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Recycling Bins, Garbage Cans or Think Tanks?

Three Myths Regarding Policy Analysis Institutes

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Abstract

The phrase 'think tank' has become ubiquitous – overworked and underspecified – in the political lexicon. It is entrenched in scholarly discussions of public policy as well as in the 'policy wonk' of journalists, lobbyists and spin-doctors. This does not mean that there is an agreed definition of think tank or consensual understanding of their roles and functions. Nevertheless, the majority of organisations with this label undertake policy research of some kind. The idea of think tanks as a research communication 'bridge' presupposes that there are discernible boundaries between (social) science and policy. This paper will investigate some of these boundaries. The frontiers are not only organisational and legal. The boundaries also exist in how the 'public interest' is conceived by these bodies and their financiers. Moreover, the social interactions and exchanges involved in 'bridging' muddy the conception of 'boundary' allowing for analysis to go beyond the dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other, to address the complex relations between experts and public policy.

Keywords: discourse; expertise, knowledge networks; policy entrepreneurs, think tanks.

Introduction

> **Think tanks** – organizations engaged on a regular basis in research and advocacy on any matter related to public policy. They are the bridge between knowledge and power in modern democracies" (UNDP, 2003: 6).

The UNDP definition captures the sense in which think tanks are an intermediary or interlocutor between knowledge and power, science and the state. UNDP's choice of metaphor is not unique. As a simple google search will demonstrate, the discourse 'bridging', 'linking' or 'connecting' the policy and research worlds reverberates throughout the web-sites, mission statements and publications of think tanks.

The idea of think tanks as a 'bridge' presupposes that there are discernible boundaries between (social) science and policy (Halfmann & Hoppe, 2004). This paper will investigate some of these boundaries. The frontiers are not only organisational and legal. The boundaries also exist in how the 'public interest' is conceived and enacted by these bodies and their financiers. Moreover, the social interactions and exchanges involved in 'bridging' muddy the conception of 'boundary' allowing for analysis to go beyond the dualism imposed in seeing science on one side of the bridge, and the state on the other, to address the complex relations between experts and public policy.

More prosaically referred to as policy 'institute' or 'centre' – Anglo American definitions of think tanks have prevailed in the scholarly literature. Such definitions are reflective of the socio-political context in which think tanks were first constituted. That is, advanced liberal democracies that allowed 'thinking space' for independent policy research. As think tanks proliferated around the world, traditional definitions have been stretched beyond original meaning and US-style taxonomies have lost their relevance. Nevertheless, the persistence of such definitions in the face of comprehensive change in the think tank modality over time, has contributed to out-dated assumptions and myth-making about their role in society and politics.

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Three sets of assumptions about think tanks structure this paper. These conventional beliefs of the roles and activities of think tanks will be referred to as 'three myths'. They are:

1. Think Tanks are Bridges
2. Think Tanks Serve the Public Interest
3. Think Tanks Think

Firstly, this paper will cast doubts over perspectives that there is something organisationally specific about think tank research that sets them apart from universities, consulting firms and NGOs. Where it was once possible to conflate research brokerage function with organisation, this is less apparent; convergence is occurring. The international spread of the think tank model alongside the forces of democratisation in Latin America, the industrial surgence of Asia, the transition of the former Soviet Union (fSU), central and eastern Europe (CEE), and the professionalisation of African elites, has lead to many hybrid forms of think tank.

Secondly, think tanks are usually portrayed as acting in the public interest, stimulating public debate, educating the citizenry, undertaking research for the rational improvement of policy making, contributing to more effective governance through policy analysis, as well as being a conduit for public participation and force for democratic consolidation. Thirdly, think tanks present themselves, and are represented by the media, as scientific establishments, composed of experts and scholars engaged in the task of thinking, writing and publishing.

These three discourses are broadcast by think tanks (via annual reports, mission statements and web-sites) to legitimate their activities. These discourses are also repeated by the various interests that fund think tanks and who often need to legitimate their funding decisions on the grounds that think tanks 'bridge research and policy', 'serve the public interest' or 'build knowledge'. However, think tanks engage in many activities that substantially diminish the validity of these discourses. Nevertheless, the 'myths' persist due to the social and political utility of such metaphors (Smith, 1991: 14).

Myth One: Think tanks are bridges between state, society and science

Five decades ago, there used to be a straightforward response to a question asking what is a 'think tank'. They were independent, non-profit research institutes with a policy orientation. When think tanks were first established – mostly after world war one – they were concentrated in the USA, the UK and its dominions, notably Canada and Australia. Of this era, the sister institutes of international affairs in the British dominions deserve mention. In the US, bodies such as the Brookings Institution, the Russell Sage Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) are among the most notable (Smith 1991).

Yet, the term 'think tank' originated later during World War Two. It was used to describe secure and 'sealed environments' for expert strategists pre-occupied with military planning, like the RAND Corporation. By the 1960s, the term was entrenched in the Anglo-American lexicon of policy analysis and was being applied to independent research institutes throughout the English speaking world. Consequently, social science characterisation of think tanks has been shaped by Anglo-American experience (*inter alia*, Weaver 1989, Smith 1991, Stone 1996). The dominance of Anglo-American perspectives of what constitutes a think tank clouds the very great diversity and hybrid forms of think tank that emerged by the end of the second millennium.

The type of constitutional architecture, historical circumstances of war or stability, the political culture and legal traditions alongside the character of the regime in power, determine the shape and extent of think tank development in a country. Consequently, 'think tank' defies exact definition. They vary considerably in size, legal form, policy ambit, longevity, organisational structure, standard of inquiry and political significance. There is scholarly difference over how to identify these organisations, symptomatic in the competing typologies (Abelson, 2006; Boucher, 2004; Ladi, 2006) that often do not keep pace with the evolving

think tank form. Moreover, the directors of these organisations – such as at the Aspen Institute – often make fine distinctions between 'research institute' and 'think tank'. Usually, such disputes revolve around the role of advocacy and organisational capacity for quality policy research with think tanks deemed to do the former and institutes the latter.

Some organisations claim to adopt a 'scientific' or technical approach to social and economic problems. Others are overtly partisan or ideologically motivated. While some institutes are routinely engaged in intellectual brokerage and the marketing of ideas whether in simplified policy relevant form or in sound bites for the media, others are more academic. Many institutes are disciplinary based – economic policy think tanks, foreign policy institutes, social policy units, etc. Specialisation is contemporary phenomenon. There are environmental think tanks, regionally focussed operations and those that reflect the communal interests of ethnic groups. While most display a high level of social scientific expertise or familiarity with governmental structures and policy processes, there is considerable diversity in style and output of think tanks. The scholarly 'ink tank' can be poised against the activist 'think-and-do tank'. That is, differences between think tanks that are analytical and geared towards publication of books and reports compared to think tanks that are more activist. Accordingly, the styles and methods of 'bridging' knowledge and power are numerous.

Today, 'think tank' is a very elastic term. Furthermore, the international use of the term differs dramatically. It has been applied to NGOs that have research arm – for instance, Oxfam or Transparency International. The term has also been applied regularly to the OECD, as well as to government research bureaux and units attached to political parties. Organisations that once would not have been thought of as think tanks are now all too ready to adopt the label.

Ostensibly, the think tank label has caché. That so many groups around the world wish to cast themselves as 'think tanks' is symbolic of the effectiveness of the label and using it as a

designation for approaching international donors and philanthropic foundations. The brand name has been so widely used its meaning is becoming opaque.

Competition and Convergence

Part of the confusion that arises over the term results from the increasingly diverse sources of policy analytic competition to think tanks. Much of the literature on think tanks has suggested that there are organisational features of think tanks that set them apart from universities and NGOs (Weaver, 1989; McGann & Weaver, 2000, Smith, 1991). However, where it was once possible to conflate science-state bridging function with the think tank form, convergence with other organisations makes this a matter of contention.

- *Interest Groups*: Interest groups are usually portrayed as promoting an interest that is sectional or promotional in an advocacy oriented manner. By contrast think tanks have been portrayed as engaged in independent research. They attempt to either influence or inform policy through intellectual argument and analysis rather than direct lobbying. They are engaged in the intellectual analysis of policy issues and are concerned with the ideas and concepts that underpin policy. However, bodies like Greenpeace, Transparency International and Oxfam have created their own sophisticated research centres. The policy analysis conducted by bodies such these is not greatly different from what might be done in a think tank like the Brookings Institution. There is a long term trend of professionalisation in NGOs, one aspect of which is building policy research capacity.

- *Professional Associations:* These bodies can draw upon the skills and expertise of their membership. For example, both the Public Management and Policy Association (PMPA) in the UK and the association of Public Policy and Management (APPAM) in the USA draw together managers and policy makers from different disciplines across the public services. The associations provide forums in which they can discuss public policy and

management issues. PMPA addresses the "big issues that affect the public services as a whole" (www.cipfa.org.uk/aims) with services, workshops, publications.

- *Consultants and commercial firms:* Increasingly, accounting firms, investment banks, law firms, bond rating agencies and stock analysts perform a powerful independent role monitoring firms and enforcing regulatory standards (Shinn and Gourevitch, 2002: 27). Acting as 'reputational intermediaries' the big accounting firms undertake independent audit and provide objective advice to shareholders. Similarly, in training and dialogue activities think tanks face competition from commercial consultants, from multinational corporations and especially from the financial sector. With the advent of the 'new public management' (NPM), consultancy companies have acquired a high profile in the transport of policy ideas, management principles and social reforms from one context to another (Bakvis 1997). Privatisation, down-sizing and out-sourcing, as well as the move towards market economies in the former soviet states gave large consulting firms – such as Coopers & Lybrand, KPMG Peat Marwick or Accensure – several reasons to establish 'government consulting divisions' in their organisations. They are producing policy relevant analysis, liaising with public servants and advocating the adoption of 'a more managerial approach in government' (Saint-Martin, 2000).

- *University Institutes:* Some think tanks have been described as 'universities without students' (Weaver, 1989: 564). While the relationship between think tanks and universities has been close in most political systems, important differences are usually observed. Think tanks are not normally degree granting institutions. There are a few exceptions, notably RAND in the USA and FLACSO in Latin America. However, the increasing growth of policy focused university institutes represent a real source of competition to think tanks. The social sciences in particular have adapted. University research centres like the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex, the Constitution Unit at UCL, the Centre for Economic Performance and the Social Exclusion Unit at LSE do academic work.

However, they also do think tank things—policy briefings, networking, consultancy, government advising etc—bridging the academic and policy realms.

The blurring of boundaries and the overlap of objectives and activities means that traditional 'think tanks' are losing some of their organisational distinctiveness (Boucher, 2004: 97). Think tanks are competing for staff as well as for official patronage and funding from new actors in their field. The media and the World Wide Web mean that the general public as well as the politician can find policy analysis more readily. However, the dual dynamic of competition and convergence is not the only set of developments that is destabilising contemporary understandings of 'think tank'. It is necessary to understand how think tanks spread internationally conceptually stretching the term 'think tank'.

The International Spread and Stretching of Think Tanks

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, think tanks proliferated dramatically. Countries where think tanks were already present such as the USA, Britain, Sweden, Canada, Japan, Austria and Germany witnessed further organisational growth. In these countries, increased competition in the think tank industry often encouraged policy advocacy and the politicisation of institutes, most particularly in the USA. The Heritage Foundation is usually cited as the exemplar but so-called New Right think tanks can be found in many countries (Denham & Garnett, 2004). The Nordic and Austrian accession to the EU, and the growth of the legislative power of the Commission, prompted a spurt of new think tank development throughout Europe, especially in Brussels (Boucher et al, 2004: 20).

Democratic consolidation, economic development and greater prospects of political stability in Latin America and Asia provided fertile conditions for think tank development. The demise of the Soviet Union also opened political spaces for policy entrepreneurs. The global think tank boom has been fuelled by corporations and other non-state actors demanding high quality

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research, policy analysis and ideological argumentation as well as by governments as they developed in size and capacity.

Think tanks have been exported to nation-states via development assistance from governments and international organisations seeking to extend policy analytic capacities, aid civil society development or promote human capital development. For instance, the UNDP regional office in Bratislava held a think tank capacity building conference in 2003 to help improve the quality of governance in central and south eastern Europe. USAID, the World Bank, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Freedom House, amongst many others, have convened similar activities. For instance, the existence of the Lithuanian Banking, Insurance and Finance Institute, has been explained as the consequence of 'foreign institutions (that) looked for partners to work with' and 'if they did not exist, encouraged their creation' (Chandler and Kvedaras, 2004). On the other hand, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Office of the High Representative undertakes many state functions and is the main source of demand for policy analysis. Thus policy analysis has tended to come from outside rather than from local organisations. The presence of numerous public and private donor organisations has seen the proliferation of many civil society capacity building bodies, but think tank-like organisations more often resemble consultancy firms (Miller & Struyk, 2004). A similar situation prevails in Serbia (Andjelkovic, 2003) and Slovakia (Boucher et al, 2004: 24). The think tank concept has been exported around the world and the term 'think tank' has been adopted in its English wording, with all its cultural connotations. However, it has been applied to hybrid organisations.

The Western view that a think tank requires independence or autonomy from the state, corporate or other interests in order to be 'free-thinking' does not accord with experiences in other cultures. In many countries, the line between policy intellectuals and the state is blurred to such an extent that to talk of independence as a defining characteristic of think tanks makes little sense. Many organisations now called 'think tanks' operate inside government. This is

evident in countries such as the People's Republic of China. Some institutes have been incubated in government and subsequently made independent. It is not unusual to find institutes with political patrons or formal links to political parties, as in Malaysia. Many of the German foundations, for instance, have been established by political parties or have strong ties to the *Lander*. Elsewhere, research institutes are attached to corporations as is evident in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Notwithstanding funding dependence or political affiliation, high-quality research and technical analysis along with critical advice can be feasible within these political contexts. However, such developments destabilise the discourse of think tanks located 'in-between' the domains of knowledge and power.

Nevertheless, other think tanks have found new spheres to do 'bridging' work. Beyond the nation-state, there are strong signs of think tank adaptation and evolution. International organisations such as the United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) have drawn think tanks in their ambit. Based in a business school, the Evian Group is in the policy orbit of the WTO but provides 'intellectual ammunition' as a business think tank to promote an open world economy.

The European Union provides yet another institutional forum for think tank activity with the emergence of EU wide think tanks disengaged from specific national identities (Boucher et al, 2004). Furthermore, with the revolution in information and communication technology, the possibilities for policy research disconnected from specific organisational settings has become increasingly feasible and fashionable. Most think tanks have a virtual presence. It has also made international research exchange and collaboration between think tanks common place. Global and regional think tank networks have become extensive.

Networks as bridges

While think tank networks are not new, over the past two decades the scale and density of networks has mounted significantly and extended from North American and European institutes to include a more globally diverse range of organisations. Networking ranges from the very informal, ad hoc, socialising or the 'thin' element of a virtual network through to formal international associations with a secretariat and large membership.

International networks have coalesced around common areas of interest and policy themes as well as around ideology. A few examples will suffice. The Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP) has offices in London and Brussels, is dedicated to the advancement of European environmental policies, and operates in a network with like minded institutes in Berlin and Madrid. In contrast, the Atlas Foundation convenes free market institutes world wide providing start-up funds and technical assistance. Operating as a 'think tank without walls', the Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), based in London, operates through a network of economists spread throughout Europe and North America with whom it contracts to produce policy studies. Since 1997 the Japan Center for International Exchange has convened the 'Global ThinkNet' meetings to promote policy-oriented dialogues.

Think tank networks are particularly noticeable at the regional level, often reflecting shared historical conditions, ties of language and ethnicity, or of encountering similar trans-border policy problems. For example, think tanks in the transition countries of Eastern and Central Europe have shared interests in privatisation and public sector reform. The enormous growth in the number of think tanks in this part of the world has propelled think tank networking. PASOS was created in 2004 to institutionalise and regularise relations between the Open Society Institute funded network of think tanks in CEE and fSU and reflects the OSI turn from capacity building to policy research (Palley, 2002).

These networks have promoted the transnationalisation of policy analysis and scientific expertise. They create the over-lapping personal and communications infrastructure for fast transfer of new ideas and policy approaches between global and local domains. More importantly, networks have become a form of governance. The typical target of the think tank has been government. However, in an age of privatisation, contracting-out, and the NPM alongside the growing importance of the private and voluntary sectors in the delivery of public goods and services, public-private partnerships de-centre policy dialogues. This is most pronounced at transnational levels among 'global public policy networks' (Reinicke, 2001). In the weakly institutionalised governance structures above the nation state, the science-policy boundaries are more fluid and constantly in negotiation.

Returning to Myth One, the development of transnational research networks alongside the hybridisation of think tank styles with their international spread and the cross-pollination with other organisations developing policy research orientation has stretched the traditional idea of 'think tank' as an organisational bridge between science and state. Legal-organisational form no longer follows function. The label think tank is now applied to bodies as diverse as government research units attached to the executive, international organisations such as the OECD, or corporate research arms like Nomura Research Institute.

Myth Two: Think Tanks Serve the Public

The mission of the think tank is often to 'serve the public interest' and their role in society to "educate the community" with their policy analysis. Indeed, many think tanks have legal status as charitable organisations and are obligated to pursue public objectives as 'third sector' organisations based in civil society. Echoes of publicly motivated aspirations can be found in the mission-statements or home pages of many think tanks. For example:

- The motto of the Federal Trust for Education and Research is "enlightening the debate on good governance" http://www.fedtrust.co.uk/);

- The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, known as 'Clingendael', promotes understanding of international affairs. The Institute acts in an advisory capacity to the government, parliament and social organisations (http://www.clingendael.nl/about/);

- The Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) in Georgia "is committed to providing a forum for substantive dialogue between representatives of different branches of the government, the civil sector and the Georgian public" (http://www.ips.ge);

- The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies indicates that its research is carried out "in the spirit of public interest" (http://www.eces.org.eg/About/Index2.asp?L1=1&L2=1).

The examples are illustrative but are very common. Civil society institutes play a self-proclaimed role in representing the public interest. Rarely do think tanks seek to demonstrate that public debate has been 'enlightened' by their research. Instead, 'enlightenment' is presumed to 'trickle down' and have 'atmospheric influence' on the culture of debate.

Some institutes do not express public objectives. The strategic focus is on policy communities and addressing ecision-making elites. For example:

- The mission of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is to 'inspire and inform policy and practice…' (http://www.odi.org.uk/about.html)

- IEEP seeks to 'raise awareness' of environmental issues and its "audience range from international and European institutions to local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry and others who contribute to the policy debate". (http://www.ieep.org.uk/)

- For the Chr Michelsen Institute in Norway, public motivations run third in priority. "CMI research assists policy formulation, improves the basis for decision-making and promotes public debate on international development issues" (http://www.cmi.no/about/index.cfm).

Working to 'promote understanding' or 'research in the public interest' begs the question: Understanding for whom? The language of engagement is one of a three-fold hierarchy.

The 'public realm' is an 'audience' to which policy analysis is transmitted downwards – as a subject to be educated and wherein to raise awareness – rather than the public treated as a source of ideas and knowledge. In OECD countries people are used to seeing institute reports addressed in the quality press like *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the *Economist*, or a think tank expert debating topical matters on a news program. This route to the public (or the electorate) is in reality a one-way, top-down process, interpolated by the media. Relatively few think tanks have mechanisms for feed back from society. Those that do might use devices such as e-discussions, focus groups, Open Days, meeting series and sometimes research partnerships with NGOs and community groups. When practised, these are the deliberative elements of think tank activity emphasising discourses of public participation, the public accessibility of knowledge, the importance of experiential knowledge (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003).

By contrast, the 'policy community' is the realm of the think tank where relatively horizontal relationships pertain. Think tanks interact with other stakeholders to policy issues – the media, NGOs, political parties, industry representatives and bureaucrats. It is in these realms where think tanks play brokerage and gate-keeping roles that constantly redefine science/policy boundaries.

At the other end of the spectrum, think tanks operate more as supplicants towards decision-makers and other actors in the political sphere, pushing ideas and analysis upwards into

decision making circles. This is particularly so in political systems characterised by high degree of state control such as Vietnam, Belarus or China.

This is not to suggest that there is no interaction between institutes and the public. However, it is not a strong dynamic. Very few think tanks are membership organisations. It is unusual to see think tank officials representing their organisations in schools and colleges. A high proportion are located in the central business district of the national capital. They rarely venture outside the national parallels to the Washington 'beltway' or the Parisian 'boulevard pereriphique'. The organisational cultures of think tanks are not as open and accessible for the interested citizen as might be their web-sites. The elite venues, dress-codes, the jargon and scientific debates serve to keep the general public at bay and help to demarcate boundaries of the policy community. Indeed, one role of certain think tanks can be to cordon public debate to safe sites of discussion where only those with mastery of policy and social scientific communication codes can participate; that is, the opposite of 'bridging'.

Interactions of international organisations with think tanks are a case in point. Think tanks are implicitly placed in the role of 'gate-keepers' to the UN, WTO or other international organisations, potentially becoming a barrier between NGOs seeking more direct access to UN personnel and procedures. In May 1999 the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, convened a closed meeting to ask the assistance of think tanks in providing analyses to help guide UN policy making (ODC, 1999). Think tanks were portrayed as organisations that could screen, channel and interpret NGO analysis and advocacy directed at the UN, and adjudicate between competing claims.

Think tanks cater primarily to the economically and politically literate and are at some distance from the rest of society. The people who found these institutes and who work in them are usually highly educated, male, middle-class, westernised professionals, often from privileged backgrounds. The organisational mandates – to inform and/or influence public

policy – drives them to engage with other usually more powerful elites in society. Those sponsored and funded by international organisations and donor groups tend to be well institutionalised, mainstream institutes whose research agendas concord in considerable degree with the policy interests of their funding source. For example, the institutions at the core of the World Bank sponsored Global Development Network are mostly economic think tanks staffed by development economists (Bøås & McNeill, 2004). In other contexts, such as Serbia, it is apparent that donors and governments prefer to interact with think tanks and expert organisations as their civil society partners (Andjelkovic, 2003: 95).   As noted of Romanian think tanks in EU accession assistance programs:

> Though the intention of many such projects is to open up assistance
>
> programmes to non-state actors, these projects are often directed through
>
> official channels, even when the declared objective is the monitoring of the
>
> government by creating alternative expert capacity in the independent sector
>
> (Ionita, 2003: 144)

NGOs may therefore view the 'research community' negatively: elite, exclusive and with insubstantial connections to the general public.

Think Tanks and the Pursuit of Private Interests

Rather than advocating the public interest, think tanks are also interested in firstly, empire building. This is most evident when winning grants or contracts becomes an end in itself. The corporate interest in expanding programmes, raising funds, publishing more books, securing media coverage and political patronage, and so forth are essential to organisational sustainability and growth, as well as the protection of jobs. The fund raising tread-mill and the day-to-day concerns of management are immediate pressures that compete with longer term, more intangible objectives to influence the climate of debate (Struyk, 2002). 'Organisational insecurity, competitive pressures, and fiscal uncertainty' are becoming increasingly common. In seeking to 'reconcile material pressures with normative motivations', think tanks 'often

produce outcomes dramatically at odds with liberal expectations' (Cooley and Ron, 2002).

Market pressures increase the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour.

Individual think tank staff can also be opportunistic, treating these organisations as vehicles for career development. They are a training ground where political aspirants can practise their hand in policy issues, hone their rhetorical skills and induct themselves into policy communities. An institute can later trade on the success of people such as David Miliband, currently a Minister in the UK Blair government and formerly director of IPPR. Henry Kissinger was once a CFR scholar. Think tanks produce human capital in the form of specialised analysts that often move between think tank, university and government service that can have long term ramifications indirectly interweaving the think tank with government agencies via its former fellows. The Adam Smith Institute says this clearly regarding its 'Next Generation Group' which:

> …serves as a meeting point for the next generation of leaders in business,
>
> academe, the professions, journalism and public policy
>
> (http://www.adamsmithinstitute.org/policy/tng.htm.)

Similarly, the Evian Group has launched an 'Open World Initiative' of 'young Evian' associates.

Think tanks need to trade on names and successful careers. Attracting new talent is essential. It prevents them from becoming stale and opens an institute to new ideas and thinking. Consequently, attracting unseated politicians and bureaucrats works to promote the reputation of an institute whilst also providing a retirement post. Jacque Delors close association with Notre-Europe (www.notre-europe.asso.fr) dramatically raises the profile of this body.

In short, think tanks have an interest in cultivating the policy careers of their fellows and providing an environment where such individuals can pursue their own interests. In a few cases, the 'vanity tank' phenomenon crystallises the tendency where personal interest

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outweighs public motivation. Otherwise known as 'candidate tanks', they rarely possess an extensive institutional infrastructure but are established to promote (aspirant) political leaders to lend political credibility to their political platforms (Abelson, 2006). Most often found in the US, such institutes are not noted for their scientific protocols.

The other danger that think tanks run, especially in liberal democracies characterised by a system of political appointment, is 'hollowing out' (Denham & Garnett, 2004: 242-43). Think tank personnel are obvious recruits to government. ODI fellows are often 'poached' by OECD-DAC, the UK Department for International Development or the World Bank. Electoral turn over of governments can sap the strength of some think tanks should their staff be appointed as part of the new administration (It is the so-called 'revolving door' phenomenon first noted in the US.) However, the politicisation of think tanks that usually comes with a close affinity with, and advocacy on behalf of, a particular administration or political party has been identified as having a more subtle and detrimental impact on the scientific integrity and scholarly credibility of think tanks. In the words of two British observers:

> Recently the chief contribution of think tanks has been to foster the impression
> that power in Britain is concentrated within a charmed circle, where policy
> wonks rub shoulders with politicians and businesspeople in a kind of
> corporatism without the trade unions. … The existence of people who have
> never worked outside the policy sphere … lends support to the impression of
> the increasing distance between government and the governed (Denham and
> Garnett, 2004: 243).

A growing disjuncture between the public rhetoric of think tanks to promote an educated society in the face of the political apathy of the citizenry of many democracies throws into high relief the exclusivity of the policy communities in which think tanks prefer to circulate.

Myth Three: Think Tanks Think

The general presumption is that think tanks house people who are engaged in thinking on the major and minor policy issues of the day; that is, they are 'thinking outfits'. This myth of intellectual and scientific enterprise is an 'idée fixe'.

There is also the phenomenon of the 'think-and-do tanks'. That is, institutes initiate and support the implementation or execution of community programs, policy trials, evaluation of programmes, monitoring and so forth. Some institutes also are engaged in ethics training, delivering in-service courses, producing TV documentaries, or capacity building. As noted earlier, organisational survival is a pre-eminent concern and one that takes resources away from 'thinking' or policy research towards marketing, advocacy and PR. Likewise, networking with other think tanks or within policy communities and global public policy networks is exacting upon the resources of think tanks.

There are also different kinds of thinking, analysis, evaluation, informing policy endeavours. These are delineated as, i.) Recycling, editing and synthesis; ii.) The policy entrepreneurship of 'garbage cans'; and iii.) Scientific validation. Working through these categories, the objective is to return to the question as to how think tanks "bridge" research and policy and negotiate the boundaries of knowledge and power.

Recycling Bins

Recycling ideas, synthesising ideas, re-interpreting scholarly work into a more accessible format is a valuable pursuit of benefit to busy bureaucrats and electorate conscious politicians. The daily pressures of governance generally mean that decision-makers function with a short attention span and rely upon their staff for the collection of relevant research and data. Think tanks strive to provide it for them.

Much academic research that has policy relevance is not in a format suitable for government use. Think tanks are very effective organisations for translating dense ideas or abstract theory

into sound bites for the media; blue prints for decision-makers; and understandable pamphlets and publications for the educated public. Many academics disdain this kind of work, while universities and colleges do not provide the right institutional or career incentives to do it.

Not only is it the recycling of ideas by think tanks, but also the re-cycling the experiences of practitioners (Abelson, 2006 chapter 5). Think tanks are a vehicle to incorporate the perspectives of former military personnel, government officials or NGO leaders who would not easily qualify for appointment to a university. The recycling of professional experience is one of the more intangible modes of bridging. Nevertheless, it enriches policy analysis and in the eyes of many decision makers enhances the credibility and likely practicality of think tank reports.

Part of 'recycling' involves repetition. The constant restatement of policy message via different formats and products – seminars, conferences, workshops, policy briefs, web-sites, books – broadcasts and amplifies policy research. While this might be considered as duplication, repetition is necessary to raise consciousness amongst the general public and the media.

Think tanks also act as editors. International organisations and governments require knowledge organisations and reputable professionals to sift and vouch the welter of information and analysis pressed upon them by NGOs, other governments, corporations and others.

> … to understand the effect of free information on power, one must first understand the paradox of plenty. A plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. Attention becomes a scare resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, interpreters and cue-givers become more in demand, and this is a source of

power. … Brand names and the ability to bestow an international seal of

approval will become more important (Keohane & Nye, 1998: 89).

Think tanks have a 'brand name' and symbolise legitimate and neutral vehicles to make sense

of the conflicting evidence and information overload.

Think tanks are recycling bins. This function is in different measure from one policy institute

to the next. However, the editing, synthesis and repetition of policy research and analysis is

usually not sufficient to influence policy as a consequence of 'trickling into' policy

communities. Instead, think tanks are far more strategic than simply acting as a bridge. They

have direct engagement with the policy process.

'Garbage Cans'?

The 'garbage can' idea was formulated by Cohen, March and Olsen to argue that policy-

making was a chaotic and irrational process in contrast to some other theories of the policy

process that portray more rational inputs of information into policy. Indeed, the bridge

metaphor implies linearity with think tanks editing or re-shaping knowledge in uni-directional

movements from basic to applied science, from problem to solution, from abstract theorists to

'enlightened' policy makers.

In the garbage can model, decision-making is portrayed as a highly unpredictable and

ambiguous process. Actors define goals and choose means as they go along. Organisations

such as national ministries and executives do not have goals in the rational sense, but define

them in the process of attaching problems to solutions.   In this perspective, think tanks can be

thought of as:

> … collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for
>
> decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues
>
> to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work
>
> (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972: 1)

In short, problems are constructed in order to justify solutions. Think tank solutions are on the look out for problems. Solutions chase problems. Problems, issues and their solutions are all mixed.

The 'garbage can' concept was modified by Kingdon (1995) where political decisions emerge from the interaction of three streams: political events, problem recognition and policy proposals. The balance of importance between these three streams, and how they interact, varies from one policy setting to another. Within the US legislative context, these streams are largely independent of each other, each developing with its own dynamics and decisions. Notwithstanding the assumptions of a pluralist political context, it has been an important theory of agenda setting, with direct relevance to analysing the role of think tanks and their 'behind-the-scenes' roles in policy.

Elected or (self) appointed officials in the political stream are highly visible actors in agenda setting. By contrast, think tanks are less visible in the policy stream, but playing a significant role in (re-)formulating policy alternatives. Since the agenda is always crowded and financial resources limited, as policy entrepreneurs they are critical in keeping policy proposals alive.

Think tanks market policy ideas that have had long cultivation in the 'garbage can'. Policy entrepreneurs in the think tank lift from their 'garbage can' policy recommendations, problem definitions, and explanations for policy dilemmas as new problems arise. Think tank policy analysis often represents sets of solutions waiting for their 'window of opportunity'. In conjunction with other 'garbage cans' they build coalitions of support via expert networks. In short, they channel the policy and political streams, to promote a convergence and seize opportunities (such as regime change, elections, policy crises) to change laws and policy. It is more than re-drawing the boundaries between science and politics; it involves re-configuring the political landscape and manoeuvring the political and scientific actors upon it.

Policy entrepreneurship takes many diverse forms, and is both organisational and individual. There is no 'recipe' or 'toolkit' for training on policy entrepreneurship. Instead, it rests on a delicate phroenetic blend of 'softening-up' actors in the political and policy stream through use of personal contacts, networking, media strategies and the creation of powerful policy narratives that simplify technical issues into manageable items of public policy. It is the management of expert discourse rather than research that empowers think tanks in agenda setting. Policy entrepreneurship is an important social practice in negotiating, sometimes negating, the boundaries between experts and decision makers. However, equally important is the scholarly credibility and intellectual authority of think tanks.

Blinding us with science?

It is usually the case that the best known think tanks do their own analysis. They have been described as 'idea factories', 'brain boxes' (Boucher *et al*, 2004) or 'thinking cells' (McGann & Weaver, 2000). Thinking is a key function definitive of a think tank. This means attracting top research staff. The most successful institutes are those with staff who could as easily be found within academic circles. The authority of think tank has been cultivated and groomed through various management practices and intellectual activities.

The knowledge credentials of think tanks scholars (PhDs; career profile in university or government research agency; service on blue ribbon commissions or expert advisory groups) bestows some credibility and status in policy debates that gives weight to their recommendations. However, neither knowledge production nor knowledge exchange is apolitical. This may be obvious. Yet, a number of social practices give their product – ideas, publications, analysis – a patina of scientific objectivity and technocratic neutrality. Sophisticated computer modelling, positive economic theories or scientific papers published in refereed professional journals create 'communication codes' and protocols that construct some knowledges as more persuasive or reliable. Codified knowledge is not only expensive to reproduce but difficult to access. Practices such as peer review and professional accreditation

are exclusionary processes in which only those with the relevant credentials and mastery of protocols can participate.

Issues of quality and rigour are paramount. The worst fate for a think tank is to be seen as delivering unreliable or sloppy analysis. With the emphasis on policy entrepreneurship and communication of easily digestible nuggets of policy information – in the form of policy briefs, media sound bites and power point pitches – the products of think tanks may oversimplify complex and technical issues. There is a tension in entrepreneurial demands for timeliness and informing the right people that can compromise the research process (Boucher et al, 2004: 22). In terms of management, think tank directors tend to stress academic style publications, rigorous methodologies and scientific peer review. It is supplemented by organisational strategies such as: creating an Academic Advisory Council; encouraging university sabbatical or teaching for think tank fellows; building post-doctoral programmes and fellowships; or hosting scholarly associations. A steadfast commitment to intellectual independence and scholarly enterprise bestows authority. Think tanks individually, and collectively, need to protect their social status as expert, research and analysis organisations.

Think tanks do think. Furthermore, they can play an important role in setting the standard for policy research and independent analysis. Doing so, they help draw the boundary between the policy relevant 'expert' and the non-expert advocate. Indeed, think tanks are one organisational manifestation of this social boundary.

Conclusion: Bridges or Barriers?

Returning to the UNDP quoted at the beginning, think tanks have been portrayed as a *bridge between* knowledge and power. This image rests on conceptions of science and politics as being two essentially different fields of human endeavour. To portray think tanks as a 'bridge' is to maintain the distinctions and to invite a perception of these organisations as neutral

publicly motivated intermediaries between the world of science and the separate world of politics and policy. This frequently occurring metaphor of think tanks as 'bridges' establishes a false ontological divide between theory and practice, between the 'ivory tower' and the so-called 'real world' (Stone, 1996; 2003). The boundaries between the two domains remain unchanged but are linked by bridges such as think tanks that also play a role in both policing and mediating the boundaries.

This paper argues that knowledge and policy is a mutually constituted nexus and that think tanks are not simple informants in transmitting research to policy. It is clear from previous studies that many think tanks help provide the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, the empirical examples that then become the accepted assumptions for those making policy. Think tanks do not act alone in such intellectual action, but more usually in coalition with like-minded thinkers in journalism, universities and so forth. Through their networks and policy communities, think tanks have 'boundary transcending' qualities (Krause Hansen et al, 2002: 108) that allow them to act as mediators. That is, they have the power and intellectual resources allowing them to do the work of articulation between the national, regional and global levels of governance. Mediation is required to manage the ideological operation of 'decoding', interpreting and reformulating socio-economic realities. Far from standing between knowledge and power, think tanks are a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus. In short, knowledge and policy are symbiotic and interdependent.

These organisations also construct narratives, routines and standards concerning their own roles between science and the state or society. Recognition of think tanks as centres for expert, scientific and authoritative advice occurs because of the scholarly credentials of these organisations. It also happens because of the relationship with policy institutions and donor groups that have a vested interest in the 'myth' that think tanks think. Commissioning and funding studies, these interests want independent, rational, rigorous analysis that is associated with the brand name. Similarly, legitimation for supporting think tanks – and the willingness

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of the media to use think tank experts – rests in the myth that they serve the public interest. More often than not, the think tank is represented as a neutral transmission belt of research, scientific ideas and policy analysis playing the appropriate 'independent' role of communication between state and society.

The ontological division in the portrayal of think tanks continues to be perpetuated because it serves a purpose in policy discourses. The 'myths' and the metaphors have more public power, media resonance and policy attraction than does the more 'messy' modelling of 'garbage cans' or complex formulations of a knowledge-policy nexus. A diffuse and pervasive 'nexus' cannot be instrumentalised into a policy tool in the same way as a compelling but simplistic narrative can be built of think tanks 'bridging' or 'linking' the scholarly/political; the national/global; the state/society divides.

Why do the myths persist? Science matters but so do interests. The myths persist because it is useful for governments and international organisations to sponsor so-called independent 'thinking outfits' that represent one-way 'bridges' between them and the 'public'.

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