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Understanding the use of media analysis in public health research through food tax debates (HEALTHEI Project): a scoping review

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Abstract

Background: Poor diet is a major public health concern. In 2021, 63·8% of adults and 22·2% of reception-age children were either overweight or obese in England. Fiscal interventions have become a popular policy measure to reduce obesity and encourage healthy eating. Such measures are highly controversial, leading to media debate promoting pro-tax and anti-tax arguments. To better understand food tax debates and the use of media analysis in public health research, we conducted a scoping review of media analyses using food taxes as a case study.

Methods: In this scoping review, we searched SCOPUS, PubMed and EBSCOhost databases on Feb 14–22, 2023, using keyword variations for “food”, “tax” and “media analysis”. Results were restricted to English-only, peer-reviewed journal articles. The initial results were manually screened through an iterative process to exclude articles that did not analyse a food tax, were non-English language, were not peer-reviewed and/or did not use media analysis as the primary method. Modelled on Arksey and O’Malley’s (2005) five-stage review protocol, two researchers used a coding framework to independently code all articles and checked result quality through regular discussion. Extracted data included article title, author, year, country, tax type, media sources used, identified media frames, and research aims, methods, results, and conclusions. Results are reported according to PRISMA guidelines and data files submitted to FigShare Repository (non-accessible).

Findings: Of 1087 articles reviewed, 19 were eligible to be included in the study. Articles were published between 2013 and 2023, with 2021 having the highest concentration of studies carried out mainly in the UK and USA. Despite search terms encompassing a range of food products, the retrieved media analyses focused on three types of food product taxes: sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB), meat, and groceries. Most articles explored arguments for and against policy implementation, with some investigating stakeholder representation. Results demonstrate that stakeholders’ arguments, both positive and negative, are consistent across countries and food products.

Interpretation: The consistency of how both pro-tax and anti-tax arguments are presented in the media demonstrates the importance of coordination between stakeholder groups to influence policy adoption. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate media analysis across a diverse range of food products.

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Contributors

ABC and RH were equally responsible for paper conceptualisation, data curation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, draft writing, and editing and project administration with detailed feedback from RW. RW, CR, and PB were responsible for funding acquisition, project conceptualisation, writing review and editing, validation and providing feedback on conceptualisation, formal analysis, and methodology. RW and CR provided direct supervision with input from PB. CV provided feedback as internal reviewer. ABC, RH, and RW are co-lead authors, with RH as the corresponding and presenting author.

Declaration of interests

CV has a non-financial research collaboration with a national UK supermarket chain. All authors declare no competing interests.

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