


How food companies influence evidence and opinion – straight from the horse’s mouth

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ABSTRACT

The tactics used by the food industry to influence public policy have been well documented, but there is little direct evidence of the rationale behind food industry actions and their level of support from within individual companies. This paper provides an analysis of an email exchange (from 2015) between former senior executives of Coca-Cola to gain insider insight into ways in which the food industry seeks to influence policy-makers as well as scientific evidence and opinion with respect to nutrition and non-communicable disease (NCD) prevention. The results provide direct evidence that senior leaders in the food industry advocate for a deliberate and co-ordinated approach to influencing scientific evidence and expert opinion. The paper reveals industry strategies to use external organisations, including scientific bodies and medical associations, as tools to overcome the global scientific and regulatory challenges they face. This evidence highlights the deliberate approach used by the food industry to influence public policy and opinion in their favour. It also demonstrates the importance of identifying and managing potential conflicts of interest when assessing the evidence base and when making policy decisions related to nutrition and NCD prevention.

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Introduction

The processed food and beverage industry has been identified as a contributor to the burden of disease through their supply and marketing of unhealthy foods, and their attempts to shape government policy and public opinion in their favour (Moodie et al., 2013). Indeed, the influence of the food industry has been emphasised as a substantial challenge to efforts to prevent non-communicable diseases (NCD; Chan, 2013).

The tactics used by companies in the food industry to influence public policy have been well documented (Mialon, Swinburn, & Sacks, 2015), and are similar to those used by tobacco and alcohol companies (Brownell & Warner, 2009). With respect to tobacco companies, the United States (US) Master Settlement Agreement (State of California, Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General, 1998) enabled the release of thousands of internal corporate documents. This led to an in-depth understanding of tobacco industry efforts to undermine public health efforts to control

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tobacco-related diseases. However, there are no such agreements with the food industry. Apart from a small number of isolated leaks of food company emails (Strom, 2016), public release of internal food company documents and communications between food company representatives is extremely rare and difficult to come by. Accordingly, evidence of the rationale behind food industry actions and their level of support from within individual companies is limited. This paper analysed direct communications between former senior executives of Coca-Cola to gain insider insight into ways in which the food industry seeks to influence policy-makers as well as scientific evidence and opinion.

Methods

A Colorado Open Records Act request by U.S. Right to Know to the University of Colorado revealed details of several emails between former senior executives at Coca-Cola. For this analysis, we examined one email communication (available at: <https://usrtk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Knowles-email.pdf>) that took place in February 2015. The pertinent aspects of the email relate to communication from Michael Ernest Knowles, a former (2008–2013) vice president of Global Scientific and Regulatory Affairs at Coca-Cola and former president of the highly prominent food industry-funded group International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), and Alex Malaspina, a former senior vice president at Coca-Cola, and founder of ILSI. At the time the email was sent, neither Knowles nor Malaspina were employed by Coca-Cola, but emails reveal that Malaspina remains in contact with Coca-Cola executives, while Knowles continued to serve as a trustee of ILSI through 2016 and of the ILSI Research Foundation through 2017. The email exchange between Knowles and Malaspina was in response to a teleconference with journalists conducted by The International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation, an industry-supported group that communicates industry positions on health, nutrition and food safety. The media teleconference concerned a 2015 United States (US) Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee advisory report. The content of the email communication was analysed using a framework for classifying the tactics employed by food companies in their efforts to influence public policy in their favour (Mialon et al., 2015). This framework lays out six strategies that food companies have been observed to use as part of their corporate political activity: information and messaging; financial incentives; constituency building; legal strategies; policy substitution; and opposition fragmentation and destabilisation. Within each strategy, Mialon et al. outlines several practices and mechanisms that have been used in pursuit of those strategies.

Results

The email exchange notes several tactics, outlined by these senior food industry figures, by which the food industry deliberately seeks to shape the evidence base on diet- and public health-related issues, and establish relationships with governments, key scientific bodies and medical associations in order to have influence over them.

Influence on evidence generation and summation

Knowles suggests that the food industry must generate its own evidence relating to the causes of obesity and food safety, both through the manipulation of external organisations and through directly commissioned work:

As to the generation of credible, consensus science on the issues hitting the industry – obesity and causative factors, sugar, low/no calorie sweetener safety – in particular we have to use external organisations in addition to any work we directly commission.

Furthermore, Knowles praises industry efforts (through the IFIC Foundation) to criticise government recommendations. Specific tactics include highlighting the limitations of existing (non-industry sponsored) evidence and focusing on doubt in science.

Exert influence over scientific bodies and medical associations

Knowles highlights the need for food industry representatives to use their positions on influential scientific bodies and medical associations to direct debate and discussion towards issues of interest to the industry. He also suggests that industry representatives should seek key leadership roles in such societies:

We do have good contacts in some [medical associations] and we should encourage them to address public health matters and 'suggest' appropriate topics.

We can ... suggest some form of debate on the issues [at the National Academies of Science], ensuring of course that the debaters are balanced!

We all belong to one or more of these [scientific societies] and we should have leadership roles in the key ones and push for individual issues to be addressed by public conference/workshops.

Relationships with policy-makers and opinion leaders

Knowles emphasises the need for the food industry to guide global debate and, in particular, to use their academic contacts to facilitate this. He also advocates broad-based collaboration with government and key opinion leaders, and involvement in nutrition-related government reviews of the evidence base:

Contentious issues need to be addressed by all stakeholders [including industry, government, and academia].

The EU [European Union] Commission is pressing for greater international collaboration with the US at the top of the preferred collaborator list, so we should encourage this through ILSI and our academic contacts.

Discussion

This paper provides direct evidence that senior leaders in the food industry advocate for a deliberate and co-ordinated approach to influencing scientific evidence and expert opinion. Importantly, the food industry seeks to do this by co-opting academic contacts, infiltrating major scientific bodies and medical associations, and influencing the generation of scientific evidence. External organisations, and the people associated with them, are depicted as pawns to be used to overcome the global scientific and regulatory challenges faced by the industry. These findings support previous analyses that have examined the tactics used by the food industry (Mialon, Swinburn, Allender, & Sacks, 2017; Mialon et al., 2015), and they complement other analyses of internal food company documents in the area (Gillam, 2016; Strom, 2016). More broadly, this paper extends the critical examination of the influence of food corporations on public health policy and outcomes (Moodie et al., 2013; Williams & Nestle, 2015).

This research is based on a single piece of communication between senior food industry figures, both of whom are former senior executives of Coca-Cola. While neither of the correspondents worked for Coca-Cola at the time of the exchange, both were influential in the food industry at the time through their roles in ILSI and IFIC. Despite the limitations of the evidence analysed, the email exchange provides a high-level perspective on the operations of the food industry in relation to the debate around diet and nutrition. Other similar examples, including from different time periods and geographic locations, would help to confirm the extent of these activities.

Conclusion

Companies that profit from the sale of unhealthy food have a clear conflict of interest in relation to NCD prevention, and are unlikely to have the public's health as a motivating factor (Moodie et al., 2013). The tactics displayed by these food industry leaders to influence the scientific evidence base and global debate in relation to nutrition and food represent a substantial risk to efforts to address NCDs globally. The public health and medical community need to be aware that they are viewed as tools through which food companies can overcome threats to their profits. This paper highlights the

importance of identifying and managing potential conflicts of interest for professional bodies, scientific societies, researchers and policy-makers. Importantly, companies need to be held to account, through the media and the public health community, if found to be undermining the public's health using the tactics described here.

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