

Analysis of a decade of media coverage of obesity

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With the new year on the way, no doubt many headlines will be urging readers to set resolutions to lose the weight they may have put on over the holidays. However, the way the British press talks about weight,

obesity and health has fluctuated markedly in recent years.

To learn more about these changes, we [conducted a linguistic analysis](#) of thousands of stories in UK newspapers about [obesity](#), diets and nutrition from 2008 to 2017.

Between these years, the national British press collectively published 43,878 articles that mentioned the words "obese" or "obesity," amounting to 36 million words. The number of these stories in 2016 was double that in 2011. There were also notable rises in terms like "obesity epidemic" over time, indicating increasing concern about the issue.

To learn more about the coverage itself, we classified words into thematic categories. These included nutrition (for example, chocolate, pies, diet), biology (genes, brain, cells), activity (exercise, PE, swimming), politics (MPs, government, budget) and [social issues](#) (discrimination, inequality, unemployment). We then tracked the collective frequencies of words in these categories over time to identify which concepts were increasing or decreasing.

Personal responsibility

The key trend we observed is that, over the years, the press increasingly framed obesity as something that is down to the individual -- either because you are born with a body that tends to gain weight, or because you make choices that result in weight gain. The frequency of words that framed obesity in terms of [personal responsibility](#), having to do with lifestyle choices (what you [ate](#) and how much [exercise](#) you did), increased over time.

For example, in articles from 2008, the word "snacks" occurred 57 times per million words. In 2017, this number jumped to 143. The set of terms related to [biological factors](#) (such as your [genes](#), [brain activity](#) or [viruses](#))

also went up over time.

We know now from health research that societal factors play a role in obesity. For example, adults in the most deprived fifth of neighborhoods in England are almost [twice as likely](#) to have obesity.

But over time, these social factors have played a smaller role in the press coverage about obesity. The frequency of words linked to social factors (government and town planning policies, practices of food manufacturers and advertisers and social inequality) have collectively decreased.

For example, in 2008, the word "government" occurred 904 times per million words, but only 418 times per million words in 2017. Even liberal newspapers like the Guardian, which tended to mention social factors the most, discussed them less over the decade.

Changing calendar

We also found that the focus on causes of obesity shifts from month to month. During Christmas and new year, there is more coverage around personal choice, like not indulging in [mince pies](#), along with [new year](#) resolutions to start a new diet.

But during the budget announcement in the spring and party conferences in the autumn, [government policy](#) relating to obesity tends to receive more media attention.

The time of year even affects the weight-loss advice printed in newspapers. In January, the focus is on joining a gym. But by February, the "new you" rhetoric tends to fizzle out and is replaced with stories reminding us to get enough [sleep](#) as that will reduce our risk of obesity.

Around April, readers are urged to engage in outdoor activities like [gardening](#) to lose weight. In August, sports like swimming and cycling are encouraged, but the bar is lowered in November, when [walking](#) is promoted as the weight-loss activity of choice.

Anxiety around obesity also tends to be seasonal. The start of the good weather in May brings an increase in the number of articles about obesity, along with stories about how to look good in swimwear. While newspapers are not to blame for the climate or the timing of political events, such factors lead to inconsistent messaging around the causes of and solutions to obesity from month to month.

We only examined a decade of articles, and it is not wise to extrapolate beyond this point, for example, by predicting that the current direction of travel is irreversible. However, for the period we looked at, there is a clear shift in the press towards situating obesity as mostly personal rather than political.

This period was one of government austerity and policies aimed at reducing spending on welfare payments, housing subsidies and social services. The message that "if something bad happens, it is your own fault" in stories about obesity fits with the dominant political ideology of the [time](#).

If personal factors do play a role in people developing obesity, they are only part of the story. The British press appears less keen to highlight the role that powerful [social factors](#) have played in contributing to the country's high obesity rates. Perhaps this could help to explain why, despite the increased focus on obesity in the news, rates of obesity and overweight have stubbornly remained at [61–64%](#) for the last 20 years.

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