Community Network

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The Manufacture of Ignorance: David Haigh

The book: *Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance* provides valuable material about how the tobacco industry tried to undermine scientific evidence on the health impacts of smoking. It is a salutary lesson on how business counters government interventions about the advertising, tax and sale of certain dangerous products. We are now facing a backlash from the sugar industry as government faces the issue of reducing consumption of sugary products.

The tobacco case study starts by arguing that modern corporate crisis management came of age on 15 December 1953. CEOs of six major cigarette companies held a secret meeting with a top public relations man to respond to scientific evidence that smoking caused cancer. This was a crisis that would have to be managed forever 'if the industry that caused death was to defy death.' Over the years in the US, the tobacco industry strategy went through a number of phases.

1. **Fighting science with science.** This involved funding shonky science that showed that there was no evidence that smoking caused cancer. This was fed to friendly journalists. This period lasted for about 12 years until the US Surgeon-General's report in 1964 confirmed the link between tobacco smoking and cancer.

2. **The sowing of doubt.** The industry spread doubt about certain facts. They demanded 'balanced reporting', which meant providing the tobacco industry views in every article on the subject.

3. **Undermining science.** This included an attack on the scientific method itself including epidemiology and statistics. Conservative 'think-tanks' and friendly journalists backed up this attack.

4. **Final phase.** The tobacco industry now recognises the overwhelming evidence. They have re-positioned themselves as ‘responsible manufacturers of a risky product’.
The tobacco industry has survived and still markets a product that adds thousands of young people each day and kills millions around the world every year. After losing every battle, the tobacco industry has won the war.

It seems that the battle over sugar tax has quickly entered the second phase. The argument for a tax is that like the tax on tobacco, the consumption of sugar would drop if it were taxed. This argument is backed up by Pigovian economic theory as well as basic common sense: that the higher the price the lower the consumption and that those who create externalities (e.g. heart disease, diabetes and tooth decay) should pay the costs borne by others (e.g. in this case costs of sickness, and health care imposed on the state sector). But industry is fighting back against the tax proposal. Companies like Cadbury Chocolate and pressure groups in New Zealand like the Taxpayers Union claim that the tax will have no health benefits.

The arguments against a tax run something like this:

- There is no proof that consumption will drop due to the tax.
- Poor people will be most affected by a tax because they are the ones that eat more sugar than others.
- It will be complicated to administer.
- Governments shy away from imposing new taxes.
- Government should focus on promoting healthy life styles such as diet and exercise to improve health outcomes.

The New Zealand government wants to reduce sugar consumption but through education rather than through regulation. Health Minister Coleman said that government prefers self-regulation to reduce levels of sugar in food products. When we consider the outcomes of self-regulating industries like mining and forestry we have cause for concern. A combined approach that includes both taxation and education will have greater chances of success. The argument that the tax will be regressive (i.e. have a greater impact on poor people than others) does not make much sense. The poor are key to reducing sugar consumption as they have higher rates of heart disease and diabetes as a result of high sugar consumption. Ill health is a burden that they and their families have to bear and reducing sugar consumption will be positive in terms of their wellbeing.
In addition, the tax collected could be used to further benefit people through green prescriptions such as subsidies for exercise programmes.

A tax on sugar products is already in place in countries like Norway, Hungary, France, Mexico and some US states. The momentum is building around the world for the introduction of a sugar tax. Already, the outcome for Mexico and other countries has been positive. Our own government is in denial but eventually even they will need to listen to sensible policy proposals from reputable health and medical associations. The costs of these preventable diseases will become a burden that the state will be unable to afford.


David Haigh