Ideology, Evidence and Anti-Consumption: 
A Rhetorical Analysis of Responses to Obesity Prevention Measures

Janet Hoek, Rachael McLean and Andrea Insch
Departments of Marketing and Medicine, University of Otago
Overview

Anti-consumption and obesity

• Analysis of New Zealand case study
  • National Administration Guidelines (NAGs)
    • Vulnerability to political change
    • Implications for public health

Rhetoric, ideology and consumption – a theoretical framework

• Application of this framework to media debate over policy introduction and removal
Promoting Anti-Consumption Among Children

Several initiatives implemented:

- **Education (Nutrition modules in school curricula)**
- **Social Marketing**

![Image of a menu and a promotional website for kids]

This website is for kids who want to have some FUN! If that's you, come and join the site, play games, earn points and get some really cool prizes.

To check out this world of fun you’ll need Flash and a fast internet connection. (You’ll have to leave your serious face behind too.)
Effects of Initiatives…

“sugary, fatty foods are still the staple food on offer in New Zealand schools” (Kedgley, 2007)
Regulation: The Ultimate Anti-Consumption Tool?

National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) amended

• Required schools to:
  • “promote healthy food and nutrition for all students;
  • Where food and beverages are sold on school premises, make only healthy options available.” (Ministry of Education, undated)

Minister of Education stated:
“\textit{A third of our children's daily food intake is consumed at school, making it the ideal place to promote healthy, active lifestyles.}” (Maharey, 2007)
Logic of Anti-Consumption Measures

Strong focus on children’s environment

• Theoretically, closely linked to behaviour modification
  • Behaviour conditioned by stimuli that precede and reinforce (Nord & Peter, 1980)
  • Ecological design simplifies access and promotes salience of brands

• Recognises habitual behaviour forms
  • Behaviours developed in childhood often entrenched and difficult to change (Birch and Fisher, 1998; Ferraro, Thorpe and Wilkinson, 2003)
Environmental Anti-Consumption

BUT

• Less than 6 months after introduction, new government rescinded NAG 5
  • "regulation in this area [was] unnecessary... regulation for regulation's sake" (Tolley, 2009)

• Media response frenzied
  • Raised important questions:
    • How debate was shaped?
    • The role of evidence in policy decisions?
Rhetorical Theory

Aristotle defined *logos* as a core element of rhetoric
• Recognises how language uses logic to persuade

Managers use rhetoric to develop:

“*strategies of corporate discourse that justify managerial decisions and impart them in such a way that an organisation can establish and maintain beneficial relations with publics*” (Skerlep, 2001, p 182)

**BUT**

Does this disguise the “*inherent fictionality of their stories*”? (Barry and Elmes 1997, p. 434)
Rhetoric and Discourse Analysis

Rhetoric linked to discourse analysis

• Discourse “supports institutions, reproduces power relations, and has ideological effects” (Elliott, 1996, p. 65)

• Recognises varied accounts will exist
  • Examines recurring terms used in these
  • Identifies key themes (discursive repertoires)
  • Reflects on functions and effects of these
## Tools of Fictionality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shift the responsibility</td>
<td>Movement of responsibility to other parties.</td>
<td>“If parents took responsibility for their children’s diets, schools would not be required to act.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>Implies desired meaning</td>
<td>“We’re taking steps to do our part”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad hominem</td>
<td>Attacking those who challenges views.</td>
<td>The proponents are “food police”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasty generalisation</td>
<td>Using a very small sample to support conclusions.</td>
<td>“Some schools oppose the regulation, so it will not work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straw man</td>
<td>Create and attack an unrelated argument.</td>
<td>“Regulation illustrates govt’s totalitarian tendencies.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slippery slope</td>
<td>Suggesting a series of unrelated consequences.</td>
<td>“Regulation in one area will lead to other areas coming under attack.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy</td>
<td>Uses unrelated example to illustrate argument.</td>
<td>“Dairies sell alcohol and girlie magazines, but schools don’t.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodology

- Collected documents (media commentaries, blogs, press releases)
- Searched Newztext Plus, Google News, Stuff, NZ Herald, Scoop sites, political party sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Complement-ary</th>
<th>Policy or Academic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings – Opposition to Regulation

**Ad hominem**

- “food police” and “pie police” criticised
  - Does not explain why regulation inappropriate or offer an alternative

**Slippery Slope**

- Regulations tell “people how to live their lives” (The Press, 2007)
  - Implies further restrictions imminent but provides no evidence
  - Does not explain why regulation would be ineffective
Findings – Opposition to Regulation

Shift the responsibility
• Principals rejected responsibility, which they claimed: “surely ...belong[ed] to the family” (NZPF, cited in The Press, 2007)
  • Fails to explain why schools should not support parents

Ambiguity
• Schools claimed they “already have policies in place so they can provide healthy eating options”
  • Fails to explain what these were or why they made the revised NAGs redundant

Hasty generalisations and straw “men”
• Selective citation and extrapolation
  • Creates impression of widespread opposition to regulation
It's about the government making a decision they believe we're not capable of making.

Freedom of speech has always been an important part of our heritage. Imagine,

if one day, the government decided the beliefs of a certain political

party were not in the public interest. Or perhaps a book.

The state is about to sell our most valuable asset.
Findings – Support for Regulation

Analogy

• “Local dairies also sell girly magazines, cigarettes and alcohol, but schools don’t provide these products to their pupils”
• Uses an unrelated analogy to make a point

Analytical

• Drew on academic evidence suggesting changes in school foods only occurred following regulatory change (Utter et al p5)
• Argued for use of academic principles, such as evaluation (Ratcliffe, 2009; Cameron, 2009)
• Noted parallels with wider evidence, such as World Cancer Council Report (Ratcliffe, 2009)
Conclusions

- Theoretically, strong evidence that changing school food supply would promote behaviour change
- Empirically, many precedents where environmental intervention successfully used to promote public health

- Policy changes perhaps inevitable consequence of political change
  - Evidence should outweigh ideology where public health involved
- No recognition of consumer resistance to food marketing
  - Failure to address the most fundamental point: How might childhood obesity best be reduced?