U.S. news coverage of corporate actors in food and beverage policy debates

2015 EPH Conference
Milan, Italy
17 October 2015

Thank you to my co-authors
Laura Nixon & Pamela Mejia

Support for this research came in part from the National Cancer Institute, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Healthy Eating Research Program, and The California Endowment.

• Research on news coverage of public health issues
• Media advocacy training and strategic consultation for community groups and public health advocates
• Professional education for journalists

The Decline of ‘Big Soda’
The state is taking a stand against the largest producer of sugary drinks and it has implications for the battle over childhood obesity.

New York Times, October 2, 2015

Competing Stories: Obesity

You Are What You Eat
Poor parenting
Bad habits & personal choices
Overactive thumbs, underactive legs
Exercise, and exercise willpower

What Surrounds Us Shapes Us
Junk food marketing
Neighborhood connectivity & safety (transit, recreation)
No time for physical activity in school
Local, state, & federal policy (taxes, advertising, zoning, etc.)
Who can argue with education?

“As with most public health challenges, more and better consumer education is the answer.”

— Sean McBride, National Soft Drink Association writing in Beverage World, November 15, 2003

The Environment Matters

Competing Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market Justice</th>
<th>Social Justice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
<td>Shared responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’re on your own</td>
<td>We’re in this together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty to your family</td>
<td>Duty to the collective good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government interferes</td>
<td>Government protects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mashup of Daniel Beauchamp 1976 & Jared Bernstein 2006

Research Methods

- Articles from 5 largest circulation U.S. newspapers
- Local newspapers from Nexis news database + others (Spanish language)
- Industry trade press
- Ethnographic content analysis

Food & beverage industry claims in news coverage

- Industry is part of the solution (33%)
- Government overreach (25%)
- Products are not responsible (24%)
- Individuals are responsible (15%)
By contrast, individual company spokesmen described his company as a good corporate citizen. For example, a McDonald's corporate lobbyist told the government, "I think it's worth paying a few cents to have more sports fields and recreational activities." A McDonald's employee told the government, "We have an obesity epidemic in our nation and we now know that sugary drinks are the biggest single contributor." Meanwhile, a San Francisco resident told the government, "Meanwhile, meanwhile, meanwhile, meanwhile, meanwhile, meanwhile... We are under siege."

Pro-tax arguments

- Tax revenues will promote health: "A healthier future for our children."
- Sugary drinks are harmful: "Soda kills."
- Soda industry actions are inappropriate: "We are under siege."

Anti-tax arguments

- Tax will hurt the economy: "The tax is a punitive economic bludgeon."
- Tax won't improve health: "Taxes don't make people healthy."
- Tax represents government intrusion: "It's a big brother assault..."
Anti-tax arguments

“My customers don’t want to pay higher prices, and in this economy, fewer of them can afford to.”
El Monte restaurant owner, October 10, 2012

“Raising prices will not stop people from handing over their cash at the register, and it will not stop obesity rates from rising.”
Richmond youth, October 2012

“. . . now we’re being told we shouldn’t even be able to buy groceries or order dinner without the government’s help?”
Telluride business owner, October 27, 2013

San Francisco campaign

- 2 cents per ounce
- Revenues dedicated to preventing obesity among kids, so needed 2/3 vote
- Unprecedented industry spending
- 56% of the vote

Coalition for an Affordable City

- The American Beverage Association (ABA) funded “Unfair Beverage Taxes: Coalition for an Affordable City”
- Spent $10.5 million to oppose the tax

Berkeley Campaign

- 1 penny per ounce tax
- General fund, so needed simple majority
- 76% of the vote
- Early research showing decrease in purchases
- Anti-industry message in a small town

Berkeley campaign

- Anti message was about confusion
- Anti-ads blanketed public transit, billboards, house flyers
- Pro message was about health, children and industry spending
Preliminary findings

- Pro-coalition prominent in Berkeley news; city officials in SF news
- Reporters frequently named the industry (not just “opponents”) & local front groups
- Few anti-tax speakers beyond Roger Salazar and the ABA – a contrast with prior campaigns
- “Industry behaving badly” surged on social media and later in news

How Berkeley took on the might of Big Soda and won

California’s city known for its liberal causes debated powerful opposition over its campaign.

In Berkeley, America’s unofficial capital of progressive politics, they’re calling it the battle against Big Soda.

Nation’s first soda tax is passed

Berkeley, Calif., became the first U.S. city to pass a tax on sugary drinks including sodas.

More than three-quarters of the votes cast were in favor of Measure D, according to the Alameda County Registrar of Voters. The measure will place a 1-cent-per-ounce tax on soft drinks. It only needed a majority of “yes” votes to pass.
Thank you!
@BMSG
bmsg.org
Find us on Facebook