1. ‘Network Intellectuals’ and ‘Networked Intellectuals’: relational approaches to the study of British think tanks

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INTRODUCTION

Situated in an interstitial space between the fields of media, academia, business and politics, think tanks are important sites for understanding contemporary policy knowledge production (Medvetz, 2012). Central to the issue of the intellectual life of think tanks and their researchers are the cross-professional networks they cultivate to gain legitimacy from multiple fields and to influence policy (Landry, 2019; Stone, 1996, pp. 132–133; Tchilingirian, 2018). However, despite the fact that there is a rich body of literature about think tanks, research into think tank networks and the act of knowledge production is limited.

The established literature on think tanks falls into two categories. First, there are macro-historical and comparative studies that have sought to chart the development of distinct national think tank ecologies (Stone & Denham, 2004; Stone et al., 1998). Second, a significant number of studies seek to understand how think tanks contribute to the formulation, promotion and implementation of policies by producing ‘the conceptual language, the ruling paradigms, the empirical examples’ that ‘become the accepted assumption for those making policy’ (Stone, 2007, p. 276). The literature consistently reminds us that think tanks are an integral part of the political landscape, yet we know little about think tank intellectual labour, and their networks still remain ‘the most arcane and least understood’ aspects of the policy–knowledge nexus (Plehwe, 2014, p. 108).

Focusing on research about British think tanks, this chapter aims to introduce the reader to two broad approaches to the study of the intellectual life of think tanks and their networks – what I call the ‘Network Intellectuals’ and the ‘Networked Intellectuals’ approaches. The former investigates think tanks as servants of an established policy network. The latter approach traces the emergent *networks* that think tank researchers make within the policy–knowledge nexus. The chapter begins with an overview of the literature on British think tanks, paying particular attention to the Network Intellectual approach. I then introduce an alternative Networked Intellectuals approach and present some illustrative findings from an ongoing study of British think tanks. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the Networked Intellectual approach and potential avenues for its use in future research.

BRITISH THINK TANKS

Think tanks operate within national knowledge regimes: the 'organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate' (Campbell & Pedersen, 2014, p. 3). The characteristics and priorities of participants in the policy-knowledge nexus vary widely between polities. State-based experts dominate in some regimes, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or corporations preside in others. According to Campbell and Pedersen (2011), Britain typifies a regime with a liberal economy and closed/centralized state, where a stable body of internal policy advisers within the Civil Service has significant influence over the way in which external advice is procured and deployed (Coleman, 1991; Day, 2002).

Think tanks in Britain emerged within the nineteenth-century intellectual milieu which encompassed the early social sciences and political/intellectual societies such as the Philosophical Radicals and the Fabian Society (Denham & Garnett, 1999, p. 46). Since then, British think tanks have endured and flourished.¹ The British tradition has developed in several stages or 'waves' of organizational change, each diversifying the types of organizational and intellectual styles active within this community. By the 1980s the term 'think tank' began to be used to describe public policy researchers in a variety of organizations with more technocratic and scholarly dispositions as well as being more partisan and openly politicized.

Think Tanks and Party Politics

Perhaps because they represent a more recent mode of intellectual engagement (McLennan, 2004; Osborne, 2004), far more attention has been paid to the more partisan politicized think tanks and their alignment with key political projects, such as the Third Way or New Right. Such studies take a 'supply side account of ideology' (Desai, 1994); they begin with a party project, a contentious policy area or politically significant moment (Pautz, 2012, p. 3) and draw a line around the key actors who played a part in its rise or demise. Within this supply-side approach, think tanks are conceptualized as actors who promote or represent a coalition or constituency by propagating certain policy discourses, outcomes or interests.

Recent examples of this strand of research include Slater's (2014, 2018) exploration of the way in which right-wing think tanks develop policy narratives (such as the 'sink estate') which obscure the complex structural causes of social problems. Similarly, Pautz (2018) traces how think tanks around the Conservative Party have supported and promoted the recent ideological 'U turn' towards austerity. These studies share a common methodological approach – a reliance on discourse analysis of texts and interviews, respectively, to trace the genealogy of policy narrative and to understand its role in propagating and legitimating contentious policy positions.

Other party-centric studies of think tanks engage in 'ideological ballistics' – attempting to establish the extent to which a think tank has been able to influence policymakers and the wider climate of opinion. Studies tend to focus on a small

subsection of think tanks and a political party. For example, the 1990s saw a number of studies of the ‘New Right’ think tanks, the Conservative Party and the rise of Thatcherism (Cockett, 1994; Denham & Garnett, 1998a; Desai, 1994). In the 2000s attention turned to the reformulation of social democracy and the development of ‘New Labour’ and the ‘Third Way’ (Bentham, 2006; Blank, 2003; Pautz, 2012) and more recently to the rebranding of the Conservative Party under David Cameron and his associates (Pautz, 2013).

Think Tanks and Elite Networks

The second cluster of research does not neglect the relationship between political parties and think tanks but places these relations within wider trans-professional coalitions of elites (including political parties, NGOs and the private sector). Some studies focus on micro-events within a lobbying campaign, for example, public health researchers have presented think tanks as agents of the alcohol (Hawkins & McCambridge, 2014; Lyness & McCambridge, 2014; Miller & Harkins, 2014) or tobacco industry (Smith et al., 2013). Think tank research is not just organized agnotology, it is a vehicle for disseminating counter-narratives at the ‘right moment’ in policy development (Hawkins & McCambridge, 2014). Researchers who take interest in the intersection of security and policy discourses of Islamophobia have drawn attention to the relationships between some neoconservative funders, think tanks and politicians from major political parties (Griffin et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2017).

Other studies of think tanks and broader elites shift focus from the individual relationships of specific think tanks to view them collectively as a new site of policy production. They conceptualize think tanks as sites where powerful elites coalesce to understand the dynamics of new modes of governance beyond the state. This ‘network ethnography’ approach is associated with British sociologists of education and policy sociologists who study the space of education policy globally and in the UK (Allen & Bull, 2018; Ball, 2012; Ball & Exley, 2010; Exley & Ball, 2011). These studies focus on *who* is active and influential within a network, *how* elite networks come to privilege certain ideas and *where* these connections are made (Allen & Bull, 2018, p. 440).

Elite network studies of think tanks use similar methodological approaches. They rely heavily on ‘investigative social research methods’ to trawl and triangulate public and semi-public data through Freedom of Information Requests, websites, published accounts and reports, and records of event attendees and speakers (Allen & Bull, 2018; Miller & Dinan, 2015; Miller et al., 2018). This data lends itself to qualitative and quantitative analysis, but the network ethnography approach is explicitly qualitative, as Ball argues that more quantitative network methods tend to focus on structure which can obscure the dynamic processes and shifting powers within policy networks (Ball, 2009; Ball & Exley, 2010; Goodwin, 2009).²

THE NETWORK INTELLECTUAL APPROACH

Though the literature on British think tanks is diverse, it is possible to detect similarities in the way these studies view think tanks and their researchers as intellectuals, and how they conceptualize think tank networks. I call this the Network Intellectual approach.

The Network Intellectual approach presents think tanks as a valuable site to explore politically significant events, policy projects and contentious activities. This typifies the intellectual labour of a think tank as a 'second hand dealer in ideas' (Desai, 1994) rather than a site from which intellectuals create novel ideas. Think tanks become knowledge *brokers* or intellectual *mediators* (Meyer, 2010): a mode of intellectualism that privileges the movement, application and translation of ideas to facilitate connections between actors (Osborne, 2004; Smith et al., 2013). As a broker and a mediator, the think tank provides a dual *integrative* and *communicative* function for a policy network.

Integrative Role of Think Tanks

Competing policy network theories disagree on the specifics of what binds the network,³ but they agree that cohesive beliefs exist and foster cross-professional relationships (Smith & Weishaar, 2018, p. 408). Think tanks are viewed as key actors who facilitate and mediate the network by encouraging communications and interactions between political groups, parties and expert practitioners. Rather than 'thinking' the think tank provides a 'third space' that fosters 'ideological fellowship' (Denham & Garnett, 1998b, p. 34) for professionals located outside dominant policy paradigms. Within these spaces the 'emotional energy' of intellectual cliques builds an in-group identity and fosters commitment to a shared world view (Collins, 1998). Think tanks become a hub – a trusted site where others can exchange ideas.

Communicative Role of Think Tanks

The communicative role of think tanks is twofold. First, think tanks can act as a mouthpiece or spokesperson for a coalition. Think tanks do this by contributing data, research, rhetoric and recommendations to those outside the core policy network – especially the media (Arnoldi, 2007; Chadwick et al., 2018; Lewis & Cushion, 2019). Think tanks use diverse methods of engaging with the network, including blogs, academic papers, policy proposals, evaluation studies and events. The second inflection is the think tank as gatekeeper for the network. Here the think tank seeks emerging ideas, research and issues which either need to be defined or translated to members of a coalition (James, 1993; Stone, 2007), for example, in translating complex techno-scientific or economic analysis for policymaking audiences.

The Network Intellectual approach has provided insightful case studies of think tanks in contemporary politics and policy development. However, the approach has narrowly defined think tanks by their service to a political project or coalition. Think

tanks become little more than a means to understand the work of a wider set of elites. This has two important ramifications for the study of think tanks. First, by binding think tanks through the metaphors of policy networks the British literature presents think tanks and their staff as either a Gramscian ‘organic intellectual’ of a political clique or the mouthpiece for funder interests. This presents think tanks as ‘vehicles of elite power’ (Wedel, 2017) who at best provide discourses to propagate dominant policy narratives and at worst promote disinformation (Slater, 2014). Lack of autonomy from the network is assumed, thus questions of how knowledge is made and the intellectual life within – and between – think tanks are overlooked. Second, though think tanks work across diverse professional fields, binding think tanks to specific cliques leads the Network Intellectual approach to restrict the types of actors counted as part of a think tank network. A researcher might use a variety of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct these networks, but they identify which relationships are significant and worth including *a priori*. There is little consideration of the variety of actors who collaborate with think tanks but are either loosely associated with, or indeed outside, a specific political network.

THE NETWORKED INTELLECTUAL APPROACH

Within the study of networks relating to public policy and expertise there are two dominant approaches – metaphorical and formal network analysis. Network Intellectual studies favour the metaphorical approach which uses networks as a descriptive heuristic tool – identifying a flexible space for policymakers to interact which is distinct from more traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical policymaking structures and processes (Oliver & Faul, 2018, p. 369). In contrast, the Networked Intellectual approach favours formal network analysis. This draws on theories and quantitative and qualitative procedures (derived from graph theory, sociology, psychology and social anthropology) referred to as social network analysis (SNA) (Oliver & Faul, 2018, p. 370). I am not suggesting that choosing SNA leads to a different perspective on think tank intellectualism. For example, the power-structure research tradition of political sociology associated with Domhoff (2006) uses formal SNA to study shared directorships between think tanks and other corporate and political actors. The crux of my proposal is the potential of formal SNA in combination with a new perspective on think tanks and their alliances.

The Networked Intellectual approach aims to understand the policy network from the perspective of think tanks and uses mixed method empirical analysis to understand the structure of the network think tanks work within. There are a number of important tenets of this new approach:

- It shifts the focus back onto think tanks as a case study of contemporary policy-focused public intellectual engagement.⁴
- Instead of bracketing out the intellectual labour behind the interventions think tanks make, this approach investigates how these intellectuals make and shape

policy knowledge, which takes account of how these actors build distinct intellectual products within the constraints of their personal biases, organizational cultures and wider political/corporate affiliations.

- This requires broadening the scope of think tank networks beyond political projects to consider *ties that emerge through process of intellectual production*. These are networks which 'tend to be less formally structured and visible and which by their nature are interstitial as they draw disparate actors and institutions together' (Kadushin, 1976, p. 770).
- Emergent networks are located through analysing the products of think tanks. My own research focuses mainly on the production of policy reports, but also tweets and other engagements. This focus on the products locates an intellectual 'within a broader socio-political or artistic arena whilst also situating other intellectuals, possibly depicting them as allies in a similar venture, predecessors of a similar orientation or alternatively as intellectual opponents' (Baert, 2012, p. 311). A policy report is more than a public presentation of research. It is an 'organizational artefact' that records the variety of actors who have contributed to its production (Freeman & Maybin, 2011, p. 160).
- To capture the important actors within an emergent network, researchers need to identify who and what resources think tanks enrol when making knowledge products. For British think tanks these resources represent the funders, authors and advisers of their publications. Studying these networks identifies the valued and powerful actors think tanks acknowledge. Such networks can include a stable core of valued allies and/or contributors who are only enrolled on single projects for their specific expertise or funding.

In order to demonstrate the potential of the Networked Intellectual approach, the following section draws upon aspects of an ongoing longitudinal study of British think tanks. The findings are derived from the analysis of disclosed think tank funders drawn from over 2500 open-access policy reports published by British think tanks between 2005 and 2012 and interviews with think tank researchers. Whilst I have provided short explanations of specific quantitative procedures,⁵ it is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a comprehensive account of the methodology⁶ or to expand upon and evaluate specific findings.

Mapping Relations

The Network Intellectual approach presents think tank networks as partisan groupings. This implies that think tank networks are ideologically *homophilous* – think tanks with shared ideological positions are likely to be in (or form) relationships with each other.⁷ Is there evidence of ideological homophily in think tank funding networks? The graph in Figure 1.1 visualizes a shared funding network of 16 British generalist 'policy advocacy' think tanks (Weaver, 1989). The nodes (circles) represent individual think tanks and the ties (lines linking a node) represent a shared funder. Each node is shaded to represent the think tank's ideological affiliation.⁸

Figure 1.1 Sixteen British think tanks connected by shared funders

SNA offers a variety of quantitative approaches for measuring homophily. For example, the EI Index determines the extent to which actors hold ties with others with similar (internal or ‘I’) or different (external or ‘E’) attributes (Borgatti et al., 2013). An EI score can range between +1 and -1. A score closer to +1 indicates heterophily whereas as a score closer to -1 indicates homophily. The EI Index can measure homophily of the whole network, of groups and the ‘ego networks’ of individual actors. The network of 16 think tanks above has an EI score of 0.179, which suggests that sharing of funders between these 16 think tanks is not polarized along ideological lines.

Mapping Resources

As well as characterizing the relationships between think tanks, the Networked Intellectual approach can also broaden understanding of the types of funders that are active within the think tank community. The established literature might lead you to conclude that think tanks are dependent on private sector funding. The findings in Table 1.1 corroborate this assertion. From the disclosed funders of 27 British think tanks it is clear that private sector funders are by far the most numerous funding bodies. However, the prevalence of private sector funders does not necessarily equal importance, popularity or power. Measures of network centrality can be employed to detect well-connected or ‘popular’ nodes within a network. Being a central actor is also associated with power and prestige (Ward et al., 2011). By applying network centrality, a more complex picture emerges (Figure 1.2). The most central nodes in

Table 1.1 Number of think tank funders by organization type

Sector	Count
Private sector	185
Trust/foundation	76
Public body	75
Charity/NGO	60
Other	28
Local government (UK)	18
National government (UK)	16
International organization or foreign government	15
Academic/research council	10
Individual donor	10
Trade union	4
Devolved government (UK)	4

Note: For visual clarity nodes with a degree of 1 have been removed.

Figure 1.2 Visualization of the disclosed funders of 27 British think tanks, 2005–12

the network are a mix of non-profit trusts and foundations, government departments and private sector actors. This neither proves nor disproves private sector influence on think tanks. However, it does suggest that certain cross sector funders are more active within the think tank community than others.

The Politics of Knowledge Production

The exploration of think tank knowledge production cannot be achieved through quantitative SNA alone. Qualitative interviews with think tank researchers recounting the experience of producing policy reports reconstructs a think tank researcher's practice, their perspective on their personal and organizational networks, and their perception of their role within them. This provides valuable insight into the way in which think tank researchers manage actors/resources from a diverse number of professions, and how researchers and think tanks oscillate between agency and dependence within their networks (Tchilingirian, 2018).

Taking funding relationships as an example, interviewees described not only how they actively procure and enrol funders, but also how they attempt to overcome potentially problematic dependencies. This story is not just a dialogue between think tank and funder. Interviews with think tank researchers highlighted how expert knowledge is translated and how various actors (such as academics, activists, politicians and so on) are utilized by think tank researchers to tame funders or to alleviate public suspicion towards research associated with problematic money. The intellectual life of a think tank is a 'dance' whereby think tank researchers have to balance a number of competing interests, ensuring they are all 'in step' with one another to secure the performance of intellectual credibility and policy relevance (Tchilingirian, 2018, p. 175).

The rich description of the intellectual life within the think tanks enabled analysis to move beyond simplistic depictions of think tanks as either passive hubs and conduits for other elites, or 'subservient' handmaidens to more powerful interests, or as 'leaders' of coalitions. Instead a nuanced understanding of the manner in which think tank researchers bring more and less powerful actors together, harmonize the various interests of competing professions, and convince their connections to invest and trust their intellectual credibility can be established. In sum, exploring how think tank researchers experience their coalitions underscores how the governance of think tank networks is an ongoing accomplishment and process.

CONCLUSION

This chapter opened with a review of the literature on British think tanks. I suggest this research shares a common approach to the study of think tanks – what I call Network Intellectuals. These studies present think tanks through their service to a policy coalition. I presented an alternative Networked Intellectuals approach that refocuses attention on the intellectual life within think tanks and uses networks analytically to understand the structure of the space in which they operate.

There are some key methodological lessons from the Networked Intellectual approach which are worthy of consideration in informing future research:

- Focusing on resources: In analysing what is valued within the network it is possible to compare capitals across organizations within the space and indeed chart them across time.
- Focusing on products: In the study of emergent networks using the output (in my case the policy report) as a site of study it is possible to populate the space with the plethora of actors within it and for this to be investigated empirically. Policy reports are not the only products; think tanks are often highly active on social media. The digital environment is a fruitful site for deepening knowledge about how think tanks go about promoting their research, advocating for policy proposals and interacting with other think tanks, other elites and perhaps the public. For example, Anstead and Chadwick (2018) conducted SNA on Twitter data to study how the Institute for Fiscal Studies interacted with political actors during the lead up to the 2015 UK budget to understand the production (and continuation) of the think tank's authority in public debates.

This chapter has presented two approaches, but these should be seen as a wide spectrum and certainly should not be seen as oppositional or incompatible. The Network Intellectuals approach has produced valuable insights about the political projects think tanks seek to promote and implement, connections to corporate lobbying, and the concepts of mediation and intellectual brokerage. The Networked Intellectual approach draws heavily on these as developments but explores them through emergent relationships and combining them with network data to understand what patterns relationships within the policy–knowledge nexus. In so doing, it provides a rich quantitative and qualitative description of the structure of the think tank network and the dependencies and tensions within the space.

This chapter opened with Plehwe's observation that think tanks and their networks remain obscure and under-theorized. In bringing the Network and Networked Intellectual approaches together, making use of online and offline data sources and the methodological power of formal SNA we can take think tanks and their networks out of the shadows and into the foreground in studies of contemporary policy advice and knowledge production.

NOTES

1. Enumerating the number of organizations self-defining as think tanks in a polity is contentious. For example, McGann (2019) counts 321 in a recent study, whereas, at the time of writing, the *On Think Tanks* (n.d.) global directory recorded 166.
2. See Domínguez and Hollstein (2014) for a challenge to this perspective. Also, later in this chapter I advocate for a mixed method approach which mitigates the risks Ball describes.
3. For example, discourse coalitions comprise actors from across sectors and professions who share similar 'views of reality' (Hajer, 1993, p. 45). Similarly, members of advocacy coalitions share 'values, ideologies or approaches' (Sabatier, 1993, p. 25). In contrast

- epistemic communities tend to be more specific, comprised of experts with shared expertise and a commitment to a policy enterprise (Haas, 1992, p. 3).
4. See Hernando (2019) for a recent example of a study that takes a similar interest in ‘how think tanks think’, albeit without the use of formal or metaphorical network approaches.
 5. Analysis was conducted using UCInet (Borgatti et al., 2002) and visualized using Netdraw (Borgatti, 2002).
 6. See Borgatti et al. (2013) and Hanneman and Riddle (2005) for introductions to quantitative SNA (the latter is a free e-book).
 7. See McPherson et al. (2001) for a review of the concept and related research.
 8. This was established through reviewing a think tank’s public descriptions of their position and values, media reports and established scholarship.

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