

Notes Day 1

Session name: What is a think tank? History, roles and models in differing contexts

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What is a think tank?

It almost seems like the one million dollar question, difficult to answer in a simple way. Many in the session agreed that the majority of people do not know what a think tank is or, when they know, the first thing they think it is something related to the military or government, or some random expert giving their opinions on television, pushing their own agenda.

More importantly, what is in a label of a think tank?

Think tanks are often confused with academia. In fact, in some countries think tanks are named as research centres or observatories. The normative definition does not actually work for a think tank. It is very difficult to pinpoint a description or a definition. Most think tanks are not like Brookings Institutions or Chatham House. Often, think tanks exist on the boundaries of other organisations. [Medved](#) shows how think tanks overlap with other fields and their impact on the organisation itself. Some are closer to media, closer to communications agencies, closer to consultancies.

Labelling is, in itself, a political act. It is also an opportunity for funding. Rejecting a label might mean rejecting being associated with funding from foreign institutions in certain regions of the world.

It is easier to identify what think tanks do:

Educate policy makers, produce papers, analyse impacts of certain policies, convene, research, deliver recommendations, lobby, advocate for policies, inform, promote public discussions, try to frame problems and sometimes suggest policy solutions.

But how often does the think tank implement the policies? There is a growing trend, particularly in some countries such as Brazil of creating *think and do tanks*. The changes of narrative also impacted the changes on think tanks: how they are seen, their roles, their ever-changing business models. It also depends on the countries' context: in Pakistan, the whole sector is facing changes due to the stop of funding from USA, for example.

The funding availability can determine the rate of growth of think tanks. They can be autonomously independent but they do need to know how to survive as an organisation especially with the current changes in the global landscape. In the future, many new models will show up.

RESOURCES:

Think tanks | Cast from Clay: <https://vimeo.com/328023181>

What is a think tank? | OTT: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4IF2MIF9KM>

Do Think-Tanks Have A Future? | Chatham House:
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/11/do-think-tanks-have-future>