Reviewer’s report

Title: Advocates, interest groups and Australian news coverage of alcohol advertising restrictions: content and framing analysis

Version: 1  Date: 31 July 2012

Reviewer: Caitlin Hughes

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Alcohol advertising restrictions have risen to the fore as a policy option for reducing harms from problematic alcohol consumption. Through analysis of the content and framing of 329 Australian newspaper items mentioning alcohol advertising restrictions Fogarty and Chapman provided insight into the level of interest, nature of interest groups and arguments surrounding Australian newspaper coverage on this issue. This identified a low level of newsworthiness of alcohol advertising restrictions and lack of specificity in coverage. They contrasted this with the high newsworthiness and clarity in framing of tobacco advertising restrictions. While this has importance for understanding whom is engaging in the current debates, the analysis and its potential contribution would be improved through attention to a number of revisions outlined below.

- Major Compulsory Revisions

The paper needs to engage with the nuances of alcohol use or alcohol advertising restrictions: in the context setting, analysis and implications. For example, compared against tobacco, the issue of alcohol consumption and alcohol advertising restrictions is considerably more complex. Tobacco is a drug for which any consumption is harmful. Alcohol in contrast is only harmful under particular circumstances and/or for particular populations, and is sometimes found to be helpful for reducing public health problems. This creates a clear opportunity for divergent interest groups and reasons why alcohol advertising restrictions and/or particular forms of alcohol advertising restrictions will be supported, opposed etc. Hence, while the paper notes the differing levels of support for different types of alcohol advertising restrictions, it does not interrogate this. The paper should note the differences between alcohol use and harmful use and why there is likely to be understandable opposition to blanket bans on alcohol advertising restrictions or to bans on particular forms of advertising etc, and consider the methods and findings in light of this context.

In particular the authors should consider to what extent the dichotomous framing of coverage on alcohol advertising restrictions as ‘supportive’ versus ‘unsupportive’ may itself miss nuances in the policy debate. Indeed, there would appear scope, using the current methods of analysis to draw out some of the differences within the sub-frames e.g. the number of statements mentioning that restrictions are necessary ‘for protection for children’ versus ‘because of a disingenuous drinks industry’. This could enhance understandings of the different ways this issue is being considered. It thus appears unfortunate that the analysis
of news-actor support was undertaken at the higher level – supportive versus unsupportive – rather than at the sub-frame. I wonder if there might be scope to re-do this? Alternatively, the authors should elucidate the limitations of the adopted frames of analysis.

The authors should revisit the interpretations of the core findings: particularly the interpretation that the lack of specificity reflects ‘the rudimentary stages of advocacy’. Indeed, it could be well argued that this (and the low newsworthiness) may exemplify the challenge of responding to alcohol use and misuse in an environ where 98% of the population consume this commodity. Advice on what can be usefully done within this context would thus be of considerable merit for the field.

- Minor Essential Revisions
There is a need to better explicate the industry self-regulations within Australia (for example the paper explains the meaning of the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice, but not the two other codes: Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) and Australian Association of National Advertisers). It would be useful to contextualise this for an international audience, e.g. is the Australian approach is typical or atypical etc? Much of the description of problems with the industry self-regulation also appears subjective e.g. ‘overly broad interpretations of the guidelines’. What does this mean? In what ways are there differences in judgements regarding breaches of the code?

There are a number of editorial/typographical errors, particularly in the introduction. Particular attention is needed to paragraph two of the Introduction. References to “early research”, “recent studies”, and “a systematic review.... echoing an earlier review” are confusing and detract from the background to the study. The systematic review I believe also pertains to youth – this should be made clearer.

Other sections that need addressing:
• Introduction – paragraph three - first sentence – meaning unclear
• Introduction – paragraph four – first sentence - re-write or delete “there are”
• Introduction – paragraph four – second sentence – ‘evidence suggests that partial bans or restrictions would be cost-effective in reducing alcohol consumption’ – please check whether this should read alcohol consumption or alcohol misuse
• Introduction – paragraph seven – first sentence – re-write section “with opposition from while licenses oppose the policies’
• Results - paragraph three – it would be useful to briefly explain the meaning of an ‘alcopops tax’ for an international audience

- Discretionary Revisions
It would be useful if this or future analysis examined the coverage of ‘alcohol advertising restriction targeted at particular high risk groups e.g. young people’ rather than ‘alcohol advertising restriction per se’.
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests