Governing childhood obesity: Print media reporting of the regulation of fast food advertising 2006-2008

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Abstract

Childhood obesity is widely constructed as reaching epidemic proportions with consumption of fast food viewed as a contributing factor. This paper explores media reporting of regulation of fast food consumption. A media search of five Australian newspapers for the period Jan 2006 to Jun 2008 elicited 100 articles relating to the regulation of fast food advertising to children. Content analysis of articles demonstrates that the key sources cited within the articles are federal politicians, consumer groups and the advertising industry. Analysis of the position of sources in relation to the regulation of fast food advertising demonstrates that the proponents of government regulation include consumer groups, state government health ministers, nutrition and public health academics and medical and health foundations. The Federal Government, food and advertising industries and free to air broadcasters favour industry self-regulation and personal responsibility for fast food consumption. Thematic analysis of the articles reveals conflicting perspectives on the role of the state; level of the accountability of the food and advertising industries; and responsibilities of parents for regulating fast food consumption in children. These issues are discussed in relation to ideas about governance.

Keywords: governance, food advertising, regulation, media analysis, governmentality
Childhood obesity is frequently presented as an epidemic with long term health and economic ramifications (Coveney 2008; Hoek & King 2008; Lupton 2004). This view is perpetuated through media reporting of the prevalence and impact of childhood obesity (Lupton 2004). This paper explores reporting of the role of regulation of fast food advertising in addressing childhood obesity. Analysis is undertaken of 100 articles published within five Australian newspapers from January 2006 to June 2008 to identify key stakeholders in the debate, how they view regulation of fast food advertising and the media framing of the debate. Three themes are identified addressing debates about the role of government in regulating fast food advertising, industry self-regulation and the extent of personal and parental responsibility for fast food consumption. These debates are explored using governmentality as a theoretical framework through discussion of ideas about the role of government and governance of food advertising. The paper argues that existing strategies reflect a neo-liberal governmental rationality.

Governmentality is a term coined by Foucault (1979: 7) to describe a modern turn towards the development of knowledges about the “art of government”. Governance, for Foucault, has two aspects. The first is the technical aspect or ‘the will to govern’ reflected in the principles and goals that guide peoples’ behaviour and manifested in the practices that regulate others (Gordon 1991). The second aspect relates to knowledges about what it is to rule; with “questions of the reasons, justifications, means and ends of rule, and the problems, goals and ambitions that should animate it” (Rose 1993: 288). Miller and Rose (1990) describe this as the mentality of rule. For Rose (1996: 42) this has a moral aspect in so far as it is concerned with the allocation of responsibility for the tasks of governance but also an epistemological aspect in that these ideas “embody particular conceptions of the objects to be governed.”
Many authors (Burchell 1993; Gordon 1991; Rose 1996; Rose & Miller 1992) argue for the current dominance of neoliberal governmental rationality. Rose (1996) views neo-liberalism as being concerned with moderating the detrimental effects of ‘excessive governance’ through distancing formal political institutions from social actors. This reduces state provision of services and increases reliance upon the individual to manage their own well-being. He identifies three defining characteristics of neo-liberalism: a pluralism of social technologies; a changing relationship between expertise and politics; and a new specification of the subjects of government.

1. A pluralism of social technologies

Neo-liberalism is premised on a separation of the market from the state. Gordon (1991: 42) argues that neo-liberalism redefines the problem of government as the anti-competitive effects of society. As such, governance is concerned with questions of how to limit the role of government in relation to the market while maintaining legitimacy with citizens (Burchell 1993). For Rose (1996: 56), a solution is found in the “quango-ization of the state” evident in the decentralisation of regulatory functions to quasi-governmental agencies or to industry supported by mechanisms for consumer involvement. The role of the state largely viewed as advisory.

2. A changing relationship between expertise and politics

The decentralisation of power is accompanied by the adoption of indirect methods of governance operating through codification of standards. Rose (1996: 54-55) argues for “calculative regimes” which promote the recording of information in a prescribed manner “making it thinkable according to particular norms” and enabling maintenance of standards in the face of decentralisation of regulation.
3. A new specification of the subjects of government

A final consideration is the creation of new subjectivities. Rose (1996) argues that the essence of neo-liberalism is self-governance through making socially responsible choices. The individual is required to take responsibility for the future by managing risks in the present through the adoption of practices that maintain personal health and security (Petersen and Lupton 1996). Increasingly people are asked to become “experts of themselves” (Rose 1996: 59). They are required to adopt self care in relation to their bodies, minds and conduct and the conduct of their families. The role of the state is viewed as establishing the requisite conditions for the exercise of personal choice and of personal responsibility (Rose and Miller 1992).

Neoliberalism and food regulation

Food regulation in Australia and elsewhere has been decentralised. A number of authors (Halkier & Holm 2006; Sassatelli & Scott 2001; Tanaka 2005) describe models of food regulation that favour institutional independence, transparency and consumer agency. Decentralisation of regulation has also occurred in relation to food advertising. Hoek & King (2008) note that the US, Australian and New Zealand, typically jurisdictions with a strong neoliberal governance, have all adopted industry self-regulation for food advertising. They argue that the advertising industry has “developed and promulgated codes of practice” rationalised by a view that written codes, complaints mechanisms and auditing processes meet “best practice” standards (2008: 261). This perspective is viewed as ignoring a conflict of interest between consumer interests and corporate profitability which the authors argue is best resolved with government intervention to ensure public health.

The decentralisation of food regulation accompanies increasing individualisation of responsibility for body weight. Coveney (2008) argues that obesity is constructed as a
problem requiring both self-appraisal and governance. Individualisation leads to increasing moral pressure for the self-discipline to manage personal weight and the weight of family members. Childhood obesity is constructed in the public arena as a problem of epidemic proportions and is associated with conflicting perspectives of children as agents who can apply pressure upon parents through ‘pester power’ for fast food but also as ‘innocents’ to be protected from the market place (Coveney 2008).

More widely, the emergence of obesity as a public health issue is accompanied by the growth of knowledges and networks of expertise that address obesity through encouraging self-regulation. Dixon & Branwell (2004: 126) argue for a ‘nutritionalisation’ of food in which food is judged in relation to “perceived contribution to nutritional health.” The nutritionalisation of food is supported by compatible interests between government, science and industry which are furthered by increasing reliance upon industry funding for research; movement across the government and non-government sectors; the use of a small group of academics as government advisors and a shared focus upon disease and health risks identified through epidemiology. From this perspective the role of government is viewed as establishing programs to “engage individuals in self-regulation of personal habits that promote healthy food choices and physical activity” (Coveney 2008: 200).

Methods

The data for this paper comes from five Australian newspapers, *The Australian, The Age, The Advertiser, The Australian Financial Review* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. A media search was conducted via Factiva using the search term “food” for the period from Jan 2006 to June 30th 2008 for all articles relating to food and trust except letters to the editor. The search elicited a total of 721 articles in all. The
articles were divided into 8 themes, pertaining to childhood obesity, GM food, food labelling, slow and organic food, food contamination, risky foods, food regulation and other articles. This paper draws upon one theme, childhood obesity, specifically as it relates to the regulation of fast food advertising to children (N=100).

The articles were subject to content analysis. Articles were mapped via theme across the timeframe to enable the identification of peaks and troughs in reporting in relation to key events. Following Wright et al. (2005), content analysis was also used to identify key claim makers in relation to food advertising through quantification of the sources cited. Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify whether claim makers favoured government regulation, industry self-regulation of fast food advertising to children or whether they placed responsibility for fast food purchasing and consumption on the individual. This data was used to determine the content of the claims made by different sources with regards to regulation of advertising.

In addition, the articles were analysed for how they framed the issue. Frames are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation” of information which give news a context and meaning (Conrad 2001: 229). They determine “what becomes “news” and how it is reported” by accentuating some aspects of a story and excluding others (Conrad 1997: 141). The newspaper articles in this study were analysed for framing of regulation of fast food advertising through exploration of the central theme of each article, the use of quotes and other literary devices and attention to the headlines and lead sentences of the newspaper articles as these “signal to the reader how to “define” the situation” (Chapman & Lupton 1994: 43).
Results

Figure 1 demonstrates the volume of articles published within the newspapers addressing the regulation of fast food advertising via month. While the debate around regulation of advertising remained on the agenda throughout the period there are two peaks in reporting in July 2006 (N=11) and April 2008 (N=8) associated with the release of voluntary marketing industry codes to regulate fast food advertising to children. Further peaks in February and May 2007 (N=7 each) coincide with the release of research on parental perceptions of fast food advertising (February 2007) and on parental support for a ban on junk food advertising at times when children watch television (May 2007).

Table 1 quantifies the number of articles in which key claim makers in the debate about regulation of fast food advertising to children are cited. The table demonstrates that Federal government representatives, most frequently Tony Abbott, the Minister for Health under the Howard Coalition government, are the most commonly cited source (N=40). Consumer groups (N=30) and advertising industry representatives (N=29) are also widely cited. Consumer interests are represented by the Australian Consumers Association (Choice) (N=13), Parent’s Jury\(^2\) (N=7) and Young Media Australia (N=5) with the remaining citations arising from lobby groups specifically formed to address this issue (eg: Coalition Against Food Advertising to Children). The advertising industry is primarily represented by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) (N=22). The membership of advertising and consumer lobby groups is fluid with the same person representing different organisations, demonstrating the extent of expertise networks. Other commonly cited sources
include nutrition (N=16) and public health academics (N=7), state government health ministers (N=17), representatives from the food industry (N=14) and medical and health foundations (N=13).

[Table 1 about here]

Table 2 outlines the position of key claim makers in relation to the regulation of fast food advertising. This table demonstrates that the key proponents of government regulation are consumer groups, state government health ministers, nutrition and public health academics and medical and health foundations. The Federal Government, food and advertising industries and free to air broadcasters favour industry self-regulation and personal responsibility for fast food consumption.

[Table 2 about here]

**Thematic analysis: Framing the Debate**

The articles were also subject to thematic analysis of the framing of the articles around the three approaches to the regulation of fast food advertising. The articles, in general, promote governmental regulation, evident in the use of literary device such as citation of research from “highly respected” or “influential” medical or health organisations and academics, juxtaposition of opposing views with the views of consumer groups and other proponents of regulation and through questioning of the motives of the advertising and food industry.

*Government regulation: Protection vs the “Nanny State”*

At the centre of the debate around government regulation of fast food advertising are questions about the role of government. For advocates of governmental regulation, regulation serves the dual purpose of protecting a vulnerable population from the “constant barrage of food marketing” and addressing the “obesity epidemic” (*The
Advertiser 13/06/06: 19). Children, as the subjects of the debate, are presented as having “impressionable minds which are being exposed to high pressure advertising” (The Advertiser 22/05/06: 11) and as not having the capacity to make healthy food choices (The Sydney Morning Herald 6/09/06: 5). As such, they are viewed as being in need of protection. Greens Senator Bob Brown is cited in The Sydney Morning Herald for example, as claiming “junk food advertisements work and we need to protect children from them” (12/04/06: 4).

These arguments are made alongside of claims that regulation of fast food advertising is a strategy to manage childhood obesity. Childhood obesity is consistently presented in the media “as one of the most significant public health issues in our country” (The Age 28/7/06: 8). The failure of the Howard government to adopt regulation is viewed as evidence of “greater concern for the interests of free-to-air television networks and junk food and beverage companies than the Australian children” (The Sydney Morning Herald 15/04/06: 23) and as “reluctan[ce] to interfere in lives of citizens” (The Age 29/7/06: 8).

The alternate view of government is one which favours minimal intervention in the lives of citizens and the market. This view is propagated by the Federal Government, and the advertising and food industries. Regulation is seen as an example of the “Nanny State” in which people “surrender personal responsibility and expect government to find a solution for them” (The Australian 19/05/08: 9). Tony Abbott describes fast food advertising as an area which does not require government regulation as it has been “proven not to work” (The Advertiser 3/08/06: 29). The food and advertising industries question regulation through appealing to ideals of a free-enterprise economy. The Chief of the Australian Food & Grocery Council states for example, that food advertising is “appropriate to a democratic free-enterprise society”
(The Advertiser, 14/09/07: 2) while the president of the AANA claims that regulation “is an underlying threat to free enterprise” (The Sydney Morning Herald 21/11/06: 3)

Industry regulation: Ethical self-regulation vs exploitation

The central proponents of industry self-regulation are the advertising and food industries, the Federal Government and free to air broadcasters. The advertising industry released two voluntary codes for regulating fast food advertising within the 30 month period covered by this study. Industry self-regulation is presented in the media as a response to a ‘losing battle’ to prevent regulation in the face of increasing consumer pressure. Earlier in the period, both the Federal Government and industry state that existing regulation is sufficient. When the United Kingdom mooted the introduction of legislation to limit fast food advertising in March 2006, the chairwoman of Free TV Australia stated that Australia had “strict regulation covering advertising” (The Sydney Morning Herald 30/3/06: 27). By February 2007, the AANA describes the debate as a “battleground” which is extending from “the food sector, through advertising to children and on to marketing more generally” (The Sydney Morning Herald 5/03/07: 8). In response, both the food and advertising industries appealed to the development of ethical guidelines. The director of the AANA stated in May 2007 that “there are heightened expectations for corporate transparency, integrity and social responsibility” (The Australian 3/05/07: 17). As a result, the second industry code released in April 2008, is presented as taking note of “widespread community concerns” (The Sydney Morning Herald 17/04/08: 3) while more recently, the AANA identified a need to give consumers “a sign they were taking the debate over the role of advertising in the obesity issue seriously” (The Australian 26/06/08: 35)
The opposing view, put by consumer groups and academics, presents fast food companies as irresponsible and as deliberately flouting “television guidelines and encourag[ing] a fast food culture” \((The \ Age\ 28/07/06: 8)\). The Federal Government is seen as needing to be “dragged kicking and screaming to the regulatory table to ban junk food TV commercials” \((The \ Australian\ 12/7/06: 19)\). These articles challenge the ethical stance undertaken by industry arguing that the food industry uses “hard sell techniques” and “trickery and aggressive marketing” \((The \ Advertiser\ 14/09/07: 2)\).

There is also discussion of the use of the internet as an unregulated medium for food advertising to children. A headline in \The Sydney Morning Herald\ says that “Food and drink advertisers find new ways to target children” with the lead sentence discussing covert food advertising to children \((The \ Sydney \ Morning \ Herald\ 13/06/06: 2)\).

**Individual regulation: Responsible vs irresponsible parenting**

The debate about individual responsibility centres on parental responsibility for monitoring and regulating fast food consumption. For proponents of individual responsibility, consumption of junk food is evidence of “lack of self-control” or irresponsible parenting \((The \ Age\ 13/4/2006: 16)\). One of the key proponents of this perspective is the Federal Government. Tony Abbott is widely reported as stating that “the only person responsible for what goes into my mouth is me and the only people who are responsible for what goes into kids mouths are the parents” \((The \ Sydney \ Morning \ Herald\ 12/04/06: 4)\). Advertising industry representatives present similar views citing research which demonstrates a statistical link between parental consumption of junk food and childhood obesity.

The solution to childhood obesity for the Federal government is found in “individuals knowing what lifestyle and food choices are healthy and having the self-discipline to
make those choices and explain them to their children” (The Sydney Morning Herald 17/4/06: 8). John Howard states that the role of the Federal government is “to provide practical assistance to individuals to enable people to make better and more informed healthy lifestyle choices in their lives” (The Sydney Morning Herald 28/07/06: 5). While this view was tempered with the election of a Labor government there is continued evidence of promotion of parental responsibility for fast food consumption with “governments [viewed as] hav[ing] a role in being able to support parents” through existing mechanisms (Nicola Roxon cited in The Advertiser 14/12/07: 8)

For opponents of this perspective, parents require regulation to support attempts to enable children to eat healthy foods in the face of “pester power” (The Sydney Morning Herald 7/02/07: 7). The irresponsibility of the fast food industry requires greater parental responsibility to counter the messages children receive (The Sydney Morning Herald 15/04/06: 23). A nutrition academic claims that “parents want some help in taking away the thing that is making their job so hard” (The Advertiser 4/08/06: 7) with consumer groups stating that “banning junk food is about helping parents by not actively working against what they are trying to do and not undermining the healthy messages they are trying to give their kids” (The Australian 19/05/08: 5).

**Discussion**

This paper has identified key stakeholders in the debate about regulation of fast food advertising and their positions with regards to regulation. Lawrence (2004: 57) argues that reporting of obesity can be analysed in terms of ‘individualising’ and ‘systemic frames’ where individualising frames “limit the causes of a problem to particular individuals” and systemic frames assign “responsibility to government, business and larger social forces.” To bring about change in public policy, obesity
must be framed as a systemic problem (Lawrence 2004). In media reporting in this study, individualising frames focus upon parental responsibility for monitoring and regulating fast food consumption. This is the position adopted by the Federal government, food and advertising industries. Systemic solutions in the media studied, are found in the regulation of fast food advertising. This position is favoured by consumer groups, state governments, nutrition and public health academics and medical and health lobby groups.

O’Mahoney & Schafer (2005: 101) argue that journalists draw upon “shared cultural codes” in producing the news. Thematic analysis of the articles demonstrates the extent to which each side of the debate uses stereotypical representations of others. Proponents of regulation construct the food and advertising industries as irresponsible and unethical and parents as responsible but overburdened by parental responsibilities. Children are presented as being impressionable and vulnerable but also as capable of exerting pressure upon parents for fast food, necessitating support for parents in enforcing good food choices. Opponents of regulation draw upon fears of excessive governance and personal responsibility for weight. This position is one which reflects neo-liberal ideals. Federal Politicians express an unwillingness to regulate the advertising and food industries, protecting the separation of the market from the state. Instead responsibility for consumption of fast food is placed upon the individual to make informed nutrition choices and to have the self-discipline to enforce these decisions upon children.

Further, both the Howard Coalition and Rudd Labor governments have adopted strategies that involve the decentralisation of responsibility for regulation of fast food advertising to industry. The mechanism for regulation is the codification of standards by the advertising industry to enable auditing of practice. For critics of industry self-
regulation, the market does not provide sufficient impetus to protect children from fast food advertising. Critics of industry self-regulation argue instead, for protecting the publics’ health through government regulation to support parents in assuming responsibility for the health of their children. In this respect they also reflect a belief in a moral responsibility of the individual for their own health and that of their families and thus, also promoting the ideals of neo-liberalism.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored media reporting of regulation of fast food advertising in the Australian print media, identifying three positions in relation to responsibility for regulation: governmental regulation, industry self-regulation and personal responsibility for fast food consumption. The position favoured by the Federal government is one which favours industry self-regulation through codes of practice alongside of individual responsibility for healthy food choices. The paper argues that this position reflects the ideals of neo-liberalism evident in the decentralisation of responsibility for regulation, the codification of practice standards and individualisation of responsibility for health.

**Endnotes**

1. This term was used to ensure access to a range of articles with implicit links to trust
2. Parent’s Jury is an online network supported by a variety of health-related non-government organizations such Diabetes Australia and the Cancer Council of Australia. Because of the composition of the membership (parents, grandparents and guardians) Parent’s Jury presents itself as a ‘citizens’ voice’ on a number of food issues.

**Bibliography**


Figure 1: Number of articles addressing the regulation of fast food advertising 2006-June 2008
Table 1: Cited sources in relation to fast food advertising

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<td>Medical/Health foundations</td>
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Table 2: Position of claim makers in relation to regulation of fast food advertising

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Con: Consumer groups
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Nutrition academics
Health foundations
Medical organisations and experts
Parents