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Coca-Cola's work with academics was a "low point in history of public health"

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An analysis of thousands of emails has shown the extent to which Coca-Cola sought to obscure its relationship with scientists, minimise perception of its role, and use researchers to promote industry friendly messaging. The findings represented a "low point in the history of public health," said one of the authors.

Academics the UK and Italy worked with US Right to Know, an investigative public health and consumer group, to obtain and analyse more than 18 000 pages of email correspondence between the Coca-Cola Company, West Virginia University, and the University of Colorado.¹

Both universities were part of a "front group" funded by Coca-Cola called the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), a global network of scientists¹ said to have been created by Coke to downplay links between obesity and sugary drinks.²

Thematic and narrative analysis of the emails obtained under freedom of information acts and published in *Public Health Nutrition* revealed that GEBN employed two main strategic approaches: the first sought to influence the research agenda and the second to establish a network of academics and opinion leaders.

The authors identified a series of tactics stemming from the strategy from correspondence between 2013 and 2015. As well as seeking to obscure research funding, they also revealed that Coca-Cola supported a close knit network of academics—dubbed the "email family" by Coke's then vice president Rhona Applebaum.

This network, the paper said, both promoted Coke's strategic public relations messages and sought to support the academics in advancing their careers and in building their affiliated institutions.

Gary Ruskin, executive director of US Right to Know, said, "Coke used public health academics to carry out classic tobacco tactics to protect its profits. It's a low point in the history of public health and a warning about the perils of accepting corporate funding for public health work.

"Coke's 'email family' is just the latest example of the appalling commercialisation of the university and public health work. Public health academics in an 'email family' with Coke is like having criminologists in an email family with Al Capone."

The paper called for more robust approaches for managing conflicts of interest to tackle "diffuse and obscure patterns of industry influence."

In order to tackle the potential criticism that published quotes were taken out of context, the authors have reproduced the full email exchanges in an appendix, which they believe to be the largest publicly available data source of Coca-Cola's interaction with academics.

GEBN became defunct in 2015, but earlier this year US Right to Know published another report documenting communications between academic researchers and another organisation, the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), funded by Coca-Cola and other global corporations.³ A BMJ investigation in 2019 also revealed how Coca-Cola had shaped public health policy in China through its funding of the ILSI-China group.⁴

A spokesperson for the Coca-Cola Company said it has not independently funded research on health and wellbeing related matters since 2016, adding that "a list of health and wellbeing research funded by the Coca-Cola Company dating back to 2010 has been disclosed on our transparency website for five years and is updated at regular intervals.

"This research is expected to be conducted in accordance with our publicly stated approach to funding scientific research, including the fact that we do not have the right to prevent the publication of research results, nor do we provide funding conditioned on the outcome of the research."

UK sugar tax

The UK government recently launched a new strategy to tackle obesity. Measures include a ban on advertising foods high in sugar, fat, and salt, online and on TV, before 9 pm. The soft drinks industry levy, or sugar tax, announced in 2016, was not extended, however.

Asked about the sugar tax and whether there had been ministerial engagement with industry over the decision, a Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said, "We continue to work with business and industry through the government's reduction and reformulation programmes on sugar, calories, and salt, and we remain committed to further action if results are not seen."

¹ Serôdio P, Ruskin G, McKee M, Stuckler D. Evaluating Coca-Cola's attempts to influence public health "in their own words": analysis of Coca-Cola emails with public health academics leading the Global Energy Balance Network. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2020. doi: 10.1017/S1368980020002098.

- 2 Barlow P, Serôdio P, Ruskin G, McKee M, Stuckler D. Science organisations and Coca-Cola's 'war' with the public health community: insights from an internal industry document. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2018;72:761-3. doi: 10.1136/jech-2017-210375 pmid: 29540465
- 3 Iacobucci G. Food and drink industry sought to influence scientists and academics, emails show. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2078. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2078 pmid: 32444353
- 4 Greenhalgh S. Making China safe for Coke: how Coca-Cola shaped obesity science and policy in China. *BMJ* 2019;364:k5050doi: 10.1136/bmj.k5050.