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Governing childhood obesity: Framing regulation of fast food advertising in the Australian print media

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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 analyses media reporting of the regulation of fast food consumption to children. A media search of five Australian newspapers for the period January 2006 to June 2008 elicited 100 articles relating to the regulation of fast food advertising to children. Content and thematic analysis of the articles reveal conflicting perspectives on the role of the state; the level of accountability of the food and advertising industries; and responsibilities of parents for regulating fast food consumption in children. The Federal Government, food and advertising industries and free to air broadcasters favour industry self-regulation and personal responsibility for fast food consumption while the proponents of government regulation include consumer groups, state government health ministers, nutrition and public health academics and medical and health foundations. The regulation of fast food advertising to children is discussed in relation to ideas about governance and the public health strategies which follow from these ideas. The paper argues that all proposed solutions are indicative of a neoliberal approach to the governance of health insofar as the responsibility for regulation of food marketing is viewed as lying with industry and the regulation of lifestyle risk is viewed as an individual responsibility.

Introduction

This paper analyses media reporting of childhood obesity and, in particular, the reporting of regulation of fast foods advertising to children. 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. This period coincides with greater interest in the regulation of fast food advertising to children by the World Health Organization and within many national jurisdictions (Harris, Pomeranz, Lobstein, & Brownell, 2009; Moore, 2007). Interest in regulation of fast food marketing arises from growing concerns about levels of obesity and, in particular, childhood obesity (Coveney, 2008; Hoek & King, 2008; Lupton, 2004). Concerns with childhood obesity are perpetuated, even amplified, through media reporting of the prevalence and impact of childhood obesity (Lupton, 2004). It is frequently presented in the media as an 'epidemic' with long term health and economic ramifications (Boero, 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Lupton, 2004; Mitchell & McTigue, 2007). The designation of obesity as an 'epidemic' has rhetorical significance beyond the epidemiological reality of increasing obesity rates as defining obesity as an epidemic ensures that it is "a matter of common concern" which must be addressed for the public good (Mitchell & McTigue, 2007: 394).

This paper identifies media reporting of strategies for managing the role of fast food in contributing to childhood obesity. Thematic analysis of the articles identifies three positions in relation to fast food consumption by children. These are concerned with the role of government in regulating fast food advertising, industry self-regulation of advertising and the extent of personal and parental responsibility for fast food consumption. These debates are explored using governmentality as a theoretical framework. The paper argues that ideas about the role of government and governance of food advertising presented in media reporting reflect neoliberal governmental rationalities insofar as they promote minimal intervention in the market and parental or self-management of fast food consumption (Rose, 1996).

Governmentality is concerned with the "art of government" (Foucault, 1979: 7) and has two aspects: the technical aspect or 'the will to govern' reflected in the principles and goals that guide

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peoples' behaviour and manifested in the practices that regulate others (Gordon, 1991), and knowledge about "the reasons, justifications, means and ends of rule" (Rose, 1993: 288). Miller and Rose (1990) describe this as the *mentality* of rule. Governmental power is not only exercised by those charged with ruling, but also by particular kinds of knowledge, or discourses, which compel individuals to act in certain ways. For Rose (1996: 42) this has a moral aspect in that 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. Neoliberalism for Rose (1996) is 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 neoliberalism: 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

Neoliberalism is premised on a separation of the market from the state. Gordon (1991) argues that neoliberalism 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 is 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 and monitoring 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. For Foucault (1979), governmental rationalities both establish models of citizenship and allocate responsibility for governance. Rose (1996) argues that the essence of citizenship in neoliberal thought 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 & 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 & Miller, 1992).

This is evident in the health arena through greater concern with the personal management of lifestyle risk. Self-management of lifestyle risks becomes one of the responsibilities of citizenship. For Dean (1999: 167) a risk focus extends the scope of public health. He views risk as a more inclusive concept than that of class or disadvantage as "the entire population can be the locus of a vulnerability," creating a moral responsibility to manage health in the interest of both self and others. While a risk focus is inclusive it is also divisive. Rawlins (2008: 138, emphasis in original) argues that a neoliberal view of citizenship is one in which "'good' citizens control their bodies according to 'The Good' choice promoted by government… while those who don't 'conform' are subject to an increased level of surveillance". A focus upon individual responsibility for public health issues therefore creates divisions based upon a capacity to manage risk between '*active citizens*' who accept responsibility for managing lifestyle risk and '*targeted populations*'… who require interventions" (emphasis in original) (Dean, 1999: 167).

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 occurred in relation to food advertising. In 2006 the WHO recommended "national actions to substantially reduce the volume and impact of commercial promotion of energy-dense, micronutrient-poor food and beverages to children" (cited in Harris et al., 2009: 218). Hawkes (2007), in a global review of strategies adopted to regulate food marketing to children, found that the most common strategy adopted was industry self-regulation (23 countries as opposed to 16 countries with statutory regulation). Between 2004 and 2006 twelve countries adopted industry self-regulation and four countries (Ireland, France, Finland and the United Kingdom) introduced statutory regulations or government guidelines. The introduction of statutory regulations or government guidelines in European countries may reflect a stronger tradition of regulation. Harris et al. (2009) note that the European Confederation of Food and Drink Industries had previously adopted the International Chamber of Commerce *Framework for Responsible Food Marketing Communication* which states that food and beverage marketing should not be misleading, promote excessive consumption or undermine parental messages about healthy eating.

Hoek and King (2008) note that the United States, Australia and New Zealand, typically jurisdictions with a strong neoliberal governance, have relied on industry self-regulation of 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). In the United States, regulation of fast food advertising occurs through the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) which established the *Self-regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising*. CARU monitors advertising but has no capacity to apply sanctions to companies which transgress these guidelines (Hawkes, 2005). While three bills to regulate food marketing to children have been introduced to Federal parliament all have been defeated (Harris et al., 2008; Hawkes, 2007). In practice, regulation of food marketing is largely driven by voluntary self-regulation programs introduced by industry (Moore, 2007). Australia also has a Federal system of government with a constitutional division of labor in which the provision of health services is a state responsibility and establishment of food labelling standards and consumer protection from misleading advertising a national responsibility (Sacks, Swinburn, & Lawrence, 2008). Advertising is co-regulated by government through the Australian Communications and Media Authority which can impose restrictions on the