

CokeGate – big soda's deep pockets reach further than we think

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Alexandra Jones is a lawyer, working on food policy with The George Institute for Global Health. She is interested in how law can be used to create conditions for people to live healthier lives, particularly in the field

of non-communicable diseases. Alexandra holds a Master of Laws in Global Health from Georgetown Law, and in 2016 will start a PhD at the University of Sydney exploring nutrition labeling worldwide.

Coca-Cola's [financial support](#) for the ambiguously named 'Global Energy Balance Network' headlined the *New York Times* in August, prompting global outcry. Citing lessons from Big Tobacco's similar tactics, the public [health](#) world called for greater clarity on exactly what – and whom – Big Soda is funding.

In a public-relations induced 'commitment to transparency,' Coke has since released details of US\$120 million spent on grants to medical, health and [community organizations](#) in the United States alone since 2010. Of this, \$21.8 million went to scientific research and \$96.8 million to support 'health and well-being' partnerships. With good evidence that the source of funding does indeed influence research outcomes and policy processes, the public has a right to be concerned.

The unfolding story of the Global Energy Balance Network highlighted the conflicted nature of Coke-funded research. Money spent has diverted conversation away from 'calories in' toward a focus on people not exercising enough. These efforts are a strategic attempt to shift international debate around obesity, and to shift it conveniently away from the side of the equation where Coke's own products are directly implicated. In a nation where soda is a leading contributor to diet calories, where [more than one third of adults are obese](#), and in the year that the World Health Organization released sugar guidelines clearly recommending reduction of free sugars, Coke continues tout the solution as 'active living'. These messages deceive consumers and undermine public health. The issue is not only that Coke funds research biased to favour their position that obesity's solution does not lie in greater regulation of their products, but also that funded scientists and experts become key actors in building and maintaining their corporate

legitimacy.

Health and wellbeing?

This month, new information about the extent of Coke's 'health and wellbeing' partnerships is perhaps even more astonishing. These are organizations that have received financial support between 2010 and 2015 in the United States – and the list is extensive. Recipients include influential medical organizations – the American Academy of Family Physicians (\$3.5 million), American Colleges of Cardiology (\$3.1 million) and Paediatrics (\$2.9 million), American Cancer Society (\$1.9 million), American Diabetic Association (\$1.1 million) and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (\$672,000). Hints of these financial ties are seen, for example, in Coke's 'gold' sponsorship of the American Academy of Paediatric's "HealthyChildren.org" website where it is listed among 'distinguished' companies, committed to 'better the health of children worldwide'.

Diabetes, dentistry, cardiology, cancer, paediatrics and more – the list goes on. And on.

Funding of minority groups like the NAACP and Hispanic Federation in New York may be particularly concerning. Both groups subsequently supported the soda industry's challenge to then-Mayor Bloomberg's proposed ban on large sugary drinks – yet both represent the populations most at risk from obesity, diabetes and heart disease; diseases linked to soda consumption.

Aside from medical organizations, Coke spent heavily on athletic groups, parks and community organizations – Scouts, Boys & Girls Clubs – many of them with a focus on (impressionable) youth.

Experts

Then come direct payments to individuals – many of whom are leading voices in these very same fields. 115 health experts received payments totalling US\$2.1 million. Analysis by Ninjas for Health suggests 57% of these were dietitians, 20% university academics, 7% medical professionals (mostly doctors), 6% fitness experts, and even a few authors, chefs and food representatives.

Among these 'New Faces of Coke', dominating social media influence is a common feature. Coke has built a strategic network whose pro-soda influence is profound and wide-reaching, utilising the most effective communications tool to reach young minds today – they're fully aware, and deeply invested.

Fallout

In the fallout of this disclosure, the race to create distance has come from both sides of these funding engagements. This week Coke announced 'budget realities' will cause it to end contracts with a number of implicated groups at the end of this year. Other partners have been more explicit in their reasons. In the case of the Academy of Paediatrics, this includes announcement that it 'no longer shares the same values' as Coca-Cola.

Meanwhile other soda companies are keeping quiet, and this may indeed simply be the tip of an industry-wide funding iceberg.

A New Nanny?

For many, these funding revelations mark a new low in the dubious and underhanded tactics of soda companies to influence the public, their

trusted leaders and ultimately – their health. In a time when the industry is happy to call any move by governments to protect citizens from these very behaviours, acts of the "Nanny State", it is important to see the true powers that be. In a moment when industry is keen to lash out on public health communities for 'telling people how and what to drink', it is crucial to reflect. Coca-Cola's spending on 'health and wellbeing partnerships' came over the same period they spent more than US\$100 million in America to defeat science-backed public health measures to protect the health of populations.

Finally, all this stands in perspective to the US\$3.37 billion Coke spent on advertising globally in 2013 alone – the craft of telling people how and what to drink.

We fear a 'nanny' who forces us to make particular beverage choices when in fact she may already be around us – wearing a signature red apron with an iconic white stripe.

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