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## **Media, ‘Fat Panic’ and Public Pedagogy: Mapping Contested Terrain**

Lee F. Monaghan, Emma Rich and Andrea E. Bombak

### **Abstract**

Discourses regarding a ‘global obesity crisis’ and alternative frames (e.g. weight-inclusive approaches to health) have proliferated through various media of communication. These media range from traditional print and visual formats (e.g. newspapers and television shows) to digital media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), which enable different publics to produce, and not just consume, text, images and other data relating to the body. Reflecting a sociological understanding of educational practices as extending beyond formal schooling, mediated obesity discourse and counter-movements have also been conceptualised as public pedagogies, which instruct people how to relate to their own and other’s bodies, health and subjectivities. This article examines what is critically known about various media at a time when governments and agencies are reinvigorating the global war on obesity, with populations being ‘advised’ to become and remain conscientious weight watchers. In conclusion, the article underscores the salience of social studies of the media when seeking to rethink obesity, incorporating critical reference to moral panic theory and the need to better understand what media can ‘do’ as enactments of public pedagogy.

**Keywords:** fatness, media, moral panic, obesity, pedagogy, social media, the body.

## Introduction

Despite reports of declining prevalence or stabilisation of ‘obesity’<sup>1</sup> rates in Western nations (Gard 2011; Ogden et al. 2015), myriad agents and agencies continue to socially construct an ‘epidemic’ or ‘crisis’ that demands corrective and preventative action. For example, World Obesity Day was launched in 2015, with the World Obesity Forum president claiming action is needed since: ‘The obesity epidemic has reached virtually every country in the world, and overweight and obesity levels are continuing to rise in most places’ (cited by Boseley 2016). Myriad ‘obesity epidemic entrepreneurs’ (Monaghan et al. 2010), ranging from scientists and governments to the media, have been actively reproducing, legitimating and amplifying this putative crisis for more than two decades. Yet, a burgeoning literature challenges or places a serious question mark over these definitional practices, what Evans et al. (2008) term ‘obesity discourse’ (e.g. Bombak et al. 2018a; Campos et al. 2006; Cameron and Russell 2016; Gard and Wright 2005; Greenhalgh 2015a; Lupton 2018; Monaghan 2014; Monaghan et al. 2014, 2018; O’Hara and Taylor 2018; Rich et al. 2011; Rothblum and Solovay 2009; Wright and Harwood 2009). Some of this literature also interrogates media messaging and frames (e.g. Boero 2013; Saguy 2013), including digital media (e.g. Lupton 2017; Cain et al. 2017). Insights include the constitutive role of media in dramatising and amplifying the putative ills of ‘excess’ weight/fatness, the moralisation of health and how such practices reproduce prejudice which, in turn, shapes attitudes to health risk and policy (Saguy et al. 2014).

Reflective of and furthering this critical turn, *Sociology Compass* has also provided a forum for incisive contributions to the obesity debate (see Bombak 2014; Cooper 2010; Pieterman 2007). Pieterman (2007), reviewing books challenging the dominant perspective, states that ‘a general conclusion which can be drawn from this critical literature is that the present risk

discourse on fat has much more to do with social and cultural issues like power, blame and control than with health problems' (p. 309). Cooper (2010) maps the emergent field of fat studies, which has roots in several decades of fat activism but which has 'been most recently mobilised by the rhetoric of an assumed global obesity epidemic, or moral panic around fatness' (p. 1020). Bombak (2014) updates the seminal critique of obesity science presented by Gard and Wright (2005) when dissecting the morality and ideology of obesity epidemic rhetoric. Again, the media is mentioned in these articles, though this is cursory and in need of elaboration. This task is especially salient today amidst the proliferation of various media, ranging from traditional print and visual formats (e.g. newspapers and television shows) to digital media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube), which enable different publics to produce, and not just consume, text, images and other data relating to the body (Smith 2016). Mindful of this complex assemblage, the present article maps what is critically known about various media at a time when governments and health organisations are reinvigorating the global anti-obesity offensive (e.g. Cancer Research UK 2018; Parliament of Canada 2016; WHO 2016). To this end, we will also connect with literature on body or public pedagogies (e.g. Evans et al. 2008; Rich 2011). This literature reflects the sociological understanding that education is not confined to formal schooling (Sandlin et al. 2011), and people engage with processes of learning about health, bodies and subjectivities through multiple channels (e.g. Goodyear et al. 2017; Rich 2016; Rich and Miah 2017; Wright and Harwood 2009).

This article is structured into five sections. First, we introduce the field of public pedagogy and outline the potential for it as a conceptual lens through which to understand how people learn about weight/fatness as obesity. Second, we establish the context wherein fat fighting has been reinvigorated and how efforts to promote slenderness as a proxy for health constitute an assemblage of public pedagogies that are practically obligatory in 'epidemic' times. Third, we

review critical literature on the role of traditional mass media (e.g. newspapers and television) in dramatising and amplifying the obesity crisis, drawing attention to issues such as power, stigma and the reproduction of social inequality. Fourth, we extend this review to nascent critical work on digital media and obesity/fatness, including recent contributions from fat studies and critical weight studies scholars. In conclusion, we underscore the salience of social studies of the media when seeking to rethink obesity, incorporating critical reference to moral panic theory and the need to better understand what media can ‘do’ as enactments of public pedagogy.

### **Examining media and the obesity crisis through the lens of public pedagogy**

Throughout this article we draw on work from the field of public pedagogy to reveal how different modes of address potentially shape how people come to ‘know’ obesity as an epidemic and global crisis. Scholarship focused on informal sites of learning (Ellsworth 2005), pedagogy writ large (Hickey-Moody et al. 2010) or public pedagogy (Sandlin et al. 2011), has drawn attention to the learning that takes place across multiple public sites and spaces. As Sandlin et al. (2011: 338) state, ‘this form of education, commonly known as public pedagogy, has been largely constructed as a concept focusing on various forms, processes and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling’. Sandlin et al. explain that public pedagogy scholarship has proliferated since the mid-1990s but the ideas influencing this work can be traced back to much earlier education scholarship. The field has also been influenced by a range of approaches, such as critical and feminist research (Ellsworth 2005; Luke 1996) and it sits at the intersections of numerous disciplines.

Sandlin et al. (2011) categorise types of public pedagogy, ranging from work focusing on *citizenship within and beyond schools* to *public intellectualism and social activism*. For our purposes, and to continue with Sandlin et al.'s typology, work focusing on pedagogies within *popular culture and everyday life* and *dominant cultural discourses* provides theoretical constructs to explore how people come to 'know' about the obesity crisis through different media. Other scholars also aid us in this exegesis. For instance, Giroux (1999, 2001) has significantly influenced public pedagogy literature, especially regarding the role of *popular culture* as a site of learning (including film, the Internet and other media). Giroux (2008: 8) subsequently maintained that rather than analysing media as isolated, 'they have to be critically engaged within the social anxieties and assumptions that promoted their production and their circulation as public texts in the first place'. Understanding media as pedagogical sites or texts opens up our inquiry as to how they not only 'teach' us about obesity but also what it means to be healthy moral citizens within a broader set of anxieties and moral panic, or what Raisborough (2016) terms a 'fat sensibility' that meaningfully produces subjectivity.

Referring specifically to how such processes are embodied, Evans et al. (2008) conceptualise media messages and practices as 'body pedagogy' which 'tend to frame our thinking about bodies and health' by constantly instructing us that overweight/obesity/fatness are 'bad things' (pp. 4-6). Such instructions are ubiquitous and, insofar as they focus on what people should consume, their physical (in)activity and how to basically live, they have also been conceptualised as 'biopedagogies' (Wright and Harwood 2009). As we will discuss, these pedagogies not only pervade what people watch, read and listen to but also how they become embedded in various interactive media (e.g. shared mobile health or m-health technologies) (Lupton 2017, 2018). Analyses of media as public, body or even bio-pedagogy are necessary in a broader context of 'healthism' (Crawford 1980) wherein lean and taut bodies are an index

of moral worth and news sources, for instance, filter and translate scientific reports on obesity for the public (Saguy and Almeling 2008). Critical literature refers ‘to the place of such media in proliferating the [obesity epidemic] discourse’, incorporating ‘judgemental and stigmatising action’ via appeals to health and normality (Fraser et al. 2010: 200). Research has shown that overwhelmingly negative media attention devoted to fatness has a demonstrable influence on beliefs, associated policies and prejudice (Frederick et al. 2016; Saguy et al. 2014). Stanford et al. (2018: 189-90), after citing the aforementioned studies, state ‘[p]rint and electronic media play a role in shaping public perceptions about policy issues related to obesity’ and these extend to ‘discriminatory medical policies’. The ethical, moral and political implications of what Lupton (2015) terms ‘the pedagogy of disgust’ have not escaped critical sociological attention either, especially in regards to mass media public health campaigns that employ ‘shock tactics’ (p. 6) in an attempt to elicit behaviour change.

However, when exploring largely negative media representations of obesity, we also need to be cautious of an encompassing notion of pedagogy that attempts ‘to capture anything and everything as remotely educative as pedagogical’ (Gaztambide-Fernández and Arráiz Matute 2014: 52). The aforementioned scholars argue that ‘pedagogy always implies a relationship that is driven by intentions and desires for particular kinds of shifts in subjectivity’ and, similar to the above reference to disgust, ‘make the case for the articulation of an ethical imperative that is always the premise of any discussion about pedagogy’ (p. 53). Expanding this proposition to the contested field of obesity and associated health imperatives entails understanding how diverse and increasingly fragmented media frame fat *and* constitute publics as pedagogical subjects – ideally responsible subjects who acquire knowledge and exercise (self-)care. Dominant ‘fat frames’ (Kwan and Graves 2013) incite responsible neoliberal subjects to work on themselves (lose weight, protect themselves from the ‘risks’ of unwanted

weight) or, as with childhood obesity, instruct parents (read: mothers) to safeguard their kids. Savage (2010: 104) similarly cautions against using the terms public and pedagogy in ‘totalising ways’ (also Evans et al. 2011; Lupton 2014). As such, rather than assuming a humanist understanding of learning as some linear process of knowledge transfer, it is important to recognise how engaging with media involves learning whereby subjects, meanings and their affects are *formed and negotiated relationally* within a dynamic ‘dominance/resistance dyad’ (Evans et al. 2011: 337). This point is worth underscoring in light of research on media representations and reception of obesity demonstrating that audiences, including those discredited by stigmatising stereotypes, are not homogenous or passive consumers. Holland et al.’s (2015) research with 142 Australians defined as obese revealed various viewpoints, including those challenging news media that is typically alarmist, moralising, individualising and reflective of journalists’ tendency to uncritically rely on pre-packaged information. Interactive digital media add to this complexity, as we will discuss later in our article.

### **A reinvigorated war on obesity: ‘As dangerous as terror threat’**

Obesity has been ‘big news’ for a number of years, with the popular media often dramatising the issue. Campos et al. (2006) and others (see Fraser et al. 2010) describe this as a ‘moral panic’ (Cohen 2002 [1972]), or ‘fat panic’ (LeBesco 2010; Saguy and Almeling 2005). Similar to Pieterman (2007), Saguy and Almeling (2005) observe that ‘the heightened public concern over obesity cannot be attributed to perceived medical risks alone’, rather it ‘is largely a response to the perception of threats to social values and public morality’ (p. 19). Today, fatness continues to be ‘framed’ (Kwan and Graves 2013) in moralising terms, with the mass media providing an established platform for shocking pronouncements or ‘melodrama’ that can be



‘told and *sold*’ (Raisborough 2016: 63, emphasis in original). Such reporting has recently generated concern in *The Lancet*, with a call issued to the mass media to avoid derogatory (stigmatising) coverage (Flint et al. 2018). Although well-intended, the call seems inattentive to how biomedicine is itself implicated via the application of offensive labels, such as obesity (Aphramor 2009a), or how medical authorities also employ melodrama when pontificating about fat to journalists and the public.

An example of the above is provided by Monaghan (2017) when discussing weight-related stigma. Monaghan describes how, in December 2015, England’s Chief Medical Officer, Professor Dame Sally Davies, expressed alarm about women and obesity to the media. Reporting on Professor Davies’ views, the headline on the front page of one of Britain’s popular tabloids, the *Daily Mail*, declared ‘obesity in women “as dangerous as terror threat”’, before adding: ‘the obesity crisis in women [should] be classed alongside flooding and major outbreaks of disease’ (Borland 2015). As reported by Borland, for Professor Davies the UK government needed to add obesity ‘to its National Register of Civil Emergencies. This is an official list of major possible threats to public health which includes terrorism, war, flooding and disease pandemics’. Readers were then informed that the UK government will publish ‘a new obesity strategy in January [2016] amid accusations they have failed to tackle the crisis’.

The educational force of the media is mobilised as part of a broader assemblage which includes diverse actors and agents across numerous national contexts (WHO 2016). For example, the Irish government has reinvigorated its anti-obesity offensive (Department of Health 2016) with national newspapers featuring headlines such as: ‘government launches 10-year war on obesity’ (Hallissey 2016), ‘new strategy aims to tackle Irish obesity levels’ (Cullen 2016) and ‘revealed: new plan to stop Ireland becoming the fattest country in Europe’ (O’Regan 2016).

Space permitting, we could draw attention to other nations and reinvigorated concerns about obesity (e.g. Parliament of Canada 2016), alongside how government-sponsored ‘health education’ campaigns are public pedagogical media in often very overt ways. What is worth stressing here, however, is that such social marketing or advertising campaigns have not escaped critical attention within and outside of sociology. Lupton (2014) focuses on two such campaigns in Australia as enacted via various media (e.g. radio, television, posters in public spaces, the Internet, the cinema). She critiques, inter alia, the assumption that the public lack knowledge, the use of unpleasant images to motivate lifestyle change and the empirical inaccuracies of paternalistic health promotion pedagogies that present behaviour change as easily achievable. Evans et al. (2011) analyse the relational pedagogy of the Change4Life campaign in England, which also used ‘networks of media’ (p. 330) when seeking to reduce childhood obesity. In practice, Change4Life was targeted at ‘working class mothers’ and ‘ethnic’ intergenerational relations that threatened ‘societal health’ (p. 333) (also see below on mother-blame and race in newspapers).

Of course, just as governments have long been interested in citizens’ health and physicality (e.g. during wartime) (Shilling 2003), there is nothing new about the media’s role in fashioning understandings of the body, weight and fatness (Schwartz 1986; Stearns 2002). Furthermore, medicalised calls to aggressively combat an obesity crisis have a history. These are recycled calls, expressed by leading public health officials and their allies for decades. For example, US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop popularised the expression ‘war on obesity’ in 1997, citing an alleged annual death toll of 300,000 Americans (Mayer 2004: 999). His call was preceded by a study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reporting a large increase in the prevalence of overweight (Kuczmarski et al. 1994), alongside an editorial featuring the term ‘epidemic’ (Saguy 2013: 107-8). According to Saguy, the media then helped ‘spread’ the idea

that an ‘obesity epidemic’ was unfolding. However, what is worth stressing is that the discernible advent of ‘the obesity epidemic’ as a discursive truth from the 1990s onwards has provided grist for (new) media that visualise, target, monitor and fight the spectacle of ‘aberrant’ flesh on a massive scale. Furthermore, the emergence of new forms of media indicates a shift towards the more ‘surveillant’ (Andrejevic 2002a) and instructional format of health media (Rich 2011), which produce particular ways of learning about ‘excess’ weight or fat. Drawing from Haggerty and Ericson’s (2000) concept of a ‘surveillant assemblage’, Rich (2011) reveals how reality media operate within a broader ‘surveillant obesity assemblage’. This literature demonstrates how media are entangled with subjectivities and wider knowing about fat, within and across various sites of learning.

Finally, before mapping critical literature on various media, it should be acknowledged that even traditional channels of mass communication and their online counterparts sometimes include alternative perspectives, aesthetics and scientific evidence. Whilst such media often provide space and ‘license’ for the reassertion of dominant ‘problem frames’ (Saguy 2013) (e.g. obesity is fatal, ugly and costly), alternative representations are noteworthy. Scholars within communication studies and feminist media analysis have explored, for example, challenges to mainstream readings of men’s (Mosher 2001) and women’s (Zimdars 2015) fatness on television and other media featuring ‘the plus-size body’ (Brown 2005; Moorti and Ross 2005). And, media interest in the ‘plus-size’ or ‘supersize’ female form persists: when finalising our article, the cover of the October 2018 issue of *Cosmopolitan* featured a ‘celebratory’ image of Tess Holliday, an unapologetic fat model, wearing a bathing suit. Academics and critics have also written for influential newspapers, such as *The New York Times* (Campos 2013; Greenhalgh 2015b), with Rothblum (2018: 65) underscoring how this and other ‘major media have emphasized the lack of efficacy of weight loss’. ‘Radical’

dieticians (Aphramor 2009b) and fat activists (Cooper 2016a) similarly avail of influential newspapers when contesting obesity orthodoxy, with Cooper (2016b) documenting a long tradition of media engagement and production by activists on both sides of the Atlantic. Given the power of the aesthetic, newspaper editors have also reflected on their choice of images following reader complaints. *The Guardian's* picture editor (Elliott 2013) commented on their use of 'headless fatties' (Cooper 2007), a visual framing device intended to render 'fat people' anonymous but which has been criticised as 'objectifying' and dehumanising (Lupton 2018: 52). Even the *Mail Online* recently featured an article criticising the Body Mass Index (BMI) (Hansen 2018). Nonetheless, just as some 'experts' quoted by Hansen claimed the BMI massively underestimates obesity prevalence, Elliot (2013) reiterated the alleged dangers of obesity and problems for the NHS. Hence, even challenging perspectives on obesity provide space for the reassertion of dominant frames. Indeed, alarming and discrediting representations of obesity as a behavioural health problem are hegemonic (Boero 2013), with a concomitant emphasis on policies related to food and physical activity (Stanford et al. 2018). Following Holland et al.'s (2015) research, people discredited by such media often appear to have internalised 'anti-fat bias' (p. 439). Understandably, then, Raisborough (2016: 70) questions whether 'new' news media reports (e.g. on obesogenic environments and 'heroic' weight-loss surgery) simply demonstrate 'a shift to benevolent representations' for 'relations of social injustice can pulsate there too' (p. 165).

### **Critical analyses of traditional mass media and 'fat panic'**

Critics of obesity discourse have devoted much attention to typically alarmist news coverage. Raisborough (2016: 5) explains that 'fact-based alarmist claims ("fat bomb" statistics, for example) have become commonplace in this genre', prompting sustained critical analysis.

Boero (2013) offers such an analysis, drawing from over 700 articles in *The New York Times*. She states the newspaper has tended to construct a chaotic scene wherein ideas of individual responsibility for health prevail and pre-existing beliefs about fat people are confirmed. Concerned with the potential mechanisms propelling weight-based stigmatisation and discrimination, Glenn et al. (2013) focus on print media coverage of weight-loss surgery in Canada. Themes include the dissemination of ‘a strong fairy-tale narrative’ (p. 633). In this story, heroic doctors and biomedical discourse reinforce neoliberal ideals of responsible individuals who avail of surgery so that they are better able to exert control over their choices and behaviour and thus avoid becoming a costly burden.

Outside of North America, and whether referring to British newspapers equating women’s obesity with terrorism (Borland 2015), or the Australian press that erroneously claims theirs is the world’s fattest nation and would likely win an imaginary fat Olympics (see below), critics routinely flag newspaper stories that dramatise the issue. This is understandable. Rhetoric about ‘killer fat’ (Boero 2013) and national disgrace (inflected by ideologies of gender, social class, age and ethnicity) throw into relief the intense moralising that saturates the anti-obesity offensive (Pieterman 2007). For example, De Brún et al. (2013) analyse Irish newspaper articles on obesity (n=346) from six major publications. They observe that mothers were often blamed ‘for childhood obesity and media messages aimed to shame and disgrace parents of obese children through use of emotive and evocative language’ (p. 17). Such pedagogies also reproduce class divisions/disdain. Writing in the UK context, Evans et al. (2008), who critique popular body pedagogies for propelling some young women into disordered eating, immediately refer to a *Daily Mail* story about an ‘overweight 8 year old, weighing 218 pounds’

who risked ‘being placed on the childcare register’ (p. 1). They state this story ‘carried tropes’ that are ‘now familiar’ in UK media ‘reporting of “obesity” issues’:

Single-parent family, broken home, irresponsible parent, bad diet and lack of exercise were all traded in terms of a striking image of a ‘morbidly obese’ child, the embodied representation of being hopelessly inadequate, irresponsibly working class and all that young people are not supposed to be. (p. 1)

Comparable news reporting in the USA has been critiqued with reference not only to the trope of parental irresponsibility but also the reproduction of negative *racial* stereotypes and inequalities (LeBesco 2011; Saguy and Gruys 2010). LeBesco (2011), discussing the moral perils of fatness, begins by citing a news story about a mother facing a charge of ‘medical neglect’ and the possibility of having her child removed by the authorities. LeBesco writes that the figures in this drama ‘are, not coincidentally, working class people of color’ (p. 156). Such depictions express common (racist, sexist, classist) prejudices about ‘revolting bodies’ (LeBesco 2004) that are denigrated, pitied and scorned. A noteworthy finding from detailed US media analysis is the degree to which such degradation is implicated in the reproduction of stigmatising stereotypes that are likely to disproportionately impact African American women and girls (Saguy and Gruys 2010; though, for discussion on how reality weight focused television discredits the poor *and* white in Britain, see Raisborough 2016).

A well-established sociological literature informs critical media analyses of the obesity epidemic. Indebted to Cohen’s classic (2002 [1972]) study of Mods and Rockers, Saguy and Almeling (2005) conceptualise heightened public concern about obesity as a moral panic. Analysing over 200 media articles reporting on scientific studies of obesity, they observe that

this panic comprises exaggerated portrayals of obese people as ‘folk devils’ who putatively violate social norms and values. This ‘fat panic’ within and beyond the USA comprises a surge of alarmist media attention that is disproportionate to the increase in obesity rates, with negative consequences to boot such as deepening a culture of blame. Accordingly, their analysis challenges the assumption that the news media simply report on objective facts about public health in tandem with the reductionist foci of biomedicine and obesity science. Campos et al. (2006) offer a similar argument. After critiquing the epidemiology of overweight and obesity, they discuss ‘social and political contributors to the obesity panic’ (p. 58) with reference to the mass media, news articles and moral panic theory. Their article draws attention to rapid social change, cultural anxieties and ‘an exaggeration or fabrication of risks’ that are projected onto already stigmatised groups (p. 58).

When discussing the social construction of the obesity epidemic, Monaghan et al. (2010) typify the mass media as amplifiers/moralisers. They note that obesity scientists also amplify the crisis through, for example, emotive language and downward revisions of the BMI; however, the mass media convey news to a larger audience and create ‘conditions for further stereotyping, myth-making and labelling’ (p. 51). This mode of entrepreneurship is located within a broader assemblage of practices and interests, including but not limited to those of obesity scientists, governments, the pharmaceutical industry, clinicians and the person in the weight-loss club qua ‘entrepreneurial self’ (Petersen and Lupton 1996). Monaghan et al. (2010) qualify their approach to moral panic theory in order to distance themselves from critics who might ‘adopt the conspiratorial aspect of this concept rather too easily’ (p. 44), but they explain that traditional media practices are crucial in ‘drawing public attention to and typifying a particular social problem over time, thus increasing and reinforcing their significance’ (p. 50). Similar to US-based research, critical reference is also made to disproportionality; for example, in the UK

at the turn of the twenty-first century the percentage increase in newspaper articles on obesity in two years exceeded the total percentage rise in obesity that had reportedly occurred in the previous twenty years. Other points include how the media further ‘sensationalize’ obesity ‘through the melodramatic use of terms like “epidemic”, “time bomb” or “war on obesity”, or what Cohen (2002 [1972]: xx) terms the ‘metaphors we discriminate by’’. Mention is also made to ‘shock’ headlines which are ‘the archetypal carriers of moral panics’ (Cohen 2002 [1972]: xii), images and graphs.

Critics of obesity discourse have raised interesting questions about the intersections between science, the media and public engagement. Holland et al. (2011) advance this discussion with reference to media coverage of a scientific report, *Australia’s Future ‘Fat Bomb’*. This report, from a leading national medical institute, lent a new sense of urgency to the obesity problem, supporting journalists’ interest in seeking a ‘novel’ angle on an already well-rehearsed story. Similar to Boero’s (2013) and Saguy and Almeling’s (2008) observations on science and newspaper reporting in the United States, Australian journalists largely failed to exercise critical judgement when reporting ‘the facts’ emanating from a professor qua spokesperson for the *‘Fat Bomb’*. Australian media also took at face value the professor’s unsubstantiated claims regarding the nation’s status as a world leader in obesity league tables, or an imagined fat Olympics (salient during the run up to the Beijing Games). Newspapers drew from a repertoire of familiar tropes when using the report as a platform to denigrate the overweight and obese, ranging from the reiteration of bellicose military metaphors to those of the slovenly couch potato. One newspaper columnist even compared fat Australians to pigs with their snouts in the trough, culpable for draining the health system and failing to heed multi-million dollar government campaigns to promote healthier lifestyles. What emerges from this and similar media analyses of obesity is that fatness is far too often ideologically framed as abject and



requiring intervention. And, while the news media might take a more dramatising and moralising tone than obesity scientists, the latter are not exempt from this.

Whilst much critical scholarship on obesity has focused on news media, television shows are also increasingly being scrutinised (e.g. Heyes 2007; Inthorn and Boyce 2010; Lupton 2018; Raisborough 2016; Rich 2011; Warin 2011). In recent years weight-loss, diet and fitness have become the focus of multiple ‘reality science’ (Cohen 2005) productions, involving ‘first person programming’ (Wood and Skeggs 2008) and the public. Scrutinising media centred on cosmetic surgery (including weight-loss), such as *Extreme Makeover* (US and UK editions), Heyes (2007: 17) suggests that such representations ‘have contributed to the evolution of a contemporary discourse in which one’s body must be made to represent one’s character’. These programmes are exported to other Anglophone nations, providing a repertoire of shared (fatphobic) meanings and a template for ‘home grown’ shows that seek to fight the nation’s obesity crisis. *Operation Transformation* is one such example in Ireland. This programme is aired within a larger state apparatus of governmentality that has been critiqued for being misguided at best and, more seriously, deflecting attention from broader issues affecting health, such as poverty and inequality (Share and Share 2017).

Raisborough (2016), Rich (2011) and Warin (2011) analyse various popular television shows within this genre, exploring what these programmes ‘achieve’ in societies wherein fatness is commonly framed as the consequence of ‘*lifestyle crimes*’ (Raisborough 2016: 6, emphasis in original). Often articulated through ‘the spectacle of celebrity concern’ (Vander Schee and Kline 2013) and critiqued for side-lining ‘the more complex, structural causes of overweight and obesity’ (p. 575) in favour of ‘bad’ behaviour (e.g. neglectful parenting, laziness and ignorance), the lessons emanating from such programmes are clear. Indeed, these authors

demonstrate the *constitutive* role of television in popular understandings, sensibilities and experiences of obesity, including how weight-focused shows (e.g. *Too Fat to Work*) form a broader genre of ‘poverty porn’ that centres the putative failings of predominantly poor white people who depend on social welfare. Accordingly, fat bodies and lives become embroiled in larger class antagonisms, scapegoating and abjection in austerity Britain (Raisborough 2016).

Returning to the field of public pedagogy, Rich (2011) undertakes a critical reading of obesity through cultural texts, but also reveals how such texts function as instructional devices. Focusing on *Honey We’re Killing the Kids* and *Jamie’s Ministry of Food*, Rich reveals the ‘complexities of how surveillance associated with these health imperatives circulates relationally and affectively as public pedagogy’ (p. 6). Framed as ‘factual’ reality style programmes, these media overwhelmingly draw on instructional narratives of self-improvement. The continued growth in this type of reality media since Rich’s analysis reflects the broader contemporary trend for learning about health to occur in sites beyond formal schooling (Evans et al. 2008; Giroux 1999; Miah and Rich 2008; Sandlin et al. 2011). Whilst an approach which focuses on dominant discourses or frames provides some valuable insight, Rich and Miah (2014: 307, emphasis in original) caution against focusing only on ‘the *content* of pedagogy rather than its *relational* derivation’. They explain that learning is shaped by affective relations between different elements of this assemblage.

Following the above, it is worth underscoring the point that fear, guilt, shame and humiliation emerge in ‘reality’ television productions about ‘ordinary people’ (Lupton 2018: 51) whose bodies and lives are portrayed as matter out of place, as transgressing socially policed boundaries of propriety. Inthorn and Boyce (2010), in their analysis of 28 primetime British television programmes dedicated to obesity, explain that shame, rather than knowledge,

prevails when instructing the public to take control of their weight. This is part of a related media genre that denigrates celebrities for gaining weight/fat, in line with what Kwan and Graves (2013) term the ‘aesthetic frame’. Regardless of whether the targets of these pedagogies are members of the public, or celebrities, such media amplify moralised concerns about “weight” not only as a primary determinant but as a manifest index of well-being surpassing all antecedent and contingent dimensions of “health” (Evans et al. 2008: 13).

### **Digital media, public pedagogies and the obesity epidemic**

Giroux (2004) flags the emergence of new sites of pedagogy within public spaces and the influence of neoliberal corporate power in their development. He suggests that ‘unlike traditional forms of pedagogy, knowledge and desire are inextricably connected to modes of pedagogical address mediated through unprecedented electronic technologies’ (p. 498). Whilst traditional mass media continue to play a decisive role in public understandings of obesity, in recent years more fragmented digitised health media have emerged. The digital media landscape through which obesity discourse is promoted is made up of a complex assemblage including: various agencies (government, commercial, health), agents (policy makers, health professionals, media ‘experts’) and artefacts or objects (health promotion campaigns, social media images, weight-loss products, digital technologies). These assemblages blur the boundaries between public/private, pedagogue/learner and producer/consumer. Reflecting the shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, over the last decade digital media have been radically altered by the expansion of new practices that permeate people’s lives and enable them to *produce* and not simply consume media. Articulating this through a framework of public pedagogy, Rich and Miah (2014: 301) write: ‘it is necessary to recognise how [digital] technology is inextricable from the manner in which people learn about health’. Pedagogies of the kind

described above are now evidenced in an increasing range of digital mobile and wearable media. Some of these are not only instrumental in framing obesity in typically individualised, behavioural terms; they are also used to predict, diagnose, monitor and regulate various health issues while, paradoxically, possibly leading to ‘embodied exhaustion’ (Smith 2016) given the constant discipline incited by such media.

A lesson from this literature is that the ubiquity and design of mobile and wearable digital devices provide *opportunities* as well as peer-based *expectations* (especially among young people) to upload and share ‘data’ via multiple, interconnected social media platforms. One example includes the proliferation of images of lean bodies emerging around hashtags such as ‘#fitspiration’, designed to motivate people to exercise and lose weight. Common digital platforms, implicated in the potentially tiresome ‘work of being watched’ (Andrejevic 2002b; Smith 2016), include: Flickr, Facebook, Wikis, YouTube, Blogs, Snapchat, Websites and Instagram. In her editorial of a special issue of *Fat Studies* on ‘digital media and body weight’, Lupton (2017) brings together fat studies and critical social analyses of digital media to examine the ‘representations, practices and performances’ (p. 129) in and with these technologies. Reflecting the proliferation of often competing perspectives/knowledge of body and weight, Lupton highlights the range of voices and images present within digital media and the tensions between them, including: fat activism, body positivism, fat shaming and stigmatisation, pro-anorexia, thinspiration and fitspiration. Whilst it is difficult doing justice to the richness of such work here, this emerging literature suggests that the advent of digital platforms has facilitated the representation of diverse perspectives on bodies, weight, size and shape. Lupton cites, inter alia, examples of digital media used by activists to advance fat acceptance and admiration (including eroticisation) via ‘the Fatosphere’ (p. 122). ‘Rad fatties’ are especially recalcitrant, subverting the idea that they should apologise for their size.

However, despite these attempts to challenge stigma and make lives more bearable via online media, negative constructs of fatness dominate the mainstream digital landscape.

Emerging research on digital media, surveillance and body pedagogies (Goodyear et al. 2017; Lupton 2017; Rich and Miah 2014, 2017; Smith 2016; Rich 2018) has highlighted some of the potentially harmful impacts of health-related digital media, particularly that which focuses on diet, weight and physical activity. Rich (2018) examines the social media micro-practices of young women to reveal not only what they are learning about ‘healthy’ behaviours, but how they learn to recognise themselves and/or others as good, healthy, active, thin and desirable bodies within environments framed by weight-centric discourses. Elsewhere, literature also highlights the dominance of individual-level frames within social media communications about obesity and the presence of derogatory and misogynist sentiment (Chou et al. 2014). In a content analysis of 120 obesity-related messages on the social media platform Twitter, So et al. (2016) found the tweets that were emotionally evocative, humorous and concerned individual-level causes for obesity were more frequently re-tweeted than their counterparts. Yet, whilst negative (often humiliating) portrayals of fatness and ‘fat people’ are dominant in digital media (Lupton 2017, 2018), such environments are also being harnessed in ways that might be considered supportive rather than oppressive, both for people seeking to lose weight and those resisting this imperative.

Regarding those seeking to lose weight, Atanasova’s (2018) research on obesity blogs illustrates the importance of a metaphor of ‘Journey’ rather than ‘War’ that ‘can be seen as affirmation of the potential of blogs to offer a space where alternative to the mainstream narratives can surface’ (p. 11; for a critique of the ‘Journey’ metaphor, see Lupton 2017). In contrast, and in underscoring further the relevance of the Fatosphere, or ‘online fat acceptance

community' (Dickins et al. 2011: 1679), digital environments enable users to resist weight-based oppression (Rich 2016) and the obligation to go on a typically ill-fated weight-loss journey. Indeed, fat blogs, social media, e-zines and other digital spaces are often utilised as part of the assemblages of more critical practices, such as those endorsed by the Health At Every Size® (HAES) movement (Bombak et al. 2018a). The micro-blogging platform Twitter has been used by the HAES® community through the hashtag #HAES. Twitter has also recently provided space for a 'backlash' to perceived 'body shaming' after Cancer Research UK launched an anti-obesity campaign (Harrington 2018). Hence, social media can provide a counter-institutional space for re-framing and learning about weight (loss), fat and health in ways that challenge, circumvent and resist dominant narratives and metaphors. In so doing, technology is incorporated into the panoply of 'media literacy' skills displayed by fat liberation activists (Cooper 2010: 1027) and others seeking to challenge social injustices centred on bodies, their appearance and assumed health status.

Finally, many of the studies described above examine particular media in isolate. As new media forms continue to emerge, researchers are starting to consider how different media converge and interrelate. Hass (2017), for example, examines television makeover narratives, revealing how they extend beyond their traditional boundaries into digital media. Indeed, the capacity for viewers to actively comment live on media through accompanying social media (e.g. hashtags associated with television shows) further complicates assumed boundaries between media producer and consumer. This might provide further capacity for alternative framings of fat. In her analysis, Hass suggests that digital media 'also offers increasing room to stories that contradict the more officially sanctioned trajectories, creating affective spaces that both continue the intimacy between viewer and performer and transform it into potentially even more interactive forms such as direct exchanges in comment threads on Facebook' (p. 149).

Elsewhere, Cain et al. (2017: 184), in their study of digital news media, also reveal that ‘attempts to disrupt the dominant anti- “obesity” rhetoric are indeed making their way into the public discourse, albeit primarily through the more informal channels afforded by comments sections of digital media’.

## **Discussion**

As stated by Boero (2013: 40), ‘media attention given to obesity is unprecedented, constant, and central to the construction of obesity as one of the greatest social problems facing the United States and the world in the twenty-first century’. Although the war on obesity is not new, the unremitting effort by numerous ‘entrepreneurs’ (Monaghan et al. 2010) to ‘fight fat’ persist not least because it ‘feeds off’ normative cultural expectations about self-control, care, responsibility and body malleability. Indeed, such values are shared across many neoliberal nations. Thille (2018: 1) writes: ‘In the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Britain, people commonly assert weight and body composition are highly malleable and under individual control through eating and exercise practices’. This weight-centric framework of thought, talk and action – this dominant ‘obesity discourse’ (Evans et al. 2008) - accords with public health agenda that target the ‘lifestyle choices’ and appearance of individuals, with the normatively healthy body commonly viewed as an index of ‘morally worthy’ citizenship (LeBesco 2011: 154). Such citizens, rather than burdening society, are fit for challenging times: they have heeded medicalised advice from, for example, reality television weight-loss shows that offer ‘lifestyle criminals’ possible redemption (Raisborough 2016).

Critical perspectives on the obesity epidemic usefully advance knowledge on how various media (e.g. newspapers, television programmes, online news sites, m-health technologies and digital media) routinely frame weight/fat and potentially influence popular understandings,

experiences and practices. Whether discussing how media inform and legitimate potentially harmful and discriminatory practices (even when offering seemingly benign representations), or how we ‘read’ health ‘from our bodies’, it is clear that ‘media matters’ (Raisborough 2016: 5). Indeed, media are constitutive of a social reality that shapes health (practices) and well-being in ways that are not necessarily intended by proponents of obesity discourse (Evans et al. 2008). The picture is ever more complex given the heterogeneity of media, overlapping boundaries and spaces for challenging obesity discourse via the production, and not simply the consumption, of text, images and other data relating to the body. However, the literature reviewed above indicates that popular media give overriding and unquestioning emphasis to medical and public health frames (Kwan and Graves 2013), dramatising and amplifying the message that weight/fatness is a massive problem requiring aggressive interventions and ultimately behavioural solutions. Such framing, attendant pedagogies and health literacies (e.g. the need to count calories and exercise regularly) resonate with and potentially shame audiences who are inclined to view obesity as an ugly and costly health crisis that is attributable to personal (or parental) failure and social irresponsibility. Defined by various critics as a moral panic, or ‘fat panic’ (Campos et al. 2006; LeBesco 2010; Saguy and Almeling 2005), disproportionate and sensationalist media attention is implicated in the reproduction of inequalities (e.g. with regards to ethnic minorities, recipients of state welfare, women and youth), while obfuscating the larger social determinants of health (O’Hara and Taylor 2018). Such processes are given a further twist via contemporary digital media platforms that render ‘fat bodies’ highly visible targets for opprobrium, discipline, correction and mineable sources of data that have economic value (Lupton 2017). This, in turn, prompts further questions. For example, how might more dispersed and fragmented media provide opportunities to challenge ‘fat fabrications’ (Evans et al. 2008) at a time when the division between expert and lay knowledge is highly contested? And, how might ‘fat pedagogies’ (Cameron and Russell 2016)



be operationalised in and through digital environments alongside moves to promote media literacy among youth, critical thinking, active citizenship and efforts to support them to become agents of positive change in their communities?

As seen above, an assemblage of counter-movements has proliferated with and through new digital media, such as HAES® and the Fatosphere. Further work is needed to address the pedagogical influence (Rich and Miah 2014) of these movements and digital environments in an age of risk, uncertainty, mistrust, mass surveillance and ‘datafication’ (Smith 2016). Such research could identify what people are learning about health, well-being, weight and obesity within and through complex digital assemblages. As Lupton (2017) suggests, future research should also attend to issues of privacy and security in the digital data economy. Accordingly, we signpost the need for further pedagogically informed research on digital media so as to understand the myriad ways in which people are being urged to know and ‘get to grips’ with fat. Sociologists need a better understanding of how these various media are entangled (how do they reify, contradict or challenge each other) and what modes of subjectivity they incite people to enact. In sum, through the above review, it is evident that the learning about fatness that people are now engaged with through multiple media is entangled with myriad practices and interests. Ranging from commercial investment (weight-loss products), risk cultures (obesity as a pandemic), biomedical expertise, as well as more resistant activist movements and counter-discourses, these practices and interests are ripe for further investigation. And, insofar as these assemblages could further or hinder social justice, including compassion and body respect, sociology has a role to play in developing critical, reflexive and instrumental knowledge for teachers, students, journalists, clinicians, public health workers and policy makers. In so doing, sociologists could ensure that ‘the ethical imperative’ (Gaztambide-Fernández and Arráiz Matute 2014) underlying discussions of pedagogy is honoured.

We will briefly make four final points. First, whilst there appears to be greater sensitivity to weight stigma and moves towards benign representations in the mass media and public health (e.g. the obese as worthy figures of redemption through the make-over, or as victims of the obesogenic environment), problems persist. For instance, it is not enough for contributors to medical journals to lament the stigmatising effects of mass media (Flint et al. 2018) without recognising how biomedicine is itself implicated. Second, it is important to engage social scientific critique of moral panic theory as applied to media representations of obesity. Fraser et al. (2010) urge social theorists of health to consider the *action* of emotions in obesity epidemic discourse. In so doing, they eschew the tendency within moral panic theory to depict emotions as intrinsically polluting visceral responses rather than circulating social processes that are constitutive of boundaries and subjectivities (see also Farell et al. 2016; Raisborough 2016). In line with such work, critical scholars could advance more nuanced understandings of public reactions to fat by attending to the complex pedagogical dimensions, literacies and sensibilities associated with mediated obesity discourse. Third, while Holland et al. (2015) assert that news media reporting cannot be considered in isolation from weight-loss advertisements, ‘women’s magazines’ and other sources celebrating slenderness, it should be reiterated that myriad modes of obesity epidemic entrepreneurship (Monaghan et al. 2010) collectively construct the putative crisis. Traditional mass media and digital media constitute a vital part of this jigsaw - interlocking with policy, prejudice and public health pedagogies in complex and as yet only partially understood ways - but they do not constitute the whole picture. Hence, ongoing efforts to challenge the war on obesity (Greenhalgh 2015a) need to be multi-pronged and diverse in scope, ranging from updated critiques of science and epidemiology (Bombak 2014; Bombak et al. 2018b; Riediger et al. 2018) to re-framing studies of weight-related stigma with reference to macro-social structures (Monaghan 2017). Finally,

it follows that when seeking to develop competency to critique the weight-centred health paradigm (O'Hara and Taylor 2018), or at least foster greater reflexivity when discussing obesity, interested parties may wish to acknowledge and learn from some of the above scholarship. Accordingly, rather than using melodramatic media representations as a convenient springboard to declare obesity a 'neoliberal epidemic' (Schrecker and Bamba 2015), for instance, contributors may be better placed to appreciate the contentious nature of this terrain and why there are calls to rethink obesity.

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<sup>1</sup> As with other critical weight studies and fat studies scholars who seek to avoid pathologising larger bodies (Lupton 2013; Rich et al. 2011), the words 'overweight' and 'obesity' should be read throughout this article with an implicit 'so-called' before them and in scare quotes. To aid readability, the terms are not repeatedly presented in our article as such but readers should remain mindful of the constitutive role of language and the negative connotations of these terms. Wann (2009) suggests that such words 'are neither neutral nor benign' (xii) and are rooted in medicalised 'weight-related belief systems' (ix).