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Media and the staging of policy controversy: obesity and the UK sugar tax

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ABSTRACT

In response to the perceived risk to health posed by obesity, governments in over 40 countries have introduced sugar taxes (also known as soda taxes), often as part of wider plans to improve national food environments. In this study we apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze 29 television news interviews addressing the sugar tax, in order to expose how and why media companies and the experts involved stage and maintain controversy. Our analysis provides evidence of a broad range of devices, ranging from the macro choice of interviewees and the role of the interviewer to their micro level rhetorical choices. They also include experts molding the same evidence to support their position and interviewers posing questions they know will result in a blunt contradiction. While individually each device may appear relatively inconsequential, their repeated use generates possibilities for self-perpetuating intertextuality and provides a sense of intractability that contributes to public disengagement with the issue. The value of studies such as this is to elucidate the use, ubiquity and effects of these devices that may otherwise go unnoticed or unquestioned.

KEYWORDS

Critical discourse analysis;
television news interview;
infotainment; intertextuality;
sugar tax; obesity

Introduction

News media of any kind reinterpret and re-present policy messages (Katikireddi and Hilton 2015). Indeed, the target population may be exposed to repackaged versions to a greater extent than to original carefully crafted communications (Patterson et al. 2016). Such repackaging will be shaped by the business models of media organizations, and the interests of programme makers (Harcup and O'neill 2017; Edgerly and Vraga 2020). Helping solve or mitigate a social problem through disseminating effective public information may be less economically attractive to media companies than framing it as intractable or controversial, so as to increase and extend its newsworthiness (O'Sullivan 2007). The news interview is a common and popular form of broadcast infotainment, mixing information and entertainment to the potential detriment of the former (Thussu 2015).

Obesity is often presented in the UK and in other developed nations as a major health issue, leading to chronic health conditions and premature deaths (WHO 2004). Concern about

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obesity has heightened, particularly over the last two decades, with obesity framed as an epidemic by 'myriad agents and agencies', including scientists, governments and the media (Monaghan, Rich, and Bombak 2019, 1) and promulgated in media reporting (Holmes 2009). More recently, excess weight has been identified as a risk factor in testing positive, hospitalization, more advanced treatment and mortality from COVID-19 (Public Health England 2020). Prior to the pandemic, the UK Government had developed several policies to reduce obesity levels in adults (Public Health England 2018) and children, including the Childhood Obesity Plan (UK Government 2016).

A major part of this plan was a levy on soft drinks based on their sugar content (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016). The UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) or sugar tax was announced in the Budget statement on the 16th March 2016 and became effective from 6th April 2018. This two-year period between announcement and implementation saw many drinks manufacturers reformulate their drinks to avoid or reduce the amount of tax due. This was attributed both to the sugar tax and increased demand for lower sugar and healthier drinks (The Grocer 2018). Other approaches to mitigate the impact of the tax included 'shrinkflation', where the portion sizes were decreased to reduce the amount of tax due (BMI Research 2018). When announced in 2016, it was estimated that the tax would raise about £500 million per annum. In November 2018, it had raised £154 million since its introduction in April of that year (BBC 2018). However, as with any deterrence tax, lower than expected tax revenues may suggest success. Evaluation of the tax one year after its introduction found mixed outcomes: '*a reduction in purchased sugar from all soft drinks with no evidence of a commensurate reduction in the volume of soft drinks purchased*' (Pell et al. 2021, 8). Evidence from other countries such as Mexico with similar taxes, also lend themselves to multiple interpretations: whilst sales of sugary drinks declined after their introduction, the effect was short-lived and sales returned to pretax levels after a couple of years (BMI Research 2018).

Sugar taxes are of global interest. As of 2020, approximately 40 countries had introduced sugar taxes (Obesity Evidence Hub 2021). Like much taxation, sugar taxes divide opinion; being welcomed by those seeking to reduce obesity (Roache and Gostin 2017) and opposed by others. Common objections include libertarian arguments for freedom of choice, and the regressive nature of consumption taxes (Tselengidis and Östergren, 2019). Other disagreements arise about the mechanisms by which such taxes should reduce sugar consumption, by either increasing prices to consumers or encouraging supplier reformulation, and use of the tax income (Tselengidis and Östergren 2019). Implementation of the tax does not indicate resolution of these issues, as evidenced by the vulnerability of such policy to change by future governments (Campbell 2022). Such contested views in society at large indicate the need for effective sources of public information.

In this study we apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to determine how and why media companies stage and maintain controversy in the specific case of the UK sugar tax. Discourse analysis has proven a popular and effective means of undertaking critical policy analysis, due to its consistency with the discursive nature of policy creation and implementation (Fairclough 2013; Howarth, Glynos, and Griggs 2016). Because social actors '*mainly make sense of the world by borrowing terms and concepts from the discourses made available to them*' (Fischer 2003, 83), CDA's perspective on how communicative practices, such as the television news interview, reflect and reinforce societal relations, makes it an appropriate instrument for our purposes.

In the following section we review the two relevant prior literatures, the nexus of which provides the focus of our research: (i) media business models and the role of the media in policy; and (ii) the framing of obesity. We also review CDA and its use in policy studies. In the Method section, we describe how we have operationalized CDA in our study. We then present our findings, a discussion of those findings and associated recommendations.

Prior literatures

Media business models and role in policy

Attracting and engaging audiences are central to the business rationale of the media (Edgerly and Vraga 2020). Targetable audiences in any advertiser-supported media business models (Eastman and Ferguson 2009), and audience numbers remain vital as TV finds new distribution platforms and new formats including streaming and online services (Barker, Shedd, and Lee 2014). Bridges (2016) argues that while profitability is less important than prestige in some license or subscription models, their sustainability depends on audience numbers.

Callaghan and Schnell (2001, 186) observe '*Given the ratings-driven environment in which the news is packaged and conveyed, journalists frequently exploit the personality, sensationalisms, drama, and conflict of stories, thereby downplaying the larger social, economic, or political picture*'. Hence the selection and framing of stories and topics by editors and journalists is not a disinterested, neutral process, but an artful, commercially-driven activity, designed to attract audiences (Kioussis 2001). The doctrine of editorial independence remains, whereby journalists avoid '*undue influence to provide coverage tailored to suit the commercial interests of proprietors or advertisers*' (Harcup 2014, 91). But the commercially-motivated construction of the news, often from resources such as public relations companies which are themselves commercially-motivated, problematizes the concept of editorial independence.

The prospect of reaching large audiences attracts policy advocates keen to get health-related messages into editorial content (Rosewarne et al. 2020). News media often carry stories supportive of a policy, such as the minimum unit pricing of alcohol (Patterson et al. 2016). However, news stories can also interfere with and degrade policy messages, such as undermining confidence in vaccination programmes (Crowcroft and McKenzie 2013) or blurring public understanding of revised alcohol consumption guidelines (Patterson et al. 2016). The media through their framing of issues wield considerable power to influence public opinion and policy support by political elites (Callaghan and Schnell 2001). For example, media framing has been suggested as a potential influencing factor in the state court's ending of a New York City sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) portion-size cap (Donaldson et al. 2015).

Obesity framing in the media

Obesity reporting in the media has received considerable critical attention over the last two decades (Monaghan, Rich, and Bombak 2019). Concerns have been raised about the tendency in British news media discourse to catastrophise obesity, to focus on obesity's consequences, to attribute obesity to individual rather than social, environmental and structural factors, and to mainstream a discourse focused on getting and staying slim (Bączkowska 2020). The tendencies identified in the British media are also evident in the

news media of other countries, including: Australia (Bonfiglioli et al. 2007), Austria (Penkler, Felder, and Felt 2015) and the USA (Boero 2012). The focus on individuals has stymied wider discussions about public health (Boero 2012) and raised concerns about the stigmatization of people deemed to be obese (Saguy, Frederick, and Gruys 2014).

Some media discourses also frame obesity as a moral issue (Penkler, Felder, and Felt 2015) and perpetuate a '*climate of fear*' about fat (Boero 2012, 44). For example, a study of obesity discourse in British television programmes identified obesity being framed as a moral rather than health issue, with shame used to spur people into addressing their weight (Inthorn and Boyce 2010). Similarly, Rich (2011) highlighted the '*pathologization of the working classes within obesity discourse*' (p.13) in which they were positioned as needing to be '*managed, controlled and "taught" how to live better lives*' (p.17).

Boswell (2014, 346) describes obesity as '*a complex, uncertain and controversial issue of clashing narratives*' with actors' perspectives broadly varying between: (i) '*a crisis that necessitates urgent and far-reaching government intervention*'; (ii) '*largely a personal issue that the government should have no role in*'; and (iii) '*disput[ing] the existence of any such "epidemic"*'. Boswell (2014, 349) describes a narrative as '*a chronological account of episodes, events and facts that actors rely on to make sense of and communicate about a complex and contested issue*' and argues that they are important for policy since '*narratives provide a common understanding of the "plot" of a policy problem*'. Boswell (2016) identifies six such narratives, offering competing explanations of, and remedies for, the perceived problem of obesity, briefly summarized in Table 1.

Take in Table 1 about here

We now provide a brief overview of CDA and discuss its use in policy studies.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Working within a critical realist ontology, CDA holds that analyzing instances of verbal and non-verbal meaning-making can reveal the iterative operation and creation of social worlds through the constitutive nature of discourse (Hewer et al. 2022). Fairclough (2013) argues for CDA's utility in critical policy studies to illuminate the relationship between '*discourse and other social elements (power, ideologies, institutions, social identities, etc.)*' (Fairclough 2013, 178).

Our analysis is of the controversialisation of policy, rather than its formation, but it recognizes the '*discursive (or semiotic or linguistic) character of policy, policy making and policy analysis*' (Fairclough 2013, 177). CDA's critical orientation and interest in finding new perspectives on taken-for-granted problems make it appropriate for investigating how policy

Table 1. Narratives of obesity (adapted from Boswell, 2016).

Facilitated agency	Obesity has its roots in rapid social change. We need to help people reconnect to healthier lifestyles.
Structured opportunity	The food environment is stacked against individuals, making them fat. Strong government regulation is needed.
Individual intervention	It is medicine's role to care for and treat affected individuals, and develop preventative solutions.
Social dislocation	Obesity is just one of many evils from social injustice and inequality.
Nanny state	Meddling by the state is the problem. People should take responsibility for their own health.
Moral panic	The 'obesity epidemic' is a sensationalist myth and discriminatory.

is represented and received. For example, O'Sullivan (2007) examines rival discourses from activists and industry apologists around regulatory policy on children and advertising. Raftopoulou and Hogg (2010) question the effect on democratic institutions of policy framing citizens as consumers and Mulderrig (2017) problematizes the role of behavioral economics, known as 'nudge', in government anti-obesity policy.

Mulderrig, Montessori, and Farrelly (2019, 1) underline the relevance of CDA to policy studies by proposing what they term the '*theoretical and methodological synergy*' of Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (CPDA). This integrates CDA into the established tradition of Critical Policy Studies which attends not only to the apparent inputs and outputs of policy formation and implementation, but to '*the interests, values and normative assumptions – political and social – that shape and inform these processes*' (Fischer 2015, 2003, 1). In a similar way, CDA attends not only to the apparent inputs and outputs of discourse as information. It acknowledges and reveals interests, values and normative assumptions in discourses that shape and inform how we see social problems (Mulderrig 2017).

CDA-oriented researchers start with '*a social problem that has a semiotic aspect*' – such as obesity – and question why it persists as a problem; in particular asking whose interests might be served by its continued existence? (Fairclough 2001, 236). CDA investigates how practices of text, talk and other forms of semiosis keep the problem unsolved, by privileging some meanings and voices, while side-lining others, in ways which reflect, and help maintain, power relations in society. Its emancipatory interest as a critical research approach is to help generate solutions to problems whose apparent intractability stems from their construction by powerful discourses which crowd out alternative interpretations.

It has been objected that their initial focus on problems leads CDA-oriented researchers to confirm their prejudices rather than conduct open-minded analysis (Rogers 2004). On the other hand, as Le and Le (2009) argue in defense of CDA, its adherents are explicit about their critically engaged stance from the outset, allowing readers and users of their research to judge its plausibility.

Rhetoric, which Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates (2001, 214) define simply as '*discourse which is argumentative and which seeks to persuade*', is an important consideration in CDA because of its concern with competing constructions of the social world. Table 2 lists several conventional rhetorical tropes. While by no means the only argumentative aspect of discourse, identifiable rhetorical figures provide a useful framework for analysis. For example, certain metaphors and rhetorical appeals associate themselves with specific narratives (Boswell 2016), establishing predictable positions in a debate.

Take in Table 2 about here

Method

Sample

The study draws on video recordings of twenty-nine television news interviews on the topic of the UK sugar tax. The videos were identified through a systematic search of the British Library's (BL) archive of all news broadcasts since 2010 (includes all main terrestrial and digital providers of English news) and a mass video sharing platform. The search categories and terms used were: television, news interview, UK and sugar tax. The dates of search were restricted to between January 2014 (first official reports

Table 2. Sample of Rhetorical Devices.

Rhetorical Devices	Description	Examples from Data	References
Anaphora	Repetition at the beginning of successive clauses	Video 7 Interviewee: . . . whether it's our Olympics, our sports, or just advertising all over our biggest TV shows, and it's always gonna be the highest salt, fat and sugar companies . . .	Lanham (1969)
Agree and switch	Appear to agree with the discussion, but then switch to an intended point	Video 2 Interviewer: what about an actual tax on sugar . . . so that producers had to pay the tax Interviewee: well maybe that would work . . . but I think educating people and trying to get them to resist being addicted to sugar	Taylor (2016)
Endoxa	General expressions suggesting common sense views. Broad suggestions of what the majority of people believe.	Video 5 Interviewer – if it [subsidy from the sugar tax] makes fruit and veg cheaper – that has to be a good thing . . .	Haskins (2004).
Energeia	Invoking vivid imagery	Video 1 Interviewee: . . . this could be the first generation of children that are outlived by their parents. Interviewer: Yes it's terrifying.	Lanham (1969)
Ethos	Establishing authority	Video 7 Interviewee: I sit in front of you today as a parent . . . and someone that is proud to . . . run a British business. I'm happy to take a spank on .profits . . . if I'm doing it right	Kennedy (1991)
Litotes	An understatement that intensifies the meaning	Video 7 Interviewee: I'm not doing this because it's like the cutest fun I've ever had, I mean I'm doing it because I think it's constructive	Lanham (1969)
Metaphor	Word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest a likeness	Video 16 Interviewee: it's just recalibrating the 'rules of the game' and at the moment the game in Britain on health for children is awry	Lanham (1969)
Pathos	Drawing on emotion	Video 20 Interviewee (child): I was eating junk food and not doing any exercise . . . I started to realize that . everybody in my class was running faster than me.	Kennedy (1991)
Topoi	Specific arguments that are commonly referred to.	Video 27 Interviewee: now the problem with this sugary drinks pack tax is that it's probably the . . . prelude to a tax on fatty foods (common argument of 'it is a slippery slope')	Kennedy (1991)

calling for a sugar tax) and December 2016 (the announcement of adoption of the tax by the government was in March 2016). The BL archive yielded 33 items. These were all reviewed and ten were excluded for the following reasons: were not of interview format e.g. only one news reporter, or were off topic. The remaining 23 videos were included in our study and fully analyzed (including one where we had to source an archive copy of the item direct from the broadcaster as the BL recording was corrupted). The systematic

review of the BL archive was supplemented by a search of a video sharing platform. The vast scale of this platform means that search strategies are more open ended. Identical terms were used for this search, but with *ex post* exclusion of items that were not by the main broadcasters, outside our specified required dates and outside the topic area. This resulted in finding six additional distinct videos to those from the BL. These were included in our study and fully analyzed, making a sample of 29 videos in total (details provided in the Appendix).

Research protocol

The three coauthors developed a tabulated analysis protocol identifying topics for interrogation of the videos. These included metadata such as broadcaster, programme and date of broadcast and topics relevant to CDA such as interviewees, role of interviewer, visual and physical layout, major narratives, use of emotion and rhetorical language. We drew on general principles of visual research, observing, noting and reflecting on issues such as what and why were people and items in view, how were they arranged and what other visual items were provided (such as subtitles) and how these framed our topic of interest (Rose 2016). The protocol included common rhetorical devices that might be expected in a debate-style interview (Kennedy 1991), the most common of which are shown in Table 2.

Analysis

The three coauthors then all undertook a detailed analysis of the same video (video 27, since it was relatively long and rich) and compared their findings. This resulted in consensual refinement of the analysis protocol. Analysis of the remaining videos using the agreed protocol was then divided amongst the coauthors. Transcripts were available for the videos from the video sharing platform, and were read in conjunction with repeated viewing. The opportunity for new discursive categories was recognized by including new categories in the tabular framework, sharing these developments with coauthors and reconsidering all other videos according to the new categories. Analysis of five of the videos was reviewed by one of the other coauthors as a further robustness check. The full tabular analysis was reviewed by all coauthors, again reverting to the videos and transcriptions where this was helpful.

Findings: how controversy was staged

The analysis identified multiple ways in which controversy was staged during the interviews, such as the choice of interviewees, the role of the interviewer, the physical arrangement in the studio, the narratives adopted by the interviewees and the detailed rhetoric used by the interviewees. These will be discussed individually below. However, many were interrelated and reinforced the sense of controversy. For example, those presenting narratives against the tax adopted more confrontational rhetoric, as will be discussed.

Choice of interviewees

Twenty-one of the videos analyzed featured a presenter and two or more experts with opposing views on the sugar tax, different expertise, social or political priorities and ideas on how to effect social change. Tax supporters were often health professionals such as doctors, dentists and nutritionists, but included celebrity chefs and restaurateurs. Opponents included journalists, economists and food industry representatives. While the different views and backgrounds appears to address requirements for balance in broadcast news (Ofcom 2021), it also guaranteed little opportunity for mutual acknowledgment of points of view, the construction of shared perspectives or a nuanced understanding of complex issues.

As well as staging controversy, entertaining and retaining the audience is vital. Interview 6, included a young woman dubbed 'Britain's fattest teenager'. While the overt aim was to understand if the tax would reduce her sugar consumption, there appeared to be a desire to have an obese person on display to provide voyeuristic pleasure to the audience. The sense of objectification, similar to the cans of fizzy drinks in shot during many of the other interviews, heightened when the doctor sitting next to her described her as overweight, adding '*you don't mind me talking about you like this?*' She quietly hangs her head in shame and embarrassment, suggesting that those involved in the interview were keener to have her '*affective embodiment*' of obesity on show (Boswell 2016, 25) than to hear her lived experiences.

Role of the interviewer

All of the videos reviewed had one or more interviewers managing the controversy between interviewees. Where there was just one participant, the 'interviewer(s) provided opposing views to challenge the participant.

Often the 'interviewer(s) sought to heighten the sense of disagreement. For example, in video 12, the interviewer is well aware that a spokesman from the food and drink industry does not support the tax, but still turns to him and asks if he would support a tax on sugary drinks, rather than all sugary food, in order to invite contradiction. The spokesperson bluntly says 'No' and goes on to say that it would not work, invoking an example commonly-cited by both sides of the debate, '*because it has not worked in Mexico*'. As well as illustrating Boswell's (2016) point about the destabilizing freedom with which 'evidence' is interpreted and invoked in connection with obesity, such point-blank contradiction appears highly confrontational, but is commonplace in the discourse of broadcast news interviews (Clayman and Heritage 2002). The resulting dissonance contributes to the sense of controversialisation and increases the drama, and thus entertainment value, of the interview.

Physical and visual arrangement

Physical organization was essential to how the videos in our sample legitimized and positioned their interviewees. In video 5, the interviewers was on location in Brighton and questioned the interviewees (a speaker from the Healthy Schools programme, a confectioner and a restaurateur) in their working locations, dramatizing the differing

sources of their expertise and opinions. Even when co-located in a studio, the spatial organization of interviewees implied unresolvable controversy. Experts were often arranged side by side along a sofa, facing the interviewer(s). Sitting uncomfortably close together in a row prevented eye contact with one another, breaking this key conversational convention. Instead, they had to make their points to the interviewers, effectively yielding control of the debate to the interviewers and limiting possibility of consensus.

The studio-based programmes (e.g. videos 2, 4 and 21) verbally introduced the interviewees and displayed on-screen graphics the first time they spoke, reinforcing their expertise and affiliations and hence their different perspectives, consistent with Tan's (2014, 307) observation that television news uses graphics, on-screen text and temporal and spatial references to create '*the impression of factuality, truthfulness and authenticity*'. In the case of video 27, an on-screen banner appeared across the foot of the screen during the programme with the words 'The budget: Is sugar tax the right move?', framing the policy as controversial from the outset.

Narratives used by interviewees

The interviewees often aligned themselves with the common narratives on obesity identified by Boswell's (2016) (Table 1), or in discourse terms, *topoi*. These included: strong government regulation is needed to address the poor food environment (Boswell's 'structured opportunity'), or sugar tax is an infringement of individual liberties (Boswell's 'nanny state'). Interviewees against the sugar tax drew on the latter, positioning the tax as an assault on individual freedom by limiting the opportunity of individuals to determine their own and their children's choices (e.g. videos 9 and 12), unfair to poorer families (e.g. videos 17, 23 and 27) and unlikely to work, following experience in other countries (e.g. videos 4 and 29). The economist in video 27 demonstrated his opposition to the tax by adopting a vigorously adversarial approach:

Economist (video 27): *When the Government starts telling families and adults what kind of fattening food they can take in themselves I think we're in a very, very dangerous area.*

Comments such as this positioned him with families and adults (and hence implicitly the audience) as jointly oppressed by politicians.

Interviewees who supported the sugar tax viewed it as a pragmatic, whole-population policy to tackle the public health issue of obesity, seeing it as societal in origin rather than the result of individual choices (e.g. videos 2, 6, 17, 25, and 29). They claimed its efficacy in other countries (videos 21, 22, and 29). This echoes Boswell's (2016) narrative 'structured opportunity', typically expressed by public health experts and activists, in which they accept individual behavior contributes to obesity, but view population level policy targeted at the food environment as a priority.

Emotive delivery

Those against the sugar tax tended to show more emotive delivery. For example, the economist in video 27 emphasized his opposition to the tax by repetition of scalar terms such as '*very, very dangerous*' and others such as '*I think this is a big, big problem*' and

'*dietary science is a very, very unsure science*'. These repetitions created rhythmic patterns of emphasis to underscore his personal conviction. Similarly, the male Daily Mail newspaper columnist in video 17 delivered his opposition to the tax more energetically than the calm, measured support provided by the two female experts in this video (children's pediatrician and dentist). All three were sitting in a line on a sofa, and while the women leaned back with their hands in their laps as they spoke, he sat forward and jabbed his finger in the air as he made his points. In opposing the tax, the columnist summarized his views on the impacts on parents with '*don't hit them in the pocket*', with the word 'hit' creating a sense of punishment and violence. Such emphatic delivery can be interpreted as demonstrating personal conviction and the urgency of the views being delivered. Introduction of the tax had been announced the previous day and so the speaker against the tax may have felt he was losing, or had lost, this debate and hence felt that he had to be more emphatic than those that supported it.

In general, supporters of the tax tended to be calmer and more conciliatory in their discursive style. This was generally consistent with the professions of those supporting the tax. For example, the pediatrician and dentist in video 17 and the nutritionist in video 27, were relatively softly spoken and, in the former case, sat in relaxed positions on the sofa. While those supporting the tax tended to be female, and hence more softly spoken, men supporting the tax also spoke more calmly than men opposed to the tax (for example the male chef in video 16 supporting the tax was more measured and reflective than the men in either video 17 or 27). However, this conciliatory style may in itself be a rhetorical move, suggesting that those that support the tax are calm, measured and reasonable people (an example of the character-based appeal known in Aristotelian rhetoric as *ethos* (Kennedy 1991)).

Malleability of evidence

Interviewees for and against the sugar tax sought to legitimize their views by drawing on evidence, consistent with Boswell's (2016, 2) observation that '*virtually everyone engaged in the debates . . . couches their claims in terms of "the evidence"*'. However, this evidence was presented as rapid sound bites with no explication. It appeared malleable to the position of the speaker, showing the interviewees were responding to the needs of the interview or their own needs, rather than conveying clarity or accuracy on the topic. For example, in videos 17 and 27, the columnist and economist respectively cited Mexico as an example of failure of a similar tax. In contrast, in video 24, the chef and supporter of the tax asserted that the tax had worked in Mexico. The case of Mexico was mentioned in six of the videos, first in October 2015 and continuing through to July 2016. The frequent repurposing of such evidence seemed to be well recognized with one interviewer (video 12) referring to its unsettled status with the term '*the Mexican situation*'.

Rhetorical devices

The interviewees, both for and against the sugar tax, drew on a range of rhetorical devices to support their positions. Metaphor is a well-known and widely employed discursive device that can aid understanding or provide emotive imagery. In video 27, consistent

with his more adversarial style and wish to present a darker interpretation of the sugar tax, the economist observes:

Economist (27): [with the tax] *I think the government using things like the NHS as a stick to beat parents with.*

The folksy metaphor ‘*a stick to beat parents with*’ casts the government as a bully, usurping a public good (here the NHS) for its own ends. There is the further irony of association with corporal punishment, administered in less enlightened times by parents to their erring children. The government is rendered unnaturally authoritarian in this metaphor by being seen to apply an instrument associated with old fashioned parental discipline to parents themselves, infantilising them by reducing their freedoms. The metaphor of a stick accords with the ‘*don’t hit them in the pocket*’ in video 17 (which was broadcast two years prior to video 27).

Supporters of the tax also used a range of rhetorical devices. An example of a conciliatory device that is consistent with the calmer and more measured demeanor of those that supported the tax is the ‘*agree and switch*’. In this the speaker appears to agree to a challenge from the presenter or previous speaker, but switches quickly to make the point they themselves would like to make. In video 17, the presenter says to the children’s paediatrician that money from the sugar tax should go into educating children and adults about good diet. She seems to agree, but delivers her view that the money should go into the health service:

Children’s Paediatrician (video 17): *Yes, I mean education is important but . . . really we want the money to go back into the NHS for prevention programmes for obesity.*

A number of the interviewees include appeals to *endoxa* – what the majority of people believe (Kennedy 1991, 26). Like the *topoi* referred to earlier, *endoxa* draw on conventional wisdom. However, rather than the specific argumentative forms of *topoi*, *endoxa* evoke widely accepted sayings, maxims and myths which, for Aristotle, offered a key insight into the structure of the real (Haskins 2004). For example, the chef in video 23, who had added a voluntary sugar levy to some of the dishes in his restaurant before the introduction of the sugar tax, used phrases such as ‘*at the end of the day*’ and ‘*it’s been said before*’ and ‘*it’s about our kids’ future*’. These appeals to *endoxa* suggest that we are all in this together and therefore we must collaborate and be prepared to compromise to find a solution, including paying additional taxes.

The interviewees also draw on *ethos* by invoking their professional experience, for example, the dentist in video 17, starts her comments with ‘*for me as a dentist*’. They offer their lived experience as parents to provide authority and authenticity. For example, the chef in video 16 noted above, tells the audience ‘*I’ve got two little girls. They are five and three*’ and the nutritionist in video 27 describes how she uses the Sugar Smart App, which shows the amount of sugar in common food and drink products, when shopping with her children.

The chef in video 24, who had been campaigning for the tax, appears to invoke *pathos* when he describes how he is both shocked and ‘*humbled*’ by the surprise announcement of introduction of the tax in the March 2016 budget. This provides counterpoint to his brash celebrity image and promotes likability, a quality which has been associated with the ability to persuade (Cialdini 2007).

Another means of raising the level of drama is the use of *energeia*, invoking vivid images to capture attention and generate emotion (Lanham 1969). In video 4, the dentist states that the NHS spends ‘*millions on general anaesthetics for children having teeth out*’, painting a nightmarish picture of hospitals and operating theaters with unconscious children undergoing surgery. In video 29, the spokesman for a drinks association, again providing a personally convenient interpretation of the ‘*Mexican situation*’, states that the average reduction in calories resulting from introduction of the tax is just 5 calories per day, ‘*which is equivalent to the bite of an apple*’, providing a powerful image of the futility of the tax.

Intertextuality

There were multiple instances of content being drawn from prior interviews. This includes repeated use of a limited set of evidence (cf. the Mexican situation) as well as of a limited pool of celebrities or experts. This appeared self-fueling, with interviewees showing lively support or strong criticism appearing several times across different interviews. In the case of celebrities such repeated appearances provide a performative intertextual space in which to differentiate themselves as brands from other celebrities (e.g. Lovrin 2013). A further instance of intertextuality was supplied by an extract from the popular light entertainment programme, Channel 4’s Gogglebox (video 5). This programme offers a form of televisual synopticon as the viewing public watch other members of the public watching popular television programmes. The episode on 23rd October 2015 featured a news interview on the sugar tax. Inclusion underlines the entertainment aspect of such news interviews. Comments from video 5’s Goggleboxers range from lack of awareness (‘*what’s a sugar tax?*’) to the more pragmatic ‘*10p on a can won’t make a difference, it needs to be £50!*’, followed by self-deprecating laughter at the self-realization that it would take such a price rise to make them change their consumption habits.

Discussion

The media are important stakeholders in the network of social and economic practices within which the sale and consumption of sugary drinks takes place. Whilst appearing to show a heartfelt desire to understand and address social issues, characterized by titles for the interviews such as ‘*Sugar tax: Should we have one?*’ (video 23), the television news interviews analyzed used a range of devices to stage controversy in the pursuit of profit-generating viewer entertainment and numbers.

We would argue that the medium of television and the message of obesity-related policy are well suited to such entertainment value, to an even greater extent than with other media and topics (McLuhan 1964; Barry and Fulmer 2004). Food and drink are staples of television content, from the meals which punctuate television drama, to celebrity chefs and lifestyle programming. What sets television apart from other news media is its embodiment of issues in the depicted reality of protagonists, animated by visual and audio cues. Viewers’ bodies are inescapably implicated in the related issues of dietary choices, personal freedoms and aspirations toward health and attractiveness, themselves also central to televised reality. The corporeality of both medium and message

guarantees impassioned and personalized controversy, fulfilling the entertainment imperative of television news.

This entertainment-seeking focus on controversy, contrasts with participative problem resolution approaches such as deliberative democracy (Habermas 1994; Dryzek 2010). While often associated with specific settings, such as town hall meetings or mini-publics (e.g. Saam 2018), a more recent systemic view incorporates a wide range of communicative forms and deliberative practices and sites (e.g. Owen and Smith 2015; Boswell 2015) including television (e.g. Parkinson 2006). Some would view the one-sided broadcast nature of television as non-deliberative, but recognize it as an important part of the deliberative system (Chambers 2021).

Staged controversialisation undermines the epistemic central tenet of public deliberation by suggesting that the issues explored are built on the unstable foundations of contested and malleable facts. For example, we have shown that what was referred to as evidence was interpreted to suit the interviewees views, with little attempt to explain, or challenge their interpretations by the interviewers. The high degree of intertextuality we witnessed, amplified this malleability of evidence, since interviewees could draw on previous broadcasts as a basis for their evidence, with no suggestion of the need to review original documents or research. With such unstable foundations, it appears that there are no robust solutions, or that one solution is no better than any other.

Undermining of the epistemic heart of deliberation makes meaningful deliberation difficult and may alienate many from taking part. It also implies a metanarrative of 'social dislocation' (Table 1) on the part of television news producers, insofar as controversialisation feeds on subjects such as obesity whose roots lie in complex social ills, but offers no constructive hope of their resolution. Boswell (2014, 360) counters that '*actors do not always draw cynically on convenient evidence to strengthen their coalitions' claims*', stating that it is more complex. We agree with this since our study highlights that additional complexity arises from the staging by media companies.

The experts that take part in news interviews also have vested interests. Both supporters and critics of policies may be co-opted into these controversial debates, involuntarily perpetuating the vested interests of the media companies. In addition to promoting their opinion on the topic, many experts will be keen to promote themselves and the organizations that they work for. Such public engagement and profile is increasingly part of the job requirements for many professional roles, including academics (Cronin 2016).

Our study identified the choice of interviewees as contributing to the sense of controversy. Interviewees with health expertise were often required to debate with individuals with different areas of knowledge, such as economists, or those defending the status quo of the food and drinks industry, ensuring that no common ground or even common language could be found. Those with the most polarized views were more likely to appear in multiple interviews, raising their profile further, effectively removing those with moderate or accommodating views from such debates. Emotive delivery often accompanied polarized views, amplifying audience appeal through drama. However, it appeared from our analysis that some interviewees displayed their emotions more than others, for example, the anti-sugar tax journalist who sat forward and jabbed his finger as he spoke against the tax (video 17). It might be that such interviewees allowed their authentic emotions to be displayed or, more cynically, in order to underscore their more polarized positions, they were undertaking emotional work (Hochschild 1979) to

heighten their display of passion. Similarly, those who appeared very calm may well have been undertaking considerable emotional work in the face of provocation from other interviewees, and often the interviewer.

Recommendations

Our recommendations address three key stakeholder groups: policy experts, citizens and media companies. Overall, we suggest policy experts (advocates and their opponents) adopt the wider critical perspective that our study has highlighted. Careful evaluation of the contributors to controversialisation that we have identified in this study will be helpful in determining if participation will promote or reduce the public's engagement with the policy under consideration. Our study supports the notion of authentic communication, in which interviewees are true to both themselves, as well as their audiences (Ciszek and Pounders 2020). Authentic communication has also been described as being the same on the inside as on the outside (Bowen 2010), and hence experts should draw from the wide range of discourse and rhetorical devices exemplified in this study as a means to reflect their own unique character, experiences, context and views, as well as a means of persuading their audience.

Turning to citizens in the 'post-truth' era, if they are to become more critical of the sources of information and news on the internet and social media, they need to be able to rely on trusted sources such as the major news organizations (Vijayalakshmi, Lin, and Laczniak 2020; Chambers 2021). While we do not view the interviews we analyzed as 'fake news', they may have a similar stalling effect on public interest in policy, since the staging of controversy suggests that no solution is better than any other, or there is no solution. We would suggest that in conjunction with the recommendations that we make for policy experts and the media companies, the public, particularly young people, are made aware of the profit-seeking vested interests of the media. They should also be made aware of the devices used to stage controversy that we have identified and discussed in this study and shown how these contrast with participative problem resolution approaches (Habermas 1994; Dryzek 2010), particularly resolution approaches that include television (Parkinson, 2005).

We recognize that the profit or audience-seeking imperative of media companies will mean that they will be tempted to continue with their current approaches. However, there are also countervailing forces that could coalesce to change the status quo. These include the increase in media channels which require a diversity of programme types and approaches if they are to win audiences. The search for diversity may include more consensual approaches to news debates. They also include increased scrutiny and regulation of the press and media channels, and if the media awareness education of citizens, mentioned above, occurs, there will be more media critical audiences. Indeed, just as sustainability and social responsibility are now viewed as profit-enhancing activities by many organizations, some media companies may find that a move to solution seeking deliberation may attract new audiences and, ultimately be beneficial to them, and wider society.

Approaches to this consensual turn could be encouraged by addressing the areas we have identified in the findings, such as including guests with similar areas of experience or expertise, to allow consensus to be demonstrated. The interviewer could

pose questions such as, how can differences be reconciled or accommodated and a focus on solutions, rather than the current focus on disagreements. Public deliberation can also be supported. Signposting can be provided to sources of additional resources to allow viewers to find out more, and this material can be curated and produced in an accessible way. Different formats could be included in the news coverage, such as greater involvement of the public, allowing them to pose questions, online or as a studio audience.

Conclusion

Our study evidences how broadcast news interviews construct policy (the UK sugar tax) as controversial, relating this to narratives of obesity, broadcasting's institutional business models and the self-presentation of interview participants and their views on the topic. Presentational devices included the choice of interviewees, their physical arrangement and the role of the interviewer, the repurposing of 'evidence' to suit the need of the speaker and the more detailed rhetorical devices employed. These devices interact and reinforce, for example, the choice of interviewees with opposing views and the control by the interviewer exacerbated discord and left no opportunity for consensus building. Power relations were reinforced for example by those with lived experience objectified by professionals.

While individually each device may appear relatively inconsequential, their repeated use over many such news interviews generates possibilities for self-perpetuating intertextuality and provides a sense of intractability that contributes to public disengagement with an issue reducing support for policy solutions.

The value of studies such as this is to elucidate the use, ubiquity and effects of these devices that may otherwise go unnoticed or unquestioned. Our work contributes to the important intersection of the literatures on media and policy, specifically policy addressing obesity. Policy does not exist in isolation rather it must be shared, understood and accepted by the publics it is seeking to benefit. Hence, like all messages, it is reliant on its medium. As we have argued, in the case of obesity policy and television news, the corporeality of both the message and the medium makes it particularly suited to staging of impassioned controversy, fulfilling the entertainment imperative of television news. Without a critical exposition of the vested self-interests of both media companies and many of the experts they recruit, public understanding and engagement with related policy is endangered.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Appendix: Table A1: Television news interviews analysed

Video Number	Programme/Broadcaster	Date of Broadcast	Source BL = British Library YT = YouTube
1	Daybreak ITV London	05/03/2014	BL
2	Channel 4 News	13/03/2014	YT
3	Good Morning Britain, ITV	26/06/2014	BL
4	Daily Politics, BBC2	03/07/2014	BL
5	Sunrise, Sky News	13/07/2015	BL
6	This Morning, ITV	12/11/2014	Broadcaster Archive Both BL and YT
7	Newsnight, BBC2	19/10/2015	
8	BBC News at 6, BBC 1	19/10/2015	BL
9	BBC News at 6, BBC1	22/10/2015	BL
10	ITV News	22/10/2015	BL
11	Sky News	22/10/2015	BL
12	Channel 4 News	22/10/2015	BL
13	BBC News at Ten	22/10/2015	BL
14	ITV News	22/10/2015	BL
15	Andrew Marr Show, BBC 1	25/10/2015	BL
16	Sky News	30/11/2015	YT
17	This Morning, ITV	30/11/2015	YT
18	ITV News, 6.30pm	03/11/2015	BL
19	ITV, 10pm	03/11/2015	BL
20	Good Morning Britain, ITV	30/11/2015	BL
21	Daily Politics, BBC2	30/11/2015	BL
22	ITV Evening News	07/01/2016	BL
23	Channel 4 News	01/03/2016	YT
24	Sky News	16/03/2016	YT
25	The Budget, BBC2	16/03/2016	BL
26	Sunrise, Sky	17/03/2016	BL
27	Sky News	18/03/2016	YT
28	Tuesday in Parliament, BBC	12/04/2016	BL
29	Good Morning Britain, ITV	18/07/2016	BL