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### Who's saying what about food advertising to children?

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### Abstract

Both Australian and worldwide authorities differ on how the issue of childhood obesity should be tackled. Some call for a junk food tax and restrictions on fast food advertising while others supported initiatives to encourage people to walk and cycle more. This paper examines the Australian media dialogue concerned with food advertising and children presented in the first six months of 2005; identifying the key spokespeople for each side of the debate and the main platforms of their arguments; and making recommendations for social marketing practice.

### Disciplines

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## Who's saying what about food advertising to children?

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### Abstract

Both Australian and worldwide authorities differ on how the issue of childhood obesity should be tackled. Some call for a junk food tax and restrictions on fast food advertising while others supported initiatives to encourage people to walk and cycle more. This paper examines the Australian media dialogue concerned with food advertising and children presented in the first six months of 2005; identifying the key spokespeople for each side of the debate and the main platforms of their arguments; and making recommendations for social marketing practice.

### Introduction

Childhood obesity is an important worldwide health problem that has steadily increased in prevalence over the last two decades. Addressing this epidemic is now firmly on the agenda of nearly all major western governments (O'Dea, 2005). The prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in Australia is high by international standards, and is accelerating sharply (Magarey, Daniels & Boulton, 2001; Booth, Chey, Wake et al, 2002). The role of television has been given considerable attention with research confirming that hours spent viewing television correlate with measures of poor diet, poor health and obesity among children and adults (Livingstone and Helsper, 2004).

The debate in Australia has focused largely on the advertising of fast foods, soft drinks, and high-calorie snack foods – with the fast food industry particularly criticised – and widespread calls for restrictions on advertising of “unhealthy” foods during children’s viewing times (e.g., Pritchard, 2003). Australian children watch an average of 23 hours of television per week, implying exposure to approximately 240 minutes of advertising per week (Zuppa, Morton and Mehta, 2003); recent research shows that about one third of advertisements during children’s television programming (‘C’ and ‘G’ programs) are for food (Morton, Stanton, Zuppa et al., 2005). There is still no conclusive evidence that food advertising causes obesity; or, if indeed it does, what types of ads are problematic. The Ofcom report (2004), which involved an extensive analysis of the research literature, concluded that the data shows only ‘modest direct effects’ of television advertising on food preference, consumption and behaviour. However, Hastings et al. (2003) argued that the effect of food promotion has been understated because indirect effects have been ignored, and because the cumulative effect of television advertising, combined with other forms of promotion and marketing is likely to be greater.

Mass media interest has been fanned by the release of a series of major studies of food advertising to children. In New South Wales, a 2001 State Government survey reported that the majority of the state’s children are watching between seven and 28 food advertisements per day, most of which are for foods high in fat, sugar, or salt. In Queensland, a 2001 University of Queensland study funded by a major health insurer found that three in four advertisements shown between 3.30pm and 7.30pm in Brisbane were for confectionery, soft

drinks, chips, desserts, processed snacks and fast food. In South Australia, a 2002 Flinders University study found that 80 per cent of food ads shown during Children's and General Viewing TV shows were for food with marginal nutrition value, and that most of these ads were for fast foods. An Australia-wide study conducted by the Australian Division of General Practice during the 2002/2003 Summer vacation found that more than 99 per cent of food ads shown during children's TV were for fast foods and there were no healthy eating messages broadcast.

The Australian advertising industry is self regulated, and the current regulation of television advertising to children is a system of co-regulation between *The Australian Communications and Media Authority Children's Television Standards (ACMA)* and *The Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice*. Industry concern was heightened after the New Zealand national press reported that the NZ government was examining a ban on junk food ads aimed at children, and Australian childhood obesity forums began to call for a ban on fast food, confectionery and soft drink advertisements targeting children (Esplin 2002). The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) and Advertising Federation of Australia (AFA) responded with strongly worded arguments that obesity was the result of personal choices not of advertising (Ligerakis, 2002). The industry welcomed an Australian federal government proposal for a joint task force (including the AANA, the AFA, Commercial Television Australia, the Federation of Commercial Radio Stations, the Australian Press Council and Magazine Publishers of Australia) to develop a public awareness campaign to target childhood obesity. The AFA's executive director Lesley Brydon was quoted as saying that "the AFA was pleased the Government had flagged that it did not consider the banning of ads an appropriate solution" (Ryan, 2002). The *Sun Herald* newspaper interviewed Robert Koltai, AANA vice-chairman, about the new campaign and reported that "he conceded it was designed to take the heat off the advertising industry for its role in promoting fast food to children" (Leggatt, 2003).

The present study was conducted to examine the Australian media dialogue in relation to the regulation, or potential banning, of food advertising to children.

### **Method**

We conducted an electronic search of all major metropolitan and regional Australian newspapers covered by the Factiva database (Factiva sources over 8000 full text newspaper, journals and newswire services) to identify articles relating to the debate about food advertising to children, published between 01 January and 30 June 2005. The search terms used were "children" and "food advert\*". We then examined the arguments presented in articles found to identify the key spokespeople on each side of the debate; that is those who are opposed to or supportive of banning food advertising to children, plus their key issues and platforms.

### **Results**

We identified a total of 42 articles which met the inclusion criteria. While a number of these were brief items reporting on specific events, many of them included comments or position statements, enabling us to determine who were the key spokespeople appearing in the Australian media during this time period.

## **Key spokespeople against the banning of food advertising to children**

*The Federal Government:* In 2004, the Government's National Obesity Taskforce developed a series of recommended actions, which included the need for "research to understand and assess the impact of current food and drinks advertising practices on community levels of overweight and obesity" and recommended "better protection for young people against the promotion of high-energy, poor nutritional foods and drinks". However, in January 2005, Tony Abbott, the Health Minister, confirmed that no work had been done, as there "is not the research to back up the assertion that one of the major contributions (to obesity) is advertising" and that instead, the government would focus on promoting physical activity and healthy eating in schools (Galvin, 2005). The government ran an \$11 million advertising campaign featuring an advertisement promoting healthy eating (featuring a character called Veggie Man) and another promoting exercise (which was paid for by the Coalition of Food, marketing and media companies). Similarly, Prime Minister John Howard stated that he preferred to allow the food marketers to voluntarily help combat rising childhood obesity levels, and derided opposition calls for a ban on children's food advertising during the 2004 election campaign as a manifestation of the 'nanny state' (Galvin, 2005; Lee, 2005a).

*The Australian Association of National Advertisers:* The AANA represents major advertisers and food industry representatives and argues that advertising is not a contributory factor to obesity. They claim figures which show the impact of food advertising on children are faulty, with the "anti-media lobby being joined by collectives of high-profile medical professionals seemingly intent on a political agenda by misrepresenting selections of research data" (Galvin, 2005). The AANA also argues that the industry is promoting healthy eating, including potential 'collaborative funding' to screen its healthy lifestyle television ads, including the previously shelved 'Jo Lively' Campaign (Sinclair, 2005b); plans to develop in children's advertising and children's advertising charter for companies to sign (Galvin, 2005). A key tenet of the AANA approach is to argue strongly for self-regulation, rather than external regulation (Lee, 2005c).

*Free TV Australia:* FTVA represents commercial television stations, and argued against a ban on food advertising and believe that current processes encourage responsible advertising (Galvin, 2005). They describe the Jo Lively initiative as evidence of their commitment "to use the positive power of television to promote responsible advertising on important social issues such as childhood obesity" (Media Release – Sinclair, 2005c). Joe Lively, a character featured in the recent *Eat Well, Play Well* campaign, was developed to educate children aged 6 to 12 years on energy intake and exercise output as part of a collaborative initiative of all sectors of Australian advertising and media industry ([www.jolively.com](http://www.jolively.com)).

*The World Federation of Advertisers:* The WFA argues that the solution is better regulation of the content of commercials, rather than banning junk food advertising; although, unlike the AANA, they suggest that this should be government regulation. The WFA also argue that banning food advertising would have negative effects on the target audience such as the revenue it currently provides to televise quality programs for children (Maulana, 2005).

*The Australian Food and Grocery Council:* The Australian Food and Grocery Council (AFGC) is the national body representing the nation's food and grocery products manufacturers. The AFGC also argues in favour of self-regulation, and further believes that its members should be allowed to make health claims in the marketing of their food products (Lee, 2005b).

## **Key spokespeople for the banning of food advertising to children**

*Coalition on Food Advertising to Children:* The CFAC has been quite vocal in its calls for a ban on all television food advertising during programs where children (aged 0-12 years) make up a substantial proportion of the viewing audience (see, for example, Maley, 2005). The CFAC has also called for an overhaul of the broadcasting regulations concerning food advertising for children, which has not been amended in a decade (Maley, 2005). CFAC argues that the AANA's Jo Lively campaign is "a Band-Aid approach" which will not have a major impact in relation to the dominance of junk food messages that children are exposed to (Sinclair, 2005c; Daily Telegraph, 2005b). Interestingly, CFAC present the bans on TV food advertising to children in countries such as Sweden and Quebec in Canada as an argument for the banning of such advertising in Australia; and cite evidence that the rates of obesity are less in countries with more regulations around TV food advertising directed towards children.

*The Australian Council for Children and the Media:* The ACCM issued a call for parents to switch off commercial television and encourage their children to watch the ABC (non-commercial broadcasting) as a strategy to reduce childhood obesity (O'Leary, 2005b).

*Rosemary Stanton:* Ms Stanton is a well-known nutritionist in Australia; and was quoted in the media as stating that television food advertising strongly influences children to eat unhealthy products (O'Leary, 2005b), and calling for a ban on junk food advertising during children's viewing times as well as the imposition of taxes on fatty food (Daily Telegraph, 2005a).

*Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity:* The CEO of this organisation, Dr Gill, was quoted as saying that the current advertising regulation system is not working and should be re-examined; that ads should be pre-screened and scrutinised by authorities; and that premium offers in ads directed to children should not be allowed (O'Leary, 2005b).

*Australian Medical Association:* The AMA, which is also a member of the Coalition against Food Advertising to Children, has been calling for a ban on TV food advertising to children (Sinclair, 2005a), specifically between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. and other peak viewing times in children under 12 (04/02/05); arguing that children's behaviour is influenced by what they see and hear and said "if they hear repeated messages it unquestionably has an influence on their behaviour" (Galvin, 2005). In the latter article, the AMA also expressed disappointment over Kraft Asia Pacific's decision to not follow its US counterpart and modify its advertising of products to children under the age of 12.

*Women's and Children's Hospital, Flinders University and Noarlunga Health Services (coalition):* This group of organizations, supported by the AMA and the Australian Consumer Association, developed and piloted a community action campaign in South Australia, which urged parents to complain to the national broadcasting watchdog every time they saw an advertisement they felt was in breach of the existing children's television standards (Nankervis & Mehta, 2005).

*International Congress on Pre-Diabetes and the Metabolic Syndrome:* Various speakers at this Congress discussed the drastic measures needed from governments to prevent weight-related issues becoming 'the biggest health epidemic the world has ever seen' (Miles, 2005); including restrictions on fast food advertising (Miles, 2005; Townsville Bulletin, 2005a).

*The Parents Jury:* The Parents Jury is a web-based network of parents who wish to improve the food and physical activity environments for children in Australia. It is an initiative of Diabetes Australia (Victoria), The Cancer Council Victoria, and the Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity. The group was established to lobby for the banning of junk food advertising during peak children's TV viewing times. The Parents Jury enables parents to nominate and vote for the biannual Parents Jury Awards for people or organisations that affect, positively or negatively, the availability and promotion of healthy food and physical activity choices for children. These awards were fairly extensively covered in the media, including both the nominations (Australian Doctor, 2005), and the "winners" (AAP MediaNet

Press Releases, 2005; Australian Associated Press General News, 2005; Daily Telegraph, 2005c; Jenkins, 2005a; Jenkins 2005b; Cairns Post, 2005; Townsville Bulletin, 2005b; Meade, 2005); with the spotlight on McDonald's for its promotion of children's toys with Happy Meals, and Coco Pops for its health claims.

## Discussion

It can be seen that the key stakeholders as appearing in the news media during this time period arguing against the banning of food advertising to children include the Federal Government, the AANA, FTVA, WFA, AFGC and CAANZ. The key stakeholders arguing for the banning include CFAC, ACCM, Rosemary Stanton, and Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity, AMA, Women's and Children's Hospital at Flinders University and Noarlunga Health Services, International Congress on Pre-Diabetes and the Metabolic Syndrome, and The Parents Jury.

The main points of contention between these two groups are:

*The evidence base:* (against) an absence of research conclusively demonstrating that food advertising is a major contributor to childhood obesity (including the existence of research examining such bans in other countries providing evidence that such banning does little to lower the childhood obesity rates) *versus* (for) children's behaviour is influenced by what they see and hear, and there is evidence that rates of obesity in other countries with such bans are lower.

*The free market:* (against) banning advertising is an unreasonable interference with the free market and is a manifestation of a 'nanny state;' campaigns promoting fruit and vegetable consumption and exercise (voluntarily developed by industry) are better suited to target the issues, and show commitment to battling the obesity issue *versus* (for) campaigns such as 'Jo Lively' will not have any relevant impact on the exposure of junk food advertisements to children

*Advertising regulation:* (against) rather than banning such ads, they should just be better regulated, although via self-regulation rather than external regulation *versus* (for) the current self-regulation needs to be re-examined.

*Benefit to the target group:* (against) any ban on food advertising will have negative consequences on the target audience in terms of provision of variety of programs, as revenue from advertising will drop *versus* (for) children should be encouraged to watch non-commercial broadcasting to avoid the potentially negative consequences of food advertising.

Implications for social marketing: The problem of childhood obesity is likely to be of key interest to health professionals and social marketers for many years to come. This issue was placed back in the spotlight recently with the release of the results of a study of 5407 school students which concluded that children are more active now than 20 years ago and that poor food choices are driving the obesity epidemic (Robotham, 2006); followed by a television interview in which the Federal Health Minister discussed the responsibility of parents to monitor their child's diet, and reiterated that the Government are not considering regulating junk food advertising but are encouraged by the industries attempts to stop "pester power" advertisements (Today, 2006). It is important that social marketers with an interest in this area keep abreast of the key spokespeople and platforms on both sides of the debate (particularly those aired in the mass media, as this is the primary source of information for many parents and other gatekeepers) if they are to be seen as credible and knowledgeable commentators and information providers. In developing social marketing programs we should take into

consideration the evidence, arguments, and varying community perspectives in order to present a balanced and effective response to tackling this issue.

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