

Framing of nutrition policy issues in the Australian news media, 2008-2018

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Poor diet is one of the leading causes of illness, disability and death internationally.¹ Governments around the world have been encouraged to implement evidence-based population-level nutrition policies, such as sugar-sweetened beverage taxes and regulation of advertising targeting children, to reduce the impact of nutrition-related diseases.² Despite evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these policies, many countries, including Australia, have failed to implement them.³

Policy change is a complex and dynamic process that involves many factors. One factor impacting on the likelihood of policy change is concern from policymakers that the public does not support the change.⁴ The media plays a particularly powerful role in influencing public opinion on health policy issues as they are a key source of information for much of the general public.⁵ How the public receive and interpret this information can be influenced by how media communicators choose to frame select issues.⁶

Frames shape how the public perceive information by excluding or emphasising particular information.⁷ The process of framing typically has four components: 1) a defined problem, 2) causal agents of the problem, 3) judgement of the causal agents and their effects, and 4) suggested solutions.

Two frames of interest in the media reporting of nutrition issues are episodic and thematic frames.⁶ Episodic framing relates to individual behaviours and discrete events. An example of episodic framing is a news story that reports obesity as being caused by eating too much fast food. In this instance a reader

Abstract

Objective: Media framing of nutrition policy issues has been said to play a critical role in influencing public and political support for these issues. We examined the coverage of nutrition policy issues in the Australian news media to determine the key frames and expert sources used by the media.

Methods: News articles published in Australia between 2008 and 2018 were retrieved from key media databases. Content analysis was used to identify nutrition policy issues reported and expert sources used. Frames were identified using a theoretical framework.

Results: Seven nutrition policy categories were identified. Expert sources included representatives from public health, food industry and politicians. Six dominant frames were identified: government responsibility, industry responsibility, societal frame, individual responsibility, parental responsibility and nanny state frame. Nutrition experts tended to use thematic frames while government and food industry sources used episodic frames to deflect responsibility onto individuals.

Conclusions: Despite high media representation of thematic frames and government responsibility in addressing nutrition policy issues, limited regulatory policy action has occurred in Australia.

Implications for public health: Further research is needed to better understand different frames and their effectiveness in influencing public and political opinion. Greater coherence amongst health advocates would be beneficial to ensure a collective, recognised voice on issues.

Key words: framing, nutrition, obesity, policy, media analysis

may assume that obesity is caused by poor food choices and is the responsibility of the individual, which is not an accurate representation of the complexity of the issue.⁸ A thematic frame puts issues into a broader, societal context so a news story that reports increasing rates of obesity in a community with high numbers of fast food restaurants and limited healthy food options may leave the reader with the impression that government intervention or policy is required rather than attributing responsibility to the individual alone.⁸ Thus, through framing,

the news media not only plays an important role in shaping public understanding about nutrition issues but also who the public sees as being responsible for the issue.⁶

Who the media choose as an expert source in nutrition policy reporting is also of interest in the framing debate. Previous research has identified two sectors as frequently chosen expert sources in matters of nutrition policy, that of the food industry and the public health sector.⁹ Being chosen as an 'expert' for a media story can offer a strategic advantage for an individual and the organisation they

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work for as it provides an opportunity to promote their framing of an issue.¹⁰

Studying the way in which nutrition policy issues are framed by the Australian news media may provide insight into why regulatory policy reform has been previously unsuccessful.¹¹ This understanding can help advance strategies to influence nutrition policy debate and to progress nutrition policy issues to affect large-scale change. This study aims to examine the extent and nature of coverage of nutrition policy issues in the Australian news media and to determine the key frames used by the media. Additionally, the study will attempt to identify which expert sources are represented in media coverage.

Methods

Content analysis was used to examine the coverage of nutrition policy issues in the Australian news media between 2008 and 2018 and to determine the key frames and expert sources used by the media. Articles in this analysis were drawn from the Factiva and the Australian and New Zealand Newsstream databases (via ProQuest) of Australian newspapers. Articles accessed were published over an 11-year period, between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2018, as advocacy and policy processes are best studied over periods of a decade or more.¹² The articles included the key words 'food and health' or 'diet and health' or 'nutrition and health' and 'polic^{ic}' or 'ban' or 'law' or 'tax' in the headline or lead paragraph.

To be included in the analysis, articles had to meet the following criteria:

- was primarily about a public health nutrition policy issue/s;
- the proposed policy was intended for the Australian public at a local, state or national level;

- had appeared in the news, features, opinion or health sections; and
- had a minimum article length of 150 words to ensure substantive coverage.

Public health nutrition policy issues were defined as any government policy that impacted on or improved the nutritional status of the population. Articles were excluded if they were about people from countries other than Australia, or if they did not describe causes and/or solutions of the nutrition policy issue.

Each included media article was read by KW. Data extracted included: title, author, date of publication, newspaper source, nutrition issue covered, whether the issue was local, state or national, and key voices and politicians/political parties. Ten per cent of the data extraction was cross-checked by KC. A content analysis¹³ of the extracted nutrition issues was undertaken by KW. This included iteratively coding key policy issues and then integrating these codes into related categories. The number of media articles in each category was documented. If an article focused on a single policy issue, such as a sugar tax, it was allocated to the appropriate category, for example, food or beverage tax. If several policy issues were discussed in one article as part of broader policy reform, such as a sugar tax, bans on unhealthy food marketing and a public healthy eating campaign, these were allocated to the preventative health category. See Table 1 for examples of each category.

Frames were identified using the theoretical framework from Russell et al.¹⁴ (see Box 1). We applied this framework to identify the dominant problem and solution in each article, which was classified as the dominant frame. Frames were not mutually exclusive; therefore, multiple frames may have been identified for a single article. Exemplar quotes for each dimension were documented.

Data coding was undertaken by KW and 10% of the total sample was double-coded and cross-checked by KC. Disagreements were identified in eight per cent of the articles, however, these were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved.

Results

The database searches retrieved 754 articles. After duplicates were removed, 632 articles remained, which were assessed for eligibility. A total of 219 articles met all four inclusion criteria and were included for analysis. The number of newspaper articles about Australian nutrition policy issues fluctuated over the 11-year time period with the most articles written in 2008 to 2009 (n=62) and 2017 to 2018 (n=67) while 2014 had the lowest number of articles written (n=5) (see Figure 1).

The top 10 newspaper sources represented state-based newspapers for each Australian state and territory except for the Northern Territory and included one Australia-wide publication (*The Australian*). These 10 sources contributed 80% (n=176) of articles. The remaining 20% (n=43) of articles came from one Australia-wide publication (*The Australian Financial Review*) and 23 other state-based publications including regional newspapers (n=19).

Of the 219 articles, 176 articles reported on nutrition issues at a national level, 37 articles were based on state issues while only six articles reported on local nutrition issues. The most frequent topic was food and beverage taxes or subsidies (n=67) followed by food advertising and marketing (n=44), which had a strong focus on advertising targeting children (n=37) (see Table 1).

The nutrition policy topics covered in the articles changed over time (see Figure 2). In 2008, food advertising and marketing was the most reported topic (n=14), however, articles on this topic declined in the subsequent years. Food and beverage taxes was the most reported issue over the whole time period and had a surge in reporting in 2017 and 2018 with 11 and 16 articles respectively. Articles on nutrition education were the least reported policy topic (n=7).

Expert sources

Three-quarters of the articles (n=164) contained 288 quotes from 90 different individuals or organisations. Health

Box 1: Theoretical framework for framing analysis of Australian news articles.¹⁴

Dimensions	Key aspects	Prompts for coding
Framing functions	Causation	What/who is identified as the main cause of the problem? Is the cause described as episodic or thematic?
	Responsibility	Who is responsible for resolving the problem?
	Solutions	What are the proposed solutions to the problem?
	Harms/Risks	What are the harms/risks of the problem? What are the harms/risks of the proposed solutions? Who is at risk of the problem/proposed solutions?
Symbolic devices	Metaphors	Are there phrases identified as metaphors?
	Stories	Are there stories identified in the newspaper articles?
	Statistics/numerical data	Are numbers or statistics used to emphasise a point?

professionals from non-government organisations such as the Cancer Council, university academics, nutritionists and dietitians were classified as ‘nutrition advocates’ and made up 74% of comments (n=214). Representing ‘food industry’ were groups such as the Australian Association of National Advertisers, the Australian Beverages Council and the Australian Breakfast Cereal Manufacturers.

Despite food industry making up only 21% (n=60) of comments, the single most prolific source used across all articles was the Australian Food and Grocery Council with comments in 27 articles. This was followed by the Obesity Policy Coalition (n=25), Deakin University academics (n=20) and the Australian Medical Association (n=15). The Australian Food and Grocery Council were most vocal on issues relating to unhealthy food advertising and marketing and taxes on unhealthy foods and sugar-sweetened beverages.

The food industry generally presented a united front in their counter-arguments towards regulatory policy interventions. In advocating for industry self-regulation to monitor food advertising to children, the Australian Association of National Advertisers commented that the intention to self-regulate “must remove any doubt about the sincerity of the marketers in wanting to be part of caring for the future of our children”.¹⁵ This was re-iterated by Australian Food and Grocery Council who stated that “industry takes this issue very seriously”, also in relation to advertising self-regulation.¹⁶

Contrasting the unity of food industry, nutrition advocates did not always present cohesive statements. In the article ‘Bid for global ban on TV ads’,¹⁷ a public health focused, consumer advocacy group stated “parents are tired of being told it’s all their problem when multimillion dollar advertising campaigns relentlessly market unhealthy food and drinks to their children”. In the same article, a private-practice nutritionist stated that parents had to take responsibility for the foods they bought and “say ‘No’ when their kids ask for unhealthy products”.

Quotes from politicians were less common with only 23% of articles presenting political statements (n=51). Former federal Australian Minister for Health, Nicola Roxon, was quoted most often across articles (n=14), followed by several state based Health Ministers from the main Australian centre-left party (Australian Labor Party) and a Greens Senator.

Figure 1: News articles about Australian nutrition policy issues 2008 - 2018.

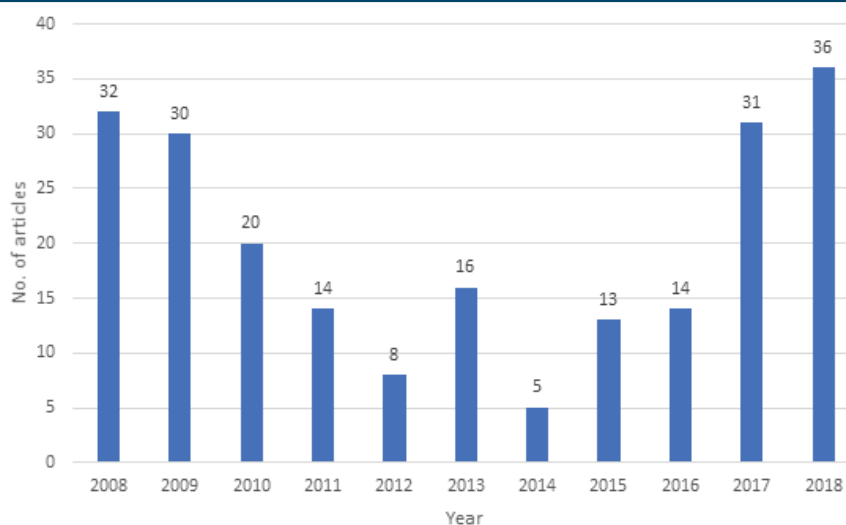


Table 1: Definition of nutrition policy categories and number of articles found in each category (n=219).

Policy category	Definition of policy category	No. of articles	No. of articles in sub-categories
Food and beverage tax	Taxes or subsidies	67	Food taxes or subsidies (n=34) Tax on sugar or sugar sweetened beverage tax (n=29) Tax on red meat (n=4)
Food advertising and marketing	Advertising or marketing of unhealthy foods	44	Unhealthy food advertising/marketing to children (n=36) Unhealthy food advertising in general (n=6) Unhealthy food advertising in sport (n=1) Unhealthy food advertising in children’s sport (n=1)
Preventative health	Broad policy reform using multiple solutions	40	Multiple solutions e.g. education program, taxes on certain foods, food advertising reforms (n=36) National food/nutrition policy (n=3) Preventative health taskforce (n=1)
Healthy public places	Nutrition initiatives or policies for specific settings	29	Hospitals (n=14) Schools (n=5) Government buildings and workplaces (n=4) Supermarkets (n=4) Sporting events (n=1) University campus (n=1)
Regulation and reform	Regulatory initiatives or food reformulation changes.	18	Food industry regulation generally (n=8) Reformulation to decrease salt, sugar or saturated fat (n=6) Banning trans fats (n=3) Banning the sale of ‘super-sized junk food’ (n=1)
Food labelling	Food or menu labelling, health claims.	14	Food labelling generally (n=7) The Health Star Rating System (n=4) Menu labelling (n=3)
Education	Education to improve public’s awareness of healthy eating or chronic disease	7	Education campaigns (n=7)

The Australian Labor Party was the most frequently quoted political party (17% of articles, n=38) while the Liberal National Party (centre-right) was quoted on 8% of articles (n=18) and the Greens commented on 4% of articles (n=8).

Framing functions

Causation

Frames were coded to identify who was the main cause of the problem and, in particular,

whether the cause was described as episodic or thematic. The majority of media frames in this study were identified primarily as thematic (73%, n=159) while 26% of articles incorporated both thematic and episodic framing (n=58) and 1% used only episodic framing (n=2). A number of specific frames fell under these two categories (see Table 2), with the thematic frames of government responsibility and industry responsibility most common.

Responsibility

The actors responsible for solving the various nutrition issues were identified as the government in 48% of articles (n=106). This was represented either as 'positive PR' for governments and involved reporting on various government initiatives to resolve nutrition issues such as the article 'Controls target public hospitals'¹⁸ announcing the introduction of a government policy to limit discretionary foods within state health facilities; or alternatively, articles called on the government to act on nutrition issues such as the article 'Anti-obesity group calls for diet survey as pressure mounts to tax junk food'¹⁹ which called on the Australian Government to fund a nutritional survey to determine which discretionary foods should be taxed.

The food industry was identified as responsible for nutrition issues in 32% of articles (n=70). Several articles highlighted the role industry played in influencing government policy to prevent tighter regulatory controls as in the article 'Lobbying by big food 'undermines' public health'²⁰ which detailed "direct evidence" of food industry using "political tactics" to influence public health policy. Food industry was also criticised for their lack of meaningful contribution to preventative health efforts and putting company profits before public health.²¹

The individual responsibility frame and societal frame were used 21% (n=45) and 20% (n=43) of the time respectively. Individuals were both "encouraged to share responsibility for good health"²² as well as take "responsibility for what food they put in their mouths."²³ Societal frames discussed how

Table 2: Media frames identified in newspaper articles analysed (n=293).

Media Frame	N	%
Government responsibility (T)	106	48
Industry responsibility (T)	70	32
Individual responsibility (E)	45	21
Societal (T)	43	20
Nanny state (E)	15	7
Parental responsibility (E)	14	6

Notes:
Articles could be coded with more than one frame hence percentages do not sum to 100%
T = thematic frame
E = episodic frame

"environmental factors" impacted nutrition issues²⁴ with several articles discussing how low socio-economic status is correlated with poor nutritional intake and how planning laws can be amended to "reduce the spread of fast-food chain outlets".²⁵

The nanny state frame (n=15) used inflammatory language to direct responsibility away from government regulation and back to the individual, for example, "nanny state plan to put health ratings on packaged food".²⁶ One Liberal party politician labelled a state government's school canteen food policy as "public health totalitarianism".²⁷

The parental responsibility frame was the least dominant frame appearing in only 6% of articles (n=14). This frame was primarily used to direct responsibility away from both government and food industry. Food industry used the parental responsibility frame in its arguments against policy change, such as bans on television 'junk food' advertising with statements like "parents should be responsible for their children's weight and

diet"²⁸ and "parents are best placed to make the right food choices for their kids".²⁹

Solutions

Overwhelmingly, the most prominent solution was the call for government to introduce food taxes (n=74). This included a tax on 'junk food' (n=33), a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages (n=20), a tax on sugar (n=12), fast food tax (n=4), red meat tax (4) and a tax on people who are overweight (n=1). Thirteen articles paired the introduction of a tax with a call to subsidise fresh food such as fruit and vegetables.

The second most prominent solution was to ban or limit the advertising of unhealthy foods (n=51), with a focus on limiting television advertising of these foods to children. Ten articles called for changes to the marketing of unhealthy foods and, as with advertising, had a particular focus on children. Examples included the banning of cartoon characters on sugary cereals and banning toy giveaways.

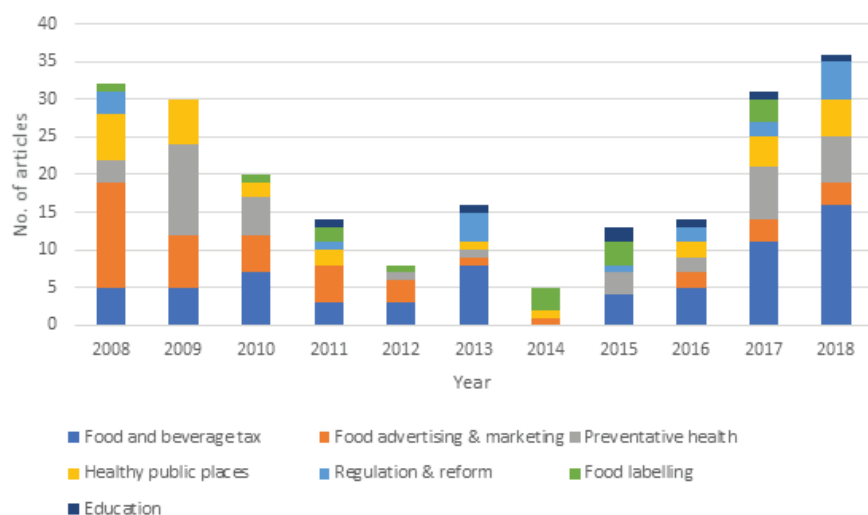
Other dominant solutions included improvements to food labelling (n=14), improvements to and use of the Health Star Rating system (n=9), product reformulation by food industry to lower the content of sugar, salt and saturated fat in pre-packaged foods (n=9) and an increase in public nutrition education (n=9).

Harms/risks

Health risks were overwhelmingly identified as the most significant harm to come from nutrition issues (n=144). This was followed by concerns that nutrition-related diseases placed an economic burden on healthcare systems (n=17).

The public, in particular children, were most often identified as being at risk from nutrition problems. Articles on 'junk food' marketing and advertising specifically identified children as being at most risk with some also identifying parents as being at risk of 'pester power'. Staff, patients and visitors were identified as at-risk groups in articles relating to unhealthy food in hospitals. Less commonly identified as being at risk were government and food industry and only two articles mentioned marginalised groups and people of low socioeconomic status as being at risk of 'junk food' advertising³⁰ and 'junk food' tax³¹ respectively.

Figure 2: Breakdown of nutrition issues in Australian newspaper over time 2008–2018.



Discussion

This study has explored Australian newspaper reporting of nutrition policy issues from 2008 to 2018. Investigation suggests that the news media did report nutrition policy issues, however, this fluctuated over the 11-year time period. There was a period of decline in nutrition policy reporting between 2011 and 2016, which could be explained by the corresponding turbulent time in Australian federal politics dominated by leadership challenges (2010–2013), the repeal of the carbon tax (2014), further leadership challenges (2015) and a federal election (2016). Several policy issues experienced an increase in reporting during 2017 and 2018. This could be attributed to the release of the National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions by the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council in 2017, although a causative relationship was not established by this study.

Surprisingly, nearly three-quarters of articles in this analysis were dominated by thematic frames. This marks a change from other international studies, which demonstrate the persistence of episodic frames in the media when reporting on obesity and nutrition related disease.³² One reason for the increase in thematic frames could be due to the focus of this media analysis solely on articles discussing nutrition policy issues which naturally apply to the population and broader, structural factors. Despite the high prevalence of thematic frames when reporting on nutrition policy, this has not translated into nutrition policy change consistent with the evidence base. Furthermore, public opinion studies demonstrate mixed levels of support for nutrition policy addressing structural factors at play for nutrition related disease both at the public and political level,³³ indicating that media framing of these issues may not have as powerful a role as once thought.

Factors that may contribute to the lack of public support for public health nutrition policy could lie in the specific frames employed in the articles.^{6,34} This analysis identified six media frames: government responsibility, industry responsibility, individual responsibility, societal, nanny state and parental responsibility. Nutrition advocates tended to utilise the thematic frames of government responsibility, industry responsibility and societal frames when presenting arguments in favour of nutrition

policy. Opponents of nutrition policies invoked the few uses of episodic frames of individual and parental responsibility and the nanny-state frame. These findings are in line with previous research^{35,36} that found that opponents of public health policies favoured frames that placed focus on individuals for making unhealthy lifestyle choices while proponents of policy change engaged systemic frames, drawing attention away from the individual to a broader, societal context. Nutrition advocates were vocal in their calls for government action and the government responsibility frame was most frequently used, which supports a growing body of evidence that shows when media reports on nutrition policies this frame is more likely to be used to demonstrate how government can implement change such as through the taxing of sugar or improving nutrition labelling.^{37–40}

The societal frame was not a dominant frame in this analysis. This frame was used to identify correlations between social determinants of health and poor nutrition and health outcomes. However, while low socioeconomic status and urban environments were identified in the news articles as contributors to these issues, there was limited discussion on other inequalities such as disability, gender, rural/remote living, and food access/security so that the public may not understand the true extent of the effects of social determinants and their contribution to nutrition outcomes. The limited use of this frame in the news media was found in previous research on media framing of childhood obesity which found that only 6% of news stories related causes of childhood obesity to societal issues.³⁴ Comparatively, the use of the societal frame had more prevalence in this study which aligns with research from Zhang et al. (2016) who found there has been a slight increase in the use of the societal frame within media reports.⁴¹

The individual responsibility and parental responsibility frames were favoured by the food industry as well as the government. These frames placed responsibility for the nutrition issue on the individual and related to behaviours that the individual was or was not undertaking such as excessive consumption of 'junk food' or not eating enough fruit and vegetables. Parents were blamed for giving in to 'pester power' from children and therefore needed to take more responsibility for just saying 'no'. This is a

common frame used by industry when an industry product is threatened, as is the case with proposed taxes (e.g. a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages).⁴² Corporations use their resources to actively promote their product while simultaneously challenging government regulation by redirecting responsibility to the individual or, in the case of children, to parents.⁴² Previous research has found the individual responsibility frame is pervasive in media coverage of public health issues^{9,43} and is responsible for perpetuating stigma and stereotypes associated with certain diseases.⁴⁴ However, the dominant use of the government responsibility frame in this study supports emerging international evidence that when media reports on proposed nutrition policies, the government responsibility frame is more dominant and may be an indication that media reporting is changing.^{37–40}

The use of the nanny-state frame criticised government regulation for impinging on personal freedoms. There was little challenge to this hyperbole from nutrition advocates, which is consistent with findings from other studies which found health advocates did little to contest nanny-state rhetoric when used by opponents of regulation.^{45,46}

Two sectors were predominantly utilised as expert sources by the Australian news media, nutrition advocates and the food industry. While nutrition advocates dominated newspaper commentary, the messages between public health organisations and individual nutrition spokespeople were not always consistent which contrasted with the united messages from food industry. Previous research has demonstrated that a lack of unity can limit the influence of the public health community, because politicians are less likely to listen to those in disagreement.^{47,48} Part of the reason for the lack of unity regarding the public health message is that not all 'experts' interviewed on the topics were 'public health nutrition experts'. This is a common scenario in the field of nutrition whereby declared 'subject experts' often lack formal training, reputable credentials or adherence to a professional code of conduct. Also, unlike the food industry which contains many groups working towards similar goals, nutrition advocates will often be more heterogenous and may see the issue in different ways depending on their background, experience and priorities.

Limitations

This study does not claim to be representative of the Australian media as only newspapers in the Factiva and Australian and New Zealand Newsstream databases were included in this study. With only 28% of Australians using print-based media to access news⁴⁹ we may have missed stories covered in online news, radio, television. This is an important media avenue that needs to be investigated in future research on this topic. Furthermore, as the study only analysed Australian media it makes the findings difficult to generalise beyond the Australian context. Finally, while we have analysed key frames appearing in news articles, this was a subjective process and we do not know how the articles were received and interpreted by different audiences.

Conclusions

This study has systematically explored media reporting of nutrition policy issues in the Australian print media using a theoretical informed framework to identify framing elements. We identified six framing functions: government responsibility, industry responsibility, individual responsibility, societal, nanny state and parental responsibility. The government responsibility frame was the most dominant, which indicates that media reporting is changing. Key expert sources were nutrition advocates followed by the food industry. While there has been a shift in Australian news reporting of episodic frames to thematic frames, nutrition advocates are yet to convert this to positive policy action. Better understanding these different frames and their subsequent effectiveness can provide useful information for advocacy. Additionally, comparing the news reporting of frames and the transition to policy action in other areas of public health where there has been policy action success would be worthwhile. Further research is required on developing effective counter-frames for use by nutrition advocates against food industry stakeholders. Additional work to unite nutrition advocates as a collective, recognised voice would also be a valuable contribution to ensuring the media use qualified subject experts in policy debates.

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