



# Between a rock and a hard place: Economic expansion and social responsibility in UK media discourses on the global alcohol industry



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## ABSTRACT

**Context:** Transnational alcohol corporations (TACs) employ a range of strategies to achieve their business objectives, including attempts to frame perceptions of their activities in media debates. TACs aim to achieve a favourable regulatory environment by presenting themselves as socially responsible actors. However, the need to secure financial investment means they must also emphasise their potential for growth. This article investigates tensions between these objectives in coverage of the global alcohol industry in the UK print media.

**Methods:** This article examines coverage of the world's four largest TACs in five British daily newspapers and one industry publication between March 2012 and February 2013. 477 articles were identified for analysis through keyword searches of the LexisNexis database. Thematic coding of articles was conducted using Nvivo software.

**Findings:** Two conflicting framings of the alcohol industry emerge from our analysis. The first presents TACs as socially responsible actors; key partners to government in reducing alcohol-related harms. This is targeted at policy-makers and the public in an attempt to shape policy debates. The second framing highlights TACs' potential for economic growth by establishing new markets and identifying new customer bases. This is targeted at an audience of potential investors.

**Conclusions:** A fundamental contradiction lies at the heart of these framings, reflecting the tensions that exist between TACs' political and financial strategies. Alcohol industry involvement in policy-making thus involves a fundamental conflict of interests. Consequently, the UK government should reassess the prominence it currently affords to the industry in the development and delivery of alcohol policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the high levels of alcohol-related harm (Public Health England, 2013), successive UK governments have eschewed evidence-based, population –level policies in favour of partnership-based approaches favoured by the alcohol industry (Anderson, 2007; Department of Health, 2007; Cabinet Office, 2004). Many of the world's largest transnational alcohol corporations (TACs), including Diageo and SABMiller, are headquartered in the UK and are listed on the London Stock Exchange [see Table 1] (Baggott, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2012). As exporters and employers, they are powerful economic actors, controlling iconic products such as Scotch whisky (Holden and

Hawkins, 2013). Reflecting this, alcohol industry actors have been afforded a prominent role in the development and implementation of alcohol policy under successive governments (Anderson, 2007; Cabinet Office, 2004; Baggott, 2006, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2012; Holden and Hawkins, 2013; Room, 2004; Department of Health, 2013). Industry bodies are now responsible for voluntary codes on the sale and marketing of alcohol and public information campaigns on alcohol consumption (Hawkins et al., 2012; McCambridge et al., 2014). Under the 2010–2015 Coalition Government, their role was further consolidated in the Public Health Responsibility Deal Alcohol Network (RDAN) (Department of Health, 2013; Knai et al., 2015).

Achieving a favourable regulatory environment is a key determinant of commercial success for corporations. Consequently, political strategy, designed to bring about such conditions, has long been recognised as a key component of overall corporate strategy, on an equal footing with market strategy (Baron, 1995). Like transnational tobacco corporations (TTCs) (Hurt et al., 2009;

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**Table 1**  
World ranking of TACs according to their annual revenue.

Company	World ranking	Annual revenue in local currency	Converted to £ <sup>a</sup>
ABInBev	1	\$39,758 m <sup>127</sup> (Anheuser Busch Inbev, 2012)	25,891 m
SABMiller	2	\$31,388 m <sup>128</sup> (SABMiller, 2012)	20,441 m
Heineken	3	€18,383 m <sup>129</sup> (Heineken, 2012)	15,696 m
Diageo	4	£10,692 m <sup>120120</sup> (Diageo, 2012)	10,692 m

<sup>a</sup> Converted with XE Currency Converter on 24th June 2013.

Saloojee and Dagli, 2000), alcohol industry actors employ a range of different approaches to achieve their political objectives in the UK and beyond (Hawkins et al., 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2012; Holden and Hawkins, 2013; Anderson, 2004; Bakke and Endal, 2010; Giesbrecht, 2000; Jernigan, 2012; Miller and Harkins, 2010; Stenius and Babor, 2010; Yoon and Lam, 2012). As Miller and Harkins suggest, communications and media strategies are a key element of their political strategy, providing businesses with ‘an opportunity to connect with popular opinion as well as elite opinion’ (Miller and Harkins, 2010).

To support the voluntary, self-regulatory approaches they favour, industry actors promote an image of themselves as socially responsible actors, committed to tackling alcohol problems through their media strategies (Hawkins and Holden, 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2013; McCambridge et al., 2013). These strategies seek to mobilise public support for industry actors’ favoured policies, in an attempt to influence decision-makers indirectly through their constituents. Previous studies have indicated the crucial role which media framing has played in the development of alcohol policy in the UK and beyond (Holden and Hawkins, 2013; Knai et al., 2015; Yoon and Lam, 2012; Hawkins and Holden, 2013; Katikireddi et al., 2014; Hilton et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2014; Nicholls, 2011; Katikireddi and Hilton, 2015).

However, policy-makers and their electorates are not the only relevant audiences for TACs. The media also play a key role in what we may term ‘corporate financial strategy,’ through which TACs promote an image of themselves as profitable undertakings ripe for investment by key actors in the financial services sector. In this context, TTCs focus on their growth potential by opening up new markets and identifying new customer bases. A fundamental contradiction appears to emerge between these discourses of social responsibility and aggressive expansion.

The study of contradictions can be insightful when analysing corporate messaging and is now a long established approach within the fields of discourse theory and analysis. In their exegesis of ‘logics of critical explanation,’ Glynos and Howarth identify contradictions within discourse as potential markers of what they term ‘fantasmatic logics’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007); which seek to cover over the fundamental instability and malleability in articulated social orders. Their work and the broader theoretical discourse tradition out of which it emerges (Howarth and Howarth, 2000) draw heavily on Derrida’s (Derrida, 2013) methodology of deconstruction, which seeks to identify the moments at which cracks begin to appear in the text and the discourses which they contain begin to unravel. Within this tradition, contradictions indicate ideological practices, which seek to mask agents’ deeper, underlying motivations. In the field of corporate actors research, such inconsistencies may indicate attempts by TACs to present themselves in ways which are not fully consistent with their business activities and the consequences that these have.

Previous studies have identified contradictions within alcohol industry attempts to frame policy debates in the UK (Hawkins and Holden, 2013). This article seeks to build on this by examining those contradictions that emerge *between* TACs’ political and financial strategies. This in turn has significant implications for UK alcohol

policy, underlining the fundamental conflicts of interest presented by industry involvement in policy-making and implementation.

### 1.1. Framing theory, political strategy and the media

Framing theory assumes that the social world is indeterminate and is open to a multitude of competing interpretations and meanings (Fischer, 2003; Hajer and Laws, 2006). Frames are ‘underlying structures of belief, perception and appreciation’ on which distinct policy positions depend (Schon and Rein, 1994). They provide an ordering logic that renders issues comprehensible (Hajer and Laws, 2006; Schon and Rein, 1994; Daviter, 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Triandafyllidou and Fotiou, 1998). The specific framing of an issue influences whether it is identified as a political problem, if it warrants action by government and what the appropriate policy responses to it are. Framing defines the terms in which political debates are conducted and the assumptions on which they rest (Béland, 2009; Weiss, 1989; van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). For this reason, policy actors have an interest in framing debates in ways that are amenable to their interests and objectives (Rein and Schön, 1996; Snow and Benford, 1992). Attempts to frame issues in a particular way are thus political acts, and controversies emerge where mutually incompatible policy frames compete to define a given issue and to dictate the policy responses to it.

The media play a crucial role in contemporary political debates, providing citizens’ principal source of information about policy issues (Edelman, 1988). As such, they are a key terrain on which political contestation occurs (Terkildsen et al., 1998; Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten, 2010). Groups aiming to influence media content may employ public relations (PR) consultants to frame and deliver their messages to media outlets (Terkildsen et al., 1998; Strömberg, 2001). In addition, the conditions under which many journalists now operate has increased the ability of PR agencies to frame media debates on behalf of their clients. Structural changes within the industry have led to significant reductions in the size of editorial staff across British national newspapers (Lewis et al., 2008). At the same time, pressure has risen to produce increasing amounts of content to fill not just print editions, but online content and social media, with a noticeable impact on the origin of many news stories (Lewis et al., 2008; Davis, 2009). Increasingly, resource-poor journalists derive stories from external sources, notably agency services (e.g. The Press Association) and press releases (Davis, 2009; Lewis et al., 2008).

In their 2006 analysis of UK news media Lewis et al. (Lewis et al., 2008) found just that under half of the new items sampled across a random two week period were either heavily reliant (19%) or exact duplicates (30%) of agency wires. A fifth of the stories were identifiably derived from PR material. The increasing reliance of journalists on externally produced copy provides resource rich actors, including corporations, a powerful opportunity to frame media debates in ways amenable to their interests, and to project a certain image of themselves to consumers, voters, regulators and potential investors. Other policy actors, including public health and NGOs are engaged in similar processes but, in comparison with the alcohol

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