

COMMENTARY

News media both represents and acts: Commentary on Howse *et al.* news media content analysis of Sydney's 'last drinks' laws

Howse *et al.* [1] examined 'news media' coverage of Sydney's two liquor licence reforms ('last drinks' and 'lockouts') implemented in February 2014. The authors analysed 445 articles published between 2014 and 2020, including in the data corpus news articles from journalists, but also opinion pieces from other stakeholders. They identified 435 unique actors mentioned in the articles, categorised the actors' views as supportive or opposed to the laws, and distinguished 12 main categories of the argument made by the most frequently quoted actors. Framed as a content analysis, the article's implicit purpose is to support public health actors' media communication strategies by using media to 'communicate and build support for preventive health policies' [1: p. 573]. This has us thinking about what it might mean to 'use' media.

Media as Actor

More than an objective and impartial platform, the media is itself a significant actor. This role is surprisingly overlooked by Howse *et al.* [1]. The news media decides what is 'newsworthy', shapes the stories it tells, elicits and privileges viewpoints and opinions [2]. This 'agenda setting' function is often implicit, achieved by how a journalist *frames* an issue [3]; that is, what aspects are emphasised and made more salient within the text. Ways to study implicit frames include differentiating: (i) news articles from opinion and commentary pieces; and (ii) actors quoted in the lead paragraph compared to the remainder of the text. Researchers may also draw on explicit theoretical and analytic frameworks to attend more closely to the ways news media constitute problems as particular sorts of problems (what is assumed and what may be silenced) and to consider the effects such enactments produce [e.g. 4–7]. In the case of Sydney's liquor licence reforms, the news media took an explicit stance on the matter, at least initially. New South Wales' two major newspapers

(*The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Daily Telegraph*) ran active campaigns ('Safer Sydney' and 'Enough', respectively) from 2012 to 2014 (largely excluded from consideration in Howse *et al.*'s analysis due to a post-intervention starting point) calling on the government to 'solve' the issue of alcohol-related violence [8–13]. For instance, *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s campaign, 'Safer Sydney', included a competition, inviting readers to create a video or poster advert, 'aimed at helping curb the prevalence of booze-fuelled violence in Sydney' [14]. In taking such an active role, these two newspapers, which accounted for nearly two-thirds of Howse *et al.*'s [1] 445 articles, aligned themselves with a particular problem definition and policy remedy: violence was *alcohol-related* or *alcohol-fuelled*, and liquor licensing restrictions, in the form of lockouts and last-drinks laws, were the remedy of choice [7]. Public health advocates seeking to communicate and build support for preventive health policies need to remember the active role played by journalists, editors and media organisations in the *framing* of an issue.

Media as Representer

While the media's role as an actor is often implicit, the news media positions itself as representing the 'facts' of public interest events, along with the views and opinions associated with those facts. Facts change, journalist's positions change and media agendas change. Over the six-year period analysed, Howse *et al.* [1] find a noticeable change in article slant—whether actor quotes were supportive or opposed to the laws. Support decreased while opposition increased. Although it may be tempting to attribute this shift in coverage to a 'winning' communication strategy deployed by the opponents of the laws, problems of social policy, such as those that prompted Sydney's 'last drinks' and 'lockout' laws are complex. They involve competing interpretations made by divergent interests and, importantly,


Received 20 September 2021; accepted for publication 8 February 2022.

implemented solutions generate ‘waves of consequences’ [15; p. 163]. As effects of the laws emerged, and were scrutinised by several inquiries, news media reported on the various consequences (intended or not). Beyond reductions in non-domestic night-time assaults, there were impacts on the late-night economy and the live music industry. There were also public responses to these consequences in the form of public rallies, protest marches and active political organising culminating in the foundation of a political party. We suggest that the volume and nature of attention given to these issues are illustrative of media reflecting change and not necessarily a failure of public health advocates to effectively communicate their findings and position. For those considering media strategy, they are more likely to succeed if their efforts are reflective of the moment, the evolving circumstances and relevant effects and concerns.

In summary, news media and journalists both shape and reflect ‘reality’. From the media’s perspective, public health advocates are only one of the many interest-groups trying to use the media to shape support or opposition to policy initiatives. Howse *et al.* [1] advise public health advocates to attend to industry contestations of public policy through news media channels. We suggest public health advocates equally: (i) attend to the framing strategies of news media and journalists as they both reflect and constitute ‘realities’; and (ii) recognise that using media as a channel to ‘communicate and build support for preventive health policies’ [1: p. 561–574] will always be temporally conditioned and may only partially translate or succeed. Furthermore, for researchers undertaking media (and other) analyses, we suggest that a critical reflexivity on our own framings and enactments of ‘problems’, and how these framings themselves shape our research, can only strengthen the quality and productivity of our work.

Acknowledgment

Open access publishing facilitated by University of New South Wales, as part of the Wiley - University of New South Wales agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians. [Correction added on 19 May 2022, after first online publication: CAUL funding statement has been added]

CLAIRE WILKINSON^{1,2} , ROBYN DWYER²  &
MICHALA KOWALSKI¹ 

¹*Drug Policy Modelling Program, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia, and* ²*Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia*

Correspondence

Claire Wilkinson, Drug Policy Modelling Program, Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia.
E-mail: c.wilkinson@unsw.edu.au

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