Methodologies for Researching Think tanks

1) Basic Information:

Medod: Case studies, Qualitative Methods and Diachronic Perspectives
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2) Description of method and how to use it:

Objectives
Those who wish to generalise about the work of think tanks face at least three hurdles. a) Their remarkable institutional diversity; b) Their high degree of instability, as they often depend on the movements and expertise of key individuals and fluctuating sources of funding; c) The richness of the data available about them and produced by them – across policy reports, parliamentary interventions, economic indicators, blogs, media appearances, etc.

What I will present here is, rather than a single ready-made method, a qualitative approach to researching think tanks that attempts to tackle these considerations. For this I will focus on the interventions of think tanks themselves, what they say (and when and how) under a specific label – their own name – to other actors across the policy debate.

In my particular research, I centre my attention on the intellectual and institutional dynamics of a subset of British think tanks during 2007-2013, seen through the prism of their policy interventions. As my focus is diachronic and based on case studies, I will attempt to weave together an account of these changes through interviews and the analysis of internal and external documents. The study that most closely resembles this line of action is McLennan's (2004) research of Demos' publications, which I thoroughly recommend.

Description of the method
This methodology relies especially on the analysis of think tanks' policy reports for several reasons. Firstly since, at least in the UK, they tend to be readily available and widely disseminated. Second, because the topics covered by them – especially for organisations relying heavily on research commissions – signal changes in the policy and funding climate. Third, because through them one can observe intellectual changes, stances on the events of the day and movements of people.

The volume of publications under this rubric can be considerable. Large think tanks such as the IPPR can produce over 60 reports each year. And although these publications share many similarities, they can have remarkable internal diversity. For these reasons I decided to focus on specific publications and briefs, coding key reports – for instance, annual reports – and research summaries through the qualitative data analysis software NVivo from a grounded theory perspective. I have complemented this with the use of spreadsheets that summarise the think tanks' publications across a set of variables, such as funder, policy area and method. However, other researchers might consider applying more quantitative measures, such as content and corpus analysis, or a more streamlined coverage of publications across several years, as do Álvarez Rivadulla *et al* (2010).

The restricted focus on case studies allows to supplement this approach with publications not only by these think tanks, but *about* them. These can comprise media appearances and parliamentary records, often apropos a policy report published at the time. Also, for the case of UK think tanks and depending on transparency levels, financial and institutional records held at the Companies House and the Charity Commission can be quite illuminative, especially in relation to changes in sources and volumes on funding.

I decided to complement these sources of data, as did McLennan (*ibid*), with qualitative semi-structured interviews. Interviews have been used in several other researches on think tanks for various purposes – for instance as part of a social network analysis or in order to focus on a more topic-driven aspect of think tank production (Redden, 2010). In my case, I took a narrative approach, asking current and former think tank experts, communication officers and managers to speak about the role they believe their organisation should play in the policy debate and how that relates to changes in the period under consideration. This has the disadvantages of requiring a clear targeting of who should be interviewed and considerable previous knowledge, which can slow the research process and demand extensive planning.

In the best case scenario, this approach generates a rich web of information that allows the tracing of diachronic changes in a specific think tank's work, and invite for further comparisons across types of think tank and contexts. It can thus afford greater attention to detail and sensitivity to change than more ambitious projects, permitting the use of mixed methods and variegate sources of data. Hence, through such efforts one can link changes in funding climates with movements of people and public interventions in suggestive ways. Denham and Garnett's (1998) seminal book on think tanks in the UK is a case in point of such an effort.

Practicalities

Nonetheless, this type of research does not lack shortcomings. The most obvious one is the specificity of its findings; in the end, all think tanks are in one way or another *sui generis*. This certainly has an effect on the generalisability and scalability of the study, but might also affect the methodological approach that is most appropriate to use on a specific think tank. For instance, a sizeable proportion of the reports the Adam Smith

Institute publishes are written by external fellows, and although these fellows broadly agree with the policy stance of the institute, it is hard to say if these reports represent the ASI itself or its broader 'advocacy coalition.' Such limitations can be remediated to an extend with a comparative approach, but even then sampling is paramount. Within a case study diachronic approach one can find tendencies and pressures, but hardly any rules that apply across the spectrum.

The most interesting methodological hurdle is, however, the issue of narrative formation. Recollecting events across time in order to form a story with a beginning and an ending necessitates a degree of selection, of deciding what is worth telling and what is part of the 'story' of a think tank. This introduces an inescapable heuristic dimension.

3) Further resources:

Álvarez Rivadulla, J., Markoff, J. and Montecinos, V. (2010) The trans American market advocacy think tank movement. In: Abelson, D. [et al] *Think tanks and public policies in Latin America*. Buenos Aires: Fundación CIPPEC. Available at [05/06/2015] https://www.academia.edu/452212/The_transamerican_market_advocacy_think_tank_movement#

Denham, A. and Garnett, M. (1998) *British think tanks and the climate of opinion*. London: UCL Press

Gonzalez Hernando, M. (2015) Thinking British think tanks and their public interventions after the financial crash. In: Ciofalo, G. Di Stefano, A. and Leonzi, S. (eds.) *Power and communication: Media, politics and institutions in times of crisis*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 99-116

McLennan, G. (2004) Dynamics of transformative ideas in contemporary public discourse, 2002-2003. Available at [05/06/2015] http://www.esds.ac.uk/doc/5312/mrdoc/pdf/q5312uguide.pdf

Redden, J. (2010) The mediation of poverty: The news, new media and politics. Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London. Available at [05/06/2015] http://research.gold.ac.uk/6540/

4) Other methods of interest:

Social Network Analysis