

## RESEARCH REPORT 53

# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THINK TANK RESOURCES AND IMPACT: AN EVALUATION OF ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO THE TJ RYAN FOUNDATION

Andre Yeo\*

### INTRODUCTION

There is no common consensus to date on what exactly is a think tank. The term 'think tank' was first used in the 1940s as a nickname for the think tanks of that century which were known instead as 'brain boxes'.<sup>1</sup> Since then, with the fragmentation of political power to include a greater diversity of political actors and the expansion of the types and roles of think tanks, the term has acquired new significance and application.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, attempting to conceptualise a universal definition of a think tank is an otiose task given the sheer diversity of think tanks, each subtly differing from the other in terms of their roles and functions. Alternatively, Diane Stone proffers that it is more constructive to conceptualise the term 'think tank' as an umbrella term. Stone posits that think tanks generally possess several common characteristics namely: organisational independence, permanency guided by public purpose, autonomy over the setting of research agendas which are policy focused, and stringent assessment standards equivalent to that in academia.<sup>3</sup>

The creation of one such think tank which would become the TJ Ryan Foundation (TJRF) was announced by Annastacia Palaszczuk, the former Leader of the Opposition of Queensland on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to assist with policy development in Queensland.<sup>4</sup> Named after the late Thomas Joseph Ryan who was the 19th Premier of Queensland, and modelled after the McKell Institute's constitution as a non-partisan organisation which excludes office-holders and employees of political parties from board membership, the TJRF is a progressive and independent think tank dedicated to undertaking research, stimulating discussion and reviewing policy processes.<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest strategic considerations of the foundation was the decision to adopt a minimalist function, focusing more on the production of research publications and press releases as opposed to the organisation of functions and conferences. This decision arose out of three deliberations. The primary consideration was the limitations imposed by the modest seed funding provided by the Australian Labour Party (ALP) and the Queensland Council of Unions (QCU). These limitations were further compounded by the second consideration, that of the presence of competitors- other think tanks, organisations, and societies that also sought to influence the policy making process such as the Australian Fabians, the Brisbane Institute, the Australian Institute of Public Administration, and the Australasian Study of Parliament Group. Competing against better resourced and established organisations in resource intensive activities such as event planning

---

\* Andre Yeo was a 2016 intern with the TJ Ryan Foundation, through the School of Political Science and International Studies' Internship Program at the University of Queensland.

<sup>1</sup> Simon J., *Capturing the political imagination: think tanks and the policy process* (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1998), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Higgott R., Underhill G. and Bieler A., *Non-state actors and authority in the global system* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 221.

<sup>3</sup> *Capturing the political imagination*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> [Record of Proceedings](#), 54th Parliament, Legislative Assembly of Queensland, 16 April 2013.

<sup>5</sup> [Why a think tank?](#), TJ Ryan Foundation.

was not a utility maximising option for a newly formed think tank with modest funding. The third deliberation was that the original leadership group was working in an honorary capacity without a bureaucratic infrastructure.

Despite adopting a minimalist approach, the TJRF has become an indispensable source of policy advice, growing in capacity and developing the necessary infrastructure required to carry out its function, some of which are the establishment of a website and a network of research associates. By contrast, many think tanks and competitors in Queensland have declined in their capacity to sustain essential operations such as the organisation of public functions and the publication of reports. Michael Clifford's engagement with the executive group after succeeding John Battams as the QCU nominee position on the Board of the TJRF has culminated in several horizontal planning proposals for the TJRF's 2016-2017 plan. One such proposal which was adopted was the decision to revise the TJRF's minimalist approach by organising policy forums. This recommendation is very opportune and has great potential to further the aims of the TJRF given the context of weakening competitors. However, as a corollary this recommendation also raises budgeting concerns about the capacity of the TJRF to sustain the proposed new initiatives.

This research paper seeks to pave the way for the 2016-2017 TJRF futures planning by exploring the distribution of resource allocation, more specifically examining the relationship between organisational input and impact for think tanks similar to the TJRF in Australia. Thereafter, this research paper then explores alternative strategies the TJRF can implement to supplement its modest funding without compromising its independence and commitment to public service.

## ORGANISATIONAL INPUTS

### Funding

Apart from the main concern of sustainability, funding has ineluctable impacts on a think tank. Like all organisations, think tanks are dependent on funding but a non-profit bipartisan think tank differs from the typical corporate organisation in having to maintain perceptions of legitimacy and neutrality amid pressure from funders. Thomas Medvetz highlights that the four pursuits of think tanks for academic, political, entrepreneurial, and media authority 'have a bipolar structure.... [Scholarly rigor] demands a certain insulation from commercial pressures, freedom from political censorship, and relative indifference to publicity'.<sup>6</sup> Thus a think tank that strives to be bipartisan or progressive has limited manoeuvrability given the incompatibility and the opportunity costs associated with the relevant pursuits.

This balancing act is further examined in the field of organisational studies which have given rise to three prominent theories, elite, pluralist and field theory. John McLevey postulates that elite theorists conceptualise think tanks as instruments manipulated by the corporate-political elite to advance their interest marginalising and excluding other non-aligned think tanks.<sup>7</sup> Pluralists depict think tanks as 'representatives of many social groups... downplay their allegiances to larger groups in an effort to promote their intellectual independence'.<sup>8</sup> Field theory occupies an ambiguous position between the two theories acknowledging the complexity inherent in the think tank community. It conceives think tanks as hybrid organisations managing relationships between different stakeholders in an uncertain environment.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Stephen Barley notes the paucity of research on how think tanks shape the environment. Barley reinforces Stone's distinction of old guard and new partisan by noting the rise of new think tanks that focused more on publicity and are 'often specialised by policy issue, approaching from an ideology, and political orientation'.<sup>10</sup> Reinforcing Medvetz, Andrew Rich and Donald Abelson highlight that publicity is a double-edged sword that may have self-defeating consequences. In a bid to secure funding, think tanks may

<sup>6</sup> Medvetz T., "Public policy is like having a Vaudeville act": languages of duty and difference among think tank-affiliated policy experts', *Qualitative Sociology* 33(4) (2010): 549-562.

<sup>7</sup> McLevey J., 'Think tanks, funding, and the politics of policy knowledge in Canada', *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 51(1) (2014): 54-75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Barley S., 'Building an institutional field to corral a government: a case to set an agenda for organization studies', *Organization Studies* 31(6) (2010): 777-805.

trade independence for ideology, and in return funders and supporters want visibility as a sign of success resulting in pressure to generate publicity thereby alienating other stakeholders and potential sponsors.<sup>11</sup> Stone further elaborates that the pressure to tailor policy analysis to specific clientele compromises the private authority of a think tank which is premised on their independent reputation.<sup>12</sup> In essence, donor funding is highly politicised in the think tank community, and it serves as one of the many proxy indicators of legitimacy. Thus examining the relationship between funding and impact serves a dual purpose, besides ascertaining sustainability it reveals tendencies in resource allocation which may indicate underlying pressures.

### Staffing

Staffing is another crucial resource, the TJRF is primarily operates as a cottage industry with research functions being contracted out, and board members and central administration staff mostly serving on a pro bono capacity. This operating procedure is optimal for a small think tank as it significantly reduces overhead costs such as administration fees, and concomitantly increases the flexibility of the organisation to adapt to changing research agendas in contrast to housing residential research associates.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between manpower and impact is intricately linked with the relationship between funding and think tank impact.

### ORGANISATIONAL IMPACT

The methodological difficulty of ascertaining think tank impact has been widely documented by researchers; it is not endemic to think tanks or public policy but instead reflects a wider limitation of social science research. This difficulty is representative of the limitations of inductive research in an open social system with multiple stakeholders, as well as the highly complicated and improbable task of distinguishing correlation from causation.<sup>14</sup> Stone proffers the problem of qualifying influence can be alleviated by analysing the function of the think tank since many have selective and targeted policy impact areas.<sup>15</sup> Of the three solutions suggested only two were adopted as examining how contributions are used necessitates a more extended framework of analysis, but it nonetheless remains an important factor for future research to examine and will be further elaborated on in the conclusion.

The myriad of think tank functions have been accounted for by identifying and selecting think tanks that are similar to the TJRF which will be later expounded on in the section on method. Given the diversity of contributions a think tank can make, it is imperative to identify a basket of indicators to effectively enable comparison. Murray Weidenbaum proffers that think tanks generally produce intermediate goods which includes but is not limited to the number of publications and functions scheduled, and the level of social media activity such as mentions and following.<sup>16</sup> However Weidenbaum cautions that they are useful only insofar as their name suggests which are as measures of intermediate impact. Weidenbaum also highlighted that understanding these indicators requires exercising some interpretation, highlighting for example how the constitution of the audience- whether they are journalists or government officials, affects the outcome of a conference.<sup>17</sup> The section examining the significance of the results to the TJRF utilises data acquired from surveys collected from the two conferences held by the TJRF, but a comprehensive examination of a think tank's direct influence on the policy making process is beyond the scope of this essay, and will be elaborated more in the conclusion. Instead, this section elaborates more on the significance of the intermediate indicators, as well as the possible confounding factors of state and federal level architecture.

### Publications

<sup>11</sup> Rich A., *Think tanks, experts, and American politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 211; Abelson D., *Do think tanks matter? Assessing the impact of public policy institutes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Non-state actors and authority*, 216.

<sup>13</sup> Weaver R., 'The changing world of think tanks', *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22 (3) (1989): 563-578.

<sup>14</sup> Williams M., 'Interpretivism and generalisation', *Sociology* 34(2) (2000): 209-224.

<sup>15</sup> *Capturing the political imagination*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Weidenbaum M., 'Measuring the influence of think tanks', *Society* 47(2) (2010): 134-137.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

Timely research output is imperative to a think tank as it must be sensitive to the dynamic policy needs of officeholders. Thus, publications such as reports and opinion pieces are the most effective mediums for think tanks to deliver policy advice as they are brief and concise enabling timely publication.<sup>18</sup>

### Functions and conferences

Besides educating the public, organising a forum or conference enables a think tank to enhance its public profile while raising public awareness for a relevant policy issue, thereby contributing to its profile as a stakeholder in the policy making process.<sup>19</sup> Unlike online report publications and commentaries which incur a nominal fee, organising events is a resource intensive activity from inviting and coordinating speakers to spending on advertising and venue rental. Thus, ensuring sustainability of these activities requires reliable, consistent and adequate funding.

### Media mentions and following

With the fragmentation of the policy role of major party organisations and the fracturing of Westminster model, more influence has been conferred on the media as a 'gatekeeper and protagonist in the national political conversation'.<sup>20</sup> With the greater influence social media platforms wield they function as a force multiplier, enhancing the impact of a think tank by enabling the rapid dissemination of information to the general public, thereby building the profile of the think tank and fostering the illusion of policy impact.

Through examining the rise and fall of think tanks in America and abroad, Stone has identified two types of think tanks that can be categorised into old guard and new partisan institutes. The TJRF strongly identifies as an old guard institute which Stone describes as having a 'broad research focus and strong academic orientations...like a 'university without students'...old guard can be divided into those focused on national public policy issues and those concerned with international issues'.<sup>21</sup> Further elaborating on the dichotomy between old guard and new partisan, Stone cautions against any false dichotomy, arguing that boundaries are transient by highlighting how some old guard think tanks have incorporated the 'think-and-do' approach of the new partisans which places an emphasis on marketing and networking.<sup>22</sup> The TJRF could be one of the many old guard think tanks abroad and in Australia adopting a more hands-on approach to more effectively compete with ideological tanks for influence over policy making processes. To ascertain this necessitates an examination of the immediate think tank community.

### CONFOUNDING FACTORS

It should be noted that there are two confounding factors, the first of which is differing state-level architecture. It is commonly stated that parliamentary systems are closed to think tanks, relying on research bureaus situated within the government for advice. As a consequence, differing state-level architecture may result in differing levels of competition which affects the funding and impact of think tanks in the state. A case in point would be the presence of the Parliamentary Research Service in New South Wales which provides Senators and Members of Parliament with policy advice and analysis, its funding capacity far exceeds that of other independent think tanks 'with a budget of A\$20 million in 2001, and a staff of 102'.<sup>23</sup> The second factor is that of party ideology and power. As major Australian political parties rely heavily on the state for funding and resources, the party in government has access and is able to channel the resources to suit its agenda.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, this contributes to the funding discrepancy between conservative and centrist think tanks, and more pertinently on progressive think tanks that deviate from the political orthodoxy of the elites. The Evatt Foundation was highlighted by Stone to show how 'despite its affinity with the ALP, Evatt had very limited access to the Federal and Labour government...[as] Evatt research did

<sup>18</sup> *Do Think Tanks Matter?*, 74-80.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Stone D. and Denham A., *Think tank traditions: policy research and the politics of ideas* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 260.

<sup>21</sup> *Capturing the political imagination*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Think tank traditions*, 256.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

not reflect the economic beliefs and political values of the party's power brokers'.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, accounting for these factors necessitates a framework that is beyond the scope of this essay but could be explored more in detail in future research.

## METHOD

In order to identify think tanks similar to the TJRF in Australia, it is imperative to determine core characteristics of the TJRF. The TJRF was codified according to three values, firstly by its independence defined by its nonpartisan position, secondly by its progressive orientation, and thirdly by its focus on Australian, more specifically on Queensland public policy. Size was not selected as an indicator to facilitate the analysis of the relationship between organisational resources and impact. The difficulty and the inherent ambiguity in the task of defining a think tank concomitantly affect its classification. Despite the conventionally accepted distinction between an independent think tank and a state funded think tank, there is in actuality, no clear distinction. 'Complete autonomy and independence for think tanks is illusory...all think tanks are shaped and constrained by their political context'.<sup>26</sup> Although the TJRF receives seed funding from the ALP and a small minority of board members identify with the ALP, the TJRF is independent as it is not officially affiliated to any political party or organisation, but more importantly its policy research agenda is determined autonomously by the board. The TJRF is also distinct from 'university tanks' or think tanks residing in, and officially affiliated to universities. Think tanks operate in three primary areas: the university sector as exemplified by the Evatt Foundation, the public sector with think tanks associated to the government and the private sector with think tanks sometimes also acting as commercial consultants.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the TJRF straddles the gap between the public sector and the private sector by maintaining a strong commitment to public service and occasionally undertaking commissioned research on behalf of the trade unions, while not being officially affiliated to any political party or corporation. Notwithstanding the fact that the TJRF draws most of its board members and research associates from the universities, the TJRF is not officially affiliated to, or recognised by any university. This aversion to partisan association is also prevalent among several potential research associate candidates, and it stems from the perceived affiliation of the TJRF to the ALP which could have a deleterious influence on the universities', and the individual's ability to secure research grants and employment opportunities. Similarly, there exists a normative dimension to research and policy-making. Policy-making is at its core a contestation of truths and worldviews, hence 'politics, values and ideology are an inevitable part of policy-making'.<sup>28</sup> The TJRF is also progressive which is distinct from conservative think tanks such as the Australian Institute for Progress. Finally, the TJRF has a broad focus on both Queensland and Australian public policy, and thus is distinct from think tanks focusing on international relations such as the Australian Institute of International Affairs, or on specific defence related issues such as the Air Power Australia.

A list of Australian think tanks (see Appendix A) was compiled from a variety of sources drawing most heavily on Pandora<sup>29</sup> -- a digital archive initially established by the National Library of Australia, and a list of think tanks compiled by the University of Melbourne.<sup>30</sup> From the list, think tanks were assessed for similarities to the TJRF by analysing both their organisational history on their webpages and the content of their publications. Next, annual reports from 2014 to 2015 were scrutinised for information regarding funding, staffing and intermediate products. As some think tanks do not publish their annual reports, requests for information were sent through emails to the various gatekeepers. Indicators with no information made available are left blank. Table 1 below shows the compiled information for the selected think tanks.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>26</sup> Stone D., 'Think tank transnationalisation and non-profit analysis, advice and advocacy', *Global Society* 14(2) (2000b): 153-172.

<sup>27</sup> Marsh I., *Globalisation and Australian think tanks: an evaluation of their role, and contribution to governance* (Melbourne: Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 1991), 8.

<sup>28</sup> Stone D., 'Using knowledge: the dilemmas of 'bridging research and policy'', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 32(3) (2002): 285-296.

<sup>29</sup> Pandora. '[Australian Think Tanks - Australian Internet Sites](#)', National Library of Australia.

<sup>30</sup> University of Melbourne, '[Think Tank Organisations - By Category](#)', Melbourne Careers Centre.

**MATRIX**

Table 1: Selected Australian think tanks

Think Tank	Prof. Staff	Approx. Exp.	Revenue	Research/Publications	Conferences/Outreach	Media Mentions	Social media activity
Australia21	17 Board members, 2 Youth Advisers	\$136,342 Employment Expenses: \$88,317 Consumables/Mkting: \$4,215 ...	\$135,975	4 Reports			7,130 Facebook likes
Centre for Policy Development	10 Board Directors	\$411,568 Advertising:\$217 Personnel Expenses: \$323,472 Printing & Stationary: \$2,204 ...	\$419,161 Interest received: \$5,434 Donations Received: \$411,063 (Sidney Myer Fund, Planet Wheeler Foundation)	5 Reports & Papers 2 Books	2 Roundtables	8 TV Appearances 7 Radio Segments 142 Written Media Pieces	3,518 Facebook likes 5,038 Twitter followers
Grattan Institute	7 Board Directors 19 Staff Members	\$5,025,000 employee expenses: \$4,212,000 Event Expenses: \$46,000 ...	\$1,161,000 In-kind Services UniMelb: \$359,000 Affiliate Fees & Program Support: \$650,000	10 major reports	27 Public Seminars 30 Private Seminars	Mentioned in the media approx. 27,745 times	Website visited 216,689 times 4505 Facebook likes 9,231 Twitter followers
McKell Institute							21869 Facebook likes 2445 Twitter followers
Per Capita						4 Forums, 5 Book/research launches	1523 Facebook likes 3007 Twitter followers
TJ Ryan Foundation	15 Board & 4 Executive Members	\$1381 Research: \$1083 Goods & Reception: \$150 Advert & Promotions: \$148	-	1 Book publication, 43 Research Reports	3 Events		232 Facebook likes 280 Twitter followers
The Australia Institute	8 Board Directors 15 Staff			43 Research articles, 17 Submissions to government inquiries or project assessment processes. 54 Opinion Pieces. 3 Surveys & 1 Book	3 Events 1 Function	18,000 TV & Radio feature	21259 Facebook likes 11000 Twitter followers
John Cain Foundation	10 Board Directors	\$24,263.35 Project Expenditure: \$16,791.64 ...	\$71,377.97 Donations: \$48,768 Sales: \$22,599.51 Conference: \$11,350.63 ...	1 Book publication	1 Conference, 1 seminar, 1 Presentation, 2 policy lunches		495 Facebook likes 199 Twitter followers

## RESULTS

Table 1 highlights a strong correlation between funding and intermediate goods and a weaker relationship between staffing and organisational impact due to the different permutations of employment arrangements that could be employed ranging from paid positions, to contract-based and pro bono positions. Although the nature of the arrangement is not explicitly stated in any of their annual reports, inference can be made from the employment expenses the think tank incurs. Think tanks such as Australia21, the Centre for Policy Development and the Grattan Institute (GI) have substantial employment/personnel expenses compared to the TJRF and the John Cain Foundation both of which depend on voluntary commitments by board members and volunteers. The strong correlation between funding and the intermediary products highlights two potential forces of bias in the ability of think tanks to generate publicity.

‘The first is the availability of funding...funding translates into media visibility, which, in turn, may attract additional financing to visible organizations. A second major source of bias appears to be the personal networks and editorial judgments (or biases) of newspaper reporters and editors’.<sup>31</sup>

Table 1 reveals that think tanks that receive high levels of donations from memberships, and grants from philanthropic trusts, sponsors and corporate affiliates have high levels of events organisation, media mentions, and social media activity, indicating some form of pressure on the think tanks to reciprocate. Although The Australia Institute does not publish its financial statements alongside their annual report, it purportedly receives, or used to receive substantial funding from the Poola Foundation and Treepot Foundation- private organisations owned by the Kantors also related to the Murdoch family.<sup>32</sup> This finding highlights how think tanks are shaped by their environment through selective funding which results in the division between funding sources for right-wing and left-wing think tanks in Australia- with the former mostly receiving funding from corporations and the state, and the latter from philanthropist organisations and lobby groups.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE TJRF

The results of this research indicate a need for diversified and carefully cultivated relationships between think tanks and donors. This section addresses the possible strategies the TJRF can implement to generate more avenues of funding and interest while staying true to its mandate to independence. This section first examines, and refutes the viability of a paid subscription model through a case study on the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). Instead, this research proffers that the TJRF should establish a dedicated donation channel, enact a registration fee for events which could be subsumed as part of a benefit package offered under a membership scheme, engage more with youths through the social media, and enhance its transparency by publishing its financial statements alongside an annual report.

The paid subscription model is commonly utilised by companies in the journalism and news industry. Given the similarities in functions between a think tank and a news organisation, this case study on the WSJ is highly relevant. The news and journalism industry is traditionally funded by a two-pronged revenue model of advertising and sales of print articles. However due to the transition towards digitalisation and the ample alternatives of free content, the model proved increasingly unviable as advertising does not contribute substantially to revenue relative to sales.<sup>33</sup> As a result, newspaper organisations in the 21st century started transitioning towards the various paid subscription models. This section examines the hybrid model utilised by some newspaper organisations as well as think tanks to improve readership before arguing against adopting a subscription based model based on a case study of the WSJ.

Under the hybrid model, content is mostly separated into ‘free’ and ‘paid’ categories. The two main hybrid models are the metered and freemium model, the former imposes a restriction on the

<sup>31</sup> Rich A. and Weaver R., ‘Think tanks in the U.S. media’, *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5(4) (2000): 81-103.

<sup>32</sup> Norington B., ‘[Think tank secrets](#)’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 August 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Kammer A., Boeck M., Hansen J. and Hauschildt L., ‘The free-to-fee transition: audiences’ attitudes toward paying for online news’, *Journal of Media Business Studies* 12(2) (2015): 107-120.

amount of news articles a reader is allowed to access for free, while the latter gives autonomy to the editors to decide which articles are charged.<sup>34</sup> The basis of the hybrid model stems from the conceptualisation of information goods as experience goods which requires consumers to have an experience in order to value them. This enables companies to leverage on the negligible cost of offering free samples of digitalised information goods while simultaneously generating revenue from advertisements.<sup>35</sup> The WSJ is an apt case study as it is largely regarded as a success enjoying strong branding and dedicated readership amid a time when news organisations were struggling with the shocks from the transition. Alfonso Vara Miguel *et al* highlighted that in 2012, WSJ online experienced an increase in subscribers by 32.4%.<sup>36</sup> However, Vara Miguel *et al* also noted that WSJ's online strategy and content gradually changed over the course of time, with paywalls increasing in frequency alongside the amount of specialised, high value added content that is not produced, and cannot be replicated by its competition.<sup>37</sup> The relationship Vara Miguel *et al* identified between charging for digital information, and the nature of the content itself is underpinned by two factors, that of item parity and worthwhileness. Given the parity offerings of alternative news sources, readers can readily switch patronage if there was a change which affects an individual's preference, alongside other factors, it results in a low willingness to pay for online news as shown by surveys of the Hong Kong and United States of America population, and generally of international audiences.<sup>38</sup>

Think tanks are further affected by the issue of item parity and competition given their function as recycling bins in which the same policy message is repeatedly emphasised via different formats and products.<sup>39</sup> Willingness to pay and patronage is determined by a concept of worthiness, a sentiment influenced by money-market and social-market relationships regulated respectively by market exchange and social exchange norms.<sup>40</sup> The unique material generated by the WSJ which parallels publications by think tanks may increase perception of worthiness, but it also inadvertently promotes a form of gatekeeping through the imposition of high subscription fees, which aside from reducing the accessibility of the materials to the general public, also promotes homogeneity amongst the readership as it would be of more relative utility and benefit to those with the relevant skills and knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

Further, the spidering technology utilised by search engines will not be able to access subscriber-only content thereby reducing the visibility and thus the impact of the think tank.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, the funding models an organisation adopts must be compatible, and mutually reinforcing. A paid subscription model inadvertently diminishes the extent of public engagement, thereby concomitantly adversely affecting donations and funds from events. Ultimately, digital publications by think tanks can and should be considered as public goods which are non-rival and non-excludable in nature, the very production of these goods represents 'a self-reinforcing mode of legitimisation for the policy research institute...[and] attracts the attention of, and resources from, other non-profit organisations...and quasi-governmental bodies'.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the TJRF should refrain from imposing a premium on digital information because it would detract from perception of the foundation's commitment to public interest, and adversely affect its pre-existing and future funding strategies.

<sup>34</sup> Vara-Miguel A., Sanjurjo E. and Díaz Espina C., 'Paid news vs free news: evolution of the WSJ.com business model from a content perspective (2010-2012)', *Communication & Society* 27(2) (2014): 147-167.

<sup>35</sup> Halbheer D. *et al*, 'Choosing a digital content strategy: how much should be free?', *International Journal of Research in Marketing* 31(2) (2014): 192-206.

<sup>36</sup> 'Paid news vs free news', 160.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-159.

<sup>38</sup> 'The free-to-fee transition', 109.

<sup>39</sup> Stone D., 'Introduction to the symposium: the changing think tank landscape', *Global Society* 14 (2) (2000a):149-152.

<sup>40</sup> 'The free-to-fee transition', 116; Kim J., Natter M. and Spann M., 'Pay what you want: a new participative pricing mechanism', *Journal of Marketing* 73(1) (2009): 44, 46.

<sup>41</sup> 'Think tank transnationalisation', 164.

<sup>42</sup> Nutley M., 'Free vs paid-for e-content is not a black and white issue', *Marketing Week* 17 (October 2007).

<sup>43</sup> 'Think tank transnationalisation', 160.



Donations are a subset of the Pay What You Want (PWYW) model which is defined as ‘a participative pricing mechanism that delegates the whole price determination to the buyer’.<sup>44</sup> Similar to other business finance models, the PWYW model is dependent on the complex interplay of money-market and social-market relationships the consumer experiences, but studies by Marcus Kunter *et al*/ alongside others have highlighted several core factors which affect consumer behaviour, of which perception of fairness, altruism and customer satisfaction may be adversely affected by a paid subscription model.<sup>45</sup> And this is pertinent as all of the think tanks surveyed except the TJRF have established channels for supporters to donate. This is because aside from the relative ease of implementation compared to other funding options, the PWYW model increases perception of fairness, ‘the seller can demonstrate to consumers that he or she believes in the quality of the products because lower prices can compensate for inferior quality’.<sup>46</sup> All of the think tanks except the TJRF analysed in the matrix have a dedicated page or paragraph on their website that enables donors to make their contributions. While establishing a dedicated page for donations may not be a pressing issue for the foundation given the small number of contributions, giving interested patrons the option of donating on the webpage would facilitate more donations. Inserting a paragraph under E-news signup would be a cost efficient way to informed interested subscribers of the opportunity to contribute to the foundation through email correspondence. It could later be developed into a separate page dedicated to donations or membership when the need arises.

Enacting registration fees for events is an alternative funding strategy the TJRF can implement to supplement the seed funding from the ALP and QCU. Planning for events is different from the provision of digital information goods in terms of cost, the significantly higher marginal cost of providing for one extra participant in an event necessitates implementing a fee to sustain the foundation’s capacity to host more of such events. 26 out of 30 and 9 out of 13 survey participants from the ‘Jobs of the Future in an Uncertain Environment’ and the ‘Indigenous Human Rights: 1966-2016 And Beyond’ conference indicated that they are willing to pay a small fee to attend future events.

Another potential area for development would be to increase the representation of youths attending such events. Questionnaires from the two conferences recently held by the TJRF revealed that a large proportion of attendees were retirees with students and young professionals constituting the lower percentage of the demographics. One strategy for the TJRF to facilitate outreach to the target audience would be to diversify and consistently engage with the public through social network sites (SNS). Research conducted by Max Halupka from the University of Canberra highlights that young Australians are more politically active online, and most youths receive their news from the social media.<sup>47</sup> Accounting for the limitations in previous studies, Michael Xenos, Ariadne Vromen and Brian Loader analysed youths from three advanced democracies namely the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia, and found that social media usage is strongly correlated with political engagement.<sup>48</sup> Further, Kjerstin Thorson highlights several affordances of SNS which enhances the TJRF’s capabilities to attract its target audience. Firstly, outreach through SNS reaches a diverse audience, secondly content posted can be shared widely and comes up in search engines, and thirdly users can track direct responses to their posts enabling users to make informed choices from the available statistics.<sup>49</sup> This is pertinent as even though TJRF has several SNS, only 6 out of 32 indigenous human rights conference participants who completed the questionnaire heard of the event through the TJRF, the majority of which were informed through QCU and other Union emails. Lastly, each social media platform offers a unique opportunity structure, by engaging with platforms such as LinkedIn, the TJRF can develop the profile of its research associates, enhancing career prospects and creating incentives for

---

<sup>44</sup> ‘Pay what you want,’ 45.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>47</sup> O’Neill M., ‘[Young online activists more politically engaged than many older Australians, research shows](#)’, ABC, 19 August 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Loader B., Vromen A. and Xenos M., ‘The networked young citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement’, *Information, Communication & Society* 17(2) (2014): 143-150.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 89-90.

researchers to engage with the foundation. With the current orientation of the Foundation towards a more proactive role, the TJRF needs to enhance its public outreach efforts by consistently engaging with those platforms to generate interest and relevance. Numerous think tanks in Australia have collapsed due to the difficulty of generating interest and relevance. The Brisbane Institute is one such example. In its heyday the Brisbane Institute enjoyed strong support from various entities in Queensland, ranging from commercial sponsors to the University of Queensland (UQ), the Brisbane City Council (BCC) and the Queensland Government. The institute ran an online magazine, the Brisbane Line, and its articles, commentaries and functions enjoyed extensive coverage in the Courier Mail but with a change in the management at UQ and the BCC, the institute encountered difficulties generating interest and the necessary funding required. It should also be noted that the conferences and functions are very much affected by the past and present political, social and economic factors. Pertinent contributory factors affecting the accessibility of youths, more specifically indigenous youths intersects with larger social justice issues such as the overrepresentation of indigenous youths in juvenile detention centres<sup>50</sup>, and the low retention rates of indigenous students.<sup>51</sup> Thus there is a limit on the extent to which organisations can engage with indigenous youths through the dominant liberal western structure given the difficulties of accessibility indigenous communities have faced, and continue to encounter. Thus, the executive committee of the TJRF should consider the nature of the function before deciding whether or not to enact a registration fee.

To complement the drive towards increased SNS participation and the implementation of registration fee, the TJRF can consider establishing a membership scheme to secure a stable and relatively predictable avenue of funding. Given that interested individuals can access online materials for free, there needs to be an incentive that compels interested parties to sign up for the membership scheme. Stone notes that the consistent patronage of the Centre for Policy Development by sections of the Australian business community despite its high membership fees can be attributed in part to its 'package of selective benefits'.<sup>52</sup> This package of benefits is also adopted by several think tanks analysed in this research, a 'Friend of Per Capita' membership costs A\$299 but includes benefits such as free or discounted tickets to events and access to new or selected publications.<sup>53</sup> With the hosts of upcoming programs, the TJRF can also offer a similar benefits package that includes discounted tickets to TJRF events. Essentially, an organisational membership offers access to a 'neighbourhood environment where key community storytellers encourage each other to talk about the neighbourhood, individual residents are more likely to belong to their community, to have a strong sense of collective efficacy, and to participate in civic actions'.<sup>54</sup> But it should be cautioned that a wide discrepancy between member and non-member ticket pricing will have the same homogenising effect as implementing a paid-subscription model on digital materials, thus membership benefits should be diversified in order to minimise any drastic difference in pricing for non-members, and the scheme should be implemented in a piecemeal manner with small pilot studies conducted prior to full-scale implementation.

As previously elaborated, the factors and processes underpinning consumer decision are highly varied and complex, changing based on context and experiences. However, a study conducted by Elia Powers and Ronald Yaros highlighted that donors highly valued trust and commitment compared to the other factors.<sup>55</sup> The importance of trust and commitment is even more pronounced when dealing with think tanks as publication materials are often opinionated. The misapprehensions of the TJRF as being affiliated to the ALP despite its independent and progressive orientation arises mainly out of the TJRF's political genesis and the funding received from the ALP. As previously highlighted, the notion of a purely independent think tank is a fallacy.

---

<sup>50</sup> Donovan S, '[Indigenous youth detention rates slammed](#)', ABC, 9 February 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Schwab R., *Why only one in three? The complex reasons for low Indigenous school retention* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> *Think tank traditions*, 253.

<sup>53</sup> '[Membership](#)', Per Capita.

<sup>54</sup> Zhang X. and Lin W., 'Hanging together or not? Impacts of social media use and organisational membership on individual and collective political actions', *International Political Science Review* (2016), 4.

<sup>55</sup> Elia P. and Ronald A., 'Cultivating support for nonprofit news organizations: commitment, trust and donating audiences', *Journal of Communication Management* 17(2) (2013): 157-170.

Instead, as field theory highlight think tanks maintain that perception of independence by balancing competing interests. Likewise, to enhance the perception of the TJRF as an independent think tank, the TJRF can balance its controversial funding source with improved transparency by publishing annual reports and financial statements. This demonstrates to patrons the position the TJRF takes on the different policy issues, and how it might deviate from its funding base- which in conjunction with a think tank's publications, functions as indicators of legitimacy.<sup>56</sup> In addition, an annual report detailing the achievements of the think tank builds the profile of the TJRF while highlighting to the supporters the impact of their donations.

## CONCLUSION

The research conducted revealed a strong and positive relationship between the indicators of funding, staffing and impact in Australian think tanks similar to the TJRF. This research proposes that the TJRF should establish a dedicated donation channel and a membership scheme which could include offering members perks such as discounts on registration fees for events. The foundation can also supplement its public outreach initiatives by targeting youths through SNS. To dispel the misapprehensions of the TJRF, the foundation should focus on enhancing its transparency by publishing its financial statements alongside an annual report. The diversification of funding strategies and the implementation of initiatives to enhance the TJRF's relevance negates the potential delegitimising repercussions associated with overreliance on any particular sponsorship given potential conditionality that might be imposed. This research also discourages the implementation of a paid subscription model as it is incompatible with the proposed funding strategies as well as to the core values and mission of the foundation. There are several limitations to this research paper which could be further explored in future research. As highlighted in the section on organisational impact, solely replying on indicators of intermediate products does not comprehensively encompass the impact a think tank makes. Future research can examine a think tank's direct impact on the policy making process by examining the connections of board members to the government or the corporate-political elite, and how its products are utilised in policy-making deliberations. Furthermore, contributions to the policy making process can be examined at two levels, 'a macro-level where their contribution is to major strategic issues affecting the whole policy making system; and a micro-level where their contribution is to the understanding of issues and the mobilisation of interests at the level of a particular policy community'.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, accounting for the confounding factors of state-level architecture and party ideology would be integral when examining the direct impact of policy making. As the venerated TJ Ryan once commented on his political future by stating that Australians would rally behind a man of purpose, integrity and grit, the TJRF named in his memory has the mandate to continue to contribute towards enriching the public policy discourse in Queensland and Australia with integrity and steadfastness,

'I have found that the great body of the Australian public would stand with a man when he was willing to fight, particularly for a good cause. That has been my experience in the past and I hope it will be in the future'.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> 'Think tanks, funding, and the politics of policy knowledge in Canada', 65.

<sup>57</sup> Marsh I., *The development and impact of Australia's think tanks* (Melbourne: Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 1995), 14.

<sup>58</sup> Murphy D., *T.J. Ryan: a political biography* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 426.

**APPENDIX A – LIST OF THINK TANKS**

Air Power Australia	Institute of Public Affairs
Australia21	John Cain Foundation
Australian Fabians	Left/Right think tank
Australian Institute for Progress	Lowy Institute for International Policy
Australian Institute of International Affairs	Mannkal Economic Education Foundation
Australian Strategic Policy Institute	McKell Institute
Bennelong Society	Melbourne Institute
Brisbane Institute	Menzies Research Centre
Centre for Independent Studies	Mitchell Institute
Centre for Policy Development	National Civic Council
Chifley Research Centre	Network Insight Institute
Committee for Economic Development of Australia	Northern Institute
Development Policy Centre	NSW Institute for Educational Research
Doctors Reform Society	Page Research Centre
East Asian Bureau of Economic Research	Per Capita
Edios/Mindhive	The Australian Institute
Evatt Foundation	The Sydney Institute
Grattan Institute Report	TJ Ryan Foundation
H.R. Nicholls Society	Whitlam Institute
Infrastructure Partnerships Australia	
Institute for Private Enterprise	