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## The Sourcing of Stories on Sugar and the Supermarket Industry in the British Press

### Abstract

This paper looked at the nature of sourcing stories in the press coverage of the anti-sugar debate and the supermarket industry in the UK. The research design was a mixed-method study founded in an interpretivist epistemology. Content analysis has been conducted on 454 articles from national and regional press and this analysis provided an answer on who influences the news agenda. Qualitative interviews with journalists explored what sources journalists use when selecting and sourcing stories. The findings show that NGOs are regularly used as a source for stories in the British press, while the news agenda is largely driven by the self-interest of journalists, which corresponds with agenda of the NGO Action on Sugar. Journalists also largely rely on contacts when sourcing stories, but NGOs are present in the mind of journalists when deciding how to source stories. In addition, views of journalists correspond with views of NGOs on the role and position of the business in society.

### Keywords

Press, Source Analysis, Qualitative Interviews, Sugar Debate, Supermarkets, UK

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# The Sourcing of Stories on Sugar and the Supermarket Industry in the British Press

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## Introduction

The agenda-setting theory of the mass media has been around since the 1960s when two US scholars analyzed views of readership and the coverage in the press that preceded those views (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The predominant focus of agenda-setting research is centered on quantitative content analysis and content analysis is inherent to agenda-setting theory because only content analysis can show how media write about a certain issue. However, the quantitative method cannot answer why media write the way they do because this method does not grasp reasons because of which journalists select stories nor does it explain how personal beliefs of journalists influence sourcing stories. Along those lines, this research study has deployed a mixed-method approach and content analysis, inherent to agenda-setting research, has been used to explore to what extent media write about the sugar debate and the UK's supermarket industry, but this quantitative part was then analyzed using qualitative interviews with UK journalists.

In other words, this study used traditional quantitative analysis to answer who the sources of articles are, but this data is then analyzed against the qualitative data derived from interviews with journalists. In this way, this study reached a different conclusion on media coverage of businesses and the findings thus go against predominant view in academia that media give space to businesses whereas NGOs are not newsworthy (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a; 2000b; Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2004; Gans, 1980; Lewis et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2010; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Van Leuven et al., 2013). Qualitative research interviews, therefore, provided different results and enriched the content analysis, with which this paper gives a methodological contribution to the agenda-setting approach to studying mass media. In other words, while solely quantitative studies pointed towards conclusion that NGOs are powerless in agenda-setting, this study has shown that this is not always the case and that NGOs have more power than usually thought, which came as a result of the qualitative component of the analysis.

Traditional agenda-setting research combined content analysis of the media with a survey to explore effects of communication, or “agenda-setting research linked specific content characteristics, usually the amount of coverage on a specific topic, with the salience of that topic to members of the audience” (McCombs, 1992, p. 818; see also McCombs, 2014; Shaw & Martin, 1992; Wanta et al., 2004). Later on, with the development of the research framework, the research shifted also from asking the question who sets the public agenda to who sets the news media’s agenda and then moved to look at external influences (McCombs, 2014; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Stephens, 1988). Finally, the research then moved to agenda-setting research and research on core characteristics of journalism (McCombs, 1992, 1997, 2014). In other words, it is not believed that the news media set an agenda with a preconceived goal in mind, but as a result of a “by-product of the necessity to choose a few topics for attention in each day’s news report” (McCombs, 1997, p. 433). The latter is subject of exploration of this paper, where journalists have been interviewed to explore their agenda and whether they have NGOs in mind when thinking of sourcing stories. With this, the study took a constructivist approach founded on interpretivist epistemology, which sees humans as creators of reality, or journalists as creators of the news agenda.

### **The Agenda-Setting Theory and Journalism Sources: A Brief Literature Review**

The agenda-setting framework has been inherent to media research since the seminal Chapel Hill study on 1968 US elections when McCombs and Shaw (1972) elaborated on a causal link between the mass media coverage and views of readership. That study was the first effort to understand the media influence in society, and it has directed further media research (Figenschou et al., 2015; McCombs, 2004, 2005, 2014; Pickard, 2014; Tan & Weaver, 2013). However, agenda-setting research has evolved since then, and nowadays this framework is used not just in elections but also to examine other issues and topics, as well as the attributes of these issues and other topics (Kim et al., 2017). Specific to this study, the agenda-setting process “offers an explanation of why certain issues and their attributes are salient and how they come to be on the media agenda (media agenda setting), the public agenda (public agenda setting), or the policy agenda (policy agenda setting), in addition to the interrelationship among the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda” (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, as cited in Kim et al., 2017, p. 7).

In addition to agenda-setting research, agenda-building research has developed as an additional area of agenda-setting research. In this area, the research is set on a question who sets the media’s agenda (McCombs, 1992, 2004), and this has then also turned into an exploration of “sources routinely used by journalists to obtain news” (McCombs, 1992, p. 816; McCombs, 2014). The exploration of sources routinely used by journalists was also the focus of this study, which explored who is setting the media agenda by analyzing sources (McCombs, 1992, 2014). In that, content analysis has been used to analyze press coverage of the sugar debate and the supermarket industry in the UK and interviews with journalists were conducted. This was done in order to explore whether NGOs are present in the mind of journalists when thinking about sourcing stories, which would mean that NGOs are becoming a routine source for journalists.

This research focus is relevant because many research studies argued, using analysis of the newspaper coverage, that NGOs are not used as sources of news stories like, for example, businesses (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a; 2000b; Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2004; Gans, 1980; Lewis et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2010; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Van Leuven et al., 2013). In addition, it has been recognized that NGOs are not successful in agenda-building and some authors argued that press releases from NGOs are not seen as newsworthy (Lewis et al., 2006; Reich, 2010; Franklin, 2004). On the other hand, some authors recognized

that news media have moved from using only routine channels such as official proceedings, press releases, press conferences and scheduled official events as recognized in early studies (Sigal, 1973) to more use of NGO sources (Singer et al., 2011; Splendore, 2017; Van Leuven et al., 2013). However, some authors also argue that even though journalists nowadays use both institutional and non-elite sources, they also stress that non-elite sources are seen as complementing news and not as sources that could substitute for institutional sources or drive coverage (Reich, 2008, 2015). However, what is relevant to emphasize is that most of the studies on this matter use quantitative content analysis on coverage in the newspapers in general, which skews the analysis. This means that whilst NGOs may not be successful in agenda-building in the business section that does not mean they are not successful in building agenda in other sections such as health, which has moved from lifestyle pages to the news agenda.

The press still has an agenda-setting potential not just because people still read the press (albeit in an online form) but also because the press is still discussed in British TV shows and journalists from the press are invited to speak about the so-called mood of the press (Cushion et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the press still plays an agenda-setting role for British broadcasters that report on debates from the press (Lewis & Cushion, 2017). Thus, looking at how press reports on business (in this case the supermarket industry) has relevance, as the press can influence industry standards and the professional practice.

The reason for selecting both anti-sugar debate and the supermarket industry for this study lies in the fact that the UK's supermarket industry has a prominence in the British media, and the interest of the media towards the supermarket industry goes that far that financial and annual reports are also the subject of media interest, and the infamous scandal on horsemeat has affected even those supermarkets not involved with the scandal on food standards, as media extensively reported on the issue (ASA, 2015; BBC, 2013; Critchlow, 2014; Fogg, 2014; Guardian, 2015; Hooton, 2014). On the other hand, debate on sugar has been of interest of the media in the past few years, and as the results below will show, this interest corresponds with foundation of a non-governmental organization (NGO) *Action on Sugar* in 2014 ultimately leading to the announcement of the sugar tax in 2016. Nevertheless, the supermarket industry is largely a target for anti-sugar activism due to their influence on what goes to shelves and the fact supermarkets have their own popular brands. Thus, anti-sugar activists include supermarket products in their analysis and they often pressure the supermarket industry to remove sweets from shelves or to remove sweets from checkouts (the latter was largely successful).

Therefore, by looking not just at how press reports on sugar but whether NGOs are considered as sources journalists would consult when writing a new story, provided a good insight into the way news media operate and source analysis followed up by interviews with journalists was a good way to gain an insight into the news media. Nevertheless, looking into sugar only would not provide fruitful results because the majority of articles are a result of policy documents and press releases from official authorities such as the Government, Public Health England, National Health System and similar. These press releases will naturally trigger media attention as research on sources has demonstrated that media use routine sources extensively (Harcup, 2004; Reich, 2015; Saikkonen, 2017; Sigal, 1973; Splendore, 2017). However, adding supermarkets provided an extra layer to the analysis, able to explain potential agenda-setting intention of the media because supermarket's press releases or activism against supermarkets to remove one particular ingredient from its products and shelves is not an obtrusive issue or something that media normally report about.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to explore sources of media articles on sugar and the supermarket industry, with a goal to determine who sets the agenda on sugar and the supermarket industry. The research questions for the mixed-method study were set to

investigate the role of sources in setting the news agenda, which was done through a content analysis of sources used in media articles. In addition, the research questions were set to explore the role of journalists in the source selection and how the selection process works. The research questions were:

RQ1: Who are the sources of the articles on the supermarket industry and the sugar debate?

RQ2: Who sets the news agenda on sugar debate and the supermarket industry?

RQ3: Are views of journalists influencing the nature of selecting sources?

RQ4: How if at all do journalists think of NGO's when thinking of sourcing stories?

### **The Researcher's Position and the Influence on the Study**

The reason for combining methods like this lies in my personal belief as a researcher. I am an interpretivist and constructionist, and a qualitative researcher, however, I have been a fan of agenda-setting theory since my postgraduate course in 2006. After reading hundreds of studies on agenda-setting I realized that content analysis is inherent to the agenda-setting framework with a good reason, as only content analysis can reveal whether agenda has been set or whether there is an attempt to set the agenda on a certain issue. Therefore, quantitative content analysis has to be used for agenda-setting research, but because I do not believe in quantitative method or positivist epistemology, I started to explore the last stage of agenda-setting, which is centered on who sets the news agenda as this was the place where I could add interviews with journalists and this part of agenda-setting research is also focused on the exploration of sources journalists use to write articles. The latter was of particular interest to me because not much work has been done on this so I was able to add something to the current knowledge, and the area of journalism sources is an area where most research shows that media are still influenced by businesses and that businesses are more newsworthy than NGOs. Based on my reading of the British press I did not feel these findings are representative of the sugar debate and the supermarket industry and thus I decided to explore it further by doing a case study research and by adding qualitative interviews to the content analysis. This was done in order to check whether generalized quantitative findings on businesses having more relevance in the media coverage still apply if a case study from the NGO's interest area is analyzed and if qualitative data is added to the research. By doing this, I was able to research the area that interests me the most (agenda-setting research) whilst also using a qualitative method, which I always believed gives the best insight into society and how society constructs discourses, beliefs and our everyday reality.

### **Method**

The approach of the paper was a mixed-method, and thus I used triangulation where traditional content analysis of media articles, inherent to the agenda-setting theory, has been further supplemented with qualitative interviews with journalists to allow more meaningful and in-depth analysis of findings. In this paper, the qualitative method provided understanding on why NGO appears so much in media articles through qualitative interviews with journalists, and thus adding interviews to traditional content analysis in agenda-setting research helped in further elaborating on the nature of the selection of sources and the reason why NGO is used as a source.

The first part of the analysis was therefore content analysis of media articles. Articles for the analysis were selected from LexisNexis database for a period between 15 December

2010 until 15 December 2015, as this period corresponds with public and media debates that led to the announcement of the sugar tax in 2016. Thus, it was deemed as relevant to see how the press reported on the issue in the period preceding the official announcement. Due to a large number of articles published on sugar in the UK, as well as the supermarket industry in the UK, in the period of five years, the analysis focused on narrowing down the search to articles that mention both sugar and the supermarket industry. The keywords used were ‘sugar’ and ‘supermarket.’

The search was first performed using the term sugar and then selecting an option ‘and’, which added supermarket keyword to narrow down the search on articles that talk about both sugar and the supermarket industry. The sub-search consisted of marking all industries, all subjects, all countries, and all UK newspapers. Duplicate options were set to off, and the date was narrowed down to five years (15 December 2010 until 15 December 2015). The search produced 1000 articles sorted by relevance, which were all taken into initial pre-analysis for suitability for this research. All 1000 articles have been read, and in total 454 articles have been selected for the analysis. The criteria for inclusion of articles in the analysis were that every article discusses sugar and the supermarket industry. Articles that discuss only sugar and/or obesity without mentioning the supermarket industry have been removed from the sample, as well as articles that only write about the supermarket industry in general (e.g. profit, problems, in few instances construction work near-certain supermarket, articles on BBC’s show *The Apprentice* where one of the candidates competing for Lord Sugar’s investment worked in the supermarket industry before, etc.).

The selection process was done manually by carefully reading articles three times and underlining sources, which were then grouped in tables. In addition, every table available in the section on findings has been manually compiled after careful numbering of elements. Every part of the analysis has been done several times to minimize the possibility of mistakes. The categories have not been pre-assigned, but the sources were grouped as they were found in articles. For example, the first identified source was academic, and this became the first category. The second identified source was the academic publication, and this became the second category. In total, 27 categories have been identified, i.e., academic (person), academic (publication/research), NGO (person and generally as an organization when it was mentioned in articles), NGO (publication/research), person affiliated with both NGO and academia, GP/doctors, government (person, unidentified sources, groups, PMs, institutional statements, Public Health England [PHE]), government (published/research), NHS (person), NHS (publication/research), business associations, supermarkets (person), supermarkets (announcements, press releases, reports, studies, website), own research, own comment, other media, Jamie Oliver, consumer groups, WHO, research by consumer groups, public (parents, Twitter users), companies (other than supermarkets), public polls, EU, EU driven research and guidelines, and other. These sources are then grouped per field to establish where the influence on news agenda comes from (Table 1).

After completing the initial analysis, insight into category ‘other’ has revealed 20 nutritionists as sources of articles, and these were then assigned a special category while other sources remained in the category ‘other’ (namely, various managers, Mintel report, survey by one company, OECD report, spokeswomen for one company, etc.). If any of these sources had a repetition of more than one, they would have been assigned a special category, but this was not the case. In addition, a category named government was deemed unsuitable. The first idea was to separate all sources within the government category however, the second analysis of these sources revealed the sources would only unnecessarily spread if they were broken down to separate categories. This type of a broader analysis of sources affiliated with politics would not bring anything into the research or help to answer research questions, and it was decided these sources would be grouped as political sources, as they all originate from politics. In other

words, all political sources were grouped under one category (Parliament, Government, parliamentary committees, etc.), however, this category did not include any partisan sources that have no power but the campaign for politics for example. The reason for this way of analyzing sources is that the research question was not whether politics influences media agenda, and if so what kind of political source, but instead, the focus of the study was to see where the agenda is coming from and what the role NGOs have in influencing the agenda.

Content analysis has been used for the research as this approach presents an established research method, and it is “used to study a broad range of ‘texts’ from transcripts of interviews and discussions in clinical and social research to the narrative and form of films, TV programs and the editorial and advertising content of newspapers and magazines” (McNamara, 2005, p. 1). This method is inherent to agenda-setting research and it was deemed as the most suitable to conduct this research, given its focus on the exploration of sources in media articles, which can be done using content analysis.

When it comes to interviews, the respondents were British press journalists and they were asked about the process of selecting sources for stories. Interview questions were based on the literature review and findings of the first part of this research. Thus, journalists were asked how they source stories, where stories come from if there is no public relations (PR) source, and how important PR from NGOs is. The reason for asking about PR sources lies in the fact that content analysis showed that majority of sources used for articles are press releases and surveys from *Action on Sugar* and then also policy documents and supermarket’s announcements, which signaled a clear reliance on PR sources when sourcing stories. Journalists were also asked that is their view on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and whether supermarkets should engage with caring for the health of the population. This was deemed as important to establish where the passion potentially lies and whether personal views correspond with the nature of selecting sources. Finally, journalists were also asked which sources they think they would contact if assigned to write a story on sugar, thus answering the research question whether NGOs are present as regular sources journalists think of when preparing a story.

The approach of conducting interviews with journalists was similar to the reconstruction interview method introduced by Reich (2009). The difference is that Reich (2009) asked journalists to reconstruct actual stories they have previously published, while for this research journalists were asked which sources *they think they would consult if assigned to write a story on sugar and the supermarket industry*. The latter is the case because the purpose of this research was to determine whether NGOs are already seen as sources journalists regularly think of when sourcing stories for topics they did not cover before. Therefore, journalists in this research were not experts in the field, but those who have not written on sugar. The reason for that is that journalists who write on sugar already use NGOs for covering the topic and thus interviews could have only been done in order to ask them why they use NGOs, which was not the scope of this research. The purpose of this research, however, was to determine whether NGOs are generally seen as relevant sources and whether the nature of selecting sources among journalists in the UK is changing.

Personal contacts have been used to recruit interviewees, as well as LinkedIn. In the case of the latter, invitations to journalists were sent randomly to all journalists who appeared in searches, however, only four responded. In other words, the recruitment process was notoriously difficult (see also McNamara, 2016; Tench et al., 2007 for similar experiences) with journalists who were contacted for the study not answering emails or refusing participation arguing they have no time. An attempt was also made to contact newsrooms of all national newspapers in the UK, however, only to have the phone hung up right after explaining that it was a research invitation call. Due to ethical requirements of the University, it would not have been possible to contact the same person again (e.g., when someone did not answer email) or



try to persuade those who refused to agree to an interview because this would be seen as coercion and cold calling.

In total, eight interviews with journalists have been conducted of which two were in person, one over the phone, one via email and four via an online set of interview questions opened in Google Forms. Google Forms document was not publicly distributed but sent directly to targeted journalists via LinkedIn. Of eight interviewed journalists, four were personal contacts and four were recruited via LinkedIn. The interviewed journalists work in the national and local press. Interviews with journalists were conducted after the content analysis of media articles. This was deemed as relevant because the content analysis first had to determine whether NGO is being used a source of news articles and once this was established journalists were then contacted to further explore the nature of selecting sources.

Journalists were asked about the process of selecting respondents for stories, i.e., how they select sources. Journalists were also asked about CSR and their understanding of the concept, as well as whether they think health should become part of CSR. In addition, journalists were asked who determines which sources were used for the story and who decides on stories. All interviewed journalists confirmed they have the power to decide on sources and angle of the story with minimum or no influence of the editor, which corresponds with findings of Thurman, Cornia, and Kunert (2016) who surveyed 700 journalists in the UK and journalists confirmed they have freedom in determining stories and sources of stories.

The interviews were semi-structured. All interviews conducted face-to-face and over the telephone were transcribed and those interviews responses that were collected via email were added to the transcript. Manual coding of interviews has been conducted, using an interpretative approach. This is another difference from Reich's (2009, p. 34) interviews, which are analyzed using statistical calculations of reliability, validity, etc. In line with the qualitative approach to analyzing interview data, direct quotes have been used in reporting findings. All face-to-face interviews lasted for half an hour.

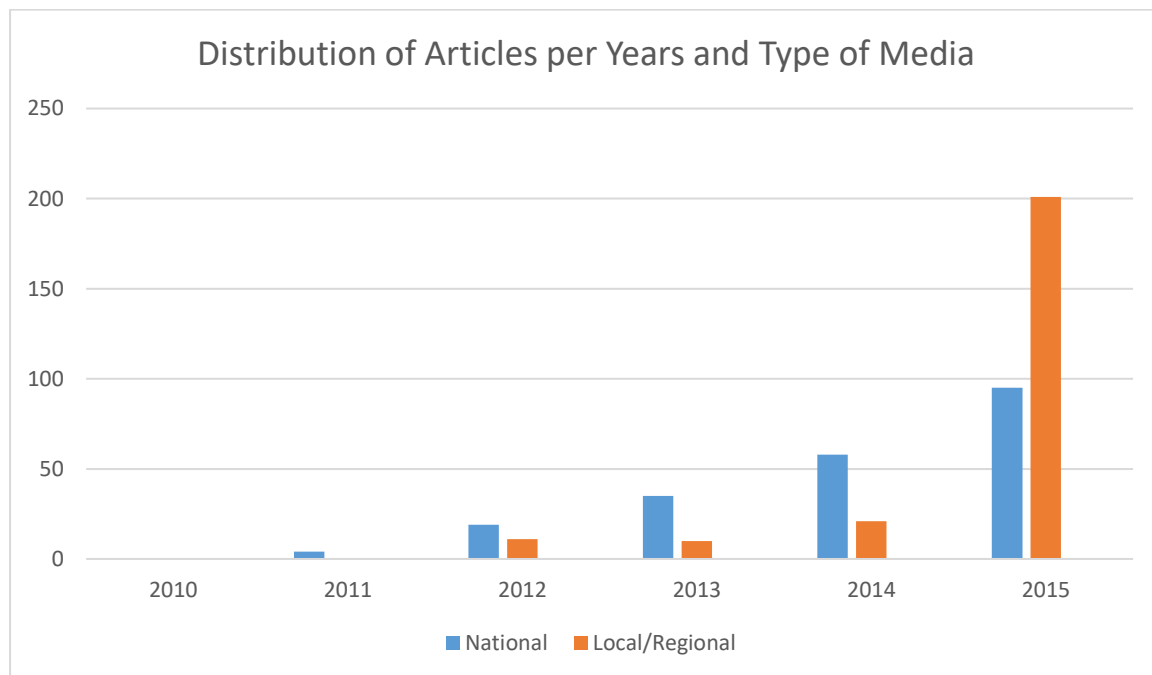
The interview questionnaire has been tested with two pilot interviews. Pilot interviews were conducted with two former press journalists who now work as lecturers at the researcher's institution. After the pilot interviews were conducted, it became obvious that the initial questionnaire was likely to fail to answer whether NGOs are positioned in the mind of journalists as a source, as journalists who never covered the debate on sugar would not necessarily remember an NGO as a source. Therefore, a question on which sources they think journalists use when writing about sugar was changed to ask who they think they would contact if assigned to write a story on sugar. Thus, the question was personalized more, and it was possible to determine whether journalists already associate NGO with sugar debate and whether NGO can then be seen as a routine source at least for this particular type of story. In addition, a question on the relevance of press releases as a news source was added to capture views on press releases because they are also issued by NGOs, however, several studies have argued that NGOs are not used as a routine source or seen as newsworthy by journalists. Thus, it was deemed as relevant to add this question to determine whether journalists use press releases as a news source.

The research study has obtained ethical approval from the Local Research Ethics Coordinator at the Leeds Beckett University, and interviewees were sent an information pack and the consent form clearly explaining what the research is about. The interviewees were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality of findings and offered to see the transcript before the transcript is used for the analysis. Only one journalist wanted to see the transcript, and the amends proposed were accepted. As per ethical requirements and a promise made to the interviewees, no names, personal information or information on the organization where they work has been used in the paper.

## Findings

As it appears from Figure 1 the interest of media towards sugar and the supermarket industry is gradually increasing, i.e., from zero articles published in 2010 up to 296 articles in 2015 in total, or 95 in national media and 201 in regional and local media. In this sense, we can immediately speak of the increased salience of sugar and the supermarket industry, and agenda-setting intention of the media, which are increasing their interest in the topic and have started to push sugar and the supermarket industry in the UK to the public agenda. This increased interest of the media in sugar debate corresponds with the foundation of *Action on Sugar* founded in 2014.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Articles per Years and Type of Media (N = 454)**



Interestingly, the number of articles in the regional and local media is higher than in the national media. This is also because the number of regional and local media is higher than the national media, which then contributes towards the larger number of published articles. The remaining part of this section will, therefore, concentrate on presenting results in line with research questions set out at the beginning of the paper.

**RQ1: Who are the sources of the articles on the supermarket industry and the sugar debate?**

When it comes to sources and the drivers of the coverage as it appears from Table 1 below, the media cited the total of 1715 sources in 454 articles selected for the analysis. According to the findings, it is NGO (16.10%), politics (13.06%) and coverage of the other media (13.52%) that are driving the coverage, which means that external sources have an influence on the media coverage and agenda-setting intention of the media. What is also visible is that the media's investigations/research does not significantly drive the coverage (2.10%).

Citations of supermarket companies (which would be routine channels) total to 22.80% of citations, however, since supermarkets are the subject of articles selected for the analysis, this does not come as a surprise because media have to ask for statements. However, many of

supermarket's sources are press releases and statements (see Table 2), which shows an increased interest in the supermarket industry, which was one of the reasons for conducting this study.

**Table 1.** General Distribution of Sources in all Articles per field (N=1715)

Type of source	Number of citations	%
Supermarkets	391	22.80
NGO	276	16.10
Other media	232	13.52
Politics (Government, Parliament, PHE)	224	13.06
Academia	114	6.64
Public	95	5.53
Companies (other than supermarkets)	74	4.31
Consumer groups	65	3.80
A person affiliated with both academia and NGO	36	2.10
Media own research	36	2.10
WHO	32	1.86
Business associations	26	1.51
NHS	24	1.40
Nutritionists	20	1.16
Jamie Oliver	19	1.10
Other	19	1.10
Media own comment	17	0.99
EU	8	0.46
GP/doctors	7	0.40
<b>Total</b>	<b>1715</b>	<b>100</b>

The numbers in Table 1 show that the amount of citations between political (Government, Parliament, PHE) and NGO sources is very close albeit the number clearly goes in favor of the NGO with 16.10% of general NGO citations in the coverage, in addition to 2.10% of citations by activists coming from both NGO and academia. However, if we look at where the articles have been published, it appears that 30.83% of articles have been published in the news section (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Distribution of Articles per Section as Assigned by the Media (N = 454)

Section	Number of Articles	%
News	140	30.83
Health and Lifestyle	20	4.40
News, UK News, Home News	14	3.08
Features	13	2.86
Frontpage	11	2.42
Female	7	1.54
Comment	7	1.54
News, Other	6	1.32

UK	5	1.10
Editorial	5	1.10
News, Frontpage	4	0.88
News, Health	4	0.88
Food	4	0.88
News, People	3	0.66
Business	3	0.66
Letters	3	0.66
Society	3	0.66
Agency, Media	2	0.44
What's on	2	0.44
Column	2	0.44
Right Minds	2	0.44
News, UK & World	1	0.22
News, Education	1	0.22
News, Letters	1	0.22
UK Politics	1	0.22
Politics	1	0.22
Finance	1	0.22
Your Money, Features	1	0.22
People	1	0.22
Tech	1	0.22
Unspecified	185	40.74
<b>Total</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>100</b>

Nevertheless, since media name sections differently even though they mean the same thing, articles have been grouped to sections (e.g., all sections labelled as news (Table 2) are put in the news section, Table 3). When we look at the results, it appears that 181 articles (39.86%) can be found in the news section as per Table 3 below, which signifies the agenda-setting intention of the media.

**Table 3.** Distribution of Articles in Groups of Sections (N=454)

Sections	Number of Articles	%
News	181	39.86
Health and Lifestyle	20	4.40
Features	13	2.86
Frontpage	11	2.42
Business and Finance	5	1.10
Food	4	0.88
Other	220	48.45
<b>Total</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>100</b>

#### RQ2: Who sets the media agenda?

Nevertheless, the fact that the media publish about anti-sugar debates and the supermarket industry does not mean that the media are setting or trying to set the agenda if it is always the political factors that publish or say something that naturally triggers media attention. Therefore, the paper also looked into topics that triggered media attention on the anti-

sugar debate and the supermarket industry to establish whether the agenda is externally driven. As it appears, while politics and NGO drive the agenda by publishing reports and guidelines, it is the media that followed up from these initiatives and started to push the agenda. This is visible in Table 4, where the number of articles with no obvious trigger is the second highest of all articles published on the issue (129, or 28.41%). Thus, it appears that the media are driving the coverage on this topic along with external drivers such as NGO and politics. While Tesco's axe of Ribena drinks could be seen as businesses driving the coverage (which would go in line with already mentioned source research that shows businesses having more influence on the coverage than NGOs), this would be misleading, because these articles are reporting on the success of the anti-sugar campaign and the fact one supermarket company banned sugary products.

**Table 4.** Triggers of Media Articles (N=454)

The trigger of the article	Number of articles	%
Tesco's axe of Ribena drinks	159	35.02
No official trigger – media's own initiative	129	28.41
NGO research	27	5.94
Consumer group's research	26	5.72
Government's research report	21	4.62
Academic research	18	3.96
Tesco's announcements	10	2.20
Political announcement/comment on sugar tax	9	1.98
Political announcements and statements on the traffic light system on supermarket food containing sugar	9	1.98
Consumer responses to Ribena ban by Tesco	7	1.54
Statements of MPs on sugar in general	6	1.32
Ribena's response to Tesco's decision	3	0.66
Statement by MPs on junk food advertising ban	3	0.66
NHS statement	3	0.66
NGOs current statement/call for action	3	0.66
Lidl's ban of sweets at checkouts	2	0.44
Independent campaigners on sugar (announcement)	2	0.44
Letters	2	0.44
A new campaign on sugar launch	4	0.88
NHS research report	1	0.22
M&S announcement	1	0.22
Co-Op announcement	1	0.22
Morrisons' statement	1	0.22

Sainsbury's announcement	1	0.22
Aldi's announcement	1	0.22
Independent research results	1	0.22
Proposal of local authorities on traffic light signs on supermarket ready meals	1	0.22
Stormont MLA supermarket statement	1	0.22
Council's press statement	1	0.22
General announcement on pester power by several supermarkets	1	0.22
<b>Total</b>	<b>454</b>	<b>100</b>

The results above have shown the self-triggered interest in the sugar debate and the supermarket industry in the British press. This interest goes that far that when anti-sugar campaigners managed to get a leading UK supermarket to ban one sugary product many newspapers published a story on this. In addition, the analysis above shows strong prominence of NGO as a source in the media. Therefore, and as already emphasized in methods section, qualitative interviews were conducted with journalists to further explore this phenomenon and to see whether views of journalists are closely linked to views of NGOs and whether they already think of NGOs as a valid source for a story, which would mean that the nature of collecting sources is changing. Therefore, journalists were asked what their view on CSR is and whether supermarkets should ban sugary products and look after the health of the population. This was deemed as relevant to establish personal views of journalists since they also stated they have freedom in selecting sources and the angle of the story (as per methods section). In addition, journalists were asked who would they contact is assigned to write a story on sugar and the supermarkets and to what extent are press releases relevant as sources of stories, which was done to establish whether NGOs are already present in mind of journalists as newsworthy sources.

### RQ3: Are views of journalists influencing the nature of selecting sources?

As already explained in the methods section, the approach to interviewing was similar to Reich's (2009) reconstruction interviewing technique where journalists were asked about their personal views on CSR, health agenda, supermarkets and then asked who they think they would contact for a story is assigned to write a story on sugar and the supermarket industry. The interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, and thus all responses on the same questions were grouped to find a common pattern in responses. The results are reported in regards to themes discussed and citations have been used to support statements, as per usual practice with qualitative interviews (McNamara, 2016).

When it comes to CSR, journalists tend to link CSR predominantly with environment and health. For example, interviewee 1 stated that CSR would be "the way companies can personally hold to account by implementing environmental and health policies/schemes", and thus views on CSR were explicitly linked with the implementation of health policies. The relevance of health for CSR became even more visible when journalists were asked what would a company have to do for them to consider it as socially irresponsible, and where they mentioned that a company would be irresponsible if it endangered "public health, the wider economy, employees or jobs" (Interviewee 1), or "not pay fair wages to suppliers, leave detected issues like food security unresolved, use ingredients that make people sick or fat (Interviewee 4). While these views were shared by many interviewees there was an agreement

by all interviewees that companies should care for the health of the population as part of their CSR. In that, respondents specifically mentioned “building a healthier world is vitally important” (Interviewee 1), and “yes, it should. Especially as people get fatter and fatter, it seems necessary to restrict access to sugary drinks and food via the producer” (Interviewee 4). Nevertheless, caring for health is where CSR really counts according to journalists, “I think that’s where CSR really counts. That is where a good CSR policy sets itself apart from an ordinary one...” (Interviewee 8).

However, when directly asked whether supermarkets should withdraw food with high sugary content levels from their shelves, majority of interviewees did not agree with that saying that it is the “individual’s own choice” (Interviewee 1), and that “using middle class/chattering class opinions to dictate health policies for growing children who need a different diet to those of us who are fully grown is not acceptable” (Interviewee 2). But, when asked what in their view causes obesity journalists expressed good knowledge of all factors that may cause this such as early childhood experience coming from parents, genes, poor diet, socioeconomic factors, lack of exercise, etc. Thus, journalists tend to understand where obesity is coming from, but they also think that health should be a concern for businesses, or businesses would be seen as irresponsible. These answers show that views of journalists are aligned with the views of NGOs when it comes to the role of business in society and the expectations of businesses.

RQ4: How, if at all, do journalists think of NGO’s when thinking of sourcing stories?

When answering where they would look for information if assigned to write an article on obesity journalists emphasized they would contact charities and academics, which corresponds with findings from the content analysis presented above. For example,

I would contact our local CCGs, for official figures and guidance, before approaching charities. Childhood obesity organizations would be able to give clearer guidance of the wider issue in theory. Universities undertaking health or research projects could be another outlet (Interviewee 1)

“I would speak to experts/academics” (Interviewee 3). In other words, journalists expressed interest in charity and academic sources as those they would ask for a statement. No journalist mentioned industry even though the industry is an important stakeholder in this debate. However, when it comes to the selection of sources, a very strong preference for using contacts has been expressed. The reasons vary from just presenting the use of contacts as a normal journalistic practice to a more common view of contacts being always available and willing to speak with a journalist. For example,

I probably favor people I spoke to before. Yeah, so if you work in a kind of one industry you tend to use the same people over and over again. Just though you know when you pick up the phone and ask have you got five minutes, they’ll say yeah, go on (Interviewee 7)

On the other hand, a distinction was made between PR sources and other sources to establish whether contacts journalists mention are PR professionals. However, journalists reported local contacts which do not come from PR and social media as a way of sourcing stories. For example, one journalist stated that the sources would be “calls, local contacts or social media” (Interviewee 1) or going out to “meet people at events and network, Twitter seems to be a good resource as well” (Interviewee 4). When asked how important are PR sources from NGOs and

pressure groups, the majority of interviewees said it is very important because NGOs are involved with people and very influential. In addition, they are also readily available to speak with the media. For example, Interviewee 4 stated that “they tend to speak to people who are involved and affected, which is good” while Interviewee 7 stated that NGOs are important and used regularly, i.e.,

Important. I would say quite important. So, there are few that I use all the time. I get regular press releases from some charities and I use them all of the time because they are quick to react to a news story that might be going on. They do their own research, which is really important, so we can easily build a story around charities research. I would say a lot of stories I write are that kind of thing. Yeah, they often just, you know if they are a good charity, they have the right people available when you want to speak to them. So, yeah.

However, the importance of NGOs in sourcing stories was expressed by one journalist who is not in regular contact with NGOs nor uses them for sourcing, because he works in a specialized section and is more concerned about readers targeted by NGOs. But this journalist explained in more details on how NGO drives coverage and the agenda and the methods that secure mainstream media coverage for NGOs,

It drives quite a lot of content because a lot of charities are involved in campaigning (...) There is a lot of pressure from NGOs (...) Well, they sort of drive the message. It is not so much that, they will put something out, they will accuse my readers of doing something so then for me I have to get the response from the trade bodies that those readers are represented and try to create a balanced story in that way. (Interviewee 6)

When asked who would they contact if assigned to do a story on sugar, many journalists mentioned NHS and Public Health England; however, these are not the drivers of the coverage as content analysis has shown. This means that a lot of the coverage may be influenced by PR materials delivered to journalists and these materials tend to come from politics (Parliament, Government, etc.) and NGO rather than NHS. However, when answering this question, the majority of journalists mentioned they would also contact campaign groups and academic sources, which corresponds with findings from the content analysis. For example, “Any local supermarket chain, a campaign group (national, hopefully with a branch in my patch), CCG/NHS Trust” (Interviewee 1). “Let me think. I would probably speak to Public Health England I would imagine. I am sure there is probably some campaigning NGOs that would be prepared to comment” (Interviewee 5). In other words, journalists tend to mention pressure groups and NGOs as important sources and even though journalists interviewed for this study have never covered sugar before they still considered NGO as a relevant source for this type of topic. Nobody mentioned *Action on Sugar* explicitly, however, if journalists are inclined to use NGOs and pressure groups when sourcing stories then it does not come as a surprise that those who did cover sugar turned towards *Action on Sugar* for sourcing stories. No journalist mentioned business sources or the supermarket industry, and thus there is a strong tendency towards preferring NGO sources, at least when this particular topic is in the stake.

## Conclusion

It seems from this study that the press is expressing increased interest in pushing sugar and supermarkets to the agenda (Figure 1) and that this interest is largely self-driven by the



press (Table 3). When it comes to external drivers of the coverage, it appears that the nature of selecting sources is changing and that NGO is becoming an important driver of the coverage and the news agenda (Table 1). In other words, the media cited a total of 1715 sources in 454 articles, of which NGO totaled to 16.10% of sources used (Table 1) and the writing on sugar and the supermarket industry is largely self-driven, e.g., there is no identifiable trigger of the article (Table 4). Interviews with journalists revealed that personal views of journalists are tending towards views on NGO in regards to supermarkets and the sugar debate, and journalists have outlined NGO as a source they consider when writing on these topics. Thus, to answer research questions, it seems that sources of articles on the supermarket industry and sugar debate are largely coming from NGO sources (RQ1) with which the nature of selecting sources appears to be changing to encompass alternative views advocating a particular point of view. With this, it does seem that, at least when this particular topic is in the stake, British journalism is moving towards more particular coverage of certain issues, and towards advocacy journalism rather than what used to be a journalism norm, i.e., fair and balanced coverage of all affairs. NGO seems to be an important source for journalism, as these drivers are the most present ones among external drivers of the coverage, and interviews with journalists confirmed NGOs as an important source of information. The reasons for contacting NGOs vary from availability, a necessity due to their campaigning work all the way to simply wanting to contact them as an important stakeholder; however, what is visible is that NGOs are seen as trustworthy and newsworthy by journalists.

Who sets the news agenda (RQ2) provides a variety of answers and it is not difficult to see why many authors claim that businesses set the agenda. In the content analysis, it appeared that self-triggered media interest is the second largest reason for writing on sugar and the supermarket industry, however, the largest number of articles was triggered by the announcement of Tesco's axe of Ribena drinks (Table 4). If this result would be looked at only statistically it would indeed look as if businesses set the agenda and drive the coverage. However, when we look at the larger context, for example, the media expressing increased interest towards sugar and the supermarkets since 2014, which corresponds with foundation of *Action on Sugar*, then the fact Tesco's axe of Ribena drinks instigated so much interest can be seen as a further evidence of the personal interests of journalists driving the coverage. In other words, the axe of Ribena drinks is seen as a victory for the anti-sugar campaign and thus this coverage corresponds with generally positive coverage of the anti-sugar debate and the personal views of journalists in regards to the role of business in society. Furthermore, NGO has managed to build an agenda and media have joined this plight with increased coverage on both sugar and the supermarket industry, that has been on the rise since 2014 when *Action on Sugar* was founded.

It also seems that the nature of selecting sources is linked with personal views of journalists on corporations and the role of businesses in society (RQ3). In other words, journalists expressed views according to which corporations should look after the health of the population and tend to consider businesses socially irresponsible if they do not act according to this view. These views show that journalists are inclined to scrutinize business, and these views are then translated into sourcing stories in a way that favors NGOs more, i.e., journalists clearly stated that businesses do need to look after the health of the population, which is the vision of *Action on Sugar*.

When it comes to selecting sources and NGO being seen as an important source (RQ4), journalists tend to emphasize NGOs as a source they would consult for a story on sugar and health, however, no journalist has said they would consult industry or businesses, which should have something to say if their policies on what goes to shelves and what is being produced is being publicly discussed. Some journalists mentioned that NGO is always readily available to speak, which can contribute towards the popularity of NGOs as a source for media stories;

however, journalists did not report that industry is not available to speak with the press, and it is a known fact that all major corporations and business associations have PR departments willing to speak with journalists.

While previous research has already discovered that journalism practice seems to be driven by the practice of “churnalism” and excessive use of PR materials (Jackson & Moloney, 2016; Lewis et al., 2008; Davies, 2008), it seems that personal preferences and opinions can also be a potential obstacle in providing an impartial account on issues of the day. This is clearly evident from this study because journalists have demonstrated they know that obesity comes from variety of influences (e.g., lack of exercise, poor diet, lifestyle, etc.) however, when it came to the nature of selecting sources they tend to go along with preferring one type of source over the other, thus influencing the public agenda in a way that provides one-sided information.

While everyone can agree that *Action on Sugar* and other NGOs have a noble and positive agenda, and we may say that journalists are trying to help the citizens when pushing this agenda, the question still remains whether this serves the public interest. In other words, singling out one issue while ignoring others does not help the public because those who want to live healthier lives need to take into consideration exercise and balanced diet as contributors towards health (Policy Statement of American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011, p. 202; Dietz, 2006; Epstein et al., 2002; Goldfield et al., 2006; Haerens et al., 2006; Washington, 2005); however, the media seem to prefer NGO’s point of view. While other studies show that NGO has less prominence in the media than businesses (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2004; Gans, 1980; Lewis et al., 2006; Lewis et al., 2008; Reich, 2010; Sigal, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Van Leuven et al., 2013), this study has shown that NGOs have prominence at least when certain topics are in stake and that views of journalists have an influence on the selection of sources. The latter comes as a contribution of qualitative interviewing, which was added as a meaningful contribution to traditional agenda-setting research centered on quantitative content analysis. As results have shown, quantitative content analysis can only establish how media write about a certain issue and who the sources are, whereas qualitative analysis has provided an understanding on why news media write the way they do and who drives the agenda.

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