

Review of: "The Role of Think Tanks in Megatrends Analysis and Future Research"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The Role of Think Tanks in Megatrends Analysis and Future Research

This paper – indeed, this topic – takes up a very important part of a broadening potential role for think tanks. I applaud the authors for taking up this theme. With that in mind, I would like to ask them to be a bit more careful in creating a unified and consistent stream through their research writing and being more forceful and direct in terms of a concluding thought.

There are many instances in the paper where the authors assert without any basis that think tanks are involved in megatrends discourses and future research. Indeed, the second sentence of the Abstract states this explicitly. Yet that is not my impression of what the majority of think tanks are doing in reality and the paper does little to convince me that this is the case.

The section titled 4. Definition and Evolution of Think Tanks really doesn't look at either ... I understand that the title is an effort to connect section 3 (Definition and Evolution of Megatrends Analysis and Future Research), but there is much academic work dedicated to simply working out what the defining characteristics of think tanks are ... and the evolution of think tanks is, as is pointed out in the paper, largely a function of the function of the think tank sector at large or a cumulative view of think tanks in a particular activity sector. One of the issues here – as written in the section detailing the CCG – is that think tanks play a role in setting agendas and conducting policy interpretations. How this matters for megatrends discourses and future research is that the time-scale that can be justified for the donors that support think tanks is usually on the order of policy creation and interpretation ... the time-scale for megatrends discourses and future research is much longer. Yet it is precisely the reality of that long time scale that makes the focus of think tanks on megatrends, future studies, or strategic foresight so very, very important.

Which brings us to the seven think tanks that are introduced. It is telling that there is discernable difference in terms of the degree to which these seven are active in megatrends discourses and future research. The descriptions for the Copenhagen Future Institute, the Center for China and Globalisation, Cultural Infusion, and 4Sing all do mention megatrends and future research explicitly but with varying degrees of concrete examples. For the Millennium Project, the focus seems to be on a global approach; the agenda for the Green Economy Coalition is less on the future than on a future green economy; the Civil Society Institute has three pillars ... but has no explicit focus on megatrends, future studies, or strategic foresight.

The conclusion seems to state (in the first paragraph) that we are witnessing a significant growth of larger and smaller

think tanks engaged in explicit analysis of megatrends, future studies, or strategic foresight ... but then (in the second paragraph) that the majority of established think tanks are not deeply affected by megatrends discourse and do not specifically engage in future studies. So, what was the point of introducing the seven cases: which side of this two-sided analysis did the seven show? I am just not sure how the pieces link up. Perhaps it was that the seven revealed the wide range of interest in megatrends, future studies, or strategic foresight – from low to high – across the range of think tanks – from small to large. If this is the case, please explicitly conclude that at the end of that section.

But there I think is the meaningfulness of the paper. Think tanks are pulled in various directions: some to argue for a particular social stance (the NRA in America), some to advance sound policy in a specific area (economic policy or foreign policy), ... but what is important now is that there are some that are taking up megatrends, future studies, or strategic foresight. The examples prove that there are various routes to and through this: these reflect new and emerging organization patterns, methodological approaches, and arenas in which to reify the abstractness of future studies. The conclusion is really that this is an area of think tank research ... and think tank reality, that should attract much more attention than it does. I hope that the authors will be able to create a more powerful conclusion to match the importance of the theme they are working on.