

How the alcohol industry seeks to undermine public health policy: aims and strategies

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Co

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See: <https://spectrum.ed.ac.uk/>



SPECTRUM

Shaping Public hEalth poliCies
To Reduce ineqUalities and harM

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What are the AI aims?

1. To defend and expand the market nationally and internationally
2. To actively displace public health from the alcohol space (hence it funds **alternatives** like charities and 'education' campaigns and interventions)
3. To promote and sustain an unregulated/self-regulated industry

What are their **strategies** for achieving those aims?

- Policy substitution
- Lobbying
- Promoting public misinformation about the health harms
- ‘Education’ campaigns
- Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns
- Undermining science
- Normalisation (including among children)
- Legal threats and other measures used to produce a ‘chilling effect’
- Marketing

What are the framings and arguments that they use?

- “It’s a normal product”
- Responsibility framings (“Drink responsibly”)
- “Harmful use” in subgroups
- Behavioural framings (“drinking behaviour”)
- Need for “Targeted” interventions (especially underage drinking) vs population-level
- Problem deflation: “The problem is declining”
- Focus on “Peer pressure” as the problem
- Focus on Parents and teachers as the solution (rather than regulating marketing)
- Mixed messages

Alcohol misinformation strategies: manufacturing doubt about alcohol harms

- Cancer denialism
- FASD denialism and denial of harms of drinking in pregnancy
- CVD denialism
- Distortion of the evidence base

Alcohol industry and cancer denialism

- We collected and analysed publicly available information from 27 industry or industry-funded “social aspects public relations organisations” from around the world
 - Included websites, documents, other health guidance they disseminate to the public



drinkaware.co.uk
for the facts about alcohol

Three main industry strategies were identified:

- **Denial/Omission**
 - Denying or disputing any link with cancer, or selective omission of the relationship
- **Distortion**
 - Mentioning some cancer risk, but misrepresenting or obfuscating the nature or size of that risk
- **Distraction**
 - Focusing discussion away from the independent effects of alcohol

Breast and colorectal cancer risk appeared to be the most frequently misrepresented cancers (...*why?*)

Cancer denialism: Denial that alcohol causes cancer, particularly breast cancer

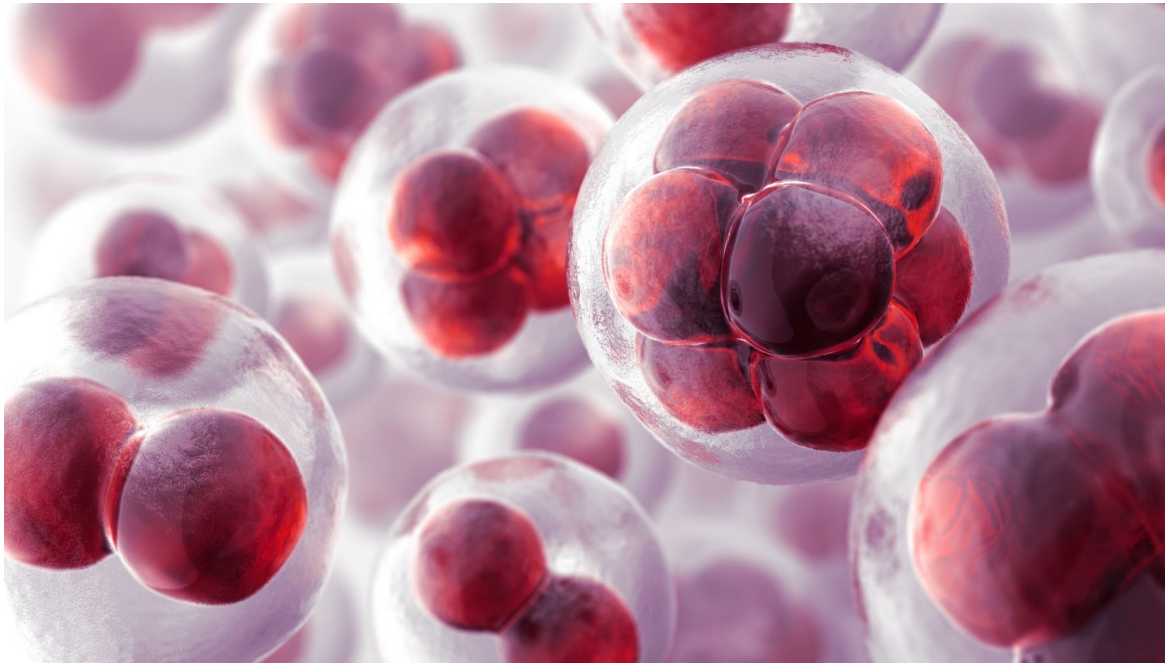
- A frequent approach was to present misleading information about the risk associated with 'light' or 'moderate' drinking:
- *Recent research suggests that light to moderate drinking is not significantly associated with an increased risk for total cancer in either men or women.*
International Alliance for Responsible Drinking
- SAB Miller website 'TalkingAlcohol.com' stated inaccurately that there is no link between alcohol and most cancers except for 'mainly cancers of the upper aerodigestive tract' and the liver
- *"...no causal relationship has been shown between moderate drinking and breast cancer"* Éduc'alcool

Selective omission: mentioning some diseases, omitting cancer

- Diageo's DrinkIQ.com website had a section entitled 'Alcohol's short-term and long-term effects on your body', listing alcohol dependence, pancreatic problems, liver cirrhosis, brain damage, death and 'physical and emotional health problems' – **but not cancer**
- Educ'alcool's webpage labelled 'The effects of moderate, regular alcohol consumption', mentioned cardiovascular and peripheral disease, stroke, gallstones, diabetes, psychosocial effects and 'other beneficial effects' - **but not cancer**

Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the "body of fact" that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy. Within the business we recognize that a controversy exists. However, with the general public the consensus is that cigarettes are in some way harmful to the health. If we are successful in establishing a controversy at the public level, then there is an opportunity to put across the real facts about smoking and health. Doubt is also the limit of our "product". Unfortunately,

B&W memo, 1969



Pregnancy, Fertility, Breastfeeding, and Alcohol Consumption: An Analysis of Framing and Completeness of Information Disseminated| by Alcohol Industry–Funded Organizations

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Alternate causation

- Brown-Forman's website, which said that it aims to present a "balanced body of research" with "opinions on various sides of issues," stated that the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure on FAS are influenced "by factors including nutrition, metabolism, genetics, and maternal age" and also socioeconomic status.
- **Educ'alcool** stated, "Remember, too, that alcohol is never the only factor involved in the development of the baby. The parents' basic health, their medical history, their lifestyle, the mother's diet, external pollutants, tobacco and drug use during pregnancy all have an impact."

Alcohol Industry activities in schools



- **Targeting children:** Analysis of school educational materials and programmes produced by organisations with alcohol industry funding
- All programmes promote familiarisation and normalisation of alcohol. The role of the industry, and marketing practices are near-invisible across the organisations' materials.
- Misinformation about the health harms (especially selective omission and distortion of the risk of breast and colon cancer; and FASD)

Schalkwyk et al. (2022) Distilling the curriculum: An analysis of alcohol industry-funded school-based youth education programmes

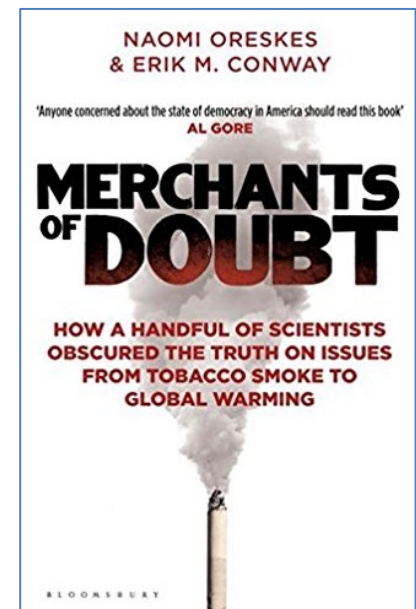
<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0259560>

- Selective omission of cancer, and breast and colorectal cancer in particular were seen in some materials
- Liver disease, liver cancer, and oral/oesophageal cancers are sometimes included
- Drinkaware's lesson on "understanding" the risks and harms associated with alcohol included a range of short- and long-term harms, **but omitted pregnancy and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).**

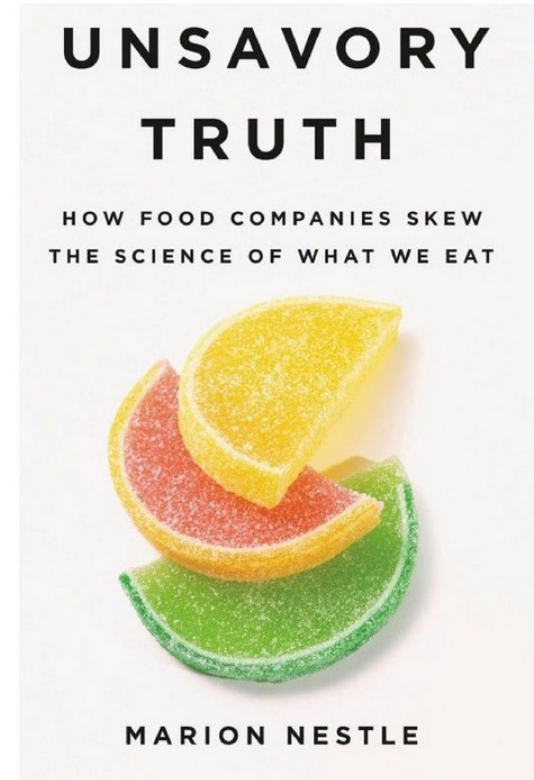
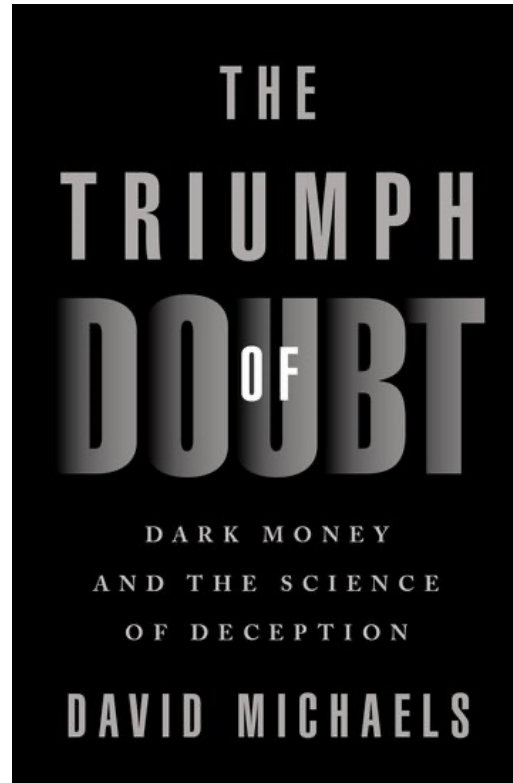
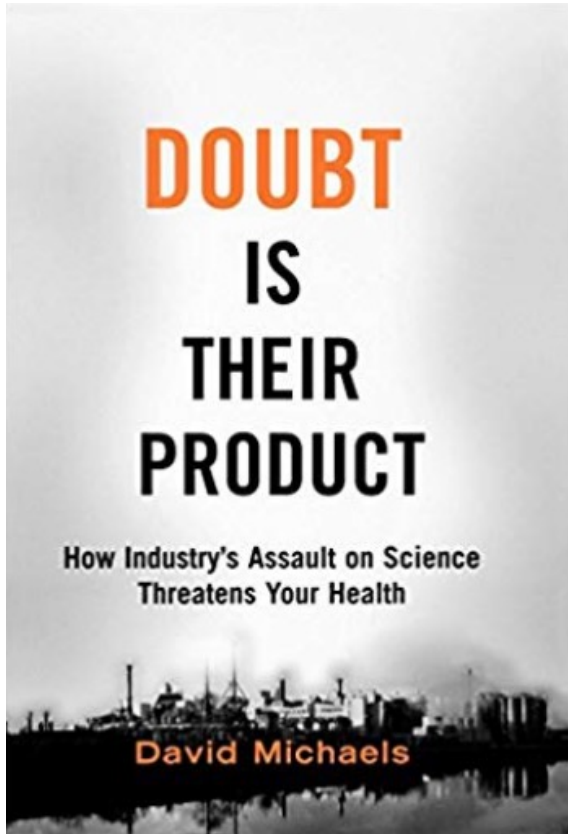
- The discourse used within alcohol industry-related materials serves to maintain the view that it is young people, their uninformed choices and behaviours, their culture, their lack of resistance to the influence of others (particularly peers) and inability to “stay in control” or manage stress, that constitute the problem –
- Conversely, alcohol itself, when used responsibly, is presented as a normal, if not beneficial, product that adults enjoy

A classic tobacco industry tactic: sowing doubt by claiming there's uncertainty about the causes, and the mechanisms

- Fossil fuel industry: Disputing climate change
- Alcohol industry: Sowing uncertainty about alcohol and cancer
- Sugar industry: sugar consumption and obesity
- Asbestos industry: asbestos and mesothelioma
- Gambling industry: disputing causality, demanding perfect evidence
- ...and many others



...further reading...



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