

Interaction between Study and Social Agenda: A Case Study Analyzing the Publications Academic Newsletter of a Chinese Civilian Research Institute

SiMin Li, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

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Abstract

Public opinion is very crucial to influence policy maker's decision. Although the civilian research institutes that are consistent with the western definition of think tank and focus on social issues are always discriminated by the Chinese government, they still strive to persuade public to support their ideas by various knowledge products. This article selects samples of typical newspapers, a series of online publications "Academic Newsletter" released by a civilian research institute—The Transition Institute, and employs content analysis and discourse analysis on them in order to reveal how the institution or its members keeping contact with the society but within a certain distance. It discovers that news reports on social issues are concerned by researchers and start to write about it. Some issues even though which are unrelated with the researcher's academic and research background, can't be ignored because they have huge impact. Not all issues will become research matter, but some interrelated and keep appearing issues will be the research target, because these issues haven't not been resolved or improved. Some researchers also make use of news reports to disseminate their earlier findings repeatedly. There's a substantial divergence on observation and conclusions between researchers, the mass media, and public. Some propositions may change people's general cognition in consciousness, but with limited ability to communicate. Some advocacies under the constant political institution can neither be realized nor adopted by policy makers, and even become a threat to the existence of organizations.

Keywords: Interaction; study; social agenda; civilian research institute

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Introduction

Although there are many definitions of “Think tank” (for example, Leeson, Ryan, & Williamson, 2012; Pascal, 2013; Pautz, 2014; Rich, 2004; Stone, 2000), it is no doubt that think tanks play an important role in international relation, country, society and market, especially in developing countries which want to make policies efficiently and democratically. In China, official research institutes and semi-official research institutes which have more government links occupy many resources and media visibility. They also get much more attention of the domestic and international researchers. (Faulkner, 2007; Gill & Mulvenon, 2002; Tanner, 2002; Zhu & Xue, 2007)

However, the civilian research institutes that are consistent with the conventional western features of think tank, such as nonprofit, independent, and focus on social issues are always discriminated by the government on registration, research issues and information access. (Cao, 2011) Therefore they are hard to access to policymakers and lack of resources. Nevertheless, civilian research institutes are treated as an integral part of civil society and stand for a force of the civilian. It is important to observe this force and understand these burgeoning institutes.

What constitutes of a think tank? What are the differences between the think tank and social agenda? What is the status of think tank in China? This article selects samples of typical media, a series of online publications “Academic Newsletter” released by a civilian research institute—The Transition Institute, and employs content analysis and discourse analysis on them in order to reveal how the institution or its members keeping contact with the society but within a certain distance.

The Transition Institute

The Transition Institute (TI) was founded in 2007 whose goal is “investigating the problems and phenomena on freedom and justice during the transition of a society.” It is concerned about taxation, taxi industry, citizen participation and the experience of transition. You can find their mission on the website describing “the protection of the property, vulnerable groups and promotion of human right.” (see from http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.org.cn/org717/org_active)

The general number of its researchers is stable and there are two to three members flowing these years. At the moment, there are two to four full-time staffs responsible for daily administrative work. In 2014, four research assistants and a researcher joined in and its researchers are 14 nowadays. It is vital to about the education background and experience of those researchers. The new one who just came was an adjunct professor of law at the university as well as there are two doctoral candidates of economics and history. The rest are masters or bachelors on political economics, mechanics, psychology, sociology and so on. Overall, social science dominates the whole background which includes a famous lawyer.

TI has many e-publications (juveniles’ education, health care, taxi industry and so on) on its website for downloading. The series of “Academic Newsletter” are the only regular publications on line. The first one was published on March, 2010 which is published once a month or several months and becomes a window to present their academic trends, researches and thoughts to the public.

Method and data

At first, the article picks out researchers' essays from the "research column" and "cover subject" of ten publications from 2010 to 2014 as samples and generalizes key words from these essays. (see Appendix A) Those key words are used to search for news and commentaries of medias on the "Baidu domestic news" website by setting finished or published time. The news are chosen like the following standards:

1. domestic regular newspapers on line, for example digital paper "People Daily"
2. reprinted news on the famous websites, such as Sina, Tencent , which are with reporters' names and from explicit agencies *
3. related with the key words directly

As for the variables and values of the content analysis, it follows that by setting "Keywords, Numbers of News, Genres of News, News Tributes and Main Content"(see Appendix B)

And then is the qualitative analysis. The article employs discourse analysis on one representative issue "unlicensed vehicle" from those essays. In addition to the texts of the researchers and media, the article will choose the professional commentaries edited by editors, comments from the anonymous and microblogs (weibo) to analysis.(see Appendix C)

Content analysis

Firstly, from the prospect of the researchers' research fields, "taxi industry, taxation, education, public works, health care and energy" and so on are strongly linked with public as well as the regular social agendas of news. For example, according to the appendix B, there were 139 pieces of news about "unlicensed vehicle" on the media in less than 30 days, at least 5 pieces a day, and such vehicles exist everywhere in China. The negative news achieves 61%.(86/139)

Some researches were made because of the news, like the Google Library reported by China Central Television. Some researches even though which are unrelated with the researcher's academic and research background, can't be ignored because they have huge impact, like an event of workers in TaiYuan province and Sun Flower Movement happened in TaiWan last year.(Appendix A)

Some interrelated and keep appearing issues will be the research target, because these issues haven't not been resolved or improved in a short time, like the "rumor" reported by media 6 pieces a day and the "railway ticket" during Chinese New Year every year. (see details from appendix B) But the perspective and extent are decided by researchers.

Secondly, TI notices to make use of news reports to disseminate their earlier findings repeatedly. They often arrange their essays published on media early on the Newsletter again. Three Gorges project that has been concerned by two members for many years, when it becomes the spot of media, they seize the chance to let public

know, even the researcher himself became the news. Apart from above, some issues rarely reported by domestic media or mentioned by the society but chose on the publications reflect the researchers' intention, like the purely theoretical article analyzing the basic contradiction of capitalism and the "Rome Statute" which often appears on international news with less linkage with China itself while researcher introduces it in detail.(Appendix B)

At last, even though TI cares much about the social agenda, not all issues will become research matter and the members have their own cases and sources as reference — as "Ministry of health should comply with the disciplines of market" says, researcher suspected the reality of the news according to his case, even those news never appears on mass media—"Changes of Chinese city land system" shows that a letter from 28 property owners could not be found on media.

Discourse analysis

Unlicensed vehicle (hei che) is a topic that everyone can say something in terms of their experiences and what they read from news media.

The nature of unlicensed vehicle

From the literally understanding of "unlicensed vehicle"(hei che), it means an illegal vehicle no matter what kinds of cars carrying passengers without registration and defaulting tax. As Hall said, news report generates from an established ideological structure which understand the world with a systematic limitation. (as cited in Chang, 1994,p.41) Media is often treated as maintaining the existing order. On this subject, news reports are in accordance with the government describing unlicensed vehicle illegal and unacknowledged. With a series of extraordinary criminal events, unlicensed vehicle also has other characters, danger — without insurance, unreasonable prices. From five professional commentaries collected by the article, only one affirms this vehicle is the "important supplement of the basic transport service".

As for the comments by the anonymous think lowly of the "licensed vehicle", because this type vehicle is the same as the unlicensed one in a way. As a result of the high cost of the licensed vehicle, people seem understand the unlicensed one. But as the researcher, the "licensed vehicle" is not regular for the disordered management and the unlicensed one is managed terrible by the administrators. As far as he is concerned, all the licensed car is unlicensed at the beginning in history and the driver of the unlicensed car who has the experience has to quit the "licensed market" because of the loss of the right and the high prices. The researcher's opinions are different from the reporters and the reviewers, not only deeper than the report but also beyond the daily observation.

The reason of its appearance

Almost all the media texts think the reason is that the licensed vehicle is not enough which leads to the unlicensed one appears. But the limited numbers depend on the situations. The commentaries and comments reflect the reality that not everyone has his own car. Therefore, nearly everyone suffers the occasion that you can't take a

“licensed vehicle” in time. In fact, this situation is pervasive. Because the unlicensed one competes with the licensed one, you can find the news about “the strike of taxi drivers ”and “authorities crack down on the unlicensed cars”. (“main content” of unlicensed vehicle in appendix B) However, researcher points out the quantity of public vehicles control. On the contrary, the “quantity of control” and public sectors who share profit emphasized by researcher rarely are reported on media.

Solution to solve the problem

Every news report in every place gives different solutions, but these methods cure the symptoms, not the disease. Unlicensed vehicle treated as illegal, nearly all the news indicate that it must be cracked down except one piece reporting legalization. The extent of hit depends on the places and target people. As for the “deficiency of licensed vehicle”, solutions include increasing the numbers of bus or route, rearranging the bus stops, improving the service of the licensed car on media texts. But the more thorough solutions put forward by reviewers, like reducing the fees of the admission, making enter sector easier and encouraging joint operation, are ineffective, even never put into practice. The researcher thinks those vehicles should be legitimated and make some provisions to ensure safe. But his advocacy is never adopted by policy-maker.

Limitation and Conclusion

The limitations of the study need to be addressed that those online media texts and commentaries presented on news websites are not from a professional database. Lacking of such database ,the study has to collect data from a Chinese News Platform website. That means I have to read each piece of news then pick them out and can't judge the genres of news precisely because of the format restricted to the webpage. Similarly, the huge numbers of the microblogs and some disappearing micro-blogs and microblogs made me choose the typical one to present.

The study explores how the institution or its members keeping contact with the society but within a certain distance. It discovers that the most researches of publications are relative with the researchers' fields and are the regular agendas of the media and public. News reports on social issues are concerned by researchers and start to write about it. Some issues even though which are unrelated with the researcher's academic and research background, can't be ignored because they have huge impact. Some interrelated and keep appearing issues will be the research target, because these issues haven't not been resolved or improved in a short time. Some researchers also make use of news reports to disseminate their earlier findings repeatedly. Some issues rarely reported by domestic media and mentioned by the society but chose on the publications reflect the researchers' intention. TI cares much about the social agenda, not all issues will become research matter and the members have their own sources and cases as references.

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* In fact, the author has read all news no matter they are on the famous websites or not because online information has many forms ,and then make statistics.

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Appendix A

The basic situation of 10 publications from 2010 to 2014

Time	Title	Author	Field	Time	Keywords	Notes
2010 NO.1 03.15	Unlicensed vehicle is legal.	You,C.L.	taxi industry	01.24	unlicensed vehicles	
	Is it the soundbite of Google Library rational?	Xia,N.	criminal law, civil right	2009 10.25	infringement copyright of Google Library	
	Science and law problems of the mental patient's forced cure.	Huang,K.P.	Taxation, mentality	2009 04.15	mental patients' forced cure	has published on media with some changes
2010 No.2 04.15	The transition from the family plan to state coercion.	Ren,X.H.	education, public works, one-child policy	04.12	population and family planning law; Yang, ZZ; allowing a second child	
	Why the reform of health care issues of farmer is so hard.	Yang,Z.L.	Agriculture rural area, new cooperative care	04.02	document of health care reform of central government	
	The crux of Chinese taxi industry: Wenzhou model.	You,C.L.		2009 07.28	taxis strike	has published on media in 2009
	The revolution of city's land.	He,Z.J.	documentary	04.12	land property right; house property right	
2010 No.3 05.15	New cooperative care gradually gets out of dilemma.	Yang,Z.L.		05.05	new cooperative care	
	Oppose to impose fuel adjustment fee.	You,C.L.		05.15	taxi fuel adjustment fee	

2010 No.9 11.27	Ministry of health should comply with the disciplines of market.	Yang,Z.L.		11.27	rules of the project of basic care; project of high quality care	
	The cost of the Three Gorges Project.	Guo,Y.S.	taxation, taxi industry, three gorges project		store water of three gorges	
	The experiences of the first try to open the fund of Three Gorges Project.	Ren,X.H.			fund of three gorges	a record describing the experience
2011 No.1 01.24	To break monopoly, to decline price.	You,C.L.		01.24	hard to get train ticket	retort an economist's opinion of price
	Raising the price can't solve the problems.	Guo,Y.S.			hard to get train ticket	doubt the mentioned economist; has published on media
	Can breaking the limitation of the entrance improve service?	Guo, Y.S. Jin,F.S.	Newsletter editor		hard to get train ticket	a discussion of between 2 researchers
	Some feelings of going back home.	Yang,Z.L.			hard to get train ticket	
2011 No.6 07.15	A report of the basic care of urban-rural integration in SanYa.	Yang,Z.L.			health care in SanYa	
	The shortcomings of the psychiatry and its legislation.	Huang,K.P.			the draft of the Mental Health Act	

	Something you may not know about the history of Three Gorges.	Guo,Y.S.			A plan of post-three gorges; disadvantages of Three Gorges	
	We have no confidence on Three Gorges.	Ren,X.H			A plan of post-three gorges; disadvantages of Three Gorges	
	The law dilemma of the Immigration.	Liu,Z.	electrical energy		immigration in Three Gorges	
2012 No.2 07.14	Rumor and social reform in China.	Xia,N.			rumor	
	To view Chinese tax system in terms of double imposition.	Huang,K.P.			double imposition	part content stemmed from a pamphlet; has published on media
	Tiered pricing for electricity is at cross purpose.	Liu,Z.			National Development and Reform Commission and step tariff	has published on media
	The legislation of the land property right.	Xia,N.			legislation of land property; real estate right	
	A short history of Chinese real estate right.	TI			legislation of land property; real estate right	
2012 No.4 11.03	An analysis on basic Capitalism contradiction.	Yang,Z.L.				purely theoretical article
	The violence in Foxconn is relevant to national system.	Chen,M.	political review; political history		an event of workers in Taiyuan	

	Condemn the violent safeguard in Foxconn.	Jin,F.S.			an event of workers in Taiyuan	
	The economy growth and the protection of labor.	Yang,Z.L.			an event of workers in Taiyuan	
	The integration problems after the riot.	Ren,X.H.			an event of workers in Taiyuan	
2013 No.2 01.28	A myth of the first cooperative care in rural area.	Yang,Z.L.			the first cooperative care	
	The freedom and liability of the submissive.	Huang,K.P.			the group petition forced to cure	
	Chong Qing's land finance.	Xia,N.			Chong Qing land finance	
	Changes of Chinese city land system.	He, ZJ.			a letter to National People's Congress from 28 property owners	
2014 No.6 06.01	To interpret the opposing-trade movement from a view of WTO	Xia,N.		05.11	the opposing-trade movement	has published on media
	An analysis on the influence which improves human right	Yang,Z.L.		2011	China and Rome Statute	has published of Rome Statute on oversea Chinese media in 2011

Note. the red words mean those contents are from "cover subject" of publications

Appendix B

Key words news quantitative statistics

Keywords	Numbers of News	Genres of News	News Tributes	Main Content
unlicensed vehicle	2010.1.1-1.23: 139	straight news: 121 depth story :16 feature: 1 interview: 1	negative 86 hybrid 3 positive 12 neutral 38	criminal cases related with unlicensed vehicles; action against them; solutions to problems; new trends in market
infringement copyright of Google Library	2009.1.1-10.25 28	straight news 26 depth story 2	negative 10 hybrid 7 neutral 11	foreign investigations on Google Library; Chinese copyrighters' responses and communication
mental patients' forced cure	2009.1.1-2010.3.14 24	Straight news: 16 depth story 8	negative 5 hybrid 2 neutral 17	ZYJ's event; reasons and consequences of "forced cure"; legislation of Mental Health Act
population and family planning law ①; Yang, ZZ ②; allowing a second child ③	①2010.1.1-4.11: 4 ②2010.1.1-4.11: 2 ③2010.1.1-4.11:27 total 33	straight news 31 depth story 2	hybrid 5 neutral 28	members' investments; adjunct professor rejected fine; proposal with a second child; discussion and analysis on one-child policy
document of health care reform of central government	2010.1.1-4.2: 18	straight news15 depth story 1 feature 1 interview 1	neutral 16 positive 2	a reform plan announced by government
taxis strike	2010.3.15-4.15: 2	straight news: 2	negative: 2	taxis stroke in BaiSe; protested insurance company

land property right ①; house property right ②	①2010.3.15-4.12: 85 ②2010.3.15-4.12: 1 total 86	straight news:64 depth story:20 feature:1 interview:1	hybrid:11 neutral 39 positive:10 negative:26	disputes about estate; definition on property; HuaiAn model
New cooperative health care	2010.4.15-5.14: 114	straight news:113 feature:1	hybrid 2 neutral:87 positive: 25	introductions of new cooperative care all over the country
taxi fuel adjustment fee	2010.1.1-5.14: 74	straight news:71 depth story:3	negative:16 hybrid:8 neutral:50	how this fee generates and a series of specifications; users and experts' feedback
rules of the project of basic care; ①; project of high quality care ②	①2010.1.1-11.27: 7 ②2010.1.1-11.27: 56 total 63	straight news:62 feature:1	negative:1 hybrid:6 neutral:37 positive:19	generation and performance of the rules; introduce the situations ,facilities and effects
store water of three gorges	2010.8.15-11.27: 111	straight news 96 depth report 4 feature 6 interview 5	neutral 65 hybrid 6 positive 40	the whole process of “pass the plan, test and achieve 175m”;introduce the situation of shipping, geology and pollution
fund of three gorges	2010.1.1-11.27: 11	straight news 5 depth report 4 feature 1 interview 1	negative 4 neutral 5 hybrid 1 positive 1	Ren,XL failed to sue Ministry of Finance for the fund of three gorges; subsequent situations of fund and the bill
hard to get train ticket	2011.1.1-1.24: 71	straight news:67 depth story:4	negative 27 hybrid 7 neutral 33 positive 4	the selling situation of tickets; ministry of railway's promise; consumers' solutions
health care in SanYa	2009.1.1-2011.7.14 21	straight news:21	neutral 16 positive 5	the first city constructed urban-rural integration system; introduction of fund, content and reimbursement

draft of Mental Health Act	2011.6.1-7.14 38	straight news:23 depth story:10 Interview:5	negative:4 hybrid 16 neutral 18	collect ideas about the draft; people's discussion, evaluation, criticism explanation; the process of enactment
a plan of post-three gorges/ the disadvantages of it	2011.5.1-7.14: 61	straight news:38 depth story:16 interview:7	negative 2 hybrid 21 neutral 33 positive 5	a plan pointing out problems released by government; terrible drought in Yangzi area; debates on the problems and review of the decision process
immigration in Three Gorges	2011.5.1-7.14: 10	straight news 9 depth story 1	negative 3 positive 2 neutral 5	arrangement and management; embezzlement of pension difficulties of immigration
rumor	2012.6.15-7.14: 181	straight news 160 depth story 18 Interview 3	negative 36 hybrid 11 neutral 121 positive 13	all kinds of rumors are verified or clarified; punishment of the rumormongers
double imposition	2012.1.1-7.14: 36	straight news 27 depth story 7 Interview 2	negative 7 hybrid 9 neutral 15 Positive 5	experimental unit on added-value tax; doubt of the tax and effect
step tariff	2012.5.13-7.14 286	straight news 247 depth story 32 interview 5 feature 2	negative 14 neutral 226 hybrid 25 positive 21	public hearing and price plan put forward by local governments; process of the price adjustment, announcement and meaning
legislation of land property / real estate right	2012.1.1-7.14 19	straight news 14 depth story 5	negative 2 hybrid 1 neutral 16	clear out limited property house; experts' solution to farmers' land property; reform in ShenZhen
an event of workers in TaiYuan	2012.9.23-11.3 31	straight news 27 depth story 3 feature 1	negative 29 hybrid 1 neutral 1	fistfight among 2000 people; reasons and management of event

the first cooperative health care in rural area	2012.1.1-2013.1.27: 0			
the group petition forced to cure	2012.1.1-2013.1.27: 2	straight news 1 depth story 1	neutral 1 negative 1	two cases happened in other places
Chong Qing land finance	2013.1.1-1.27: 2	depth story 2	neutral 1 hybrid 1	land finance in many other places in China
a letter to National People's Congress from 28 property owners	2010.11.1-2013.1.27: 0			
the opposing-trade movement	2014.3.1-6.1: 105	straight news 93 depth story 8 interview 4	negative 37 hybrid 8 neutral 52 positive 8	the whole record of the movement; all kinds of responses, judgement and influences
China and Rome Statute	2011.1.1-2014.6.1: 2	straight news 1 depth story 1	neutral 1 positive 1	international court needs Chinese lawyers; review of Chinese human rights

Appendix C

The reviews of “unlicensed vehicle”

Key words	Editorial & Letter	Comment	Microblog	Searching Time
unlicensed vehicle	5	68	326	2010.1.1-1.23