

(Re)Thinking think tanks in the age of policy labs: The rise of knowledge-based policy influence organisations

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Abstract

The idea of ‘think tanks’ is one of the oldest in the policy sciences. Although the topic has been studied for decades, recent works dealing with advocacy groups, policy and behavioural insight labs and into the activities of think tanks themselves have led to discontent with the definitions used in the field, and especially with the way the term may obfuscate rather than clarify important distinctions between the different kinds of knowledge-based policy influence organisations (KBPIO) operating in the contemporary policy landscape. In this paper, we examine the traditional and current definitions of think tanks utilised in the discipline and point out their weaknesses. We then develop a new framework to better capture the variation in the kinds of knowledge-based organisations which operate in many sectors.

KEYWORDS

knowledge diffusion, knowledge generation, knowledge mobilisation, knowledge-based policy, policy labs, think tanks

1 | INTRODUCTION

The idea of ‘think tanks’ is one of the oldest in the policy sciences. In fact, the field itself largely grew out of the activities of one such entity, the post-WWII US RAND Corporation for which such luminaries as Gary Brewer and Charles Lindblom worked prior to moving into academe. Although their role in policymaking has been studied for decades, the emergence of organisations such as advocacy groups, policy innovation labs, policy institutes, national centres of excellence, policy and behavioural insight labs and the changing activities of think tanks themselves

have led to discontent with the common taxonomies of such policy organisations used in the field (Lindquist, 2021). These concerns have to do with a nomenclature for policy research organisations which hide more than they reveal about the differences between types and which leads to some confusion about, for example, whether policy labs are think tanks or vice versa (Wellstead & Howlett, 2021).

This has led to demands for the better clarification and (re)assessment of what exactly is a 'classic' think tank and how it operates. Greater bureaucratic autonomy, agencification and the emergence of adhocracies have led to the rapid growth of quasi-autonomous knowledge organisations within government agencies as well and externally supported policy innovation labs, living labs, policy hubs and behavioural or nudge units all of which share some characteristics with traditional think tanks but are also different in many ways including their permanence and orientation towards policy issues and activities (Lindquist & Buttazzoni, 2021). As Pautz (2010) lamented over a decade ago, 'while there is a significant body of literature on think-tanks and their role for policy change and continuity, debate on the definition of what actually constitutes a think-tank, how it does what it does and what its role is, has somewhat come to a standstill' (p. 420).

In light of the development and increasing proliferation of these new kinds of organisations and activities (Wellstead & Nguyen, 2020; Olejniczak et al., 2020), we develop a needed new diagnostic-based definition and classification of what can be termed 'knowledge-based policy influence organisations' (KBPIOs), a general term which encompasses both the old and the new in this area of study and policy advice activity. This new term, which better captures the variation in the field, focusses on the specific role(s) played by different kinds of KBPIOs with respect to knowledge production and use – knowledge generation, diffusion and mobilisation – and the level of institutionalisation of the organisation involved in each of these activities. This taxonomy and definition allows for a more precise and parsimonious appreciation and understanding of what each type does and how this varies from other kinds of knowledge-based organisations active in policy-making.

The advantages of adopting such a diagnostic scheme is that it can complement the traditional and other emerging definitions of specific kinds of knowledge-based policy organisations without engaging in concept stretching. Instead, the new model should be considered what Gerring (1999) defined as a 'building-block for developing inferences' which are theory driven. In what follows the KBPIOs framework is introduced, and then discussed with suggestions for future research directions proffered.

2 | THE INADEQUACY OF TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF THINK TANKS

In countries like the United States and Canada, outside of government, think tanks have long been considered a principal source of policy research and knowledge creation. This dates back to at least the aftermath of the Second World War and the appearance of policy-aimed knowledge institutes in defence policy analysis, if not earlier (Stone & Ladi, 2017). In other countries, like Japan and China and many countries in Europe, their creation is much more recent and dates to only the 1990s and 2000s but their number, size and impact have been growing (Weaver, 1989; McGann and, Weaver 1999; Dobuzinskis et al., 2000; Weaver & Stares, 2002; Xufeng, 2009).

This growth in mainly, but not exclusively, non-state organisations which are dedicated to policy analysis and the study and provision of policy advice (Doern & Levesque, 2002) has attracted considerable attention and led to the growth of efforts to list and chronicle that growth. Since

2008, for example, James McGann of the University of Pennsylvania has published the annual *Global Go To Think Tank Index* that now lists over 6500 think tanks using a set of 18 criteria to distinguish between them. These measures include variables such as the quality and reputation of the think tank's staff, its ability to recruit and retain elite scholars and analysts, access to key institutions, media reputation and so on.

Such an undifferentiated taxonomy does not aid the systematic addressing of important analytical and practical issues around such organisations, and such kind of organisation has the most impact on policy or helping to assess the relative relevance of, for example, being a partisan private versus non-partisan and non-profit entity, or a public one. As Gerring (1999) noted there are several criteria by which definitions and concepts may be judged and traditional conceptions of think tanks excel at the first three (familiarity, resonance and parsimony) but fail in the remaining five (coherence, differentiation, depth, theoretical utility and field utility).

For example, Rich's definition of think tanks as 'independent, non-interest-based, non-profit organisations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process' is still commonly used (Rich, 2004, p. 11). Although this concept is familiar and resonates with readers, as pointed out above, it does not encompass governmental or private think tanks and does not clarify what 'independent' or 'non-interest-based' means in either theory of practice. By definition, organisations like government-funded policy labs or industry-sponsored research institutions are excluded from analysis, even if these are, as suggested above, the areas in which major growth has occurred in the field in recent years in areas such as co-design, collaborative governance and behavioural insights. As such, it fails to effectively differentiate the field and has poor depth and coherence and limited theoretical and field utility.

That is, by often simply labelling any policy research organisation as a 'think tank', such work has led to concept stretching and diminished understanding of both older and newer research organisations because these approaches fail to distinguish between such obviously different organisations as the Brookings Institution with a \$117 (2017) million budget and over 300 employees or a small and under-funded research shop such as the Institute for Sustainability, Energy, and Environment at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign or the many similar university-based 'briefcase' institutes existing around the world (Fraussen & Halpin, 2016). And new organisations, like older ones, engage in what can be thought of as traditional 'think tank-like' activities but as much variation exists among these non-traditional organisations as between new organisations and traditional think tanks, and current concepts and nomenclature impede recognition of the different tasks and activities they engage in and what is their impact on policy-making.

The proliferation of a whole other set of knowledge-based policy research organisations has thus muddled even further the already murky picture existing of the conceptual and empirical think tank landscape (t'Hart & Vromen, 2008; Strassheim & Korinek, 2016; Straßheim, 2020) and cries out for clarification.

3 | THE NEED FOR A NEW TAXONOMY

In general, the think tank literature has only continued to incrementally modify popular taxonomies and frameworks developed in the 1980s and 1990s, if not earlier (Lindquist, 1993; Stone (2007). The most popular classification scheme remains McGann's well-known taxonomy based on the type of affiliation the think tank enjoys (e.g. autonomous and independent, quasi-independent, university affiliated, political party affiliated, government affiliate and

TABLE 1 Criteria for differentiating think tanks

Author	Criteria for differentiating think tanks
McGann	By institutional type: academic-diversified; academic-specialised; contract research organisations; advocacy think tanks; policy enterprise
Rich	By issue: single-issue; multi-issue; full-service By budget: less than \$500,000; \$500,001–\$1 million; \$1 million–\$5 million; more than \$5 million
Weaver (1989)	By institutional type: universities without students; government contractors; advocacy think tanks
Fraussen and Halpin (2017)	By capacity: high; low By autonomy: high low
Abelson (2018)	By function: nature of policy analysis; personnel, research products; funding By institution type (adding to Weaver, 1989): policy clubs (Lindquist, 1993); government councils; think-and-do tanks (from Stone, 2007)

quasi-governmental). Of course, as pointed out above, this classification includes many kinds of agencies and organisations linked to governments that Rich excludes, especially private-sector-funded organisations (Rich, 2004). Rich, on the other hand, does distinguish between different kinds of think tanks within his relatively narrower gambit, looking at organisational characteristics such as budget size, political orientation and scope and purpose research. But, as noted above, his definition eliminates a priori many significant organisations and agencies, including newer types such as policy labs.

The problem with existing taxonomies can be seen in Table 2 which sets out some of the variations in the think tank definition and classification employed by leading figures in the field.

As presented in Table 1, different authors utilise different structural criteria for differentiating between these ‘organisations that produce and principally rely on expertise and ideas to obtain support and to influence the policymaking process’ (Rich, 2004, p.11).

Some research pursuing better classification, however, has advanced the field by making distinctions concerning important variations in the kinds of organisations examined. These variations include how well funded and how large these organisations are, where they are located between the public, private and non-profit sectors, including academic institutions, how those factors affect the kinds of activities each undertakes – between policy promotion and basic research, for example – and, especially, how influential they are.

Attempts to provide improved taxonomies and better definitions by scholars such as Weaver, Abelson, Fraussen and Halpin are especially noteworthy. Although Weaver joins McGann in focussing on institutional type as a key differentiating criteria – albeit with a larger remit – Abelson makes a notable advance in adding a ‘functional’ dimension to this analysis, highlighting the different aims and goals of different organisations of this type.

An especially notable contribution by Fraussen and Halpin (2017) continues in this direction by examining both the autonomy from funders, of whatever type, enjoyed by the think tank, operationalising Rich’s criteria of ‘independence’ while at the same time operationalising ‘function’ in terms of having a research or non-research *raison d’être* and, in either case, examining what capacity the organisation enjoys to pursue that goal.

These latter taxonomies are helpful in pointing to some directions and criteria that can be used to reflect the existing and emerging complexity of the rapidly changing policy knowledge and

advice environment found in modern societies. We argue, however, that existing models which focus only on traditional think tank-like research organisation – however these are defined – remain too static to reflect the changing nature of policy research and other knowledge utilisation activities carried out by new and older knowledge organisations.

4 | IMPROVING THE GENUS: THE NOTION OF KBPIOs

Along with these innovations within the think-tank literature itself have emerged notable contributions by a nascent policy innovation lab scholarship who have proposed taxonomies of their own (Wellstead et al., 2021). For example, Michael McGann and his colleagues suggested policy labs could be defined by the degree of autonomy from government oversight, the source of their funding and the methods, tools and techniques employed (e.g. design-led, open government/data, evidence-based) McGann et al. (2017). And in their study of 20 policy innovation labs, Olejniczak et al. (2020) defined them according to structure (e.g. organisational arrangements, legal status and form [public, private, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs)], level of operation, years of operation and the nature of their networks), functions such as their products, types of analysis, size and types of projects and thirdly, processes more specifically the methods and tools that utilised.

Significantly, these scholars have articulated the basis for a classification matrix based on how policy labs redefined issues, explored and analysed policy problems and tested solution. Given policy labs' emphasis on experimentation and stakeholder involvement, this scholarship has gone to some lengths to distance itself from the think tank literature. But we argue otherwise by proposing a workable diagnostic taxonomy that incorporates all KBPIOs, including think tanks. The challenge for a new generation of KBPIO scholarship is to further develop related concepts that provide greater clarity and analytical rigour in the field. This we argue will reinvigorate scholarly development in inquiries into the role(s) that rich variation of knowledge-based organisations plays in policy-making.

5 | OPERATIONALISING KBPIOs

To resolve these challenges with traditional definitions of think tanks and move KBPIO research forward, we propose a more dynamic diagnostic approach reflecting the different knowledge functions (creation, diffusion and utilisation) in which different kinds of knowledge-based organisations engage in their efforts to influence policy, as well as their durability (permanent vs. ad hoc).

Current think tank-focused models have created a conceptual problem which has served as a sometimes-unrecognised barrier to more and better research and understanding of the think tank phenomena. A superior method of distinguishing between the many different types of agencies and NGOs involved in this sphere of policy work and assessing their impact and influence on policy advice and policy-making lies in making clear their function and structure with respect to the activities involved in knowledge utilisation.

Table 2 below sets out the basic functions involved in knowledge utilisation – creation or generation, diffusion and mobilisation – which can be used to highlight this first important distinctive characteristic of any such knowledge-based organisation, be it traditional or contemporary (Oh, 1997; Webber, 1991). As the figure shows, this can be juxtaposed with the role played by

TABLE 2 A general model of knowledge-based policy influence organisations

	Supply (producers/disseminators)	Demand (users)
Creation/Generation	Research 'Positive knowledge' (Zaltman, 1979)	Routine information Conceptual (Rich, 1997) 'Use' (received and read) (Rich, 1997)
Diffusion/Transfer	Advocacy/brokerage	Learning 'Attribution gap' (Zaltman, 1979) (inaccurate perception of knowledge and how the user should perceive it 'Utility' (knowledge could be used, but not employed) (Rich, 1997)
Mobilisation	Information recycling (‘packaging of knowledge’)	Strategic communications Policy experiments 'Knowledge testing' (Zaltman, 1979) Incremental and preventive effects (Zaltman, 1979) Instrumental (Rich, 1997) Influence and impact (Rich, 1997)

TABLE 3 KBPO types by function and structure

	Permanent (function/organisation and example)	Ad Hoc (function/organisation and example)
Creation (generation)	Experimentation/experimenters, e.g. policy shops	Borrowing/recyclers, e.g. co-design/insight labs
Diffusion (mobilisation)	Entrepreneurship/instrumental constituencies, e.g. propaganda TTs (Heritage)	Advocating/advocates, e.g. advocacy groups
Utilisation	Advising/designers, e.g. foundational TT (Brookings)	Promoting/lobbyists, e.g. lobbyists

Note: A taxonomy of existing organisations can be constructed based on this typology (see Table 4).

Abbreviation: TT, think tank.

organisations involved with each function, which can either supply these knowledge goods independently or do so in response to specific demands on the part of governments.

Following a standard knowledge mobilisation framework (i.e. generation, diffusion, mobilisation) allows all of the activities of the different kinds of knowledge-based influence organisations set out above – be they traditional or modern – to be better understood. Focussing on the different tasks involved in knowledge use, such a framework can be used to cover off the respective research, advocacy/brokerage and strategic communications activities in which each is engaged.

This is the first key dimension of think tanks which differentiated them not only from each other but from other policy-relevant organisations such as political parties and other such policy advisors who do not have knowledge at the forefront of their activities.

A second key dimension highlighted by many of the early observers of think tanks cited above has to do with the kinds of structural features KBPIOs have, namely their duration, permanence and/or institutionalisation. This second dimension can be used to capture the organisational aspects of research organisations within each of the knowledge utilisation activities presented in Table 3 (see Table 2).

TABLE 4 A taxonomy of existing knowledge-based policy influence organisational types by duration

	Supply	Demand
Creation/Generation)	1) Permanent Brookings type think tanks 2) Ad hoc Small Fraussen/Halpin type ‘interest groups’	1) Permanent Nudge Units 2) Ad Hoc Task Forces
Diffusion	1) Permanent Larger Interest groups/think tanks 2) Ad Hoc Policy and co-design labs	1) Permanent Government research agencies and policy shops 2) Ad Hoc Consultants
Mobilisation	1) Permanent Interest groups 2) Ad hoc Lobbyists	1) Permanent Strategic communications 2) Ad hoc Political staffers

6 | DISCUSSION

Using a model such as that provided here, researchers can generate insights into both these kinds of KBPIO, without having to worry in the first instance about factors such as their size or organisational location and sources of funding, rather shifting the focus of analysis towards the kinds of knowledge products they provide, to who, and why. And it is these later questions which are key in the field, not those which have dominated past research efforts in this area. The model presented here, which is derived from and shows some affinity with traditional approached to organisations such as think tanks and policy labs, greatly expands the definition of such KBPIOs and provides some insights into both their important differences (and similarities). This enhances the kinds of analyses undertaken by Halpin and Fraussen and allows their more precise targeting to the kinds of organisations – in this case, knowledge generation and diffusion oriented – which they would like to see encouraged. It also allows the two existing literatures on the subject – the old and continuing discussion of think tanks per se and the new and emerging discussion of policy labs and other similar entities – to talk to, rather than past, each other.

Thus, in their investigation of Australian think tanks, Halpin and Fraussen (2017), for example, noted the potential for think tanks to augment government capacity and help address real problems in society, but only under certain circumstances. That is, they argued that governments (in their case Australia) have declined in their ability to address long-term problems due to increased partisanship and other kinds of institutional/electoral gridlock. But, in order to address key questions like climate change or homelessness they need more long-term strategic thinking. And this means they need high capacity/autonomous research and advice and think tanks at least potentially can cover this off, at least those which are not too interest or party driven. And they found in a survey the field of non-interest/partisan think tanks in Australia that many, albeit small and non-permanent KBPIOs did have these characteristics and so could improve or enhance policy-making.

This is an example of how differentiating between KBPIOs based on their role(s) in knowledge utilisation is crucial to recommending action which can improve policy-making and policy outputs. That is, Fraussen and Halpin recommended that governments encourage only certain kinds of knowledge-based research organisations in order to help them regain some of their lost

abilities to address wicked-type issues in an (overly) partisan era. Once this assessment and diagnosis has been made, they argue, governments could, for example, deploy procedural tools like open access to data and research to enhance IT capacity and/or deploy indirect funding such as tax breaks for foundations and charitable research deductions and the like (e.g. treating employment of highly qualified personnel as a business expenses) in order to increase the capacity of such KBPIOs while allowing them to retain their autonomy.

7 | CONCLUSION

One of the key advantages of considering a knowledge-based approach for the definitional and taxonomical issues surrounding think tanks with its focus upon the creation, diffusion and utilisation literature permits researchers many avenues to further refine their analysis within each of these fields of organisational activity.

As the discussion above in the case of traditional think tanks has shown, it is important to begin with the rationale and purpose for any knowledge-based policy influence organisation. That is, what specific aspect of the knowledge utilisation spectrum is its primary concern? For example, examining what type of knowledge a particular organisation uses – practical or intellectual knowledge and normative or cognitive (Rich, 1997) – helps to understand who it is targeting with its research and communication activities: the public, governments or other social or civil society actors.

As this paper has shown, the existing literature is not a big help in assessing the nature and particularities either of traditional think tanks or of more recent policy labs and other similar kinds of endeavours. Providing general support to think tanks which might just increase lobbying or other kinds of purely interest-driven knowledge mobilisation activity, for example, would be counterproductive in many cases and more precise typologies and assessments are required if such organisation are to contribute to policy success.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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