Think Tanks:
The Quest to Define and to Rank Them

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On 22 January 2014 the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania releases its latest "Global Go To Think Tanks Report." This series of annual reports, launched in 2007, has been subject to substantial criticism from scholars working in or on think tanks.

Analysis

Over the past decade, various organizations and publications have started to rank think tanks, mostly at the national level. Top-ranked think tanks like to announce their standings in promotional material and on their websites. While such ranking indexes help to draw attention to the growing think tank scenes across the globe and are thus to be welcomed, the existing rankings are fraught with problems; conceptual and methodological difficulties in particular are abound. Current attempts to rank think tanks therefore need to be approached with caution.

- There is no agreement on what essentially defines a think tank. Many definitions have been offered, but not one is entirely satisfactory. Given the prevailing ambiguity and also vagueness of think tank conceptualizations, we often do not really know which organizations should be considered thinks tanks and which ones should not.

- The national contexts in which think tanks operate differ and so do the ways in which they perform their various activities and roles in pursuing their manifold missions. Think tank rankings at the regional or global levels are thus always dubious.

- Output, public outreach or other performance-based criteria are usually offered to buttress think tank rankings, but these criteria are often not weighed or properly operationalized.

- It is especially difficult to assess think tanks' policy-oriented influence. Various rankings try to measure some of the output produced by think tanks – output that can be understood as "intermediary products." Counting such products can help to get a better idea of think tanks' visibility, but not of their actual impact on public policy.

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Defining Think Tanks: Trying to Nail Jelly to a Wall?

The term "think tank" has many connotations, which has resulted in conceptual ambiguity. Takahiro Suzuki (2006), the Japanese think tank veteran and scholar, parsimoniously defines a "think tank" as an "organization that conducts public policy research." Diane Stone (2001), a prominent expert on think tanks, defines them as "relatively autonomous organizations engaged in the research and analysis of contemporary issues independently of government, political parties, and pressure groups." In a major political science encyclopedia, Stella Ladi (2011) describes think tanks as "organizations that are distinct from governments and whose objective is to provide advice on a diverse range of policy issues through the use of specialized knowledge and the activation of networks." Andrew Rich (2004) defines "think tanks" from a US perspective as "independent, non-interest-based, non-profit organizations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process." Given that the aforementioned are all scholars, we can assume that they are conscious of their particular definitional choices and the conceptual commitments they entail. The point is that a particular definition will broaden or narrow the scope for an organization to qualify as think tank. For example, a think tank affiliated with a political party might well qualify as a think tank under the definitions given by Suzuki and Ladi, but would not do so under the definitions given by Stone and Rich.

More broadly, we can note that there is an inverse relationship between the number of attributes deemed essential for defining the object of interest and the number of objects that are covered by the definition. For instance, the more attributes mentioned in a given definition of "think tanks," the fewer think tanks that will actually be covered by that definition. It should also be acknowledged that some attributes used to define the object in question are not as self-evident as they may seem. With respect to think tanks, an attribute such as "independent" can mean different things. It may refer to financial independence, institutional independence, or even intellectual independence. In the first case, we would need to investigate funding patterns to determine whether a given think tank qualifies as independent. In

the second case, we might look at existing organizational links (e.g., affiliations). In the third case, the ideas or ideologies underlying the policy advice offered by think tanks would come into play. Moreover, assessments of "independence" can also differ depending on the national context. While a US-based observer might, for example, consider a state-funded think tank as one that is not independent, an observer based in Western Europe might see state funding as something that is – or at least can be – absolutely in line with independence. In sum, definitions of "think tanks" can suffer not only from problems of conceptual ambiguity but also of conceptual vagueness.

Thus, the challenge is to offer definitions that are as concise as possible but still manage to capture the essential attributes of think tanks. Such definitions should also be precise enough to reliably demarcate those organizations covered by the definition from those that are not. For the purpose of a cross-country analysis of think tanks, I would define "think tanks" as organizations whose main mission is to inform or influence public policies (and in some cases also corporate affairs) on the basis of research and analysis provided by in-house and affiliated staff. Such a definition implicitly acknowledges that think tanks come in various stripes and colors. Reflecting the particular contexts they are operating in ("exogenous factors") and the specifics of the particular organizations ("endogenous factors"), think tanks:

- differ in size;
- operate on a stand-alone basis or are linked to government ministries, foundations, universities, political parties, etc.;
- employ, in varying proportions, staff with different kinds of primary expertise (researchers, PR specialists, former government officials, etc.);
- specialize on given topics or use a broader but still delimited focus;
- receive different types of financing, including public funding, private-sector donations, membership fees, and contract funding for specific projects;
- aim to inform or influence public policy by engaging in different types of activities (e.g., such as publishing policy papers and briefs; organizing and participating in policy-relevant forums and networks; providing assessments, testimonials and recommendations in various kinds of meetings with parliamentary and executive

policy makers; appearing in the media; and supplying personnel through short-term secondments or on a more long-term basis, for example, after changes in government).

Supply and demand factors influence the institutional development, the organizational characteristics, and the modi operandi of think tanks in national settings. Such factors include political regime type, the institutional particularities of political systems, political traditions, regulative conditions, the availability of (different kinds of) funding, labor market specifics and established career options, civil society dynamics, and so on (see Stone 2004, 2005). Notably, however, such factors do not work in the same universal way, as variation exists across the globe and even within world regions. To understand why and how think tanks operate the way they do, we can either map the landscapes of national or issue-specific think tanks or zoom in on individual think tanks.[1] The resulting topologies and case studies can benefit from Tom Medvetz's advice to conceptualize think tanks as hybrid organizations operating in between the fields of academic knowledge production, politics, business, and media. While think tanks need to be close to and tap into these fields (which supply them with authority, funding, and access to opinion and decision makers), they also need to keep a certain distance in order to maintain their specific identity as think tanks. Operating as a think tank thus requires a careful balancing act (Medvetz 2008, 2012), which will play out differently across space and time.

The discussion so far should have made clear how difficult it is to adequately define and, in broader terms, conceptualize think tanks – even if the related discussions and analyses are confined to a particular national setting. Things become even more complicated if the aim is to conduct cross-country examinations. This is, however, exactly what one of the most well-known global ranking indexes of think tanks sets out to achieve. In the following section, some of the conceptual and methodological problems associated with the Global Go To Think Tanks (GGTTT) rankings – conducted and published annually since 2007 by the Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania – will be discussed.

Ranking Think Tanks across the Globe: How it is Done and Why it Fails to Deliver

Rankings are essentially an instrument for ordering outcomes or at least assessments thereof. While rankings are usually fairly brief, they can be the subject of endless discussion. They can be based on more or less "hard" indicators or on more subjective assessments. In the social sciences as well as in public discourse, we tend to focus more on rankings that are based on hard indicators.[2] The GGTTT index represents an effort to "generate a ranking of the world's leading think tanks" (McGann 2013, 4). This index has certainly helped to put the spotlight on organizations that are in the business of providing research-based policy advice. James McGann and his associates put the current number of think tanks operating in 182 countries across the globe at 6,603. While this count is probably too high,[3] most scholars would agree that the countries with the most think tanks are (perhaps even in this order) the United States, China, the United Kingdom, India, and Germany (ibid., 34). As most of the existing literature on think tanks deals with organizations situated in the United States, any efforts to overcome this spatial bias are certain to be welcomed.

It is important, however, not to take the results of this particular ranking exercise at face value. The organizers of the GGTTT index are upfront about some of the biases of their rankings, in-

1 Recent examples include the insightful studies by Boucher (2004) and, Missiroli and Ioannides (2012) on European think tanks with a focus on EU policy issues, by Thunert (2008) on the German think tank scene, and the in-depth study by Wiarda (2010) of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in the US.

2 Which is not to say that subjectively based rankings are without interest – just think of national rankings of most popular/unpopular politicians.

3 While a lengthy (and since 2007 certainly improved) definition of "think tanks" is provided in the GGTTT reports, the number of think tanks counted overall and at the country level beckons the question of how far the GGTTT organizers take their own definition into consideration when they try to identify think tanks across the globe. Entries in the 2012 rankings include, for example, Amnesty International, Transparency International, and Human Rights Watch (three global advocacy groups), the World Economic Forum (an international organization with a corporate membership), the "Max Planck Institute" (the Max Planck Society is probably meant here, which is, however, just an umbrella organization for the 80 plus German Max Planck Institutes – all of which are mainly devoted to conducting basic research), the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Open Society Institute (two foundations). Also, are we really to believe that in 2012 there were 137 "think tanks" in Argentinia, 86 in South Africa, 54 in Romania, 53 in Kenya, 51 in Bolivia and 28 in the Dominican Republic?

cluding the possible underrepresentation of think tanks in world regions such as Africa and Asia. In the most recent ranking processes, they have tried to address this problem by "democratizing" the nomination process – that is, by allowing "peers" from all 6,603 "think tanks" as well as some 3,500 journalists, "public and private donors," and selected policy makers to nominate up to 25 organizations in one or more of the existing 38 ranking categories (self-nominations are not allowed). In round two, the same people can rank the organizations that receive five or more nominations in round one. It is up to the participants how many think tanks they want to rank in any of the existing categories (self-ranking is not allowed). The resulting lists are then vetted by an unknown number of "functional and regional experts" to check for "any errors, translations typos or serious omissions." In round three, the same group of experts has a chance to review the final rankings and to suggest "any warranted" changes to the organizers, who then prepare the final rankings for publication. The result of this process is that early every year, we come to learn which are the "top think tanks" in the world, by world region, "area of research," or some other criteria. Or do we really?

These rankings, however, unfortunately suffer from some serious problems. When ranking think tanks, it is necessary to undertake this task on the basis of clear-cut criteria. If a think thank is ranked top (or higher or lower than another organization) in category A or B, for example, we should know why. Participants in the GGTTT index ranking process are presented with a lengthy (but, according to the organizers, not exclusive) list of 18 broad criteria, which includes "access to elites in the area of policymaking, media and academia," the "number of recommendations to policymakers," "staff serving advisory roles to policymakers," "awards given to scholars," and "success in challenging the traditional wisdom of policymakers and in generating innovative policy ideas and programs." While many of the criteria listed are arguably useful for assessing the performance of think tanks, participants receive little guidance on how to operationalize or weigh these criteria. Rather, they are asked to reflect on the differences between numerous "resource indicators," "utilization indicators," "output indicators," and "impact indicators," which are supposed to be linked to some of the criteria previously mentioned.

The question here is how realistic is it that ranking participants – be they ordinary nominees or "panel experts" – will or are able to make use of the multitude of criteria and indicators? The participants are presumably busy people who cannot be expected to employ large teams of methods-savvy research assistants to prepare their assessments. In all likelihood, the vast majority of participants will in some way take shortcuts in conducting their evaluations, perhaps by basing them on personal contacts with think tanks or by focusing on well-known, long-standing think tanks. Clearly, such assessments would be subjective, and visibility is not the same thing as success in terms of helping to turn ideas into policy. So while the rankings give the impression of being based on some rigorous application of carefully chosen criteria and indicators, in reality they are not. It is basically about perception, not analysis (Mendizabal 2011). Of course, as the methodological foundations of the ranking process are flawed, so are its results.

In sum – as also pointed out by Enrique Mendizabal (2011), Goran Buldioski (2011), and others – the GGTTT rankings suffer from a number of serious problems, most of which cannot be remedied. Furthermore, what value is there in globally – or regionally for that matter[4] – ranking think tanks (i.e., organizations operating differently in vastly divergent national and other contexts)? While top-ranked think tanks are happy to make use of their strong standings (not least when seeking funding), rankings such as these could contribute to a situation wherein think tanks start to invest more in public relations activities than in their core policy research (Mendizabal 2011). Might we, however, arrive at more useful rankings if we just focused on one particularly important aspect of think tanks – namely, their policy influence on specific national or other contexts? I address this question in the following section.

Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks: Output-Based Metrics and Their Limits

The question of whether think tanks are influential – and, if so, how much – has often been

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4 As Mendizabal (2012) notes, "[c]omparing across an entire continent offers no valuable insights unless a common playing field of characteristics is used."

raised.[5] Answers, if ventured at all, differ. Responses depend to a significant degree on the theoretical dispositions and inclinations of those posing the question. Adherents of "power elite theory" might be inclined to argue that think tanks can and do exert influence because they are part of the ruling elite. Neo-Marxists might believe in a Gramscian vein that think tanks matter because they contribute to forming and upholding hegemonic discourses. Pluralists might consider think tanks to be important suppliers in the "market place" for policy ideas. Of course, think tanks themselves can also be prone to overstating their influence in the policy process ("credit claiming"), which is motivated by a need to convince funders of their value (Stone 2004). As Murray Weidenbaum (2010) notes, "there is an inevitable amount of puffery in the claims of individual think tanks." Most observers would, however, subscribe to Weidenbaum's assessment that the influence of think tanks "varies by organization, issue, and time period." Yet, this raises the question of what exactly constitutes "influence." One answer has been provided by Andrew Rich (2004, 153),[6] who defines influence in this context as "success by experts in making their work known among a set of policy makers so that it informs their thinking on or public articulation of policy relevant information." "Periods of critical transition" (Stone 2004) in particular, such as postelection changes of government or periods in which hitherto prevailing paradigms are challenged by real-world events and/or by new(ly dominant) government actors, can provide windows of opportunity for think tanks seeking to influence policy processes.

Tracking down the actual influence of think tanks in policy processes – be it during the agenda-setting stage or policy deliberations – is complicated in practice. It is a rare occurrence that high-ranking policy makers officially acknowledge the input of think tanks in such processes. While discourse analysis can help to better understand policy-making processes, it usually cannot account for the dynamics involved. Determining the possible influence of think tanks in policy processes thus also requires case-specific process tracing. Such process tracing, however, faces difficulties due to methodological and other reasons. For example, it can take years (even decades) before an initial idea is eventually translated – if at all – into a concrete piece of legislation or government action. Moreover, the success of such translation processes usually has many guardians – or at least actors claiming guardianship – while failure (i.e., no action taken) is usually a stray and is certainly not discussed much (see also Weidenbaum 2010). This is linked to the general problem of attribution: "Policy input comes from many places. Public or governmental policy development is a complex and iterative process in which policy ideas are researched, analysed, discussed and refined – often through broad consultations with many stakeholders. When a policy is finally adopted, it may wear the fingerprints of many hands" (Kuntz 2013). Process tracing is in any case a time-consuming activity. It requires the available evidence being painstakingly pieced together in order to arrive at plausible explanations for some outcome. However, while the scholar(s) concerned might try to refute alternative explanations of the outcome, such accounts can never fully be ruled out.

It is perhaps not surprising then that efforts to capture and assess the influence of think tanks usually rely more on quantitative indicators and more easily available data. For example, "input" into policy processes can be measured by counting the number of policy papers and briefs issued by individual think tanks, as well as oral presentations and testimonials provided by think tank staff to members of the legislature and the executive. It is also possible to count policy-oriented events organized and attended by think tanks and their staff, media interventions by the latter,[7] instances of think tank staff getting seconded to government agencies, and so forth (Kuntz 2013). In a related vein, Julia Clark and David Roodman (2013) have recently sought to measure the public outreach activities of US think tanks and international development think tanks using the following five indicators: (1) number of "social media fans" (i.e., Facebook likes and Twitter followers), (2) relative global web traffic rank, (3) number of sites linking to their websites, (4) number of mentions in global news sources (in all languages), and (5) number

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5 See Abelson (2009) and Weidenbaum (2010).
6 We should of course not ignore the possibility of think tanks providing only ex post "intellectual legitimation" for policy courses already charted and policy decisions already taken by the executive (Stone 2004).

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7 For example, the non-profit organization Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) provides rankings of US think tanks based on their citations in the media. See most recently <http://fair.org/extra-online-articles/fair%E2%80%88study-think-tank-spectrum-2012/> (accessed 23 September 2013).

of Google Scholar citations. To get a better idea of the efficiency of the think tanks in question, they also adjust their results for budget volumes. Clark and Roodman are very much aware of the methodological problems and the general limitations of their ranking exercise, but they certainly demonstrate that is possible to go beyond simple perception-based rankings.[8] While the quest for "perfect" think tank rankings is clearly elusive, stimulating work like the aforementioned shows that there is scope for improvement.

At the end of the day, however, quantitative metrics can only help to get a better idea of the output or visibility of think tanks and their staff. Quantitative metrics can be useful for capturing the "intermediate goods" (Weidenbaum 2010) offered by think tanks. Such metrics have, however, little to say about the actual impact that think tanks, individually or collectively, might have on policy processes. Whether policy makers make use of these goods is a different question. Reputational data – based, for example, on surveys asking policy makers how much they value individual think tanks and their experts – can be used to try and capture impact. But again, such data are more about perceptions and tell us little about actual impact. Moreover, it is difficult to link such data with other quantitative data in a convincing manner.[9] Given these analytical problems, ranking think tanks in terms of influence remains a highly problematic undertaking, even at the national level.

Handle with Caution

This paper is intended to alert readers to the numerous problems and challenges besetting current efforts to rank think tanks. It is not an argument to simply do away with such ranking indexes, imperfect as they are. Rankings will remain attractive for many reasons. They appeal to our curiosity in terms of wanting to know who is performing well and who is underperforming. They may even help in terms of establishing benchmarks of successful think tanks as well as improving governmental and organizational policies. Rankings will always be around, but we need to be careful when reading and using them. Furthermore, with respect to existing think tank rankings, we need to be aware of their conceptual and methodological foundations in order to understand their respective limitations. In particular, we should not mistake perception-based rankings for those based on sound and rigorous research. However, if we approach think tank rankings with the necessary caution, we can enjoy them in a responsible manner.

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8 Another, qualitative approach has been pursued since 2001 by *Prospect Magazine* in the UK, which uses a panel composed of a handful of experts to judge its annual think tanks awards (online: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/thinktanks/the-awards/>, accessed 21 December 2013).

9 For an attempt to link reputational data with data on both academic journal publications and media interventions, see the recent ranking of the national daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) of Germany's "most influential" economists and the organizations they are affiliated with (FAZ, 26 September 2013, 10, online: <www.faz.net/oekonomen>, accessed 21 September 2013). Methodologically more dubious are the rankings of South Korean think tanks provided by the *Hankyung Business* newspaper, which are based on amalgamations of scores for "public influence," "quality of research papers," "competency of researchers," and "scale of the institute" (online: <http://magazine.hankyung.com/business/apps/news?popup=0&nid=01&c1=1001&nkey=2011122100837000421&mode=sub_view>, accessed 12 December 2013).

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■ Related GIGA Publications

Abb, Pascal (2013), *China's Foreign Policy Think Tanks: Changing Roles and Structural Conditions*, GIGA Working Papers, No. 213, January, online: <www.giga-hamburg.de/de/publikationen/working-papers>.

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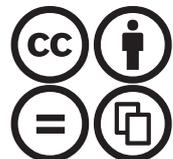
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