

Commentary on Savell *et al.* (2016): Alcohol producers as problem inducers

Savell et al. demonstrate the utility of monitoring the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of the alcohol industry. Beyond showing CSR is used to hide its political agenda, the paper suggests that the alcohol industry should be studied as an inducer of alcohol-related problems.

This is a timely and important report that focuses on a critical issue in the study of alcohol policy: what are the tactics of the alcohol industry and their impact on alcohol marketing policy? Savell *et al.* [1] demonstrate the utility of monitoring the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of the alcohol industry, collecting qualitative and quantitative data about its *modus operandi* and studying its impact on policy. Beyond the documentation showing how the alcohol industry uses its CSR umbrella to hide its political agenda, the paper raises the critical question of whether the alcohol industry should be studied as an inducer of alcohol-related problems. An inducer, according to an unpublished manuscript by my late colleague Rene Jahiel, is a causal mechanism that is neither an agent, nor a risk factor, nor a vector, but one that coordinates these different factors to maximize exposure of susceptible hosts to a given agent. Entities that may function as inducers include large for profit corporations such as the transnational alcohol producers, whose marketing policy agenda is likely to enhance alcohol's role as an inducer [2,3].

Alcohol marketing and sponsorship have become pervasive and insidious with the recent concentration of the alcohol industry into transnational corporations that have incorporated former national breweries such as Guinness and Budweiser into globalized portfolios [4]. Drinking patterns are no longer taught by the family and the community, but are now inculcated through sophisticated marketing strategies that associate alcohol with sex, romance, success and an affluent life-style that is often beyond the reach of most people.

The formidable resources devoted to information dissemination and constituency building suggest that the industry knows that unregulated alcohol marketing is its main path to growth in alcohol consumption and profits. It is therefore strange that so little attention has been devoted to the study of the alcohol industry by social scientists, perhaps because their methods, theories and measures are inadequate to the task. If that is the case, what is needed is a new approach to policy research that includes industry activities as part of the policy environment and policy development process [3,5]. Regarding research agendas, to the extent that population measures are considered much more influential than individual level

interventions, one would hope that research funding agencies would devote more attention to the development of better research tools and databases that can be used in population research.

The real question we should be pursuing, and that is only partially addressed by Savell *et al.* is: what is the impact of these CSR-related marketing policy activities on alcohol availability, alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems? The alcohol research community has, for too long, treated the alcohol industry like the elephant in the living room. It is not even a topic of theoretical conversation, much less a subject of research. Savell *et al.*'s findings suggest that the strategies and tactics of the alcohol industry are likely to increase alcohol's psychological and social availability, and thereby increase the early initiation of drinking, the frequency and intensity of use and the kinds of problems associated with drinking, as was suggested recently by a review of industry activities in Africa [5]. If the mechanisms that induce epidemics of excessive drinking can be identified at the population level and traced back through a causal chain to the activities of the alcohol industry, perhaps we could finally find better solutions to our policy dilemmas.

Declaration of interests

None.

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