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Citation:

Topic, M and Tench, R (2018) Evolving Responsibility or Revolving Bias? The Role of the Media in the anti-sugar debate in the UK Press. Social Sciences. ISSN 2076-0760 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100181>

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Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

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Article

# Evolving Responsibility or Revolving Bias? The Role of the Media in the Anti-Sugar Debate in the UK Press

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Received: 13 August 2018; Accepted: 25 September 2018; Published: 29 September 2018



**Abstract:** This paper analyzed the coverage on the anti-sugar debate and the supermarket industry in the British press, in a period between 2014 and 2015. Using social responsibility of the press theory and a qualitative two-tier content analysis, we first conducted a documentary analysis of public relations materials (press releases and surveys published by Action on Sugar as a main anti-sugar advocate in the UK), and then we traced these public relations materials in the press coverage. We also analyzed whether some sources are preferred more than others by focusing on the nature of quoted sources and whether the media give a voice to everyone, both the anti-sugar activists and the relevant industry figures who claim that sugar is not the only reason for the current obesity problem in the UK. The results show that the media have not given a representative voice to the industry but only to the anti-sugar NGOs, thus opening a question of journalism standards and the extent the press could be considered as socially responsible in this particular case.

**Keywords:** social responsibility theory; Hutchins Commission; UK; sugar debate; supermarket industry; news sources

## 1. Introduction

The sugar debate has been prominent in the British press since 2014, when *Action on Sugar* was first founded. The debate on sugar expanded from initial NGO advocacy, and in 2016 the British Government announced a sugar tax to decrease sugar consumption in the UK, and tackle rising levels of obesity. This intervention was proposed because there is a concern that the UK, like other countries around the world, is heading for an obesity epidemic (Cattell and Capehorn 2011; Health Survey for England 2011; PHE 2016). Following this and due to visibly increased media coverage of the anti-sugar debate, we looked at the role of the media in the anti-sugar debate. The reason for this interest lies in the fact that in early reporting on weight issues and obesity the media were blaming individuals for their lifestyle and nutrition choices, and then they have shifted the blame to the food industry (Lawrence 2003). The latter was mostly done through alarmism, sensationalism and dramatization in the news reporting. For example, Saguy and Almeling (2008) argue the media use dramatization to report on scientific findings by labelling obesity as a crisis, and citing historical data to show how dramatic the present situation is, as well as enforcing the discourse on blame and responsibility. In this case, individuals were blamed for obesity, while parents were blamed for childhood obesity, along with schools and society in general (Saguy and Almeling 2008). Nevertheless, some authors argue that media are causing moral panic and “this ubiquitous obesity discourse, rather simplistically and reductively defines ‘weight’ or ‘fat’ as a primary determinant of people’s health and well-being ( . . . ) obfuscating the uncertainties and contradictions which exist in the knowledge on weight and health emanating from the primary research field” (Rich 2011, p. 6).

In addition, some authors argue that the media's negative portrayal of obesity increases stigmatization (Flint et al. 2016) of obese people while positive or neutral coverage of the issue would increase positive perceptions, and help obese people minimize associated health risks (Pearl et al. 2012).

However, when it comes to the UK, it seems that lots of media coverage is focused on sugar as a way of tackling obesity, which goes in line with shifting the blame to the food industry and ignoring other factors that influence obesity such as lifestyle, exercise but also genetic predispositions. For example, in a study conducted by Silventoinen et al. (2010), both parenting style and genetic predispositions have proven to influence obesity (see also Watson et al. 2006; Tremblay and Perusse 2017).

Thus, using the social responsibility theory of the press this paper analyses coverage of the British press on sugar and the supermarket industry in a period between 2014 and 2015, which is a period when the main advocacy group *Action on Sugar* was founded (2014), and just before the announcement on the introduction of the sugar tax by the British Government (2016). The paper looked at the media positioning on the debate on sugar and the supermarket industry. In other words, the paper looked into the coverage of the sugar debate to establish whether the media use all arguments and cite sources from all sides, when reporting on sugar and the supermarket industry.

As already explained, due to growing obesity debates, sugar presents an important issue in the British public sphere deserving of the analysis on how the press reports on this important matter. In addition, the supermarket industry has attracted regular media attention, and therefore combined with growing public and consumer health concerns, health care is increasingly becoming part of the CSR strategy for the UK's supermarket industry. Thus, the supermarket industry also presents an interesting case, because many of these businesses have their own branded products, and are targets of anti-sugar activism. Nevertheless, the supermarket industry gives a good ground for looking into the notion of media bias. In other words, if the media are including the supermarket industry in the debate or pushing them to tackle sugar in their branded products, then the media are getting involved in the debate by supporting one side of the argument. While it could be argued that protecting the health of the population could be seen as the media's way of protecting public interest and thus being socially responsible, this cannot be the case if the media are assigning blame to only one factor that contributes to obesity. If so, then the information is misleading for the public, which will prevent them from tackling obesity by not taking into consideration other factors that can cause it such as parental influence, sedentary lifestyle, exercise and genetic predispositions (Black et al. 2017; Ghobadi et al. 2017; Avery et al. 2017; Jordan et al. 2008; Schneider et al. 2007; Viner and Cole 2005; Reilly et al. 2005; Hancox et al. 2004; Epstein et al. 2002; Miles et al. 2001; Vuori et al. 1998). In such a scenario, the media would be demonstrating professional practice that cannot be seen as serving the public's interests, but rather, such practice could be seen as ultimately failing in delivering the core purpose of journalism, which is telling the truth. Telling the truth is a complex process and there are different schools of thought, each seeing journalism as a profession differently. This issue will be debated in the next section of the paper.

## 2. Social Responsibility of the Press

Social responsibility theory is one of the four theories of the press (Siebert et al. 1963), which introduced authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility and soviet communist views of the press. However, four theories of the press were disputed in several works later on, especially because of the diversity of media systems in Europe, before and after the collapse of Communism. However, even the harshest critics of the press theory proposed to keep social responsibility theory in a revised theory of the press. For example, Nordenstreng (1997) proposed a new model, which would include the liberal-individualist paradigm, social responsibility paradigm, critical paradigm, administrative paradigm, and cultural negotiation paradigm (pp. 108–9).

The social responsibility theory is however strongly linked with *A free and Responsible Press* report published in 1947 by the Hutchins Commission (officially entitled the Commission on the Freedom of the Press), established in the US to determine the role of the press in society and to assess the state of

journalism as a profession, since it was recognized that the press has both rights and responsibilities (Bivins 2004; see also Culver 2017). The head of the Commission was Robert Hutchins from the University of Chicago, and the main point of the study was the notion of a press that would be both free and responsible. The Commission published a report in 1947 and called for the press to be responsible, and in today's terms this is usually understood as socially responsible. According to the Hutchins Commission, the press has five obligations,

- To provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events in a context that gives meaning;
- To serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism;
- To develop a representative picture of the constituent groups in society;
- To be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of society;
- To provide full access to the day's intelligence (Bivins 2004, p. 42).

These recommendations mean that Hutchins and his colleagues believed that the press needs to immerse themselves in creating the wellbeing of society and not just report on social issues. These recommendations up to today remain praised by scholars, i.e., Curran (2011, p. 9) called them, "still perhaps the most cogent and elegant report on media policy ever published in the English language", and some scholars require these recommendations to be memorized by their students (Bates 2017). However, the question that arose from these recommendations is "exactly to what degree are the media expected to give up their traditional autonomy in order to serve public interest (or cater to its needs)?" (Bivins 2004, pp. 42–43).

Proponents of social responsibility of the press argue that the media cannot simply provide information, which would go in line with traditional views of the media as an objective observer (as proposed by (Lippmann [1992] 1997), and this view was upheld for decades), but that instead the media must open a public debate. While the social responsibility theory has its origins in the liberal theory of the press that attempted to "respond to a disillusionment with the liberal hope that an unregulated press would be a responsible educator of citizens on matters of public interest" (Ward 2008, p. 298), authors later argued that the liberal view of the press means the press is failing to fulfil its purpose. For example, Lasch (1990) argued that democratic societies need debate and not just information, because if information is not debated, then it would be misleading or manipulative. In addition, McNealy (2017) argued that the libertarian theory of the media had six functions, "(1) service to the political system; (2) enlightenment of the public; (3) serving as a watchdog; (4) serving the economic system through advertising; (5) acting as a vehicle of entertainment; and (6) maintaining its independence" (p. 3). This is very different from the social responsibility theory that invites for commentary and criticism rather than serving the political system.

Critics, on the other hand, see the social responsibility theory as an authoritarian view of the way media should operate or as a "social democratic vision of the press" (Pickard 2015, p. 7), and thus this concept was aligned with collectivist regimes, such as the one in the former Soviet Union (Siebert et al. 1963). However, others argued that the social responsibility theory is a democratic theory, because a market orientation of the press does not support democracy, and thus the press should assume a social responsibility approach. This approach then does not necessarily undermine objectivity, because "any theory that the press has a voluntary duty to perform positive functions could belong in this category, but social responsibility theory (. . . ) clearly upheld the US journalistic ideal of *objectivity*, which stresses factual (especially investigative) reporting over commentary, the *balancing* of opposing viewpoints, and maintaining a neutral observer role for the journalist" (Benson 2008, p. 2593, emphasis in the original; see also Nerone 1995). Some other authors also argued that objectivity of journalism is a myth and that journalists should engage with public life and the public (Rosen 1993). In other words, while the original idea of the press was based on objectivity which then lead to the creation of ethical codes and professionalization of journalism (Ward 2008), the social responsibility theory advocates freedom of journalists to report as they like in return for covering public

issues and participating in creating wellbeing of the society (Ward 2008; Bivins 2004; Klaidman 1987; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001). This practice also includes political involvement of citizens and the role of a journalist is to promote that inclusion (Benson 2008), however, while maintaining some sort of balance and objectivity in their reporting (Benson 2008).

In a nutshell, the main argument of the social responsibility approach is that the media must remain free from external influence and pressure (including Government), however, some authors argue that, “by permitting, or expecting, a less-than-objective account, consumers of news increase their own burden of gathering the facts for themselves” (Bivins 2004, p. 43). This is because liberal theory of the press, which was the predominant understanding on how the press should function for decades, advocated that “journalists do not simply have freedom to publish but they also have a *duty* to publish the most accurate and comprehensive truth on matters of public interest, and to report independently without fear or favour” (Ward 2008, p. 298, emphasis in the original).

Nevertheless, the implementation of social responsibility theory has inevitably led to the question “what level of responsibility can the media accept before they lose the autonomy they need to remain fair and balanced?” (Bivins 2004, pp. 43–44). According to some authors, the danger of the social responsibility approach to the media is that “although the press may be obligated increasingly toward promoting the public welfare, there is a danger that such leanings may result in the news media becoming more like their cousins in advertising and public relations—professions in which bias is expected” (Bivins 2004, p. 44). Nevertheless, proponents of social responsibility theory then argued that if the media fail to provide a “representative picture of the constituent groups in society” and “full access to the day’s intelligence” (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947, pp. 21–28, cited from Ward 2008, p. 299), then Governments had the right to intervene with regulations (Peterson 1956).

All this begs the question, what is the truth in journalism? Truth in journalism is meant to be factual and balanced reporting. In other words, journalists are supposed to report on what is actually happening and speak with all interested parties. Telling the truth in journalism basically means that journalism can be distinguished from entertainment and opinion, and this is why journalism has been considered as the Fourth Estate. The Fourth Estate concept is linked to libertarian theory of the press and it means that journalists are meant to report on the reality and distinguish facts from “fiction, lies and bias comments” (Broersma 2010, p. 25).

This ultimately leads to the question of sources journalists use, because journalists cannot personally witness or check everything they write about. The question of sources then leads to the question of the influence of public relations on media, especially in time of multimedia environment and growing pressure on journalists. This is particularly the case for press journalists, who now have to produce articles for both print and online editions. The views of journalists on PR professionals also reflect the truth-seeking orientation and the promise of journalism. As correctly argued by Greenslade (2015), “journalists have always felt superior to PRs. They like to see themselves as servants of the public holding aloft the banner of freedom and regard PRs as the servants of vested interests who deny the people their right to know” (Greenslade 2015, n.p.). Nevertheless, this argument has been extended to ask whether the public would want their news spun or opinionated (ibid.).

As correctly argued by Broersma (2010), journalists have been claiming to tell the truth since 1610. This claim came as a result of the press trying to distinguish themselves from “gossip, pamphlets, newsletters and other early modern news products”, which is why “newspapers promised to supply reliable information instead of opinions or fiction” (ibid., p. 24). The promise of telling the truth led to publishing guides on journalism, and the first one was written in 1695 by Kaspar Stieler who said “One buys and reads newspapers because one is told what is true and can be passed on. Lies have short legs and never live to be old” (Stieler 1969, p. 32, cited from Broersma 2010, p. 24). Therefore, journalists can be held accountable when reporting opinion and not just facts.

These debates ultimately lead to academic inquiries into the role of public relations in media coverage and the possibility of biased coverage in the media as a result of public relations influence. In that, scholars argued that public relations is influencing journalism, which brings the role of

journalism into the question, and we may add that if this would be the case then this would create a concern on the social responsibility of the media. Maxwell (2014) warned that, “some 17.5 per cent of the total number of news stories appearing in these newspapers were based, at least in part, on press releases. Press conferences and background briefings accounted for another 32 percent” (p. 115). However, some authors correctly argued that journalists will assess sources according to reliability, authoritativeness, past suitability, productivity, and trustworthiness (Gans 1980; O’neill and O’Connor 2008). In addition, those sources that are seen as eager to provide the information are those that journalists will turn to more frequently, and these eager sources can then become regular sources (Gans 1980). This can explain why journalism got intertwined with public relations, and why public relations professionals have been used as sources by many journalists, as it is the nature of public relations to be of service to the media. In addition, journalists are known to use routine sources such as Government and businesses (Sigal 1973; Gans 1980; Harcup 2004; O’neill and O’Connor 2008; Carlson 2009; Reich 2015; Saikkonen 2017; Splendore 2017), whereas available research argues that NGOs do not have that much prominence in the media. For example, Reich (2015) argued that “the sources that did receive privileged news access traditionally were those dubbed in the literature as authoritative, hegemonic, consensual, official, accredited, routine, senior, “effectors” of events, or “primary definers” of social reality” (p. 2413, emphasis in the original) (see also Gaye 1978; Gans 1980; Van Leuven et al. 2013; Lewis et al. 2008; Curtin 1999; Davies 2008; Davis 2000a, 2000b; Franklin 2004; Lewis et al. 2006; Reich 2010).

Public relations is used by almost all organizations (public, state and private) and many studies have explored the influence of public relations on the media (Franklin 1997; Jones 1995, 1999; Barnett and Gaber 2001; McNair 2000; Lewis et al. 2008; Franklin 2008). However, public relations and its development have also helped alternative sources find their place in the media, e.g., environmental groups and trade unions (Anderson 1997; Davis 1998, 2002; Manning 1998, 2001; Palmer 2000). According to some authors, the wealthier daily press is more resourceful in terms of journalists and is thus expected to be “more resilient to PR initiatives than poorly resourced weekly (especially free) newspapers with few journalists and little budget” (Lewis et al. 2008, p. 2). However, as demonstrated in the research conducted by Lewis et al. (2008) not even the national press, including respected ‘broadsheet’ newspapers in the UK is immune to the copy-paste practice of publishing press releases and agency news sourced copies. White and Hobsbawm (2007) argued that “journalists have a long-standing claim to the pursuit of truth”, however, the question remains whether journalists can “still justify this claim” (p. 287). These authors also argued that journalists selectively use information according to their own interest and with the ultimate goal of retaining readership. In other words, when selecting sources and interpreting events journalists are not interested in truth but in what their readers want to read (ibid., p. 288). This new media strategy has been described as engagement (Marr 2004), a concept much used in public relations (Yeomans 2015). While this approach is perfectly satisfactory for public relations, some authors argue that this is not “compatible with journalism maintaining a moral position that the pursuit of truth remains more of a priority now than the pursuit of market share” (White and Hobsbawm 2007, p. 288).

What is particularly relevant is the fact health is already seen as the area with most PR content. For example, Lewis et al. (2008) investigated the influence of PR on newspaper articles only to find that 37% of stories are wholly or mainly based on PR material. In addition, according to some studies, governmental and business sources continually outnumber other news sources in media articles (Sigal 1973; Hall et al. 1978; Fishman 1980; Gitlin 1980; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Hallin 1994; Philo 1995; Davis 2000a; Lewis et al. 2008). In this sense, stating that a discussion on journalism standards and the use of PR sources is needed seems indeed relevant as argued by Lewis et al. (2008). However, this discussion should also be extended not only to encompass corporate PR but also communiqués coming from NGOs, as well as any sort of influence on media that has an impact on journalism standards and the role of media in society.

### 3. Method

The aim of this research was to answer *whether* the press prefers some sources over others. For that, we conducted a content analysis for investigating the coverage and tracing sources in the selected outputs. The selected case was anti-sugar debate and the supermarket industry. The reason for selecting this case is the large coverage of the anti-sugar debate in the press, which ultimately led to the announcement of the sugar tax in 2016. Therefore, we looked at the media coverage of this issue in 2014 and 2015, which are the first two years of work for *Action on Sugar*, and these two years directly precede the announcement of the sugar tax in 2016.

The supermarket industry was selected because it is an industry with prominence in the media and can reveal whether the media are biased against businesses and whether they can be seen as serving the society by developing “a representative picture of the constituent groups in society” (Bivins 2004, p. 42). Nevertheless, the supermarket industry is closely tied to the sugar debate because many supermarket companies have their own branded products and thus they will naturally be of interest to *Action on Sugar*, however, this does not mean that the media must follow this path. As already explained, a socially responsible media are expected to create wellbeing but also to be truthful and balanced in their coverage and represent all of society and not just one part of it.

The analysis has therefore been conducted initially on public relations documents published by *Action on Sugar* (surveys and press releases) in 2014 and 2015. These documents were firstly traced in the media coverage. In total, eight surveys have been analyzed and 14 press releases. This was followed by analyzing 113 published media articles that were produced following these surveys and press releases released by *Action on Sugar*. There was a total of 113 media articles published following the release of 14 press releases and eight surveys by *Action on Sugar*. These articles have been identified using the charity’s website, and thus researchers were not involved in sampling that could potentially influence the results and cause bias.

The media coverage has been analyzed to establish whether the media prefer some sources over others, i.e., a source analysis has been conducted to see whether the media quote only *Action on Sugar* when reporting on their findings or whether they reach out for other sources (e.g., industry). This was deemed relevant to assess whether the media act in line with recommendations from the Hutchins Commission that forms the backbone of the social responsibility theory. Thus, exploration of sources and whether media cite both sides in their coverage was useful to assess whether the media are meeting the first three criteria from the Hutchins Commission, i.e., “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that gives meaning; serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism; develop a representative picture of the constituent groups in society” (Bivins 2004, p. 42). The sample used for this analysis was the same sample of media texts used to trace public relations sources ( $N = 113$ ).

By using this method, we managed to establish to what extent PR sources from NGOs influence the media, and to what extent the media rely on these sources when reporting on sugar. Nevertheless, by using this method we managed to investigate the notion of preferred sources. This is not investigated by trying to establish bias using a quantitative method as many other researchers use, because we were not interested in numbering articles on the issue as opposed to some other issue, nor we were interested in numbering sources and comparing them against each other. We were interested to see who media cite in articles following a release from *Action on Sugar*, and whether they give a voice to the industry. We also wanted to see to what extent the anti-sugar activism is directed towards the supermarket industry, i.e., if the activism is directed towards the supermarket industry, this could be seen as if the media are joining a plight against the sugar, by acting as a pressure group rather than a media organization meant to report on the issue.

*Action on Sugar* and its documents are relevant for this research because the goal of this organization is to influence policies and put sugar on a blacklist, so that sugar consumption can be reduced. In addition, *Action on Sugar* was selected for the analysis because this organization is the

one that is most consulted by the media when it comes to the sugar/obesity debate(s), and this is the only organization in the UK that campaigns against sugar.

*Action on Sugar* has all of its surveys and press releases available on their website, and each survey/press release is accompanied with a link to media coverage of the publication/document. This way of managing communication and the media success of their campaign work provided a very good source for documentary analysis, as well as analysis of sources used and tracing sources in the press coverage. For this analysis, all surveys published during 2014 and 2015 were analyzed. Press releases are also available for the same period of time. These two years are relevant because *Action on Sugar* was founded in 2014, and in 2016 an announcement was made by the British Government that the sugar tax will be introduced, which represents a success for the anti-sugar campaign.

The first part of the documentary analysis comprised analysis of surveys, and the next part was the analysis of press releases. However, before the analysis of press releases was conducted surveys were removed from the sample, because *Action on Sugar* publishes survey results in both sections, i.e., surveys and press releases. In other words, *Action on Sugar* conducts survey research on products and the sugary content, and these survey results are available both as surveys and press releases. Thus, they are published twice on the website.

The questions that arose from the document analysis were how the media report on these surveys and press releases when they cover them, and whether they add the supermarket industry into articles referring to these surveys and press releases. As already mentioned, *Action on Sugar* has links to all media coverage following a survey/press release, and these articles have been traced to gain an insight into how the media reported on these surveys and press releases and whether they included the supermarket industry in articles even though *Action on Sugar* did not mention the industry. Very importantly, if the media are merely using press releases for their stories as other research has reported (e.g., Davis 2000a; Lewis et al. 2008), do they also include statements from the industry when *Action on Sugar* has included them, or these statements have been left out, which then brings another dimension to the notion of media preferences in the use of sources. The main research questions that guided this research were,

- (a) Is the UK press preferring charity sources over business sources?
- (b) Is the UK press socially responsible, as per Hutchins' recommendations?
- (c) Is public relations influencing the UK's press coverage? If so, what is the nature of this influence?

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Documentary Analysis

Of only two surveys in 2014 the supermarket industry was the main subject of the survey in one of them, while in 2015 of six surveys published the supermarket industry was not the main subject of the study in any of them. Only three surveys had the supermarket industry included in the analysis along with analysis of products from other companies, and the other three surveys did not include the supermarket industry at all (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Analysis of Surveys by Action on Sugar.

| Year | Number of Published Surveys | Supermarket Industry as Main Subject of the Survey | Supermarket Industry as Part of the Survey (Other Companies Included) | No Supermarkets Mentioned in the Survey Results |
|------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| 2014 | 2                           | 1  | 1   | 0   |
| 2015 | 6                           | 0  | 3   | 3   |

When it comes to press releases (Table 2), the situation is similar in a sense that in 2014 of 11 press releases published no supermarket was mentioned, while in 2015 of three press releases published only one had the supermarket industry mentioned as the main topic of the document. The other two do not refer to the supermarket industry at all.

**Table 2.** Analysis of press releases by Action on Sugar.

| Year | Number of Press Releases Published | Supermarket Industry as Main Topic of the Press Release | Supermarket Industry as Part of the Topic of the Press Release | No Supermarkets Mentioned in the Press Release |
|------|------------------------------------|---|--|--|
| 2014 | 11                                 | 0   | 0  | 11   |
| 2015 | 3                                  | 1   | 0  | 2  |

In other words, while *Action on Sugar* does include analysis of sugar level in some supermarket products and comments on the supermarket industry, this is not always the case.

#### 4.2. Tracing Analysis: Action on Sugar's Documents in the Media Coverage

According to Table 3, it appears that when *Action on Sugar* publishes a survey result that mentions the supermarket industry, the media do not always quote the supermarket industry but merely report on the survey, from which it is possible to argue they cannot be seen as giving voice to everyone (McNair 2009; Brown et al. 1987; Kurpius 2002). The survey results include the supermarket industry because supermarket companies produce own branded products; however, the media rarely quote statements from the industry. For example, in 2014, *Action on Sugar* published two statements and the national media published six and seven articles respectively following these surveys while local media published 10 and two articles respectively, and no article quoted a statement from the supermarket industry. In 2015, the situation slightly changed and *Action on Sugar* also published more surveys. However, the findings are not much more positive because, for example, of eight articles in the national media and 12 articles in the local media following the first released survey in 2015, only three articles cited the supermarket industry.

When it comes to press releases from *Action on Sugar*, the situation is different because the media did not publish information on all press releases and therefore the possibility for preferential treatment was lower (Table 4). However, when it comes to the press release from *Action on Sugar* calling on the Prime Minister at the time—David Cameron—for immediate action, the organization did not mention the supermarket industry in their press release but some media did include the supermarket industry perspective.

The findings demonstrate a tendency towards bias against the supermarket industry because the media can be seen as giving a voice to *Action on Sugar* that directs its activism against businesses by asking them reduce the amount of sugar in products. By doing so it is arguable the media is also taking a stance and engaging in the activism.

#### 4.3. An Analysis of Sources

Given the fact tendency toward bias was established in the previous section, this notion was explored in further detail to see whether the media not only give a stronger voice to *Action on Sugar* but whether they also omit quotations of the industry in general and the supermarket industry even when *Action on Sugar* does quote the industry. As demonstrated in Table 5, the media do not always quote the industry even when a document (survey or press release) from *Action on Sugar* does, which clearly points towards media bias towards businesses and the fact that the supermarket industry (frequently mentioned in the media in regards to the anti-sugar debate as already explained above) can be seen as a target and used to criticize business more generally. For example, in 2014, *Action on Sugar* published two documents that quoted the industry, which was followed by media articles that did not always quote the industry. In other words, of six articles in the national media, four of them quoted the industry while of 10 articles in the regional and specialist media only two quoted the industry. This means that the media are selectively taking information out of *Action on Sugar* and therefore presenting a position on the debate and expressing their own preferences.

The situation in 2015 is also similar. For example, in a document entitled 'Cereals still stuffed with sugar' *Action on Sugar* quoted the industry, and this document was followed by eight articles in the national media and 12 articles in regional and specialist media, of which five articles from national media quoted the industry while only one article from regional and specialist media did the same.

**Table 3.** Mentions and Statements of Supermarkets in Media Articles following Surveys from Action on Sugar.

| Year | Survey Title   | Does Survey Mention the Supermarket Industry | Number of Articles in the National Media | Number of Articles in the Regional or Specialist Media | Number of Articles Mentioning the Supermarket Industry | Number of Articles Quoting a Statement from the Supermarket Company |
|------|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| 2014 | Squeezing the Truth out of Hidden Sugars in Children's Juices  | Yes  | 6  | 10   | 11   | 0   |
| 2014 | A Thirst for sugar? New research exposes shockingly high sugar content in fizzy drinks and calls for immediate action  | Yes  | 7  | 2  | 5  | 0   |
| 2015 | Cereals still stuffed with sugar   | Yes  | 8  | 12   | 18   | 3   |
| 2015 | Energy Drinks Fuel the Obesity Epidemic  | Yes  | 4  | 8  | 8  | 2   |
| 2015 | Parents Being Misled into Buying So Called 'Fruit Snacks' Not Permitted in Schools   | Yes  | 6  | 9  | 11   | 1   |
| 2015 | Call for sugar—sweetened soft drink manufacturer to set global sugar reduction targets to help halt worldwide obesity epidemic set to reach 1.12 billion by 2030 | Yes  | 2  | 6  | 5  | 1   |
| 2015 | New Survey Reveals Shocking Levels of Salt and Sugar Found in Popcorn  | Yes  | 3  | 8  | 5  | 0   |

**Table 4.** Mentions and Statements of Supermarkets in Media Articles following Press Releases from Action on Sugar.

| Year | Press Release Title   | Does Press Release Mention the Supermarket Industry | Number of Articles in the National Media | Number of Articles in the Regional or Specialist Media | Number of Articles Mentioning the Supermarket Industry | Number of Articles Quoting a Statement from the Supermarket Company |
|------|---|---|--|--|--|---|
| 2014 | Are top government nutrition advisers 'Addicted to Sugar'?  | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | n.a   |
| 2014 | Worldwide experts unite to reverse obesity epidemic by forming 'Action on Sugar'  | Yes   | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | Action on Sugar comment: Ten Minute Rule Motion on Food Labelling for Sugar Content   | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | Comment: Chief Medical Officer publishes annual report on state of the public's health  | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | Action on Sugar comment: New health bill in California for sugary drinks to be labelled with health warnings                                  | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | World Health Organization (WHO) calls for action on sugar   | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | AoS Manifesto   | No  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | Time for the UK to lead the world in sugar reduction to prevent obesity   | no  | 0  | 0  | N/A  | N/A   |
| 2014 | New analysis of the relationship between dental decay and sugar recommends a reduction in added sugar intake to less than 4 teaspoons per day | no  | 1  | 1  | 0  | 0   |
| 2014 | Time for action: Childhood obesity plan as requested by Jeremy Hunt MP  | no  | 4  | 1  | 0  | 0   |
| 2014 | ACTION STATION: Leading British nutrition scientists acknowledge NOW is time to take action on sugar  | no  | 3  | 4  | 0  | 0   |
| 2015 | Sugar—Cameron Must Act Now  | no  | 7  | 1  | 2  | 1   |

**Table 5.** Citations of the Industry in Articles following Document Publications from Action on Sugar.

| Year | Document Title   | Does the Document Quote the Industry | Number of Articles in the National Media | Number of Articles in Regional/Specialist Media | Citations of the Industry in the National Media | Citation of the Industry in Regional/Specialist Media |
|------|--|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| 2014 | Squeezing the Truth out of Hidden Sugars in Children’s Juices  | yes                                  | 6  | 10  | 4   | 2   |
| 2014 | A Thirst for sugar? New research exposes shockingly high sugar content in fizzy drinks and calls for immediate action  | yes                                  | 7  | 2   | 4   | 2.  |
| 2014 | Are top government nutrition advisers ‘Addicted to Sugar’?   | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | Action on Sugar comment: Ten Minute Rule Motion on Food Labelling for Sugar Content  | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | Comment: Chief Medical Officer publishes annual report on state of the public’s health   | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | Action on Sugar comment: New health bill in California for sugary drinks to be labelled with health warnings   | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | World Health Organization (WHO) calls for action on sugar  | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | AoS Manifesto  | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | Time for the UK to lead the world in sugar reduction to prevent obesity  | no                                   | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | Worldwide experts unite to reverse obesity epidemic by forming ‘Action on Sugar’   | yes                                  | 0  | 0   | n/a   | n/a   |
| 2014 | New analysis of the relationship between dental decay and sugar recommends a reduction in added sugar intake to less than 4 teaspoons per day                    | no                                   | 1  | 1   | 0   | 0   |
| 2014 | Time for action: Childhood obesity plan as requested by Jeremy Hunt MP   | no                                   | 4  | 1   | 0   | 0   |
| 2014 | ACTION STATION: Leading British nutrition scientists acknowledge NOW is time to take action on sugar   | no                                   | 3  | 4   | 0   | 0   |
| 2015 | New Survey Reveals Shocking Levels of Salt and Sugar Found in Popcorn  | no                                   | 3  | 8   | 1   | 0   |
| 2015 | Sugar—Cameron Must Act Now   | no                                   | 7  | 1   | 5   | 1   |
| 2015 | Cereals still stuffed with sugar   | yes                                  | 8  | 12  | 5   | 1   |
| 2015 | Energy Drinks Fuel the Obesity Epidemic  | no                                   | 4  | 8   | 3   | 5   |
| 2015 | Parents Being Misled into Buying So Called ‘Fruit Snacks’ Not Permitted in Schools   | yes                                  | 6  | 9   | 1   | 4   |
| 2015 | Call for sugar—sweetened soft drink manufacturer to set global sugar reduction targets to help halt worldwide obesity epidemic set to reach 1.12 billion by 2030 | no                                   | 2  | 6   | 1   | 2   |

## 5. Conclusions

Can we say that it is the responsibility of the media to protect the health of the population and engage with health activism? We may say yes if the media is seen as serving the public interest by helping their readers to live healthier lives. However, in this particular case study we may ask whether this is truly the case. This is because, and as argued by the liberal theory of the press, “a less than an objective account increases burden on consumers to gather news for themselves” (Bivins 2004, p. 43), which can be the case here where the media are singling out only one part of the problem that causes obesity and thus ignoring health research that argues it is other factors that contribute towards obesity too, e.g., sedentary lifestyle, diet, genetics, etc.

However, if we take a social responsibility theory perspective, it seems that critics were right in asking whether the media taking responsibility for the population will mean promoting a biased view of a problem similar to the promotional techniques of marketing communications and advertising. In this particular case, the media did demonstrate a preference for charity sources over business sources, and thus opted for pushing one particular view and one particular agenda. Therefore, we may ask again whether the media are serving the public with this coverage. In other words, is there a difference between media and advertising if both sides promote one particular agenda without giving a voice to the other side?

When we look at Hutchins’ recommendation we could say that in this particular case the media failed to provide “a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context that gives meaning” (Bivins 2004, p. 42). This is because, as it has been shown earlier in the paper, the media did not provide a comprehensive view of the problem since they omitted or ignored sources from the other side (industry). In addition, the media in this case also failed to serve as “a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism” (ibid.), because the other side did not have a chance to comment and defend its position by, for example, arguing that sugar is not the only health problem that causes obesity and other health issues. Finally, the media cannot be seen as providing “a representative picture of the constituent groups in society” (ibid.), because only one group and one particular view gained prominence in the coverage and as a result the media also failed in telling the truth, because readers are led to believe that only one aspect causes obesity.

Following other research on the influence of public relations on the media, it is quite clear that the media do follow public relations documents from *Action on Sugar*, and therefore the communication lobby from this source can be seen as a significant driver of the media coverage on this matter. But in this particular case it is the NGO’s public relations activities that are driving the coverage of the sugar debate and pushing an agenda. Interestingly, viewed in this way this case challenges the often-propagated image of public relations as a profession used only for corporate spin and supporting a pro-business agenda. The questions asked by some scholars seem to be changing at least when anti-sugar and this research are considered, i.e., Davis (2000a) asked whether public relations is a corporate and state resource used to dominate the media agenda, but this cannot be argued here because the media primarily express their own interest and perspective, which can also be connected to the values of British journalists that have evolved with the change of generations. Thurman et al. (2016) found that journalists in the UK largely believe that the media should scrutinize business as much as politics, which means that journalists see business as equally important as politics. However, according to some studies governmental and business sources continually outnumber other news sources in media articles (Sigal 1973; Hall et al. 1978; Fishman 1980; Gitlin 1980; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Hallin 1994; Philo 1995; Davis 2000a; Lewis et al. 2008), which is not what this research has shown. In addition, we can argue that journalism is compromised (Lewis et al. 2008), because news stories are clearly PR material and mainly a ‘copy and paste’ of the source press release with minor editing. In addition, media preference seems troubling because the media are not only failing to give a voice to everyone but journalists are actually removing statements even when an NGO quotes them, thus pointing towards a certain bias in the process of selecting sources and taking an angle.

When it comes to the media bias, other research has reported bias towards business sources as opposed to NGOs, i.e., [Lewis et al. \(2008\)](#) conducted a major study on British media and found that health is the area where 37% of stories are generated by PR content and that corporate PR has more influence than the NGO PR (38 versus 11% in favor of corporate presence in the media). In other words, other research has reported that, “the most successful “spin doctors” come from business rather than from NGOs, charities or pressure groups” ([Lewis et al. 2008](#), p. 12). While the study of [Lewis et al. \(2008\)](#) analyzed all sections of the media and came up with this conclusion, these findings cannot be confirmed with this research that conducted an analysis based on one case study. For this particular research, media are clearly more inclined against business and in favor of the NGO.

It therefore seems that the nature of sources—at least when the British press and the anti-sugar debate are under analysis—is changing and that it is the NGO that has a more prominent position in the British press whereas business sources are rarely consulted, or in some instances removed from press release being published even when an NGO is quoting the industry. This means that we can speak of advocacy journalism pushing for one particular cause. So, are we seeing an evolving sense of responsibility or is it instead a case of new perspectives of bias in the British press? It therefore seems that in the present press landscape the media is changing towards embracing advocacy journalism and moving forward from a traditional, libertarian, view of journalism as an objective account of the day meant to only report the truth.

Arguably, this case study used a small sample of articles, and thus conclusions cannot be generalized. However, the study has pointed towards more affirmative position of NGOs in the press than was previously recognized in the academic literature. The contribution of this study is therefore not in its findings in general, but in the trends identified in the findings, and thus in its method. In other words, all other studies conducted on media bias and the relationship between media and public relations are quantitative and use large samples encompassing all articles published across newspaper sections. Those findings, as discussed earlier in this chapter, continually point towards the dominance of corporate and political public relations in newspaper coverage, however, when we focused on one case only, the results are pointing towards a different conclusion. Therefore, the contribution of this paper is methodological and future research on media should concentrate more on case study research, in order to explore whether NGOs dominate as sources of media articles in some areas, and if so, in which areas.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft, M.T.; Review and editing, R.T.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank three reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments on this paper.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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