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1 **The media playbook for food taxes: an analysis of UK print and online news media**
2 **coverage of food and non-alcoholic beverage tax debates 2017-2023**

3

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25

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30

31 **Abstract:** Analysis of media coverage of food tax debates is limited, with most focusing on taxation
32 of sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs). This study explored UK media coverage of food tax debates,
33 extending beyond SSBs to other food products. We investigated trends in print and online news
34 media coverage and how the UK media presented anti- and pro-tax arguments. A mixed-methods
35 content analysis of eight UK news publishers between 2017 and 2023 was undertaken. Articles
36 (n=369) were coded to identify publishers, food product types, and tax types. Coverage was mapped
37 by date, by food product, and by publisher. The article sample was refined to exclude coverage
38 related to the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy, and remaining articles were analyzed for argument types
39 and uses around other food tax debates such as meat, sugar and salt.

40 The results showed that the media respond to triggering events and reproduce arguments from key
41 stakeholders such as industry, policymakers, and prominent researchers. Similar arguments were
42 consistently used across all publishers, regardless of food product. Pro-tax arguments tended to
43 reinforce the evidence for negative health impacts while anti-tax arguments questioned the need for
44 and efficacy of intervention. This can be understood as a ‘media playbook’ of food tax arguments. To
45 the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine media coverage of food taxes across
46 food products. It develops work exploring the media’s impact on food tax debates and informs food
47 policymakers about the acceptability of food taxes and recommended strategies for media
48 engagement.

49

50 **Key words:** food taxes, news media, food policy, journalism, agenda setting, SDIL

51

52 **1. Introduction**

53 Poor nutrition is a public health concern, with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) accounting for
54 74% of all deaths globally (WHO, 2025). Fiscal interventions targeting unhealthy food and non-
55 alcoholic beverages (‘food taxes’ hereafter) have been increasingly adopted into national policy ,
56 with over 119 countries implementing them to combat obesity and other diet-related negative
57 health outcomes based on strong and growing evidence (Charteris IJ et al., 2025; Vigo et al., 2022;
58 World Bank, 2023). Despite their potential, food taxes to address poor diet outcomes are still a
59 source of controversy in the UK. This controversy has been reported on and amplified by the media,
60 which in turn can impact public and political perceptions of food taxes. Previous literature
61 demonstrates that media coverage of these food policy debates is influenced by editorial
62 perspectives (Hilton et al., 2018).

63

64 A review of the literature suggested that most existing media analyses of food taxes: 1) focused on
65 sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) (e.g. Niederdeppe et al., 2013), 2) analysed print and online news
66 media rather than social media or other media sources (i.e. TV, radio, blogs, etc.), and 3) identified
67 similar proponent and opposition argument types across different countries and food products
68 (Bonifant-Cisneros et al., 2023). Studies were published between 2013 and 2023 and were mostly
69 carried out in the US and the UK (e.g. Cicchini et al., 2022).

70 The media play a significant and powerful role in influencing public and policy discourse and
71 perception, known in media and policy literature as ‘agenda setting’ (McCombs, 1972). By discussing
72 a topic at a particular time, through particular editorial slants, or selectively emphasising or
73 downplaying different aspects, the media can present biased pictures of reality. On the other hand,
74 by selectively deciding what gets reported and when, the media influence which topics the public
75 perceive as important or noteworthy. Consequently, media coverage can affect public acceptability
76 of a policy, depending on how and when it is reported (Caraher, Furey & Wells, 2023).

77 Within the UK, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL) came into effect in April 2018 and was widely
78 covered by the media. The levy aimed to reduce obesity and other diet-related ill-health outcomes
79 by targeting soft drink manufacturers and encouraging them to reformulate their products or reduce
80 portion sizes (HM Revenue & Customs, 2016). Since SDIL’s implementation, food tax debates have
81 remained important in public discourse and policy discussions, exemplified by Henry Dimbleby’s
82 2020-2021 National Food Strategy report and current discussions about the Labour Government’s
83 ‘Good Food Cycle’ White Paper. In November 2025, it was announced that the Labour Government
84 would extend SDIL to include sugary milk-based drinks and lower the sugar threshold for all drinks
85 from 5g to 4.5g per 100ml (HM Revenue & Customs et al., 2025)

86 This paper aims to investigate how the media present arguments and create a discourse around food
87 tax proposals by analysing print and online news media coverage of food tax debates in the UK. This
88 analysis extends beyond sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) to other food products, such as meat,
89 sugar and salt, and other non-alcoholic beverage types. We investigated:

90 RQ1: What are the main trends for UK print and online news media coverage of food tax debates
91 over time, by food product, and by publisher?

92 RQ2: What types of arguments are used by the media for and against food taxes, especially non-
93 SDIL taxes?

94 RQ3: How are these argument types used by the media overall, and how does their usage
95 change across different publishers and different food tax proposals?

96 RQ4: What discursive patterns are created in media discourse with these argument types?

97 **2. Methods**

98 We conducted a content analysis of print and online media coverage of eight media publishers.
99 Selection criteria were based on Buckton et al.'s (2019) methods, including circulation figures and
100 prominence in the UK (see Table 1). Based on the work of Wring and Deacon (2018) and Bayram
101 (2013), publishers were categorised as either left-leaning (liberal) or right-leaning (conservative) for
102 analysis (Table 1). Articles were manually coded in Microsoft Excel to identify publishers, food
103 product types, and tax types. Trends in publication peaks and troughs were plotted against a
104 timeline of events. The sample of articles was then refined to exclude articles related to the Soft
105 Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL), because media arguments, frames, and stakeholder representation of
106 SDIL have already been explored by existing literature (Penney et al., 2023). We excluded Sunday
107 versions of the main publications (e.g. Observer or Mail on Sunday) because they were not
108 accessible on all databases. Social media was also excluded because we were focused on *news*
109 media sources published by large and influential media organisations (following Buckton et al.'s 2019
110 criteria) rather than individual posts or views.

111 **Table 1. Included publisher list, with circulation and political slant**

Print media publisher	Digital media publisher	Circulation	Political slant
The Guardian*	N/A	105,134	Left
The Independent*	N/A	N/A	Left
The Times	thetimes.co.uk	365,880	Right
The Daily Mail	MailOnline	715,797	Right
The Daily Express	Express Online	102,884	Right
The Sun	thesun.co.uk	1,210,915	Right
The Daily Mirror	mirror.co.uk	173,981	Left
The Daily Record	dailyrecord.co.uk	38,998	Left

112 Source: Authors informed by Press Gazette (2026) and Wring and Deacon (2019)

113 *Publishers that could not be separated by print and digital mediums due to database search restrictions

114 **2.1 Search procedure**

115 The authors completed systematic searches of two media databases: LexisNexis and Factiva.

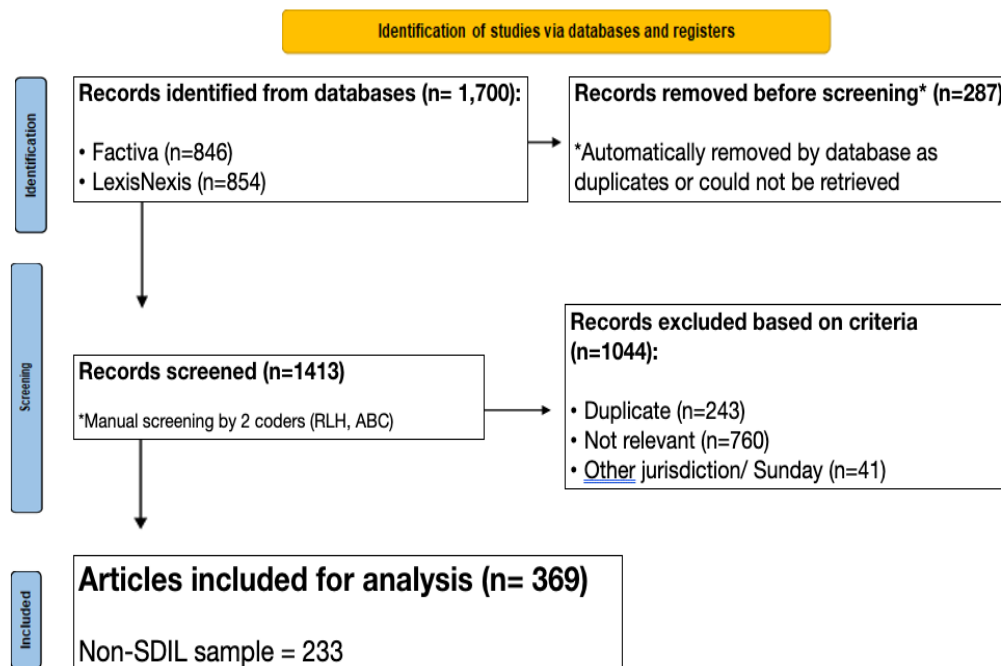
116 Searches were conducted using filters for geographic region (UK), publisher (Table 1), language

117 (English only), content type (newspaper), and time period (1 Jan 2017 to 31 May 2023). This period
 118 was chosen to capture the debates surrounding the adoption and implementation of SDIL in 2018
 119 and related food tax debates emerging around the National Food Strategy reports (2020, 2021) and
 120 the Johnson administration’s Government Food Strategy (2022) A list of keywords was developed to
 121 capture the concepts of ‘tax’, ‘food’ and ‘non-alcoholic beverages’ and drafted into two search
 122 strings (available on FigShare).

123 2.2 Data sample

124 A total of 1,700 newspaper articles were identified through the search engines. Manifest data that
 125 consisted of date, headline, author, publisher, type of publication (print or online), wordcount, and
 126 section was extracted for all articles and compiled into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet document. We
 127 began by removing all duplicates (n=285), leaving us a sample of 1,415 articles. Of these, we
 128 reviewed titles to identify those articles covering food or beverage taxes in the UK. We also reviewed
 129 type of publication and word count to identify online versions. Articles with the longest word counts
 130 were retained in cases where multiple versions existed (Buckton et al., 2018). Based on these
 131 criteria, we excluded 1,046 articles, resulting in a final sample size of 369 articles for analysis (Figure
 132 1).

133 **Figure 1. PRISMA diagram for article selection**



134

135 Source: Authors

136 2.3 Data analysis

137 The quantitative analysis involved producing descriptive statistics for the full sample of articles
138 (n=369) to answer the first research question and identify coverage trends over time, by food
139 product, and by publisher. To answer questions 2-4, we excluded any articles which related only to
140 SDIL, then conducted a qualitative thematic analysis exploring proponent and opposition arguments
141 around food taxes (n=233). Data visualisations were made using Microsoft Excel.

142 A sub-sample of the non-SDIL articles (10%) was individually coded by three researchers to develop
143 a thematic coding framework, using reflexive thematic analysis methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
144 Identified themes were compared, discussed, and revised by lead researchers until agreement was
145 reached for all codes. Then, the full sample of non-SDIL articles (n=233) was thoroughly read and
146 manually coded by two researchers through an iterative process using Microsoft Excel. The
147 identified argument codes were discussed until the full sample was analysed and final themes were
148 agreed.

149 **3. Results**

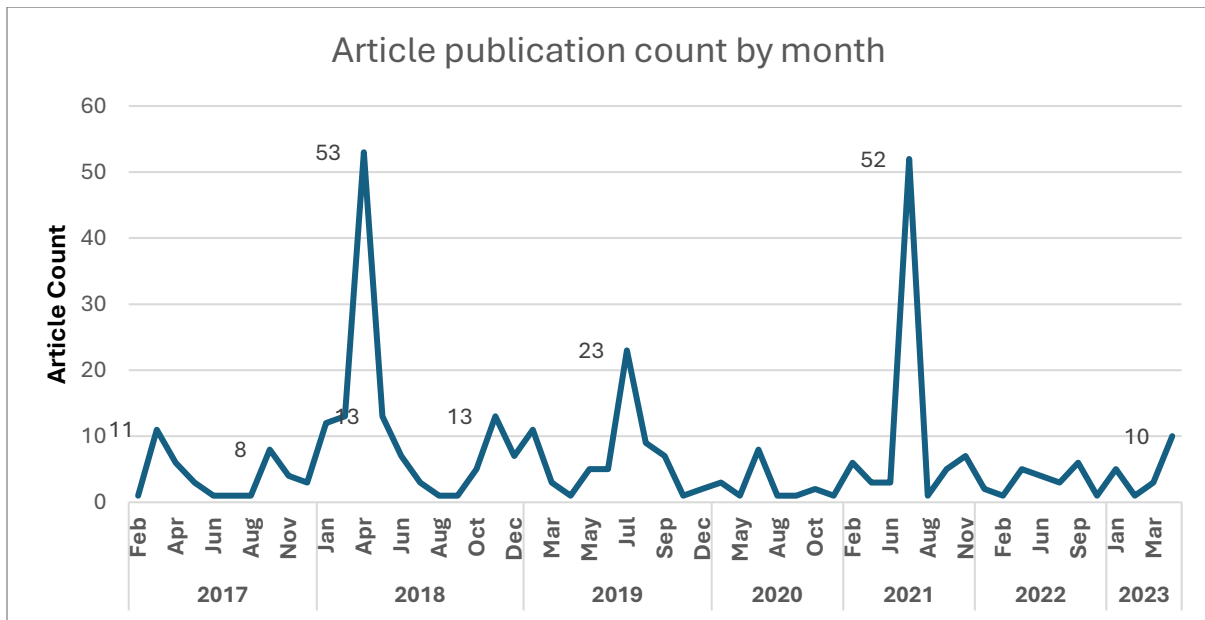
150 Results from both the quantitative and qualitative analysis are presented, organised by our four
151 research questions.

152 **3.1 What are the main trends for UK media coverage of food tax debates over time, by food** 153 **product, and by publisher?**

154 ***Coverage over time (2017-2023)***

155 For the period of January 2017 to May 2023, there were two peaks in coverage (Figure 2), with ~50
156 articles published for each. The first peak, in April 2018, was mainly in response to the
157 implementation of SDIL. The second, in July 2021, was largely in response to the publication of the
158 second part of Henry Dimbleby's National Food Strategy (NFS): The Plan, an analysis of the UK food
159 system commissioned by the government to inform the development of a Government Food
160 Strategy (NFS, 2021). Two smaller peaks coincided with the publication of an Oxford study
161 (Springmann et al., 2018) about a meat tax and its resulting debate (n=13), and Boris Johnson's 'sin
162 tax' speech during his 2019 campaign for Prime Minister (n=23) (Figure 2). The most extreme
163 difference in coverage occurred in 2021, which had the lowest coverage of one or less articles for six
164 months and one of the highest peaks in coverage in July. Coverage in 2022 was also low: six months
165 of this year had one or fewer articles published on UK food taxes.

166 **Figure 2. Articles published by month**



167
168 Source: Authors

169 **Coverage trends by food product**

170 Media coverage of tax options for different food products also changed over time and seemingly in
 171 relation to key events. Eight food product categories were identified in the sample of articles,
 172 including: meat, sugar in beverages, sugar in food, salt, calories, fat, junk or unhealthy food, and
 173 other. Sugar in beverages was the most common food product tax discussed in the media from 2017
 174 to 2019. There was also some discussion of taxing ‘junk’ or unhealthy food and an increase in
 175 discussion about meat from November 2018 to January 2019. In February 2019, the Transport for
 176 London ‘junk food advertising ban’ came into effect, which accounts for some of the discussion
 177 around junk or unhealthy food that year (Thompson et al., 2021). In 2021, there was a clear shift in
 178 the type of food products discussed for taxes, in response to the publication of the NFS (2021).
 179 Beginning in July 2021, there was a large rise in discussion of ‘junk’ or unhealthy food in the media.
 180 This category was used for articles which discussed more than one food product type; in this case,
 181 the articles discussed tax options for both sugar and salt in response to the NFS proposal for a sugar-
 182 and-salt reformulation tax (NFS, 2021).

183 **Coverage trends by publisher**

184 Media coverage of food taxes rose across all publishers in 2018 and 2021 and lowered in 2020 and
 185 2022. The Sun and thesun.co.uk had the most coverage of food tax debates following
 186 implementation of SDIL in April 2018, with 45 articles published. This figure was also the highest

187 number of articles by any publisher in one year and likely relates to their ‘Hands Off Our Grub’
 188 campaign in response to SDIL (Table 2).

189 **Table 2. Publisher article count by year**

Publishers	Political Slant	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Daily Mail/ MailOnline	Right	9	28	21	3	21	4	8	94
The Sun/ thesun.co.uk	Right	4	45	9	4	16	1	0	79
The Times/ thetimes.co.uk	Right	5	15	8	3	9	7	5	52
The Daily Express/ Express Online	Right	3	17	8	1	10	3	3	45
The Guardian	Left	11	9	12	2	4	3	1	42
The Daily Mirror/ mirror.co.uk	Left	5	10	3	2	8	3	2	33
The Independent	Left	1	3	4	2	8	0	0	18
The Daily Record/ dailyrecord.co.uk	Left	1	1	2	0	1	1	0	6
TOTAL		39	128	67	17	77	22	19	369

190 Source: Authors

191 Left-leaning publishers tended to have less coverage overall of food tax debates than right-leaning
 192 publishers (Table 2). This trend was reflected by publication volume: the right-leaning Daily Mail/
 193 Mail Online had the highest coverage of food tax debates overall (25%), while the left-leaning media
 194 outlet Daily Record/ dailyrecord.co.uk had the least (less than 2%).

195 **3.2 What types of arguments are used by the media for and against food taxes, especially non-SDIL**
 196 **taxes?**

197 We identified a total of 34 argument types used by the media for and against tax proposals for
 198 unhealthy food products beyond SSBs (e.g. excluding SDIL): 15 proponent and 19 opposition (Table
 199 3). Examples of non-SDIL tax proposals include: an extension of SDIL (inclusion of a different food
 200 product, raising/ lowering of threshold, raising/ lowering of rate), or a separate tax on a different
 201 food product (e.g. meat, sugar-and-salt, calories, etc.).

202 We organised these argument types into seven themes (three proponent, four opposition), along
 203 with example quotes (Table 3). We found that proponent and opposition arguments focused on the
 204 same topics but took opposite stances. Common topics included effectiveness of the proposed tax,
 205 available evidence, popularity of the proposal and impacts on poor or vulnerable populations.

206 More examples of proponent arguments were found than opposition arguments (658 to 547), even
207 though there were more *types* of opposition arguments identified (19 to 15). This suggests that the
208 more limited number of proponent argument types were repeated in articles more frequently than
209 more varied opposition argument types. This could be for multiple reasons: e.g. to avoid accusations
210 of bias and provide due say to opposing side(s), or to better refute proponent arguments (in the case
211 of editorial slant).

212 The majority of proponent argument types related to evidence which supports the tax proposal,
213 with additional themes around supporting positive change, and balancing power for the public good.
214 By comparison, opposition argument types followed multiple themes, but tended to focus on
215 questioning different elements of the tax. These arguments included: consequences of the tax,
216 credibility of the tax and/ or tax advocates, evidence for the tax and its reliability, and
217 implementation of the tax in terms of popularity, practicality, and legality (Table 3).

218 **Table 3. Food tax arguments by theme, with argument frequency**

Argument Theme	Quotes	Argument type
(Evidence shows) Food product causes negative health outcomes		
Evidence supports tax	"Information campaigners and initiatives from voluntary organisations ranging from Greenpeace to Paul and Linda McCartney's Meat Free Monday have succeeded in convincing some people to review their meat consumption. So it can be done." (Farlie, The Guardian, 21 Apr 2017)	Tax should be extended (because it is effective)
		Evidence supports tax
		Food product should be treated like tobacco/ alcohol
Tax will support (long-term) positive change	". . . a tax is just part of a complex jigsaw, and our whole food system needs a radical overhaul, so that no one is dependent on food banks, farm workers are paid a living wage and our farmer's roles as custodians of nature is properly recognised." (The Guardian, 1 Oct 2019)	Incentive for industry to reformulate (because tax is effective)
		Tax will encourage healthier choices
		Revenue from tax will support services
		Tax will offset negative environmental impacts
		Tax will reduce health costs
		Tax will help poor/ vulnerable
		Tax will support animal welfare
Tax is part of a broader strategy		
Action is needed (by government)	"If we're going to make a dent in this problem, Government is going to have to really get involved." (O'Boyle, mirror.co.uk, 8 Mar 2022)	Government has a responsibility to act
		Opposition is unreliable/ corrupt
		Big industry has unchecked power
Tax will have (immediate) negative consequences	"A tax on high-sugar, salt and fat foods will disproportionately hit poorer households because they	Tax is regressive
		Tax will harm consumers

	<p>spend a higher proportion of their income on these items.” (Chapman, The Independent, 3 Jul 2019)</p>	<p>Tax will cause economic harm</p> <p>Tax will cause unintended consequences</p> <p>Tax is a slippery slope/ gateway to other taxes</p> <p>Tax reduces enjoyment of food</p> <p>Tax negatively impacts taste of food</p>
<p>Tax and/ or tax advocates pose a threat (to individuals, democracy, civil liberty, etc.)</p>	<p>“That [the tax], too, will fail because people can choose to eat and drink what they want in a free country. The nanny state lobby’s solution is to stop Britain being a free country, and that is why they must be resisted.” (Boyd, MailOnline, 20 Sep 2019)</p>	<p>Tax is a nanny-state act</p> <p>Tax is a(un just) moral punishment</p> <p>Advocates are unreasonable/ irrational/ privileged</p> <p>Tax is an attack on British culture</p> <p>Tax is a threat to democracy</p>
<p>Action is not necessary and/or Evidence is not credible</p>	<p>“We are already reducing exposure to fatty and sugary foods, and are now consulting on further plans to offer clear labelling and more support for individuals to manage their weight,’ a [government] spokeswoman said.” (Stubley, The Independent, 7 Aug 2019)</p>	<p>Alternative measures should be taken instead of the tax</p> <p>Evidence does not support tax</p> <p>Tax will be ineffective</p> <p>Action is already being taken</p> <p>Previous taxes demonstrate there should not be a new tax</p>
<p>Tax cannot be implemented</p>	<p>“Mr Osbourne admitted [a tax on orange juice] would have been ‘too controversial’ while he was in charge of the Treasury because ‘most people think a glass of orange juice every day is a good thing.” (Heffer, MailOnline, 3 May 2023)</p>	<p>Tax is unpopular</p> <p>Tax is illegal/ difficult to enforce</p>

219 Source: Authors *Green shading represents proponent argument themes, examples and types; Red shading represents oppositional argument themes, examples
220 and types. ‘Food product causes negative health outcomes’ sits outside proponent themes as a unique argument, and a starting point for discourse (Fig. 3)

221 **3.3 How are argument types for non-SDIL taxes used by the media overall, and how does their**
222 **usage change across different publishers and political slants, and different food tax proposals?**

223 *Trends in overall argument use by the media*

224 The most common argument type in this data sample overall was ‘Food product causes negative
225 health outcomes’. For example, an article from The MailOnline introduced one new food tax
226 proposal: “Obesity is soaring and some experts believe raising prices of sweets and chocolate is one
227 of the best ways to tackle the problem” (Foster, 2 Jun. 2017). This argument type was commonly
228 used by both oppositional and propositional articles in this sample, and oppositional arguments
229 tended not to refute that obesity was a problem or that unhealthy food products were a cause.
230 Instead, they questioned the different elements of the tax or raised other issues. In the MailOnline
231 article above, tax opponents questioned short-term consequences of the tax proposal, the credibility
232 and authority of its proponents, and the practicality of implementing it, but did not deny that sweets
233 cause negative health outcomes. For example, one opposition argument was: “Doctors are really
234 overstepping themselves and becoming incorrigible busybodies. It is not their job to control the
235 economy or the price of goods. They should concentrate on making sick people well, rather than
236 meddling with the pricing of products of which they disapprove” (Foster, 2 Jun. 2017).

237 An article by thetimes.co.uk demonstrated how tax opponents agree with the argument that
238 unhealthy food products cause negative health outcomes. The article reports: “...the Food and Drink
239 Federation insisted the industry was making progress on sugar and salt, saying, ‘There is no evidence
240 that additional food taxes can change consumer behaviours over the long-term. Food and drink
241 companies should focus efforts where they can have the maximum impact, instead of managing the
242 impact of wrong-headed legislation” (Smyth, 21 Dec. 2018). This is another example of a tax
243 opponent questioning the effectiveness of a tax or a rate increase but not denying the underlying
244 argument that unhealthy food causes obesity. These types of opposition arguments shift the
245 discourse around food taxes from the starting point of ‘Food product causes negative health
246 outcomes’ and a possible policy solution (in this case a sugar-and-salt levy) to questioning the
247 viability of that policy solution. For example: the role of government (i.e. “wrong-headed
248 legislation”), the seriousness of the problem (i.e. progress is already being made) and possible
249 negative consequences of action (i.e. industry “managing impact” rather than “focus[ing] efforts
250 where they can have maximum impact”).

251 The five most common opposition argument types found were: 1) tax is regressive, i.e. harms the
252 vulnerable and poor; 2) tax is a nanny-state act/ health is an individual choice; 3) tax will harm

253 consumers; 4) alternative measures should be taken instead of the tax; and 5) tax is unpopular.
 254 These arguments support the idea that opposition discourse focuses on shifting conversation away
 255 from evidence of negative consequences of unhealthy food products toward questions about policy
 256 action, including possible negative consequences of fiscal intervention, the role of government, the
 257 credibility of tax advocates, necessity for fiscal intervention, and practical limitations of
 258 implementing a food tax.

259 The five most common proponent arguments (after ‘food product causes negative health
 260 outcomes’) found were: 1) tax is an incentive for industry to reformulate; 2) tax should be extended;
 261 3) government has a responsibility to act; 4) evidence supports tax; and 5) tax will encourage
 262 healthier choices. These arguments suggest that proponent discourse builds on the starting point
 263 that unhealthy food products cause negative health outcomes with claims that evidence supports
 264 the case for fiscal policy intervention and demonstrates its effectiveness, the government's role is to
 265 take policy action in the interest of the public good, and policy action will be effective in supporting
 266 positive change.

267 ***Publisher arguments used by political slant***

268 Of the eight publishers selected for the study, four were left-leaning or liberal and four were right-
 269 leaning or conservative (Table 1). Both groups of publishers used similar types of arguments and
 270 were applied in similar frequency, though the emphasis or priority given were slightly different
 271 across publishers.

272 The top five proponent arguments identified in these articles were the same for both left- and right-
 273 leaning publishers, though the order of the arguments (in terms of the most used argument type)
 274 varied slightly. These argument types included: ‘Food product causes negative health outcomes’,
 275 ‘Incentive for industry to reformulate’, ‘Government has a responsibility to act’, ‘Evidence supports
 276 tax’, and ‘Tax should be extended’. The most common arguments found for both left- and right-
 277 leaning publishers were ‘Food product causes negative health outcomes’ and ‘Incentive for industry
 278 to reformulate’.

279 **Table 4. Most common opposition argument types used, by political slant**

Left-leaning publishers	Right-leaning publishers
Tax is regressive	Tax is regressive
Tax will be ineffective	Tax is a nanny-state act
Tax is not popular	Tax will harm consumers

Tax will harm consumers	Alternative measures should be taken
Alternative measures should be taken	Evidence does not support tax

280 For left-leaning publishers, the third most-common argument type found was ‘Government has a
281 responsibility to act’ whereas right-leaning publishers used ‘Tax should be extended’. ‘Evidence
282 supports tax’ was the fourth and fifth most common argument type for left-leaning and right-leaning
283 publishers respectively (Table 4). These trends in argument use reflect the differences of ideology
284 between liberal and conservative thinking. The clearest example of this is with the use of ‘Tax is a
285 nanny-state act/ Health is an individual choice’ as an argument: left-leaning publishers included this
286 argument in their articles, but right-leaning publishers emphasised it more. This finding reflects the
287 differences found in liberal and conservative approaches to government intervention: liberal ideals
288 value government intervention for the public good while conservative ideals prefer less government
289 intervention in favour of individual rights.

290 ***Argument use for different food tax proposals: meat tax vs. sugar-and-salt levy***

291 Two tax proposals were more common and developed than others in this document sample: a meat
292 tax and a sugar-and-salt levy. Selected articles showed that coverage of the meat tax proposal began
293 to rise in November 2018 after Springmann et al. (2018) published a journal article proposing a
294 range of policy measures – including fiscal measures targeting red and processed meat products --
295 would reduce diet-related ill health (Figure 2). A media debate followed this and lasted until January
296 2019, when Green Party MP Caroline Lucas made a statement about a meat tax at the Oxford
297 Farming Conference. Meat tax discussion waned and almost disappeared from food tax discourse
298 until February 2021, when it was suggested as part of a discussion for action on climate change
299 ahead of COP26. A meat tax is an interesting example because it is the only food product in our
300 sample for which the media uses environmental arguments: ‘Tax will offset negative environmental
301 effects’ and ‘Tax will support animal welfare’. Both of these argument types are proponent, and ‘Tax
302 will offset environmental effects’ was used by the media much more than the animal welfare
303 argument (37 thematic references to 2).

304 The differences in arguments used in the cases of a meat tax and a sugar-and-salt levy are important
305 when considering the motivation for food taxes and their intended targets. The meat tax, as
306 proposed by Springmann and colleagues (2018, p. 22), seems to target both manufacturers and
307 consumers to: 1) directly reduce consumption of meat and 2) indirectly reduce diet-related ill health.
308 The sugar and salt levy, by comparison, targets manufacturers to incentivise reformulation (NFS,
309 2021, p. 6). The food tax discourse curated by the media in these articles does not recognise these

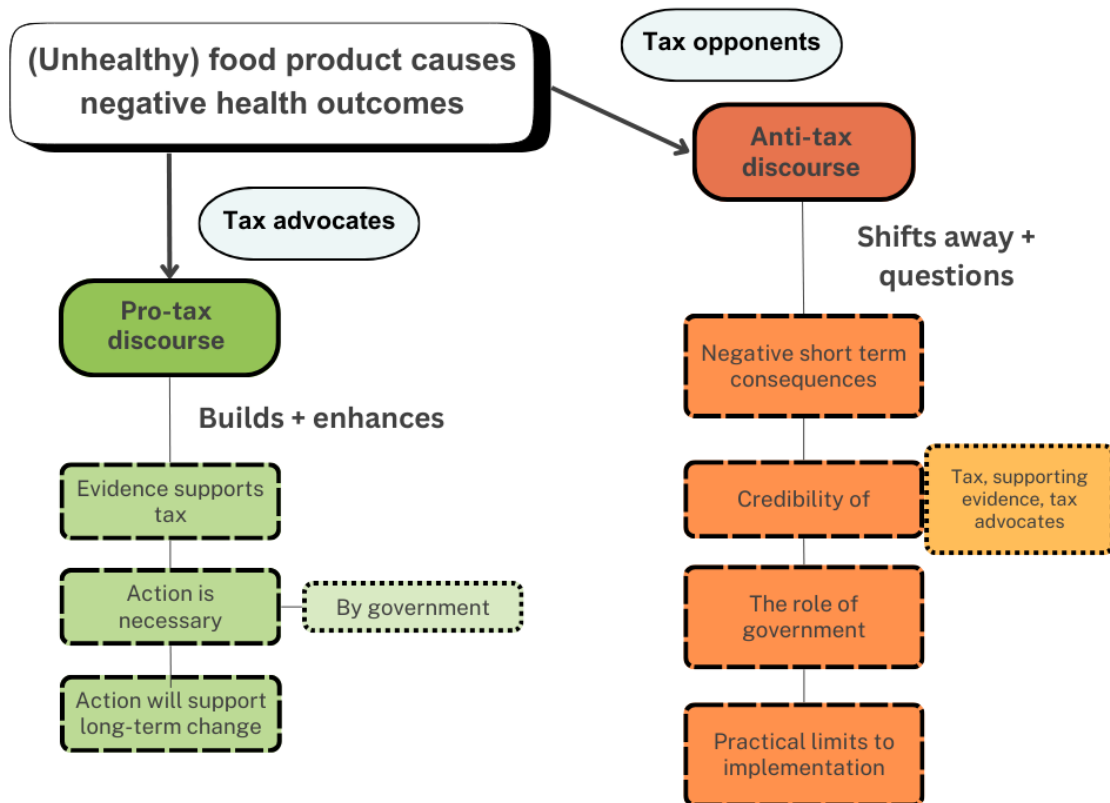
310 differences; instead, both tax options are portrayed as targeted toward consumers. For example,
311 one article by MailOnline discussed the sugar and salt levy with the headline: “At least your wallet
312 will be slimmer! Boris Johnson’s posh food tsar urges the UK to introduce the world’s first tax on
313 sugary and salty food in war on fat that would cost a family of four £240 a year each” (Wooller, 14
314 Jun. 2021). The first line of the article states: “World’s first proposed ‘snack tax’ on sugary and salty
315 food could add £3.4 bn a year to families’ shopping bills.” The four-page article includes two
316 references to reformulation: “Mr Dimbleby said the tax will encourage firms to reformulate their
317 recipes or reduce portion sizes” (Wooller, 14 Jun. 2021) and “Dimbleby’s recommended levy will, he
318 believes, force the profit-driven food giants to formulate their products to reduce the quantity of
319 unhealthy and now costly ingredients” (Wooller, 14 Jun., 2021). In both cases, the statement is
320 followed by the argument that ‘Tax will negatively impact consumers’: “But the food and drink
321 industry trade body warned the extra cost would be passed on to consumers in higher prices in
322 restaurants and supermarkets” (Wooller, 14 Jun. 2021) and “There is little question that some of this
323 cost will be passed on to the consumer” (Wooller, 14 Jun. 2021). Most of the opposition argument
324 types for the sugar and salt levy focus on consumer harm (‘Tax is regressive’, ‘Tax will harm
325 consumers’ and ‘Tax is a[n unjust] moral punishment’) whereas the opposition argument types for
326 the meat tax only include two on this theme (‘Tax is regressive’ and ‘Tax will harm consumers’).
327 Instead, the meat tax argument type prioritises the popularity of the tax (‘Tax is unpopular’) and
328 alternative measures to fiscal intervention.

329 **3.4 What discourse patterns are created in the media with these argument types?**

330 The different trends in argument use overall, by publisher, by political slant, and across two food tax
331 proposals illustrate that the media consistently used the same ‘playbook’ argument types for food
332 tax debates in this sample which follow clear themes and discourse patterns. The example of the
333 meat tax proposal versus the sugar-and-salt levy showed how the media tend not to distinguish
334 between different types of taxes or other subtle differences (rates, motivation for the tax, intended
335 target audience, etc.) but rather reiterate the same argument themes.

336 These findings suggest that the media consistently drew from a playbook of different argument
337 types for food tax debates and curated a clear discourse which emerged in these articles as a result.
338 The overall most common argument found – ‘(Unhealthy) food product causes negative health
339 outcomes’ – was used as a discourse starting point, because both tax advocates and opponents
340 seemed to accept it as true. From there, different discourse patterns were curated through use of
341 the different argument types Two patterns emerged (Figure 3):

342 **Figure 3. Food tax discursive patterns in media discourse**



343
344 Source: Authors

- 345 1. Proponent discourse built on and enhanced the argument type: '(Unhealthy) food product
346 causes negative health outcome' with three themes: evidence supports tax (1), action is
347 necessary (by government) (2) and action will support long-term change (3);
- 348 2. Opposition discourse shifted discourse away from evidence of negative health consequences
349 toward questions about the need for action, including credibility of the tax, supporting
350 evidence for the tax and tax advocates (1), negative short-term consequences of action (2),
351 the role of government (3) and practical limitations for implementation of the tax (4).

352 These patterns in discourse seem to be consistent across UK print and online media coverage of food
353 tax debates 2017-2023, regardless of food product type, publisher, tax type, or publication date. The
354 patterns repeated, created through use of the same argument types and in response to key events
355 such as political announcements, speeches or new publications. As a result, articles followed the
356 same overall patterns in which proponent discourse focus on the negative effects of SSBs, the
357 success of SDIL, and the need for further action while opposition discourse supported Johnson's
358 review, questioned the success of SDIL, claimed SDIL caused harm to consumers and industry and

359 further action will do the same, and reinforced the message that taxation on food products is a
360 'nanny-state' action.

361 **4. Discussion**

362 The results of this study demonstrate four key points. First, the media respond to triggering events
363 and reproduce arguments from key stakeholders such as industry, policymakers, and prominent
364 researchers. These findings are consistent with the wider media analysis and agenda setting
365 literature, which demonstrates that 'peaks' and 'troughs' of media coverage tend to correspond to
366 significant political or social events, reporting on the events and responding with different editorial
367 slants (McCombs, 2005).

368 Second, there were 15 proponent and 19 oppositional argument types used for and against non-SDIL
369 food tax proposals. All argument types were used consistently by the media, regardless of food
370 product, type of tax proposed and publisher. The coherence and consistency of the argument types
371 and their usage point toward an intentional strategy for discussing food tax proposals. Previous
372 research suggests that these are strategies employed by tax advocates and opponents when dealing
373 with the media (Hilton et al., 2020), but these results demonstrate a strategy used by the media
374 itself to present the arguments and create a discourse around food tax proposals.

375 Media literature supports this idea, with a broad evidence base which demonstrates that media
376 organisations have a powerful role in influencing public and political opinion through tactics such as
377 media framing and agenda setting (McCombs, 2005). Research also shows that prominent messages
378 from stakeholders – such as 'the food tax will harm vulnerable people' or 'the food tax is effective
379 for combatting obesity and diet-related disease' – have a tendency to be repeated and amplified
380 across multiple media organisations, demonstrating both 'churnalism' and intra-media agenda
381 setting (Davies, 2008; Djerff-Pierre, 2012), commonly described in media literature. 'Churnalism' is
382 the tendency of time-pressed journalists in a fast-paced environment to take content directly from
383 press releases, social media, or media communications in an effort to save time, without critically
384 analysing the content. Intra-media agenda setting refers to patterns of reporting being copied
385 between journalists and media organisations, so that the same issues and stories are repeated
386 across news outlets, only editing the editorial slant or framing. A clear example of this was the
387 coverage around Boris Johnson's campaign against 'sin taxes', with the same quotes and campaign
388 event being repeated across all media publishers.

389 Third, the most common opposition argument types emphasised that the proposed tax: was
390 regressive or harmful (to the vulnerable or to consumers more generally); was an overreach by the

391 government restricting an individual's right to choose; was unpopular; and alternative measures
392 should be taken instead of a tax. The most common proponent argument types claimed that: the tax
393 proposal was an effective incentive for industry to reformulate; the tax proposal should be
394 extended; the government has a responsibility to act; evidence supports the tax; and that the tax
395 proposal will encourage healthier consumption choices. While there were more types of opposition
396 arguments identified (15 proponent, 19 oppositional), we found more examples of proponent
397 arguments being used (658 proponent quotes, 547 opposition quotes). This demonstrates that
398 proponent arguments were used more frequently, although the *types* of opposition arguments used
399 were more diverse. Opposition arguments tend to focus on economy and consumer impact whereas
400 proponent arguments tend to focus on evidence, government responsibility and moral or ethical
401 arguments.

402 These findings are consistent with existing literature on food tax debates exploring stakeholder
403 argument types and use, some of which propose the idea of an industry 'playbook' (Hilton et al.,
404 2020). While existing research demonstrates that there is a strong likelihood for industry aligning,
405 coordinating, and strategically planning communication to the media, including the broader
406 literature on unhealthy commodities such as alcohol and tobacco (Douglas et al., 2020), the
407 consistency and coherency of our results suggest that the playbook concept is not limited to just
408 industry. Existing literature mainly presents the idea of a 'playbook' as an industry tactic to argue
409 against a specific tax proposal (Hilton et al., 2019). Essman et al. (2019) state this idea most clearly:
410 "Food and beverage industries have employed a playbook to resist regulation including neutralizing
411 negative media coverage of their products and influencing the policymaking process due to
412 economic power" (p. 2). The arguments used in the industry playbook are only oppositional – they
413 argue *against* a specific food tax measure or proposal. In contrast, our results demonstrate that
414 proponent arguments were also used consistently across publishers, food product, and tax type.
415 Additionally, although the stakeholders who were quoted may be different between articles and
416 publishers, the argument types used remained the same. This demonstrates that argument use is
417 less dependent on specific stakeholder groups and more on the publisher's editorial slant and
418 motivations – concepts supported by media and communication effects literature ([Kitzinger, 2000](#)).

419 Finally, two discourse patterns clearly emerge through the media coverage: 1) proponent arguments
420 reinforce and build on the assumption that 'unhealthy food causes negative health outcomes', while
421 2) oppositional arguments shift away from that assumption to question the viability and efficacy of
422 proposed intervention. The first, proponent discourse pattern emphasises the quality and reliability
423 of evidence supporting the tax proposal, with additional themes around supporting positive change

424 and balancing power for the public good. The second, oppositional discourse pattern, by
425 comparison, uses more themes to distract and question the underlying assumption. Discourse is
426 shifted away from recognising the negative consequences of unhealthy food by emphasising the
427 immediate and short-term negative consequences of the tax proposal. At the same time, the tax, the
428 supporting evidence, and any supporting actors are questioned on basis of credibility, reliability, and
429 efficacy. The role of government, in terms of its power, jurisdiction, and motives, is also questioned.
430 Finally, practical and logistical limitations of the tax are questioned and emphasised, focusing on its
431 popularity, efficacy and even legality. These findings are consistent with other media analyses of
432 food tax debates which demonstrate that these discourse patterns appear globally and for or against
433 SSB taxes (Simmonds & Vallgarda, 2021; Moerschel et al., 2022)

434 **5. Limitations**

435 There were practical challenges inherent to the methodology of this research, in that data was
436 limited by both database restrictions and the chosen time period. Discrepancies in news database
437 coverage is reported in a number of previous studies (for example Buntain, Liebler and Webster,
438 2023; Gilbert et al., 2024) in terms of numbers of numbers of stories returned as well as coverage of
439 a specific event across different databases. Therefore, database restrictions were addressed by using
440 multiple media databases to identify articles and cross-check results, but some limitations remained
441 in that only online and print media could be included (excluding social media, blogs, etc.) and Sunday
442 versions for many national papers were unavailable. The time period was strategically selected as
443 2017-2023 to capture discourse surrounding SDIL's implementation and end when the research was
444 conducted (2022), although we recognise that discourse was influenced by events and media articles
445 pre-dating this search period and has continued to evolve since then. One final limitation is that
446 conclusions cannot be drawn between the effects that media discourse has had on behaviours,
447 including policy design and implementation. This was not within the scope of this project – which
448 instead focused on analysing discourse -- and any causality of media effects is difficult to prove
449 (McCombs, 2005).

450 **6. Conclusions**

451 This research explored UK media coverage of food tax debates by mapping argument types for non-
452 SDIL food taxes, usage trends, and application as a 'playbook'. Articles for food tax debates from
453 eight UK media publishers were systematically searched and analysed using a mixed methods
454 approach. Publication trends demonstrate that discourse responds to key events, such as political
455 announcements, speeches, new publications, policy implementation, etc. and that right-leaning or

456 Conservative publishers tend to provide more coverage around food taxes than left-leaning or
457 Liberal publishers. A total of 34 argument types (15 proponent, 19 opposition) are consistently used
458 by the media in non-SDIL food tax debates, regardless of publisher, political or editorial slant, and
459 food product or tax type and follow seven themes (three proponent and four opposition, Table 3).
460 While the argument type remains consistent, the use of arguments is closely related to the
461 publisher's editorial or political agenda, with different media organisations selectively choosing who
462 to quote and which quotes to use in articles to fit the narrative they want to tell. Findings from this
463 research demonstrate that proposals for future fiscal policy interventions targeting unhealthy food
464 or beverage consumption should consider the different proponent and opposition argument types
465 used by the media. Researchers and policymakers should plan and coordinate media communication
466 strategies and be prepared to address the different argument types. Media engagement should
467 prioritise establishing credibility for both the evidence and its spokespeople and clearly address
468 concerns about the short-term impacts of the intervention rather than the long-term benefits. If the
469 intervention is targeted toward manufacturers (such as SDIL) or targeted to any stakeholder group
470 other than consumers, this point should be emphasised in communication with the media.

471 The media curate a discourse around food tax proposals through use of these argument types and
472 themes, which follow two patterns: proponent discourse builds on and enhances the argument type
473 'Food product causes negative health outcomes' and opposition discourse shifts away from this and
474 questions the need for action, the short-term consequences of action, credibility of the tax, its
475 evidence, and its supporters, and the practical limitations of implementing the tax.

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478

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