

relevance of think tanks at different stages of policy-making. We will also discuss why it is necessary to re-examine how policy influence is achieved. Rather than assuming that think tanks can be influential only if they produce desirable policy outcomes, we must understand how their influence can be felt at some or all stages of the policy-making process. In short, failure to convince policy-makers to pursue a recommended course of action does not necessarily mean that think tanks lack influence. Indeed, as we will see, there are many ways think tanks can and do leave an indelible mark on the body politic.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## Is Anybody Listening? Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks

In the previous chapter, we examined how think tanks rely on various channels to influence public opinion and public policy. The purpose of this chapter is to consider how scholars can better assess the influence or impact of think tanks at different stages of the policy-making process. As noted, although the behaviour of think tanks has been subjected to increased scrutiny in recent years, little progress has been made in evaluating the nature and extent of their contribution to public policy. Indeed, rather than discussing how different methodological approaches can be used to study think tank influence, journalists and scholars have for the most part been content to make sweeping and often unfounded observations about their policy impact. Needless to say, these have done little to advance our knowledge of how think tanks engage with the public and with policy-makers to influence the political agenda.

To address what is clearly a significant shortcoming in the literature, this chapter will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of relying on quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluating think tank performance. By so doing, we can begin to think more critically about how to overcome some of the many methodological obstacles that limit our ability to make informed observations about the influence of think tanks. Although the concept of influence is ambiguous and difficult to grasp, it is central to any discussion about politics and policy-making. It is also central to any discussion about think tanks and their efforts to become entrenched in the policy-making process. As students in introductory political science courses are reminded, politics is about the struggle for power and the ability of various individuals and

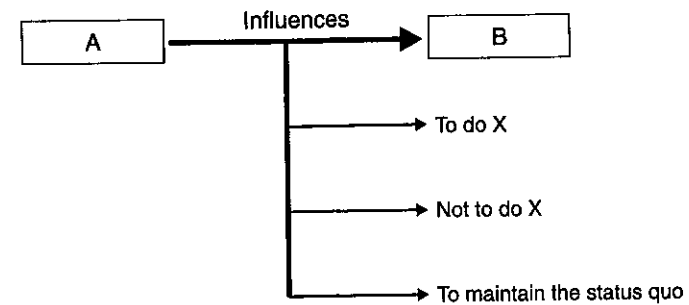
organizations to achieve desirable outcomes. But it is also about ideas, the ambition of leaders, and the goals and aspirations of citizens. In short, it is about competing visions of the national interest and the many forces that shape the fate of nations. It is for these reasons that we need to explore more fully how think tanks contribute to policy development.

The American political system, as previously discussed, is the ideal environment for think tanks to inhabit. As organizations competing in the free and open marketplace of ideas, they have innumerable opportunities to share and discuss their ideas with the public, with the media, and with policy-makers. However, as in any business, they must be able to monitor the quality and appeal of their products. Unfortunately, unlike that of Fortune 500 companies and the millions of small businesses across the United States, the success of think tanks cannot be measured in terms of profits and losses. It can only be measured by assessing their ability to influence the views and attitudes of the public and policy-makers. Before delving into the various ways to measure influence, we must first discuss what scholars mean by *influence*. As we will discover, although the process of wielding influence can be easily summarized using lines and arrows, understanding the nature of influence and how it is exercised is far more complicated. Influence is often treated in a linear fashion whereby two parties negotiate policy outcomes, but in reality, a more holistic approach may be required to comprehend how policy influence is achieved.

#### EASIER SAID THAN DONE: THE ABCS OF INFLUENCE

In one of the more serious treatments of influence in the literature on international relations, K.J. Holsti suggests that influence occurs when A convinces B to do X, convinces B not to do X, or persuades "B to *continue* a course of action or policy that is useful to, or in the interests of, A."<sup>1</sup> A's inability to achieve any of these desired outcomes, which could be the result of a multitude of factors relating to either A or B, would suggest that under these circumstances, A was unable to exercise influence. For Holsti, influence, which he regards as an aspect of power, "is essentially a *means* to an end. Some governments or statesmen may seek influence for its own sake, but for most it is instrumental, just like money. They use it primarily for achieving or defending other goals, which may include prestige, territory, souls, raw materials, security, or alliances."<sup>2</sup>

The easiest way to measure influence, according to Holsti, "is to study the *responses* of those in the influence relationship. If A can get B to do X, but C



cannot get B to do the same thing, then in that particular issue, A has more influence. If B does X despite the protestations of A, then we can assume that A, in this circumstance, did not enjoy much influence."<sup>3</sup> In other words, influence is perceived to have taken place if B responds to or reacts in a manner acceptable to A. Conversely, influence has not taken place, according to Holsti's model, if B does not abide by A's wishes. In short, influence is tied directly to specific policy outcomes.

In studying the relationship between states in the international system, as Holsti does, it may make sense to employ a linear model of influence. After all, by understanding the power capabilities of two states engaged in conflict and the efforts undertaken by either or both parties to exercise influence, it might be possible to explain what factors may have helped or hindered A's and B's efforts to achieve their goals. Indeed, if scholars are interested in evaluating why some arms control negotiations between the United States and Russia succeeded and others failed, this model could prove to be useful. However, relying on it to evaluate the influence or impact of think tanks and other non-governmental organizations in the policy-making process is problematic.

To begin with, in studying the policy-making process and the various individuals and organizations that participate in it, it is critically important to understand the identities of A and B. In Holsti's model, A and B are sovereign states that have considerable resources at their disposal to exercise influence. Now imagine that A is a resident scholar at a Washington-based think tank with expertise in foreign policy and security studies and B is the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. A has published a study on national missile defense and is asked to testify before this committee. According to Holsti's model, if A's recommendations are not followed by B and in fact are rejected (in other words, if A's goal is not achieved), A would be perceived as having no influence. Alternatively, if A's recommendations

are embraced by B, A would be deemed to have had influence. Yet, as we will discover, both scenarios raise serious methodological problems.

First, we cannot assume that if A's recommendations are dismissed by B, A has had no influence in the policy-making process. Although A may not be able to take credit for influencing a specific policy decision, A could have played an important role in helping the public, policy-makers, and the media to consider other approaches to resolving a potentially difficult policy problem. Indeed, as Peschek and others have argued, think tanks are most effective at framing the parameters of public policy debates. Second, A may be well positioned to share ideas with policy-makers at different levels of government, who in turn could draw further attention to the issues A has flagged. As a result of suggesting that influence is tied directly to policy outcomes, scholars are ignoring the many access points that think tanks and other non-governmental organizations have to the policy-making process. Conversely, by presuming that A has had influence over B because A's preferences are satisfied, Holsti allows himself to fall into a different trap. Even if the recommendations A has proposed closely resemble policies that are introduced, he should not take for granted that A has had influence over B. It is conceivable, as we will discuss, that A has only reinforced what was on B's mind or that other domestic and external forces compelled B to act in a certain way. In reality, despite the perception of having considerable influence over B, A may have exercised very little.

Holsti should also keep in mind that, given the vast number of individuals and organizations that compete in the marketplace of ideas, it is often difficult to identify the source and origin of an idea which could span several generations. As scholars of public policy are well aware, every successful idea has a hundred mothers and fathers. And since many ideas take years before they make their way onto the political agenda, it is also likely that they have grandmothers and grandfathers. Regardless of an idea's gestation period, one thing is certain: every bad policy idea is an orphan.

Think tanks, as noted, have a vested interest in creating the impression that they exercise enormous influence. If this were not a concern, they would not devote so much time and resources to enhancing their profile. However, scholars must resist the temptation of drawing on anecdotal evidence to support or reject these claims. They must also resist the temptation of trying to simplify a process that is anything but simple and straightforward. Influence, like so many other aspects of politics, is far more complicated than the linear model suggests and cannot be reduced to two or three likely outcomes. In fact, contrary to Holsti's model, it is not always possible to confirm when A has or has not had influence. As much as scholars would

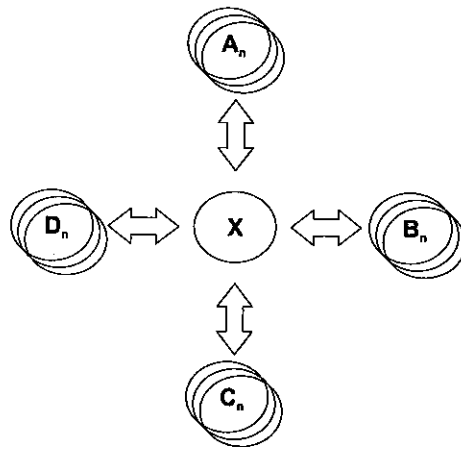
like to argue with some degree of confidence that A has been able or unable to exercise influence over B, it is increasingly difficult to do so because of the complexity and ad hoc nature of the policy-making process. Rather than concluding that individuals and organizations have or do not have influence, scholars may want to consider the likelihood that participants in policy-making enjoy different degrees or levels of influence at different stages of the policy cycle.

In the following section, we will discuss how scholars can do so by embracing a more holistic approach to the study of policy influence. In addition to offering an alternative to examining influence in a linear fashion – an approach that assumes that two players will rely on various strategies to achieve their desired goals – this model compels scholars to think of the policy-making process as a series of conversations taking place (often simultaneously) between multiple actors in distinct policy environments. In this model, influence is not tied directly to specific policy outcomes but is achieved through the interaction and exchanges between various participants who are directly and indirectly involved in the policy-making process.

#### A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO POLICY-MAKING

In reflecting on the influence of think tanks on the media, congress and the executive, Leslie Gelb, the former president of the Council on Foreign Relations and Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent for the *New York Times*, commented that "it is highly episodic, arbitrary, and difficult to predict."<sup>4</sup> His remarks were limited to think tanks, but he could just as easily have been making an observation about the nature of the policy-making process in the United States. It is because policy-making is highly episodic, arbitrary, and difficult to predict that a holistic approach to studying policy influence may prove more useful.

In some respects, this approach builds on the work of scholars who study policy or epistemic communities and issue networks in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Policy communities and issue networks are composed of individuals and organizations that, by virtue of their expertise in a particular policy area, are invited by policy-makers to participate in various stages of the policy-making process. These communities, which are divided into two spheres – the core (sub-government) and the periphery (the attentive public) – seek to influence specific public policies.<sup>6</sup> The approach that we are considering is similar to policy communities in so far as it focuses on different clusters or centres of knowledge and expertise. However, unlike policy communities, which are created in large part to influence one or more government policies



(X), a holistic approach considers how multiple actors (represented by  $A_n$ ,  $B_n$ ,  $C_n$ , and  $D_n$ ) attempt to influence the environment in which policy decisions are made. In other words, a holistic approach to policy-making assumes that while officials in the White House, on Capitol Hill, and in various government departments and agencies attend to the affairs of state, conversations are taking place between policy experts in universities, in think tanks, in interest groups, and in the private sector which, with the assistance of the media and other outlets, can help to enrich policy debates. While elected officials may prefer to insulate themselves from the discussions taking place in or between clusters  $A_n$ ,  $B_n$ ,  $C_n$ , and  $D_n$ , they cannot ignore how these conversations shape the political agenda.

Among the many benefits of a holistic approach is that it compels scholars to think about policy influence, not in terms of how it is exercised between two players, A and B, but how it can be fostered over time by different individuals and organizations acting alone or working together or in concert with various policy-makers. Such an approach also provides a broader and more sophisticated understanding of policy influence. Recall the example we used of a resident scholar from a Washington-based think tank who was asked to testify on national missile defense to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Using Holsti's linear model of influence, we suggested two possible outcomes, given A's preference that the recommendations put forward be adopted: A convinces the chair of the committee (B) to endorse the recommendations, in which case A's influence is achieved, or B rejects A's recommendations, in which case A exercises no influence. The linear model provides an all-or-nothing proposition – A either has or does not have influence.

A holistic model which acknowledges that influence can occur in different ways and at different stages of the policy cycle presents a more realistic picture of how A might achieve influence. Even though A might not be able to convince B to endorse the proposed recommendations, A's testimony may spark a debate in the media, in academic circles, in the Oval Office, at other think tanks, and in countless other places where public policy is discussed and analyzed. The fact that A may not have altered B's position regarding national missile defense does not mean that A lacks influence; nor does it mean that in the medium or long term, A's recommendations will be ignored. Rather, B's unwillingness to fulfill A's wishes suggests simply that in this instance, B is unable and/or unwilling to follow A's advice.

The time frame over which influence occurs is also an important consideration, particularly with respect to matters of war and peace. Although Holsti does not specify what he considers a reasonable time frame for A to influence B, it is clear from the linear model he presents that once B makes a decision, A is no longer in a position to exercise further influence. Unable to convince B to act according to A's preferences, A may seek influence through other channels. This was certainly the case when the Bush administration decided to deploy troops to Iraq after it became clear that the United Nations Security Council would not endorse the invasion. Decisions such as the one leading to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein reinforce why it is important to look beyond the narrowly defined parameters of a linear model of influence; a holistic model encourages scholars to pay attention to what takes place after a decision is made, a period in which *residual influence* may surface. Let me explain. If B does not act according to A's wishes, as the example mentioned above illustrates, it does not necessarily mean that in the short, medium, or long term A will be denied influence. Moreover, if B does act according to A's wishes, it does not mean that A will immediately move on to the next issue. Indeed, B's accommodation of A may provide A with an incentive to influence other decision-makers and stakeholders. In some respects, residual influence can be regarded as goodwill which develops over time between individuals and organizations that have reaped tangible benefits through cooperation. This goodwill in turn could, as early functionalists such as David Mitrany predicted, spill over into more sensitive areas of negotiation.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike a linear model, a holistic approach does not try to reduce influence to an all-or-nothing proposition; as noted, it acknowledges that there are degrees and levels of influence. It also acknowledges that there are individuals and organizations which, by virtue of their expertise and connections to key policy-makers, are well equipped and positioned to influence both the

policy-making environment and specific policy decisions. In a holistic approach, it matters if A is a scholar at a think tank, the editor of a newspaper, the head of an interest group, a professor at one of the nation's leading universities, a CEO of a major corporation, or a former cabinet secretary. In the final analysis, it is important to recognize that with any important policy issue, whether it is strategic defense or the war on terror, there are literally hundreds of organizations, including think tanks, that try to convey their ideas to policy-makers. And as scholars interested in how policy agendas are shaped, it is our responsibility to determine the most effective ways to evaluate their contribution to public policy.

A holistic approach to studying policy influence is not neat and tidy, but neither is the process by which public policy is made and implemented. Public policy, as the case studies in the two following chapters demonstrate, cannot be explained by limiting our discussion to two players trying to negotiate favourable outcomes; nor can it be explained through computer-generated flow charts. The process by which think tanks and other non-governmental organizations try to assert influence, like the process of making policy decisions, is, as Gelb reminds us, highly episodic, arbitrary, and difficult to predict. Ironically, this is what makes the study of public policy interesting.

Understanding who exercises influence and under what conditions it is achieved is a constant challenge for scholars in the field. Part of the challenge, in addition to developing an appropriate model to study influence, is determining the most effective ways to measure policy influence. In the following section, we shift our attention to how scholars can use both quantitative and qualitative indicators to assess or evaluate the influence of think tanks. How useful these criteria are for assessing the influence of think tanks on public opinion and public policy is a question that will undoubtedly lead to a lively exchange in academic circles. In the interests of promoting such an exchange, we will begin by focusing on what think tanks seem to value most – making the headlines.

#### CAN POLICY INFLUENCE BE MEASURED? A QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

##### *The Media*

On any given day, you can pick up a newspaper, turn on the radio, watch the news or a current affairs program, or scan the thousands of political Web sites on the Internet to find out what is on the minds of policy experts at

America's leading think tanks. And if that is not enough, you can subscribe to *Think Tank Watch*, a weekly e-mail newsletter prepared and distributed by the Canadian embassy in Washington which summarizes the research activities of Washington-based think tanks. The Canadian high commission in London has recently begun a similar newsletter to monitor the work of British think tanks.

For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the print and electronic media in the United States and around the world look to policy experts to shed light on important and controversial political issues, and think tanks are only too willing to oblige. Often referred to as "talking heads," scholars from think tanks appear with great regularity on the network news and on political talk shows to comment on a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues. They become particularly visible in the hours and days following historic events such as the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, when journalists and media executives scramble to make sense of what has transpired. When they are not on television or on radio, policy experts from think tanks share their insights on the op-ed pages of major American newspapers. In short, think tanks understand the demands placed on the media and respond by providing them with a steady stream of timely and relevant information.

Think tanks, like corporations involved in the entertainment and advertising industries, appreciate the impact the media have on shaping our perceptions of what and who is important. That is why, as discussed in the previous chapter, they devote so much time and resources to strengthening their ties to various media outlets. Few think tank directors need to be reminded of the potential benefits of generating substantial media exposure; positive exposure not only enhances the credibility of think tanks, but even more importantly, it creates the impression that they wield enormous influence, a valuable currency that can be used to achieve desirable outcomes.

Having influence is something all think tanks covet, but in reality, most settle for the perception of exercising influence. And what better way to create the perception of influence than to capture the attention of the media. As the marketplace of ideas has become increasingly competitive, several think tanks have closely monitored their media exposure relative to their rivals. What is at stake is more than bragging rights; it is the opportunity to translate heightened exposure into additional philanthropic, corporate, and private funding. In the following section, we will examine the amount of media exposure a select group of think tanks with expertise in foreign and defense policy generated in leading American newspapers and on the television net-

Table 7.1

Print media coverage of selected think tanks, January 2001 – January 2005; totals of all media sampled

Think tank	Subject						Total	Percentage
	Iraq	Afghanistan	9/11	al-Qaeda	Terrorism	Missile defense		
PNAC	60	28	37	20	52	12	209	1.01
Hudson	104	50	97	32	158	30	471	2.27
Center for Security Policy	147	31	81	47	191	66	563	2.71
Hoover	324	125	211	84	354	38	1,136	5.47
Cato Institute	258	121	272	87	437	31	1,206	5.80
Carnegie Endowment	398	187	204	114	409	115	1,427	6.87
AEI	633	181	401	146	629	61	2,051	9.87
Heritage	544	245	386	150	685	119	2,129	10.25
RAND	391	260	528	232	691	63	2,165	10.42
CSIS	742	327	362	231	754	73	2,489	11.98
Council on Foreign Relations	853	358	469	288	846	71	2,885	13.89
Brookings	1,054	495	786	271	1,270	169	4,045	19.47
Total							20,776	

SOURCE: LexisNexis®.

NOTE: Because of similarity of search criteria, there is likely some article overlap in the numbers.

works between 2001 and 2005. The purpose of compiling these data is not to confirm which think tanks do or do not have influence but to demonstrate how this indicator of influence may be used in quantitative evaluations of think tank performance.

Using the database Lexis/Nexis, we recorded the number of times a select group of think tanks – the Project for the New American Century, the Centre for Security Policy, the Hudson Institute, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution, the Brookings Institution, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the American Enterprise Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and RAND – were mentioned in six major newspapers – the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Times* – in relation to six important events or issues – Iraq, Afghanistan, 9/11, al-Qaeda, terrorism, and missile defense – between January 2001 and January 2005 (see table 7.1 and tables A4.1 to A4.6 in appendix 4).<sup>8</sup>

The number of references to each think tank may be inflated since more than one of these terms could appear in a newspaper article, but our purpose here is to simply demonstrate a general pattern in think tank exposure.

Table 7.2

Total television exposure of selected think tanks, January 2001 – January 2005; totals of all media sampled

Think tank	Subject						Totals	Percentage
	Iraq	Afghanistan	9/11	al-Qaeda	Terrorism	Missile defense		
Hudson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00
PNAC	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.14
Hoover	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	0.41
Center for Security Policy	4	1	0	1	4	0	10	1.36
Cato Institute	4	0	0	1	4	0	9	1.22
CSIS	2	3	0	1	6	0	12	1.63
AEI	17	2	0	1	6	0	26	3.53
Heritage	11	3	4	1	10	2	31	4.21
Carnegie Endowment	42	7	4	10	25	8	96	13.04
Council on Foreign Relations	65	8	6	7	36	1	123	16.71
RAND	30	7	7	33	51	1	129	17.53
Brookings	152	31	17	23	68	5	296	40.22
Total							736	

SOURCE: Vanderbilt Television News Archive.

The exact number of citations is not as important as how scholars might use these figures to determine the extent of think tank influence. A think tank receives one media hit for each reference made to the events and issues selected.

Of the twelve think tanks sampled, the Brookings Institution ranked first, receiving over four thousand citations, or 19.48 per cent of all print media references, almost twice the share of exposure generated by AEI, Heritage, and RAND. Other think tanks that attracted considerable exposure included CSIS and the Council on Foreign Relations. The Project for the New American Century, the think tank credited with influencing the Bush doctrine, ranked last, attracting only 1 per cent of media exposure. There was tremendous variation in the exposure think tanks generated across newspapers and issue areas. For example, Brookings's exposure ranged from a low of 10.26 per cent in the more conservative *Washington Times* to a high of 26.17 per cent in the more liberal *Washington Post*. By contrast, the Heritage Foundation, known for its conservative leanings, attracted the most coverage, 21.57 per cent, in the *Washington Times* and the least coverage, 4.49 per cent, in what many would regard as the more liberal *New York Times*. Brookings was quoted most often with respect to Iraq and terrorism, whereas RAND, for instance, was cited most for its views on issues relating to terrorism and 9/11.

The results were similar for the broadcast media (see table 7.2 and tables A4.7 to A4.10 in appendix 4). ABC, NBC, and CNN called on experts from the Brookings Institution or cited one of its studies far more often than from any other think tank: it received 40.22 per cent of all broadcast media citations in this sample, more than twice the share recorded by its closest competitor, the Council on Foreign Relations (16.71 per cent), and almost ten times the exposure generated by the Heritage Foundation (4.21 per cent). The exception was CBS, which relied equally on RAND and Brookings (both received 25.44 per cent of the network's coverage). Once again, PNAC attracted very little attention (0.14 per cent), a step up from the Hudson Institute, which was not the subject of any discussion by the four networks.

In our review of these figures, an obvious question to ask is, Why do some think tanks attract more exposure than others? While there are several factors, including the size of a think tank's budget, size of staff, area of research, ideological orientation, and geographic location, which could help to explain why some think tanks are cited more than others,<sup>9</sup> our concern is less with how and why think tanks attract media coverage and more with what these figures tell us or do not tell us about the extent of their influence.

Scholars interested in using quantitative approaches to studying think tank influence tend to focus on media coverage because it is relatively easy to measure. Although it is time-consuming, scholars can draw on different databases, including the one used in this chapter, to compile information on how much exposure think tanks attract in the print and broadcast media. In so doing, they can record how many times think tanks are quoted, the policy issues they comment on most often, and the period of time over which they appear to enjoy the most visibility. Scholars may also elect to undertake rigorous content analyses of newspaper coverage so that they can measure the number of column inches devoted to think tanks. Moreover, should they be so inclined, they can keep track of whether the ideological leanings of think tanks are identified – liberal, conservative, Marxist, libertarian – and if the institutes are described in a positive or negative manner. All of this information can then make its way into studies evaluating the impact of think tanks.

The major advantage of tracking media exposure is that it enables scholars to identify those institutes that are most active or relevant in framing the parameters of important public policy debates. For those interested in how think tanks become involved at the initial stages of the policy cycle, when ideas from multiple sources are being articulated, assembling a list of organizations making the headlines is critical. By following think tanks that are making the news and the issues that they are addressing, scholars can begin to examine more closely what additional steps they might take to promote

their ideas. While some think tanks may be content to have one of their scholars or studies mentioned in a newspaper, others will try to use the media to garner public support for a new policy idea or initiative. As momentum for an idea builds, think tanks can then rely on many of the channels described in the previous chapter to capture the attention of policy-makers. In short, for many think tanks, being in the spotlight is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for exercising influence.

Unfortunately, other than providing some initial information on which organizations are at the forefront of policy debates, media exposure tells us very little about the nature and extent of think tank influence. Indeed, contrary to what is said in the annual reports issued by various think tanks and their directors to their boards of directors, media visibility should not be equated with policy influence. The fact that a think tank study or report is referred to in the *Washington Post*, for example, does not mean that the public or policy-makers will be swayed by its contents. To suggest otherwise, we would have to be confident that the report was read and understood by a sufficiently large cross-section of Americans. Even if it could be established, through a public opinion survey, that a significant percentage of the American people were aware of a specific think tank report mentioned in the *Washington Post*, it would be difficult to demonstrate, for the reasons stated earlier in the chapter, that the report *influenced* either public attitudes toward a particular issue or the views of policy-makers. Moreover, even if it could be confirmed that public opinion had shifted as a result of this report, we would still have to contend with the many methodological obstacles limiting our ability to trace the origins of an idea to a policy outcome. It is for all these reasons that, as previously discussed, a more holistic approach to studying policy influence could prove more useful. Rather than trying to equate media visibility with policy influence, we should explore how policy issues discussed in the media, in the academic community, in the private sector, and in think tanks eventually make their way to policy-makers.

It is also important to keep in mind that our data on media visibility ignore vital information necessary to make informed observations about think tank influence. What the Lexis/Nexis database search provides is raw numbers on think tank citations. What is left out is the context in which comments by think tank scholars or references to think tank studies are made. Furthermore, the figures included in our charts do not reveal the type and scope of coverage think tanks receive. For instance, we do not know how many of the four thousand citations Brookings recorded in the print media were on the front or back page of newspapers. For obvious reasons, this factor could have a profound impact on the number of potential readers

who come across references to this and other institutions. Moreover, we do not know which, if any, articles about the work of think tanks generated the most interest. Using Nielsen ratings, television networks can determine roughly how many viewers watched a particular program, a system that may help scholars study the exposure of think tanks in the broadcast media. However, it would be of little use to those looking at think tanks and the print media. Put simply, tracking the media visibility of think tanks may provide scholars with an important piece of the puzzle, but it is still only a piece. The entire puzzle can only be completed when more information about the involvement of think tanks is known.

### *Congressional Testimony*

In addition to monitoring how much media coverage they receive, think tanks pay close attention to how often their scholars are invited to testify before congressional committees. A list of scholars who have given testimony as well as the full text of their remarks is often available on think tank Web sites. The reason for this practice is obvious. Think tanks want to convey the impression that they are credible and important actors in the policy-making community, and what better way to do this than to advertise their accomplishments? Although there are several factors, according to Andrew Rich and Kent Weaver, that could account for why some think tanks appear before legislative committees more than others,<sup>10</sup> we need to consider how data on congressional testimony can be used to further our understanding of the involvement and impact of think tanks in the policy-making process.

Between 1 January 2001 and 1 January 2005, the same time frame used to track media exposure, policy experts from the think tanks sampled in our study testified 120 times before seven Senate and House committees with responsibility in the areas of foreign and defense policy (see table 7.3 and figs A4.1 to A4.6 in appendix 4).<sup>11</sup> Ranking first in number of appearances made was the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a veritable who's who in the foreign policy-making establishment. Experts from CSIS appeared before legislative committees on 33 separate occasions, or 27.5 per cent of the time, well ahead of its closest competitors, the Brookings Institution (22), AEI (14), and RAND (10). Only a handful of appearances were made by experts at Cato (1), the Hoover Institution (2), PNAC (3), the Hudson Institute (4), the Center for Security Policy (5), and Heritage (8).

According to our data, CSIS was most visible in the Senate, where its scholars appeared 20 times. Most of the testimonies were made before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where CSIS experts discussed issues

Table 7.3  
Combined testimony before US Senate and House of Representatives committees by selected think tanks, January 2001 – January 2005

<i>Think tank</i>	<i>Number of testimonies</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Cato Institute	1	0.83
Hoover	2	1.67
PNAC	3	2.50
Hudson	4	3.33
Center for Security Policy	5	4.17
Heritage	8	6.67
Carnegie Endowment	9	7.50
Council on Foreign Relations	9	7.50
RAND	10	8.33
AEI	14	11.67
Brookings	22	18.33
CSIS	33	27.50
Total	120	

SOURCE: LexisNexis®.

ranging from bio-terrorism and the threat of infectious diseases to the crisis in Iraq and negotiations with North Korea. In the House of Representatives, CSIS maintained a strong presence (13 appearances), but fell slightly behind the first-ranked Brookings Institution, whose scholars testified 14 times, mostly before the House Committee on International Relations. AEI and Heritage put in strong showings with 10 and 8 appearances respectively.

The data on congressional testimony raise similar methodological problems to that compiled on media exposure. What we are presented with is information that may help us to identify think tanks deemed to be credible (at least in the eyes of some policy-makers) but scarcely any insight into which presentation or presentations given by think tank scholars were considered useful and relevant. Once again, the figures revealed in the charts do not speak to the issue of influence but merely address the frequency with which think tanks are called upon to testify before Congress. And as Rich and Weaver point out, there are several factors that could explain why some think tanks appear more regularly before legislative committees than others.

Without paying close attention to the committee proceedings in which scholars from think tanks testified, it is virtually impossible to predict how much or little influence they exercised. Indeed, in the absence of detailed information about the inner workings of individual committees and the policy preferences and goals of its members, one could reasonably conclude



that data on think tank testimony have limited utility. However, if one compares such data to that on media exposure, it becomes clear that this approach to assessing policy influence may prove more promising. In fact, by comparing the visibility of think tanks before Congress and in the media, we can observe that they enjoy different levels of recognition at different stages of the policy cycle. For example, while the Brookings Institution received 40.22 per cent and 19.47 per cent coverage respectively in our sample of the broadcast and print media, its scholars appeared before Congress 18.33 per cent of the time. By contrast, while CSIS enjoyed the strongest presence before Congress (27.50 per cent), its exposure in the broadcast (1.63 per cent) and print (11.98 per cent) media was far less significant. By keeping track of where in the policy cycle some think tanks appear to be most active, we can then explore in more detail the nature of their contributions to specific policy debates. In short, in assessing policy influence, what is important to highlight is not which think tanks ranked first, second, or last in such categories as media exposure and congressional testimony, but which think tanks, relative to other institutes and organizations involved at the same stage of the policy cycle, were best equipped and positioned to influence public policy.

We cannot determine this by focusing solely on quantitative indicators of policy influence. Media exposure, congressional testimony, and other measurements such as number of publications produced and size of staff and budgetary resources can only take scholars so far. Although data on these and other aspects of think tank activity can be useful in documenting patterns and trends in the institutes' behaviour, a more comprehensive understanding of their influence is required to probe more deeply into their involvement in the policy-making process.

#### THE INVISIBLE CLOAK: THINK TANKS, PUBLIC POLICY, AND QUALITATIVE INDICATORS OF INFLUENCE

Studying public policy and the efforts of non-governmental organizations to shape it would be so much simpler if political scientists could magically transform their academic robes into invisible cloaks. By becoming invisible, they could make their way around the White House, Capitol Hill, and dozens of government departments and agencies as easily as Harry Potter did in the cavernous hallways and staircases of Hogwarts, the fictional school where he and his friends were sent to learn the arts of witchcraft and wizardry. And like the bespectacled wizard whose presence went undetected as

long as he remained under his invisible blanket, political scientists could travel effortlessly inside the corridors of power. With their cloaks around them, there is little scholars could not ascertain about who and what was influencing the behaviour of policy-makers. They could observe meetings between high-level officials in the Oval Office, overhear phone conversations between key members of Congress, and gain access to confidential documents. The mysterious and complex world of policy-making would suddenly become open and transparent.

But the world at Hogwarts is very different from the one that policy-makers in Washington inhabit. At Hogwarts it is outsiders such as Harry Potter who can draw on extraordinary powers to uncover what is taking place behind closed doors. By contrast, in Washington, insiders use their authority as elected and appointed leaders to conceal the inner workings of the policy-making process. It is they, not the scholars who study them, who hide behind their invisible cloaks. There are wizards in Washington – the Washington Wizards – but they play in the National Basketball Association; they are not members of ancient societies hoping to uncover the state's most highly guarded secrets.

Since scholars cannot hide behind imaginary cloaks to observe first-hand why certain policy decisions were made, they must find other ways to shed light on the policy-making process. We have already considered some quantitative indicators that may be employed to assess the contribution of think tanks to policy-making. Among other things, we discovered that numbers reflecting the amount of media exposure think tanks generate and/or the frequency with which their experts appear before legislative committees often leave us with more questions than answers. To remedy this problem, we may want to consider how qualitative approaches can be used to provide further insight into how think tanks become involved in policy-making and the nature and extent of their influence.

When scholars refer to qualitative approaches to the study of policy-making, what exactly do they mean? Generally, they are referring to non-statistical methods of analysis, including archival research and interviews, which enable them to reveal the inner workings of the policy-making process. Those employing this approach maintain that while quantitative indicators may be useful in evaluating policy influence, so too are intangibles such as personal contacts with high-level officials who may have a profound impact on shaping policy decisions. For example, in looking at how often experts from think tanks testified before congressional committees, we focused primarily on which institutes logged the most and fewest number of appearances. No consideration was given to the reputation and standing of

the experts who testified or to the composition of the congressional committees. Why is this aspect important? It is important because in the policy-making process, it matters who is providing advice and to whom the advice is directed. It makes a difference if testimony is being presented by a former cabinet secretary or a relatively unknown academic from a Washington-based think tank who was called upon at the last minute to fill in for a more seasoned scholar. It also makes a difference whether policy experts are testifying before high-profile or relatively obscure committees, and it makes a difference whether the topic being discussed is a priority for Congress and the administration or is an issue that, like so many others, is forgotten overnight.

As we will discuss in some detail in our case studies, the relationships and contacts that develop between think tanks and policy-makers can often explain why some think tanks are able to enjoy considerable access to various stages of the policy-making process. Heritage president Edwin Feulner's friendship with key members of the Reagan transition team in 1981 certainly played an important role in allowing the foundation to make its *Mandate for Leadership* study known to the incoming administration. The same can be said for PNAC, which relied on several of its more prominent members, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney, to communicate the recommendations outlined in its much publicized report *Rebuilding America's Defenses* to President Bush.

However, while personal contacts and connections to decision-makers may help facilitate access to various levels of government, they do not guarantee that policy experts from think tanks and other organizations will be able to exercise policy influence. As Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Carter, recently acknowledged, different communities of scholars and former policy-makers in Washington attempt to influence public policy. "There are some communities that do not have much influence, except perhaps in shaping public attitudes to some extent through op-eds, television and so forth ... and there are other communities [of policy experts who] have acquired a certain degree of public recognition [and] have some degree of influence, not excessive, but some ... [They have] influence because of their natural access to policy-makers."<sup>12</sup> According to Brzezinski, experts who fall into the latter category can enjoy "a great deal of influence when government policy gets into deep trouble. Take Vietnam, for example, if things are not going well, all of a sudden viewpoints which are divergent from the standard policy gain a great deal of circulation and are listened to much more carefully."<sup>13</sup> Although there may be an incentive for policy-makers to listen to more diverse points of view when their "policy

gets into deep trouble," there are several other factors that may explain why some administrations would be more inclined to turn to outside policy experts, a subject that we will explore in the next two chapters.

The importance of qualitative analyses to the study of think tanks cannot be overemphasized. If done properly, archival research and interviews can produce volumes of information that can document in great detail the critical factors which shape public policy. But quantitative methods should not be overlooked or ignored. On the contrary, qualitative approaches can offer scholars something that raw data cannot – the historical and political context in which policy decisions were made. In chapters 8 and 9 we will draw on both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to evaluate the extent to which a select group of think tanks were able or unable to exercise influence at different stages of the policy cycle. In so doing, we will remain cognizant of the many methodological barriers often encountered in studying policy influence. Assessing policy influence is inherently difficult, but it is necessary if we are to make any progress in studying the involvement of think tanks and other non-governmental organizations in the policy-making process. The alternative – to rely on anecdotal information or data that tell us little about whether policy-makers and the public are listening to the steady stream of information being distributed by think tanks – is not an option.