

When two sides go to war: Newspaper reporting of ‘television food advertising restrictions’ as a solution to childhood obesity

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Childhood overweight and obesity is a major public health problem in Australia and overseas. Food advertising during children’s television programmes has been identified as one contributing factor to childhood obesity. The media plays an important role in informing the public and presenting arguments supporting and opposing solutions to childhood obesity. The aim of this study was to analyse newspaper coverage of the debate over restricting television food advertising as a solution to preventing childhood obesity. A newspaper search was conducted over the period July 2002 to July 2005. One hundred and sixty-six articles were analysed for article characteristics, speakers quoted, causes and solutions of childhood obesity and arguments presented. The majority of the articles (82, 49%) took a positive slant towards restricting television food advertising to children while 35 (21%) had a negative slant. The main causes of childhood obesity presented were: television advertising of unhealthy foods, lack of physical activity, increased screen time and time stretched parents. The main areas presented as solutions of childhood obesity were: policy changes to food advertising, supportive environments for physical activity, supportive environments for healthy eating and healthy eating policies. Strong arguments and strong language dominated the debate which remained polarised between health professionals and Federal government and industry. In spite of opposition towards restrictions on television food advertising to children, the media’s stories played an important part in keeping the issue on the public and political agenda.

Keywords: risk; risk regulation; media; obesity; childhood obesity

The media plays an important role in informing the community about public health issues. The media can define public perceptions on issues by choosing what to present and *how* this information is presented. The selective presentation of issues is called framing, and can define what problems are perceived to be important and what the causes and solutions might be (Durrant *et al.* 2003). The problem of childhood overweight and obesity is commonly discussed in the Australian media with more than 5000 related articles reported in newspapers between 2002 and 2005. The causes and solutions to childhood overweight and obesity have been the subject of newspaper articles, conferences, fora, international summits, academic research, political debate, reports, books, documentaries, expert opinions, parent evenings and websites. The reporting and discussion of these events in the print media has resulted in large public exposure to the issue.

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Levels of childhood obesity in Australia trebled between 1985 and 1995 (Magarey *et al.* 2001) and it is now estimated that nearly 30% of Australian children are overweight or obese (Booth *et al.* 2003). Experts acknowledge the multi-factorial nature of overweight and obesity, and recognise that high levels of unhealthy foods advertised during children's television programmes are one contributory factor (Hastings *et al.* 2003, Lobstein and Dobb, 2005, World Health Organisation, 2003). Concern in Australia and worldwide about the advertising of unhealthy foods to children has led to a growing movement calling for restrictions as an important prevention strategy (Coalition of Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), November 2003, World Health Organisation, 2004).

Media advocacy is defined as the strategic use of media to pressure policy makers to act (Wallack *et al.* 1993). As the debate over restriction of television food advertising to children continues, the media is instrumental in informing the public about the supporting and opposing arguments for television advertising restrictions. The framing of issues in the media is of interest to health advocates who want to secure public support on public health problems.

While there has been significant reporting of the problem of childhood obesity (Lupton, 2004), this study is limited to an analysis of newspaper articles that discussed restrictions on television food advertising directed at children as a solution to preventing childhood overweight and obesity. The study covered a three year period when the issue began to be discussed in the public domain.

Method

Media selection

This study focused on newspaper media coverage because it is representative of all media coverage as is highly correlated with reporting of the same issues in other media such as television (Durrant *et al.* 2003). Glynn (Glynn, 1999) described the press as a more *accurate* source of news information compared to television.

Search criteria

The search covered newspaper articles printed between 1st July 2002 and 1st July 2005, in all Australian newspapers that were accessible via the electronic newspaper database *Factiva*. This period was chosen because July 2002 marked the launch of the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), a national advocacy group that raised the issue of restricting television food advertising onto the political agenda (Coalition of Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), November 2003). The analysis covered three years, which included the Australian Federal election in November 2004. National, state and local newspapers were searched because they were considered to reflect a comprehensive spectrum of news that the public receives. The search was limited to articles that contained the phrases 'television food advertising' or 'food marketing' and 'childhood obesity' or 'childhood overweight' within them.

Article selection

The authors examined all articles retrieved from the search and eliminated articles that were less than 150 words and those articles where none of the main themes discussed restricting television food advertising to combat childhood overweight and obesity.

Duplicate stories that were published in different newspapers were not eliminated in order to analyse the extent of coverage of certain themes.

Coding of articles

Qualitative and quantitative data, based on the ethnographic content analysis approach, were extracted from the articles. Ethnographic content analysis has been defined as the reflexive analysis of documents (Plummer, 1983). The aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid. Although categories and 'variables' initially guide the analysis, others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study (Altheide, 1987). Altheide (Altheide, 1987) has suggested that numeric as well as narrative data be collected when studying such documents as TV news. Using this method, numeric data was extracted relating to the extent of the coverage as well as, the emergence of words, themes and frames. Quantitative codes were developed by the researchers and included: the extent of the coverage, the tone of the article, the proposed causes and solutions to childhood obesity and the spokespeople quoted in the articles. Qualitative themes were developed through hand-coding and analysis of the data. Author Tuesday Udell coded the articles and in addition a 10% random sample of articles were coded again by author Kaye Mehta to assess inter-coder reliability. An 85% agreement between coders was achieved and this was considered acceptable.

Quantitative data analysis

Counts, percentages and frequencies were calculated using SPSS for Windows Version 11.5.0, SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL. Characteristics of the article were coded including: headline, date of article, newspaper name and type of article. The article placement was defined as: first four pages, first four pages + photo, other pages, other pages + photo. The newspaper type was defined as: national, state or local. Australia has two national newspapers – *The Australian* and *The Financial Review*, state newspapers were defined as those newspapers distributed in the capital cities and local newspapers were distributed in smaller regional areas.

The slant of the article, towards restricting television food advertising to children, was coded as: positive (supporting restrictions on food advertising), negative (opposing restrictions on food advertising), or mixed (both views presented – more positive, both views presented – more negative, both views presented – neutral). Where both views were presented, the number of positive and negative statements in the article were counted. Slant was coded in order to evaluate reactions to the idea of restricting food advertising to children.

Each person quoted in the article was coded as a speaker along with their position and organisation. The speakers in the articles were recorded in order to identify the main proponents and opponents in the debate and to evaluate whose opinions dominated the debate.

Within each article, the possible causes and solutions of childhood overweight and obesity directly or explicitly suggested by the journalist or the speakers were coded. Every article offered solutions but not every article discussed the causes of obesity. Some articles offered more than one cause and solution.

Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data was analysed manually and analysed for language including: recurring themes, imagery, tone and ideologies.

The arguments offered by journalist or speakers in the articles were categorised into those *supporting or opposing* advertising restrictions. These arguments were summarised and collated into recurring themes. The particular use of language, phrases and imagery to present the arguments was analysed to reveal the prevailing and competing ideologies in this debate.

Results

Article characteristics

This study found one hundred and sixty-six Australian newspaper articles published over the period 1st July 2002 – 1st July 2005 that reported on restricting television food advertising to children, as a solution to childhood overweight or obesity.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the newspaper articles coded. Nearly half (n = 72, 49%) of all articles were published in five newspapers: The Sydney Morning Herald (New South Wales), The Australian (National), The Age (Victoria), Courier Mail (Queensland) and The West Australian (Western Australia). Most articles (n = 128, 77%) appeared as news. Articles appeared most frequently (n = 134, 81%) after the first 4 pages with few (n = 32, 19%) appearing in the first 4 pages. The slant of the article towards ‘restrictions’ was mostly positive (supportive; n = 82, 49%).

Speakers in the debate

The main organisations supporting the restriction of television food advertising to children were CFAC and their member-organisations such as: Australian Medical Association, Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity and the Royal Australian College of Physicians (Table 2). Prior to the November 2004 election the Federal Labor Party also spoke in support of restrictions. The chairperson of CFAC, Ms Kaye Mehta (n = 28, 31% supporting restrictions) and the Prime Minister, Honourable Mr John Howard (n = 17, 33% opposing restrictions), were the speakers most often quoted (Table 3).

Causes and solutions to childhood overweight and obesity

Journalists generally cited academic or market research for evidence of the causes and solutions to childhood obesity, although some journalists were seen to be expressing their own opinion. Not all articles discussed the possible causes of obesity but all articles offered at least one solution and some articles offered up to eight solutions. The causes of childhood overweight and obesity discussed in the articles are listed in Table 4 and solutions are summarised in Table 5. Television food advertising was found most often in the articles as a cause of childhood overweight and obesity, and policy strategies to ban or restrict television food advertising was offered as the most common solution. In the articles, parents were often described as responsible for the problem because they were too busy and were not being ‘good’ parents by allowing their children to eat unhealthy foods and be sedentary.

Arguments for restricting food advertising

The following were the main arguments put forward by journalists and speakers in support of restrictions on food advertising during children’s viewing times.

Table 1. Characteristics of articles on television food advertising restrictions by newspaper, July 2002 – July 2005.

Newspaper	Total (%)	Region, State, Circulation ^a	Slant			Placement			Article Type			Letter to the editor
			Positive	Mixed	Negative	First 4 pages (photo)	Other (photo)	News	Opinion	Feature		
The Sydney Morning Herald	27 (16%)	S, NSW, 225900	11	5	11	11	16	26	0	0	0	1
The Australian	17 (10%)	N, All, 293000	3	9	5	4 (2)	13 (2)	9	1	7	0	0
The Age	15 (9%)	S, VIC, 197000	4	11	0	9	6	10	2	2	1	1
Courier Mail	12 (7%)	S, QLD, 208000	5	4	3	3	9	9	2	0	1	1
The West Australian	11 (7%)	S, WA, 201000	4	2	5	0	11	10	0	1	0	0
Mercury	10 (6%)	S, TAS, 49000	6	3	1	1	9	7	2	1	0	0
Herald Sun	9 (5%)	S, NSW, 587000	7	1	1	0	9	7	2	0	0	0
Canberra Times	9 (5%)	S, ACT, 37000	4	2	3	2	7	7	2	0	0	0
Advertiser	6 (4%)	S, SA, 191300	5	1	0	1	5	4	0	0	2	0
The Gold Coast Bulletin	5 (3%)	L, QLD, 42000	3	0	2	0	5	3	2	0	0	0
Sunday Mail	4 (2%)	S, SA, 321000	4	0	0	0	4	2	1	1	0	0
The Sun Herald	4 (2%)	S, NSW, 533000	3	1	0	0	4	4	0	0	0	0
Financial Review	3 (2%)	N, All, 86000	0	0	3	0	3	3	0	0	0	0
Newcastle Herald	3 (2%)	L, NSW, 50000	1	1	1	0	3	1	1	1	0	0
Townsville Bulletin	3 (2%)	L, QLD, 27000	0	1	2	0	3	2	0	1	0	0
Geelong Advertiser	3 (2%)	L, VIC, 28000	2	0	1	0	3	2	1	0	0	0
Sunday Telegraph	3 (2%)	S, NSW, 734000	3	0	0	0	3 (1)	3	0	0	0	0
The Daily Telegraph	3 (2%)	S, NSW, 405000	2	1	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	0
Other ^b	19 (11%)	State & Local	15	7	3	1	18	16	2	0	1	1
Total	166		82 (49%)	49 (30%)	35 (21%)	32 (19%)	134 (81%)	128 (77%)	18 (11%)	14 (8%)	6 (4%)	6 (4%)

^aL, Local; N, National; S, State; NSW, New South Wales; VIC, Victoria; QLD, Queensland; WA, Western Australia, TAS, Tasmania; ACT, Australian Capital Territory; SA, South Australia; Note that circulation of newspapers fluctuates; numbers quoted are Monday-Friday except for Sunday papers.
^bOther newspapers: These newspapers had less than 3 articles: Central Coast Express Advocate, Brisbane news, Innisfail Advocate, Brimbank Messenger, Penrith Press, Townsville Sun, Sunday Mail (QLD), Doncaster Templestowe News, Manly Daily, Sunday Times (Perth), Sunday Age, Cairns Post, Sunday Tasmanian, Illawarra Mercury.

Table 2. Organisations who were quoted in newspaper articles on restrictions on television food advertising to children, July 2002 – July 2005.

Support	Oppose
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Australian Divisions of General Practice ■ Australian Medical Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Advertisers ■ Australian Association of National Advertisers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity ■ Coalition on Food Advertising to Children ■ Consumer groups ■ Federal Labor Party (Opposition) ■ International Association of Food Organisations ■ Royal Australian College of General Practitioners ■ Royal Australian College of Physicians Schools ■ Sporting groups ■ World Health Organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Australian Broadcasting Association ■ Commercial television stations ■ Dietitians Association of Australia ■ Fast-food companies ■ Food manufacturers ■ Free TV Australia
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Federal Liberal Coalition Party (Federal government)

Food advertising in children's viewing time contributes to childhood obesity

This study found a number of articles arguing that advertising was a significant contributor to the growing childhood obesity crisis. The articles cited evidence of the high levels of unhealthy food advertising during children's viewing times and research showing links between advertising and children's food choices. Proponents of food advertising restrictions considered that this would assist children to reduce consumption of unhealthy foods.

Food advertisements contradict healthy eating messages

The majority of food advertising to children was for high-energy low-nutrient foods, and it was argued that this was giving children a skewed message about 'good foods to eat' and was undermining the efforts of parents, doctors and teachers to teach healthy eating to children. One journalist pointed the finger at industry saying that they are '... actively scheming to make our kids fat and keep them fat' (Glynn, 1999).

Current regulations are not working

It was argued that the current system of co-regulation was not working well to protect children's interests. Regulations were regularly breached and monitoring and surveillance was inadequate. Proponents called for tougher regulations.

Young children are vulnerable to exploitation

Articles argued that advertising to children was manipulative and exploited children's trust and naiveté. It was suggested that children needed to be protected from high exposure to advertisements encouraging them to eat high-energy low-nutrient foods. As one journalist reported, 'Children do need to be protected from the persuasive and unhealthy messages sent to them via TV food ads' (Jones, 18 June 2004). And another wrote, 'Media organisations and the food industry should be held responsible for the consequences of food advertising to children' (Canning, 18 June 2004).

Table 3. Speakers in newspaper articles who were quoted by journalists in support of or in opposition to restrictions on television food advertising to children, and number of times quoted, July 2002–July 2005.

Speaker	Support		Oppose		Quoted
	Occupation	Quoted	Speaker	Occupation	
Kaye Mehta	Chairperson, Coalition on Food Advertising to Children	28 (31%)	John Howard	Prime Minister of Australia, Federal Liberal Party	17 (33%)
Rosemary Stanton	Leading nutritionist	12 (13%)	Robert Koltai	Deputy Chairman, Australian Association of National Advertisers	7 (13%)
Rob Walters	Australian Divisions of General Practice	11 (12%)	Ian Alwill	Chairman, Australian Association of National Advertisers	7 (13%)
Kate Lundy	Spokeswoman on information and technology, Federal Labor Party (2004)	8 (9%)	Julie Flynn	Free TV Australia	5 (10%)
Boyd Swinburn	Professor of Population Health, Deakin University	8 (9%)	Guy Russo	CEO, McDonalds	4 (8%)
Larry Anthony	Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Federal Liberal party (2004)	6 (7%)	Dick Wells	Chief Executive, Australian Food and Grocery Council	3 (8%)
Michael Rice	Committee Chair, Child and Youth Health	5 (5%)	Australian Association of National Advertisers		3 (8%)
Clare Hughes	Australian Consumers Association	5 (5%)	Lesley Brydon	Executive Director, Advertising Federation of Australia	3 (8%)
Mark Latham	Leader of the Federal Labor Party (in opposition 2004)	4 (4%)	Matthew Melhuish	Chairman, Advertising Federation of Australia	3 (8%)
David Crawford	School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University	4 (4%)			
Total		91			52

Table 4. Causes of childhood overweight and obesity presented in newspaper articles grouped by area of responsibility, July 2002–July 2005.

Causes of childhood overweight and obesity	n
Television advertising of unhealthy foods	51
Lack of physical activity/sedentary living/ playing less	36
Increase in screen time	32
Irresponsible parenting/time stretched parents	22
Consumption of unhealthy foods	20
Bad eating habits	14
Advertising/Marketing	8
Modern living	8
Toxic environment	6
Lack of physical education at school/lack of sports facilities and male teachers at school	5
Genetic predisposition	4
Imbalance in energy in and energy out	4
Socio-economic disadvantage	2

Table 5. Solutions to childhood overweight and obesity presented in newspaper articles grouped by area of responsibility, July 2002–July 2005.

Area of Responsibility	Solution area		
	Supportive environments	Policy	Education
Healthy eating	38	28	1
Physical activity	64	5	0
Parenting	18	0	17
Food advertising	4	139	6
Socio/Environmental	12	2	18

Parents deserve support to educate children

Some articles argued that a ban on food advertising would help parents to combat sophisticated advertising that encouraged children to exert pressure on them to make purchases of foods seen on television. Proponents recommended government support of parents in the form of restrictions on food advertising to children.

Restricting food advertising to children should be part of a multi-strategy approach

Most writers and speakers agreed that a multi-strategy approach was required to address childhood obesity and that this should include physical activity and nutrition approaches. It was acknowledged that a ban on advertising would not solve the obesity crisis alone but that it would address the current obesogenic environment to which children were exposed.

Arguments against restricting television food advertising

The following arguments were put forward by journalists and speakers opposing restrictions of television food advertising:

Advertising does not cause childhood overweight and obesity

These articles argued that advertising was not a contributory factor to childhood obesity. They argued that it was not the advertising but the sedentary nature of sitting down to watch television that was making children fat. Other factors such as exercise, peers and family eating patterns were considered to be more influential on food choice than advertising.

Banning television food advertising is not a solution to childhood obesity

These articles argued that banning advertising was a gimmick and a headline grabber but was not a solution to childhood overweight and obesity. These articles took the approach that parents were responsible for what their children eat. One journalist was quoted as saying it was 'absurd to suggest parents were unable to resist the pressure of children or advertising to feed the family junk food' (Dow, 13 September 2002). Those opposing the banning of unhealthy food advertising on television said that it was seen as the easy solution for parents while they suggested that advertising did little to influence a person's behaviour.

A common argument against a ban on advertising was the use of comparison countries such as Sweden, Norway and Canada by proponents of greater restrictions. These articles often reported that banning advertising during children's programmes in Sweden had no impact on obesity levels and that obesity had continued to rise despite the bans.

Others demanded concrete proof that a ban would work. They argued that there was no definitive proof that advertising was a contributory factor to childhood obesity. Advertising representatives were quoted as saying that this solution was 'totally unsupported by facts and totally unjustified by logic' (Shoebridge, 2 July 2004).

Television stations need the income from advertising

These articles argued that a ban would force cuts to programming, particularly quality children's programmes. It was estimated by one journalist that the television industry would lose up to \$200 million of advertising and would only serve to 'spawn a new layer of bureaucracy' (Shoebridge, 28 June 2004).

A ban on advertising would be an infringement on commercial freedom of speech

The argument presented was that banning the promotion of legal products was a restriction on the freedom of commercial speech. The Prime Minister, Honorable John Howard was quoted as saying 'if something is legal to sell, then, in the absence of an overwhelming public interest case, it should not be illegal to advertise it.' (Seccombe, 22 June 2004). Arguments against a ban labeled it 'undemocratic', 'un-Australian' and 'a blatant interference with civil liberties' (Shoebridge, 2 July 2004).

Australians do not want more government regulations

The most common argument against banning television food advertising was that it took away people's responsibility for their own actions. This argument raised fears about the growth of a 'nanny-state' which, they argued, would have serious implications for freedom

of expression. One journalist was quoted as saying ‘preventive government policies do not even work ...’ (Conde, 5 February 2005).

Language

The language used in the media articles conjured up images of children being ‘attacked’ ‘blitzed’ and ‘bombarded’ by ‘aggressive food marketing’. Articles talked about the chronic health consequences of unhealthy weight and reinforced the idea that children were being handed a ‘death sentence’. The articles encouraged children to ‘fight’ and ‘battle’ against their weight while society had to ‘fight back’ in order to ‘combat’ this dangerous ‘pandemic’ / ‘epidemic’ / ‘crisis’. These themes were reinforced by dramatic headlines such as ‘war on junk food ads: mums dads enlist’ (Nankervis and Mehta, 6 February 2005).

One side of the debate, those for restricting television food advertising, defended the innocence of children. They argued that children were ‘vulnerable’, ‘impressionable’, ‘trusting’ and ‘easy targets’. The role of advertising was to seduce and manipulate the watcher. Advertisements were described as ‘aggressive’, ‘ruthless’ and full of ‘cheap gimmicks’. Children were depicted as sitting ‘trance-like’ ‘staring at television’, fed a diet of ads that put them ‘under the spells of marketing techniques’. ‘Advertising was portrayed as an insidious force’ from which children have little protection. The advertising industry was described as ‘unscrupulous’ and ‘giants’ who preyed on their audience’s weakness and vulnerabilities. This ‘exploitation of children’ said one article ‘is deplorable’ (Spence, 24 January 2005).

Others blamed the children and parents for the problem of childhood overweight and obesity – ‘Don’t blame the foods, blame the people who can’t control their appetites.’ (Anonymous, 10 November 2003). Children were described as ‘slothful, lazy’; opinion pieces depicted visual images of children stuffing ‘sludge’ down their throats and quotes such as ‘whole packets of snacks are stuffed into faces and sugar drinks are chugged back in micro-seconds’ (Vernon, 26 January 2005). Parents were often singled out and criticised in the articles. Described as ‘time poor’ and too busy to cook, parents were blamed for children’s requests for fast food. ‘Parents simply have to say NO ... its up to parents, not the government, to turn off the television ...’ (Armstrong, 4 July 2004).

Those opposing advertising restrictions argued that restricting television food advertising was a ‘band-aid’ measure or ‘quick fix’. They said that such moves would have ‘implications for freedom of speech’. Health professionals were described in articles as ‘food fascists’ and ‘fat police’. The Federal Government (Liberal) was often portrayed as ‘championing the battlers’ and representing ‘everyday Australians’. The major discourse in these articles focused on groups that were ‘attacking our way of life’ and restricting food advertising was described as ‘un-Australian’ and ‘un-democratic’. The Federal Government and Industry joined forces to attack the Federal Opposition leader, Honorable Mark Latham who supported the restrictions to television food advertising to children. His policy was described as ‘ham fisted’ and ‘draconian’ and, an ‘embrace of the nanny state’. In one article the advertising industry described the policy as ‘unwarranted’ ‘unsupported by facts’ and ‘totally unjustified by logic’ (Shoebridge, 2 July 2004).

Discussion

During the period of this study, childhood obesity was in the spotlight as a major public health problem in Australia. A number of significant events took place during this time.

In July 2002 the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children was formed to push forward the debate about advertising food on television (Coalition of Food Advertising to Children (CFAC), November 2003). In 2002 the Australian States held obesity summits (New South Wales Government, 2002, Victorian Government, 2006) and the Federal and State Health Ministers set up an obesity task force (National Obesity Task Force, 2003). In November 2004 a Federal election took place with a Liberal-National Coalition victory. The Liberal party opposed a ban on food advertising on television (Schubert, 23 June 2004). The Australian Labor party on the other hand campaigned in support of a ban on food advertising to children (Shoebridge, 28 June 2004). Television food advertising to children, which had not previously been considered as an important solution to childhood obesity, made its appearance on the public and political stage at this time.

This study found that between 2002 and 2005, the issue of restrictions on food advertising to children, was debated in the media. There were one hundred and sixty-six articles in thirty-two newspapers with at least twenty-one different individuals, groups or organisations expressing an opinion. The search strategy which specifically looked for discussion of restrictions on food advertising to children, and articles exceeding 150 words, limited the number of articles included in the study. Television food advertising was cited most often in the articles as a cause of childhood overweight and obesity ($n = 51$), and policy strategies to ban or restrict television food advertising were offered as the most common solution ($n = 139$). The study period from 2002 and 2005 coincided with interest in Australia about childhood obesity and in particular the role of television food advertising. It can be seen from the number of media articles and the range of views discussed that the issue of 'restrictions on food advertising to children' was well canvassed by the print media.

The discussions about television food advertising to children, in the media articles were polarised. Proponents of restrictions on television food advertising to children included a national advocacy group, public health organisations, and representatives of the Labor party. Opponents of restrictions came from the Liberal party and industry groups involved in advertising to children. Most newspaper articles were supportive of the restrictions, 49% supportive versus 21% against, and a third of the papers offered both sides of the debate.

This analysis found that the dominant arguments in favour of television advertising restrictions were focused on improving the health of children and creating an environment that supported healthy eating messages. In contrast, the main arguments against television advertising restrictions were focused around the economic impact on television broadcasters and infringement of commercial freedom of speech.

Proponents of restrictions highlighted the power of advertising to influence children and warned about the magnitude of the childhood obesity problem. Opponents of restrictions placed the major responsibility with parents, questioned the validity of advertising as a problem and warned about the impositions on commercial free speech. The language of discussion was strong and persuasive. Proponents of restrictions spoke the language of battle against the obesity epidemic and protecting innocent children against ruthless predators. Opponents blamed parents for being weak, and warned against a nanny-state. Such a polarised discourse reflects the highly contested ground between the competing interests of public health advocates and industry groups.

The discussion of restrictions on television food advertising uncovered by this study is typical of how 'conflict' stories are told by the media. The media plays an important role in a democratic society, of bringing conflict issues to the awareness of the public and engaging them in the public debate and decision-making process (Peters, 1994). The media

tells its stories through frames, and in so doing sets the agendas for what the public should think about (Vraneski and Richter, 2002). Journalists rely on various actors such as experts, interest groups and politicians, to provide them with information upon which to create media frames. As well as portraying the views of actors, journalists also put their own 'spin' reflecting their values, experience and the political orientation of their organization (Scheufele, 1999). The divergent media frames and the wide variety of experts interviewed, reflects a relatively new issue being introduced and debated in the public, namely the role of television food advertising in childhood obesity.

Public health advocates value the role of the media as an agent of social change; educating the public and engaging them in debate and building support for change (Wallack *et al.* 1993, Chapman and Lupton, 1994). The framing of issues in the media is of particular interest to public health advocates because of the power of language, in particular metaphors, symbols and labels, to influence public perception of issues (Caret *et al.* 1994). This study showed that proponents and opponents of restrictions on television food advertising as well as journalists themselves, used strong language, rich in symbolism, to argue respective positions in the debate.

Two dominant paradigms emerged in the media discussions about responsibility for health outcomes: these were the individualist paradigm and the socio-environmental paradigm (Baum, 1998). Articles representing the individualist position blamed parents for the problem, suggesting that parents were too busy or negligent by allowing children to eat unhealthy foods and be sedentary. On the other hand, the socio-environmental position was seen in articles that suggested the need for environments to support healthy food choices; these included healthy school canteens, and restrictions on junk food advertising to children. This position fits with a public health perspective to address the obesogenic environment for children (Swinburn and Egger, 2004, Zimmet and James, 2006). These paradigmatic conflicts are present in society and they were well represented in the articles studied, in relation to the idea of restrictions on food advertising to children. Nevertheless portrayal of the conflict was not entirely balanced with more articles taking a positive slant (82, 49%) compared to those taking a negative slant in relation to restrictions (35, 21%). This could be attributed to journalist's own opinions or those of their newspapers.

The use of the electronic newspaper database *Factiva* to undertake a detailed analysis of all newspaper articles in Australia over the period between 2002 and 2005, facilitated a comprehensive search, which was a strength of this study. A potential weakness of the study was that it was only limited to a content analysis of media articles greater than 150 words, discussing 'restrictions of television food advertising to children'. While this strategy contained and focused the study, it nevertheless did not allow for a deeper investigation into other causal factors implicated in childhood obesity. Neither did the study undertake a discourse analysis about the dominant social norms and values expressed in the discussion of these issues. Future studies analysing media reporting of the childhood obesity problem are needed to address these aspects.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the role of the media in discussing the issue of television food advertising to children as a contributory factor in childhood obesity. During the time of the study this issue took its place in the childhood obesity debate for the first time. In spite of opposition from the Federal government and industry groups towards restrictions on television food advertising to children, the media stories played an important part in

keeping the issue on the public and political agenda. Media analysis such as that undertaken by this study, can assist the campaign of interest groups, by allowing them to monitor the debate and take a 'reading' of the public and political sentiment.

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