tank construction, we can promote scientific and democratic decision-making, amplify China’s voice, demonstrate Chinese wisdom, build international consensus, and address global development bottlenecks.

**China Media Technology:** What conditions, in your view, are conducive to establishing and developing think tank operations? Compared to think tanks from other institutional backgrounds, what are the distinctive characteristics

and advantages of media think tanks?

**Zhao Lei:** Currently, numerous universities, enterprises, government agencies, and media organizations have established specialized research institutions, yet the problem of “many but not strong, repositories without wisdom” remains pronounced. The key conditions for developing think tank operations lie not in hardware but in software—specifically, three fundamental functional orientations: building academic consensus, shaping public understanding, and improving relevant policies. When these three functions are not fully realized, think tanks’ effectiveness is severely diminished. Some think tanks overemphasize their commercial attributes, pursuing profit and publicity, which undermines sustainability. Long-term social think tank development requires an “entry threshold” rather than “barbaric growth.” Given limited human time and energy, organizations cannot afford to strike out in all directions—a flurry of random punches merely scratches the surface. Therefore, think tank construction must be focused, professional, and concentrated, avoiding waste of resources outside the main channel.

Media think tanks’ unique value lies in “interconnectivity.” Their construction must achieve not only wisdom docking but also public opinion docking. Media think tanks attract considerable attention precisely because they bridge wisdom and public discourse. In practice, they are agile, quickly identifying emerging issues; active, mobilizing advantageous resources from diverse parties; and powerful in communication, effectively narrating China’s social progress story while maximizing research dissemination and social consensus-building.

**China Media Technology:** Compared with their foreign counterparts, what stage of development is China’s think tank industry in, and what should be its future direction?

**Zhao Lei:** China’s think tank development remains in its infancy but possesses strong momentum. With substantial demand and numerous challenges to address, think tank construction must identify critical breakthrough points and key priorities, following the framework of “self-cultivation, team-building, governance, and global vision.”

“Self-cultivation” involves researching major issues, enhancing research capabilities, and developing core competencies. “Team-building” requires forming genuine academic communities rather than isolated individual efforts. “Governance” means providing sound advice, effective solutions, and quality consultation. “Global vision” entails cultivating strategic awareness, broadening international perspectives, participating in global governance, and enhancing Chinese think tanks’ institutional discourse power.

## II. Cover Think Tank: A Case Study

**China Media Technology:** Ms. Zhou, as a newly established innovative think tank, Cover Think Tank has gained considerable popularity. What achievements has it made since its founding?

**Zhou Kaili:** Thank you for the invitation. As an innovative think tank under Cover Media, Cover Think Tank is guided by the vision of “creating small but beautiful intellectual products,” dedicated to providing high-level intellectual support for the most cutting-edge and complex internet new economy. It has become not only a concentrated expression of Cover Media’s innovation capacity, influence, and policy advisory capability but also a platform that has assembled numerous expert committee members and partners from internet academia and industry.

Since its establishment just over six months ago, Cover Think Tank has released several influential reports in the internet new economy domain, including the *China Mobile Travel Safety Report*, *Online Car-Hailing Regulatory Model Innovation Report*, and *China Personal Information Security and Privacy Protection Report*. These have garnered attention and acclaim from senior officials, industry peers, and the broader public, contributing positively to advancing innovative economic policies.

By the end of 2016, in addition to frequently publishing in major core and industry journals, Cover Think Tank achieved significant annual milestones: selection among the 11 media think tanks in the CTTI (China Think Tank Index) and recognition as one of the eight excellent think tanks for the “Belt and Road” initiative in the internet era.

**China Media Technology:** What are Cover Think Tank’s main characteristics, and what business segments does it comprise?

**Zhou Kaili:** Within Cover Media’s overall architecture, Cover Think Tank serves as an important component of the pan-content ecological platform. From an operator’s perspective, its main characteristic is being “small but beautiful,” focusing intently on the innovative economy and internet trends. Since its founding, we have launched a product matrix built on internet thinking, encompassing research reports, themed forums, “Cover Thinking Sharing+” salons, think tank interviews, and Cover Lecture Halls. This matrix aims to provide brand communication services for Cover Think Tank and Cover Media through internet-based dissemination, achieving commercial value via customized enterprise services while integrating and activating internet thinking to explore strategic expansion models.

**China Media Technology:** Cover Think Tank proposes to serve the “internet new economy,” with internet thinking as its core competitiveness. How does it apply internet thinking to serve the industry?

**Zhou Kaili:** This is indeed a central question we have been exploring: how

can an innovative think tank integrate well with internet thinking to generate synergistic effects? I believe the answer lies in three main aspects.

First, the organizational and operational models of innovative think tanks must be built on internet thinking. As a niche high-end industry, innovative think tanks typically pursue a “small but beautiful” path, organizing dispersed intellectual resources through resource-sharing platforms to provide policy advice and industry consulting for governments or third-party enterprises. In this context, channel advantages become crucial. Beyond offline channels, think tanks must leverage internet-based channels such as apps, WeChat official accounts, Weibo, and other strategic online media partnerships. Only by maximizing internet-based organizational models and operational methods can innovative think tanks achieve leverage—moving heavy weights with small forces.

Second, innovative think tanks should develop a series of products adapted to the internet era. As mentioned earlier, we have formed a product matrix synergistically aggregated from five major components: the high-level political, business, and academic expert circles gathered through “Cover Thinking Sharing+” salons and Cover forums; the scientific research output matrix comprising think tank interviews and internet new economy research reports; and the public welfare science popularization activities represented by Cover Lecture Halls, which have achieved excellent social benefits. This product matrix does not operate in isolation but, through internet “connectivity,” combines online and offline channels to deeply excavate product characteristics and maximize synergistic effects.

Most importantly, innovative think tanks must have sufficient confidence to embrace new ideas and courage, continuously updating knowledge in the evolving internet landscape to see further ahead. “Audience needs above all” represents the true essence of internetization. For media think tanks as representatives of innovative think tanks, their parent media companies must fundamentally have the courage to use advanced internet awareness for self-transformation. The combination of media and think tank—two relatively traditional models—requires deconstruction, subversion, and innovation through internet awareness. With limited precedents to draw upon, this innovation process demands extensive self-exploration, testing decision-makers’ courage and perseverance in areas such as market demand mining, functional block integration, personnel and production organization, and even product design.

Third, innovative think tanks require a sound organizational structure with professional talents in operations, fundraising, and research. While academic leaders and experts are important, top experts have limited capacity and energy. With an open, shared intellectual mindset, most experts hold concurrent positions across multiple think tanks, creating research overlap. Consequently, as mentioned earlier, innovative think tanks predominantly establish resource-sharing platforms, making the operations team critically important. In a media think tank, experts function as the brain, the operations team as the heart, and the media’s inherent communicative power as the circulatory system. Think

tank operators must be both highly specialized intellectuals and well-trained in media and business thinking.

**China Media Technology:** What is Cover Think Tank's future development vision?

**Zhou Kaili:** It is undeniable that traditional media faces unavoidable decline, making transformation and innovation urgent priorities. While revolutionizing productivity through new technologies, the media industry is also seeking innovation in production relations, particularly in product development and promotion. Media think tanks represent experimental bases for the media industry's self-distinction and breakthrough.

After a year of arduous efforts, Cover Think Tank has achieved notable accomplishments and been recognized as a classic example of media innovation and transformation. Encouraged by this recognition, we will continue our efforts. Based on strategic positioning, Cover Think Tank will implement grounded, refined methodologies, continue providing professional services such as policy analysis and industry research for local governments and enterprises through flexible mechanisms and market-oriented operations, catalyze the existing product matrix to achieve greater impact, and transform it into intellectual power to create small but beautiful intellectual products.

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### III. Development Path for Media Think Tanks

**China Media Technology:** Professor Zhao, what conditions should media institutions possess to establish and develop think tank operations? For institutions like Cover Think Tank, what development path best leverages their distinctive characteristics and sustainable core competitiveness?

**Zhao Lei:** For institutions like Cover Think Tank to develop sustainable core competitiveness, they must have channels, experts, and brand achievements. The success of China's think tank enterprise ultimately depends on three criteria: continuously providing intellectual support for solving major practical and strategic problems; exerting significant influence on policy improvement through representative research achievements; and cultivating experts and scholars with substantial social or even international influence.

**China Media Technology:** Think tank development has become a central government priority and an important reform measure, inspiring confidence across the sector. Please describe your vision for the future development blueprint of the think tank industry (or media think tanks).

**Zhao Lei:** Think tanks should be positioned as a cause rather than an industry, requiring numerous experts actively engaged in research. Looking ahead, think tank work should be direct and straightforward, not circuitous—precise, powerful, and firmly grasping the pulse of China's social progress.

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

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