Vested interests in addiction research and policy
Why do we not see the corporate interests of the alcohol industry as clearly as we see those of the tobacco industry?

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ABSTRACT

Aims To compare the current status of global alcohol corporations with tobacco in terms of their role in global governance and to document the process by which this difference has been achieved and the consequences for alcohol control policy. Methods Participant observation in the global political arena, review of industry materials (submissions, publications, conference presentations, websites) and review of published literature formed the basis for the current analysis. Results Recent events in the global political arena have highlighted the difference in perception of the alcohol and tobacco industries which has allowed alcohol corporations to participate in the global governance arena in a way in which tobacco has not been able. The transnational producers of alcohol have waged a sophisticated and successful campaign during the past three decades, including sponsorship of intergovernmental events, funding of educational initiatives, research, publications and sponsoring sporting and cultural events. A key aspect has been the framing of arguments to undermine perceptions of the extent of alcohol-related harms to health by promoting ideas of a balance of benefits and harms. An emphasis on the heaviest drinkers has been used to promote the erroneous idea that ‘moderate’ drinkers experience no harm and a goal of alcohol policy should be to ensure they are unaffected by interventions. This leads to highly targeted interventions towards the heaviest drinkers rather than effective regulation of the alcohol market. Conclusion A sophisticated campaign by global alcohol corporations has promoted them as good corporate citizens and framed arguments with a focus on drinkers rather than the supply of alcohol. This has contributed to acceptance in the global governance arena dealing with policy development and implementation to an extent which is very different from tobacco. This approach, which obscures the contribution supply and marketing make to alcohol-related harm, has also contributed to failure by governments to adopt effective supply-side policies.

Keywords Alcohol, corporations, global governance, policy, tobacco, vested interests.

The adoption of the Political Declaration on Non Communicable Disease (NCD) by the United Nations in September 2011 provided insight into the current politics of health. Involvement of those with conflicts of interest due to commercial involvement in risk factors for NCDs has been canvassed [1]. The events around the Political Declaration also provided a stark illustration of the difference in the way the tobacco and alcohol industries are perceived.

At the United Nations (UN) High Level Meeting on NCDs and the meeting of the Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) network (the NCD Alliance), which preceded it, the difference in the perception of the two industries could not have been clearer. There were no representatives of the tobacco industry in the meetings and a very clear message was conveyed in every session that tobacco was a priority for action globally, regionally and nationally. In stark contrast, participants in the UN meeting included representatives from global alcohol producers: Anheuser-Busch InBev, Diageo plc, SABMiller plc, Molson Coors Brewing Company and a Washington-based organization funded by the biggest global producers, the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP), SAB Miller, Diageo,
Heineken and Kirin Holdings are also members of the World Economic Forum, one of the participants in the UN HLM, from which the tobacco industry is excluded [2].

As far back as the 1980s, the alcohol producers were voicing concerns within their industries that there was a danger of alcohol facing ‘not dissimilar threats’ to the tobacco industry. The 1984 Grand Metropolitan document ‘Threats to the Drinks Industry’ urged the alcohol industry to counter these threats by putting money into alcohol education and other projects while ensuring that alcohol retained its positive image in the public mind in order to neutralize the pressures for more restrictions [3]. Analysis of the CEO’s Issues Books of Phillip Morris (who owned the Miller Brewing Company), released under the Master Settlement Act, highlighted concerns throughout the decade of the 1990s; they emphasized the key threats as being tighter restrictions on advertising, marketing and sales; strong enforced labelling including health warnings; blood alcohol content lowering; and measures to increase taxes and legal drinking age [4].

What has followed gives every appearance of a consistent and coherent strategy on the part of the alcohol producers to establish their credibility as ‘partners’ in efforts to address the global expansion of alcohol-related harm. In addition to direct lobbying, the producers and their front organizations (i.e. apparently independent organizations receiving finance from them) have engaged in sophisticated stakeholder marketing to ensure that governments, intergovernmental organizations and even NGO networks see the alcohol industry as ‘part of the solution’.

Their status as good corporate citizens has been enhanced by their sponsorship of high-profile political events. In 2005 [the year the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was established by the World Health Organization (WHO)] Diageo, one of the transnational corporations most active in this strategy, sponsored the G8 meeting held in Gleneagles Hotel, Scotland [5,6]. More recently in 2011, Diageo, with Browary Polski and the Brewers of Europe, sponsored Parliament Magazine’s reception marking the transfer of the European Union (EU) Council Presidency to Poland [7] leading a European NGO to write a letter of protest about the event which, in their view, ‘provided an opportunity in the political space for the alcohol industry to enhance their influence on the European politicians and Members of the European Parliament’ [8].

Another important tool of the alcohol industry’s stakeholder marketing is to provide support for educational interventions. This both enhances the corporation’s standing but also focuses attention on educational approaches which evaluation research has found to be largely ineffective in changing drinking behaviour [9,10], thereby posing no major threat to the industry’s sales. Particularly incongruous is Diageo’s funding of the UK National Organization for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in order to teach midwives to advise expectant mothers of the risks of drinking in pregnancy [11]. The rise in heavy episodic consumption by women of childbearing age in Britain is fuelled by changes in women’s role and economic independence, but facilitated and enhanced by marketing which targets women, including the development of new beverages, the Ready to Drinks (RTDs). A majority of women reduce their consumption when they know they are pregnant [12], but the likelihood of conception when heavily intoxicated [13] has increased because of this population-level increase in heavy episodic consumption [14–16]. Education in emerging markets has been linked with efforts to ward off regulation, as in the example of beer producers in Brazil who, while lobbying not to be included in proposed advertising restrictions, funded education for minors, drink driving campaigns and donated several breathalysers [17].

The pervasive ‘drink responsibly’ alcohol industry campaigns have been analysed and shown to be ‘strategically ambiguous’, engendering positive corporate images [18]. In Australia recent analysis has shown the way in which a front organization focused on educational approaches, Drinkwise, was cited in submissions from industry interests to create an impression of social responsibility while promoting interventions that maintain profits and campaigning against effective interventions [19].

Other funding approaches to building their good corporate citizen status have included research and sponsorship. Funding alcohol research, such as the Diageo input to University College Dublin’s project on health risk behaviour of young adults [20], does not cost a great deal in the context of the budgets of the transnational corporations (TNCs) involved, but does provide a platform for their claim for a role in policy development and implementation. Sponsorship of high-profile sporting and cultural events (recent global events include: Budweiser’s 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup; Molson’s 2011 Vancouver Olympics; Heineken’s 2011 Rugby World Cup) contributes to the normalization and positive resonance of the product. In Thailand a survey found that 71% of the youth audience of the 2006 Soccer World Cup broadcast, which was supported solely by ThaiBev (the major national brewer), appreciated the support and wanted to repay the sponsor (Phoojadkarn Newspaper 13 October 2006, cited in [21]). In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), one of the smallest economies in South East Asia, hosting the South East Asian Games was said to have been made possible only because of sponsorship by Beer Lao, a prominently marketed national brand, part-owned by government and partly by Carlsberg. Industry’s programme of activity with the goal of influencing policy options in an industry-friendly but less
effective direction has led to contestation over their involvement in the policy arena, with limited success. In the development of the WHO Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol [22], the inclusion of ‘economic operators’ in the list of stakeholders with whom WHO would ‘collaborate’ (as opposed to consult) was an issue of considerable debate [6].

The outcome was a compromise: one that allowed some distance from industry interests in the development of the strategy but also provided some opportunity for direct input to WHO (as well as the usual influence on member states). In the process, between the Working Paper (prepared by the Secretariat, March 2008) [23] and World Health Assembly Executive Board meeting in January 2010, and following consultation with economic operators [24], among others, a number of industry-friendly changes occurred. These were: insertion of ‘economic operators’ as actors in implementation of the strategy; and softening of language on taxation including removal of recommendations on: taxing beverages with ‘special appeal to adolescents’. Language regarding the liability of sellers and servers was also softened. Regarding a key issue for industry, protecting their ability to market their brands, the Working Draft’s proposals included: ‘restricting or banning direct or indirect marketing in certain or all media and restricting or banning sponsorship activities that promote alcoholic beverages…’ within a ‘regulatory framework, preferably with a legislative basis, with appropriate and timely sanctions’. This was also softened by replacing ‘restricting or banning’ with ‘regulating’ and reference to ‘setting up regulatory or co-regulatory frameworks, preferably with a legislative basis, and supported when appropriate by self-regulatory measures’ [22].

Self-regulation in this context refers to voluntary codes implemented by the industries involved in marketing and which research has shown to be ineffective in reducing the impact of marketing on young people [10]. To promote self-regulation is a key priority for industry and one of three current priorities for ICAP, which has run a number of regional workshops on ‘self-regulation’ of alcohol marketing, with the participation by government officials [25,26]. The message that appears to be being conveyed is that this approach is accepted internationally as the most appropriate response [27].

Active engagement of industry players in policy development and implementation also takes place at the national level in mature markets [28] and emerging markets. ICAP has been active in countries with large, youthful populations and growing economies where the expansion of supply and marketing of commercial alcohol yields rich pickings for the TNCs. Their role in Africa in collaboration with SAB Miller in co-hosting stakeholder meetings to develop alcohol policy has been documented [29], as has their focus on strategies that have been found to be largely ineffective, rather than the interventions for which there is a strong evidence base [10]. Their efforts have not gone unchallenged and in Malawi, one of the countries concerned, subsequent alcohol policy development, carried out without interference from commercial interests, documented the influence exerted by the alcohol industry including: targeted and strategic funding of social development initiatives, promotion of divide and rule by sponsoring ‘friendly’ civil society organizations, offers to sponsor and/or facilitate formation of the alcohol policy while also campaigning extensively against the use of alcohol testing devices for drivers, lobbying law-makers and aggressively marketing their products [30].

ICAP has also co-hosted national policy development workshops in Vietnam and in Papua New Guinea in the past few years, both countries with growing economies and youthful populations, and moving from non-commercial alcohol to commercially produced and marketed branded beverages providing enormous opportunity for expansion into new sectors of the population and new drinking patterns. The messages in the Vietnam meeting from ICAP included ‘excessive regulation has negative consequences… industry members have a strong track record… there are opportunities for further industry action, often in partnership’ [31] and from a participant introduced as being from the South Australian state government (also a consultant to ICAP), advice that the goal of sustainable alcohol policy should be to ‘maximise benefits and minimise harms… willingness to accept the reality of benefits and risks… do not alienate significant groups of stakeholders’ [32].

Asia Pacific Breweries, a major player in Vietnam, is reported in trade literature as expecting double-digit growth in beer demand to continue [33] and Diageo is reported as taking a ‘softly-softly approach’ to ‘placate potentially volatile authorities in a one party state’ by partnering with local spirits company, giving them an opportunity to reach consumers of local spirits [34].

While availability of data is limited, the WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol [35] reports that Vietnamese consumption rising and available survey data suggest marked increases in the proportions of young people aged 14–25 years becoming drinkers [36].

The global alcohol industry is engaged in a race against time, to ensure the diffusion and normalization of drinking in emerging markets before governments and civil society are able to ensure adequate policies to limit the spread of heavy drinking and alcohol-related harm in the population.

How has the alcohol industry framed the issue of alcohol-related harm to achieve, in contrast to the relatively more constrained tobacco industry, an active role in
Alcohol corporate interests compared with tobacco

policy environments? As is the case with the tobacco corporations, the alcohol corporations are producers and marketers of an addictive substance which causes significant harm. The net effect of alcohol consumption on health is detrimental, with an estimated 3.8% of all global deaths and 4.6% of global disability-adjusted life-years attributable to alcohol. Disease burden is related closely to average volume of alcohol consumption and, for every unit of exposure, is strongest in poor people and in those who are marginalized from society [37]. Alcohol contributes to the NCD epidemic, primarily cardiovascular disease and cancers, but also to injury and mental ill health and, importantly, has significant impact beyond the drinker to those in the family and work-place [38,39].

The messages conveyed by the comprehensive, sophisticated and well-resourced stakeholder marketing campaigns carried out during the past three decades have not, by and large, attempted to deny the harms. They have, however, attempted to minimize their importance by a parallel focus on benefits: the industry has facilitated the promulgation of the popular ‘moderate drinking is good for you’ messages [40,41] and framed the appropriate societal response to alcohol harms as finding a balance between benefits and harms [42]. It has also attempted to qualify the nature of causal relationships, in an approach very reminiscent of the tobacco industry [43]; for example, in relation to alcohol’s causal role in aggression [44].

Industry messages have presented and supported a strong focus on the drinker at the expense of the substance, locating the source of harm in ‘heavy drinkers’ who are a small minority and who are contrasted with the majority of social or moderate drinkers. The emphasis on the drinker also allows for an emphasis on targeting heavy drinkers by education or treatment as the most appropriate approach.

This framing, that the drinker, not the substance, is key and the benefits of moderate drinking must be preserved, then allows for the stance, conveyed consistently by industry stakeholder marketing, that the goal of alcohol policy should be to encourage moderate drinking (with an apparent implication in emerging markets that abstainers will be recruited to moderate drinking).

Focusing on a minority of heavy drinkers allows a deflection of attention away from the prevention paradox demonstrated in a number of countries, especially those relatively accepting of intoxication, which shows that the heaviest drinkers by volume of consumption account for less than half the acute alcohol-related harms—a finding which supports the use of population-wide policy measures rather a focus on the heaviest drinkers only [45].

It also deflects attention away from the reality of the alcohol market. Analysis of consumption in some mature markets has shown that a large proportion of the alcohol produced and sold by the producers is consumed in heavy drinking sessions with increased risk of harm; in a number of western markets this has been found to be at least half the market (more in the market consumed by younger consumers) [46,47], with obvious implications for industry sales and profits of any reduction in harmful drinking levels.

Industry messages are framed in terms of individual rights and the need to balance these against societal needs. There is no acknowledgement of the role of the government as regulator on behalf of the collective good. The messages promulgated by the alcohol industry contrast clearly with those which have become widely accepted in relation to tobacco, where the focus is on the substance itself and the methods the industry uses to market and supply it to consumers, leading to a regulatory response which controls price, accessibility and marketing in order to reduce harm.

For a number of reasons, including the pharmacology of the two drugs, the societal goal for alcohol in many countries will be different from that of tobacco, a reduction in harm rather than an eradication of use. However, while the goals may differ the drivers of alcohol-related harm are the same, over-supply and marketing practices, as are used in tobacco promotion, and the policy tools available to reduce harm are also the same. These include, most importantly, imposition of alcohol-specific taxes which reflect alcohol content and affect affordability, restriction on supply (including enforced minimum purchase age), restrictions on marketing and drink driving interventions such as establishment of blood/breath alcohol levels and random breath testing.

The consistent activity by the alcohol industry and its front organizations to undermine the uptake of these policies in both mature and emerging markets argues for their exclusion from the policy arena in the same way that the tobacco industry is excluded. Just as there is a fiduciary duty of cigarette producers to their shareholders to achieve the best possible profit outcome, where necessary undermining effective policy in order to protect and enhance sales, so too must alcohol producers and marketers. The conflict of interest is the same.

Declaration of interests

None.

References


