

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper Concerning a Contentious Consumer Tax: A Case Study

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, MEd, MBA, MHum, MCHES

Professor

College of Nursing and Health Professions

Drexel University

1601 Cherry Street

Room 774— MS 71043

Philadelphia, PA 19102

484-557-4339

sfg23@drexel.edu

This is original work that has not been published or submitted for review previously.

I am the sole author accounting for all aspects of the research, study, and writing.

I have no conflicts of interest to declare.

There is no funding source to declare.

Aknowldegements are not needed.

Abstract

Bias reporting by United States newspaper journalists is an enduring concern for the public and political commentators. A confluence of reasons for such bias, and invariably for “liberal minded bias,” has exacerbated such concerns. However, much of the criticism for journalistic bias relates to national newspapers and specifically coverage of government and politics. In the midst of this concern, many praise the virtues of local reporting as newspapers in the US dwindle. The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine if the decision makers for a local city newspaper remained fair and balanced in giving voice to stakeholders during and after passage of a contentious law involving a tax on sweetened beverages. To measure bias toward authors for or against this novel consumer tax, the study tracked commentaries published in the city’s newspaper for a four-year period. Results of this review showed no evidence of bias related to favoring authors or their reasons given in the commentaries published. The study demonstrates that, in the face of the declining trust of news media, residents may feel confident that local newspapers remain fair and balanced in giving space to the voices of citizens and groups during the policy-making process.

Keywords: bias in journalism, public journalism, local newspapers, op-eds

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper Concerning a Contentious Consumer Tax: A Case Study

Bias reporting by US newspaper journalists is an enduring concern both for the public and for general and political commentators (Bozel & Baker, 1990; Goldberg, 2003; Levin, 2019). A confluence of reasons for such bias, and invariably for “liberal minded bias,” has exacerbated such concerns (Gambescia, 2019). Reasons for bias encompass how journalists are “trained” at most universities (J. M. Baer, personal communication, 25 May 2017; Zito, 24 May 2017); the proclivity of those entering the field to be overly skeptical (Reich & Godler, n.d.), to have liberal views and to express political party favoritism (Levin, 2019); the rise of public journalism (Rosen, 1999); the 24/7 news feeds causing “feeding frenzies” (Sabato, 1991; 2000); the drop in readership and the change in business revenue models, i.e., print versus digital (Abernathy, 2010; DiStefano, 2006; Hill, 2006; Isaacson, 2009; Kurtz, 2009; Siklos, 2006); and the shock of the 2016 presidential election outcome in the United States—both about who lost and who won (Goodwin, 2017; Sheehan, 2016).

Much has been written about the decline of readers of print newspapers (Hewitt, Jarvis, & Stengel, 2006; Kanaley, 2005; Shin, 2005; Sutel, 2005). This drop-off naturally led to a decline in subscriptions, to a decline in print advertising, and to a decline in revenue that caused a reduction in news reporters. Additionally, it not so subtly changed the nature of what was reported (content) and how news stories were written (context).

Concomitant with the change in newspaper reporting, the public accelerated its distrust in journalism (Editors, 2019; Gramlich, 2020; Ingram, 2018). Additionally, the purpose of news

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu
reporting became a topic of debate among owners, editors, and journalists (Bunch, 2018;

Gammage, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Kurtz, 1997; Newton-Small, 2008; Ridenour & Walsh, 2016;

Samuelson, 2004; Satulo, 2005; Shieffer, 2017). The modus operandi of journalists as the objective purveyors of the news came into question (Jacobs, Rando, Satulo, & Schudson, 2004).

The practice of giving balanced coverage in a story, i.e., getting feedback and giving voice to both sides of a contentious issue, came into question (Kitty, n.d.). The public journalism or social journalism movement matured (Rosen, 1999), and those harboring an ideology and opinions about public policies not necessarily held by others in society, even if those others were the majority, “came out” and claimed a moral duty to right the many wrongs in society and push for policies that “make life better” (Johnson, 2007).

Although much of the concern around the growing distrust of the public about what is reported and the challenges of keeping a newspaper going focused on national or metro daily newspapers, many feared that the closing of local newspapers could have a greater impact on citizens’ lives than the obligatory “breaking [national] news” of each quarter hour in a day (Abernathy, 2018; Arkoosh, 2017; Bowden, 2007; Friedlich, 2019). Certainly national news is important for learning about how the federal government is fulfilling the social contract, but most everyday events related to livable neighborhoods, clean streets, public health, good schools, safety from crime, fair and reasonable taxes, and a sundry of other public goods happen at the local level. Academics, industry experts, newspaper industry leaders, educators, pundits, editors, and some journalists praise the virtues of local reporting as newspapers in the United States dwindle (PEN America, 2019; Zito, 16 October 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

The purpose of this descriptive study was to see if the decision makers of a *local newspaper* remained *fair and balanced* in giving voice, or actually space, to stakeholders during and after the passage of a novel, contentious law involving a “consumer type” tax increase on a commonly used product. The issue involved a proposal by the mayor of Philadelphia (March 2016), and subsequently proposed as a bill by the city council, for a 3-cent per ounce tax imposed on distributors of sweetened beverages sold in the city. The study tracked the commentaries published in the city’s daily newspaper. Commentaries were selected to examine for bias because they are written by and read by the movers and shakers in the community. Commentaries, or op-eds, were chosen for this analysis because they “present an opinion or perspective of someone with insight on the news” (Palan, 2019). The goal of commentary writers is to draw conclusions, share anecdotes, give recommendations or novel suggestions, show relationships, connect facts, or to excite, engage, motivate, and sometimes entertain readers. Often commentaries are used as part of media advocacy campaigns regarding a piece of legislation (Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan, & Themba-Nixon, 1993). Commentaries are selected by an editor, most likely one on the editorial board of the newspaper. Therefore, comparing the nature and extent of commentaries selected for publication to the opinions of the editorial board could be telling in terms of bias or favoritism directed to one side of the controversy. This study examined the nature (author and affiliation; reasons for or against the tax) and the extent (number published) of commentaries published in the local city paper for four years--from the time of the mayor’s proposal to three years and eight months after the passage of the new tax on sweetened beverages sold in the city (March 2016–March 2020). The study was designed to see if any bias “infected” local newspaper coverage of a contentious issue, given that the public increasingly believes bias is taking place in national newspapers.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

Background on Sweetened Beverage Tax Proposal in Philadelphia

On March 3, 2016, James Kenney, mayor of Philadelphia, PA, presented his budget to the city council, a 17-member unicameral legislative body for the city (Nadolny & Vargas, March 2016). In that budget, he asked council members to pass legislation to place a 3-cent per ounce levy on distributors for “any beverage with added sugar,” such as sodas, sports drinks, and sweetened teas.

The tax would add an estimated \$400 million to the city’s revenue stream. The rationale, or need, for the tax made no reference to health issues, i.e., the litany of problems associated with ingesting too much sugar, such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, gout, and tooth decay, among others. The bulk of the money raised from the tax would be used to fund prekindergarten for low-income families, followed by rebuilding parks and recreation centers, helping open 25 “community schools,” and improving libraries (Vargas, Terruso, & Nadolny, 2016).

At that time, Berkeley, CA was the only municipality in the United States to pass a sweetened beverage tax (Healthy Berkeley, 2020). Naturally, those involved in the production, delivery, and sale of sweetened beverage drinks were against the levy (manufacturers, distributors, Teamsters Union or non-union drivers, owners of small food stores, large food markets, and restaurants) (Terruso, & Nadolny, 2016; Von Bergen, 2016). Understandably, consumers of sweetened beverages of all ages were unnerved by the thought of paying more for a commonly consumed product. All suspected that, whereas the tax was levied on distributors, the tax would be passed along to consumers (Bostic, 2016; Nadolny, 12 March 2016; Wolfe, 2016). As is common with any redistributive policy, i.e., a tax to consumers, tax freedom groups and individuals were against the tax (Parry, 2016; Sepp & Brouillette, 2016). Furthermore, many

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

people and groups feared that the money collected from the tax would be diverted to other city

needs or used to fill gaps in the budget-strapped city (DeFelice, 2016). Additionally, many were concerned that the city did not have the employees and know-how to implement the proposed tax and actually collect what was owed by the distributors.

The administration's rationale for levying this sweetened beverage tax on consumers was not related to the health benefits of consuming less sugar. When the mayor or anyone from his office spoke about the tax to the media, he or she mentioned specific city services, benefits, and infrastructure improvements, with several counting as a common good, e.g., parks and broad citizenship benefits such as community schools, libraries, and a favorable boost to prekindergarten for low-income families. The former mayor of Philadelphia, Michael Nutter (1992-2006), had actually made two attempts to tax sweetened beverages sold in the city, but got little support, including from then council member James Kenney (Brennan, 2016). However, there was no denying the health benefits to people, especially youth, of drinking fewer sweetened beverages (Bishop, 2016; Sims, Berthold, & Mittermaier, 2016). In addition, there was no denying that health groups from the community and beyond would be strong advocates of getting this levy passed (Sapatkin, 9 June 2016).

A paradoxical argument about the health rationale for passing the beverage tax was put forth. Almost all health and welfare and community groups claimed that the health problems caused by too much sugar affected poor, often minority, residents. They not only pointed out that these residents drank a lot of sweetened beverages but they also criticized the beverage industry for targeting these neighborhoods with their marketing activities. They noted that the small corner stores, so to speak, sold cheap, unhealthy food items, including a lot of soda. Advocates in these poor neighborhoods, such as members of the clergy, were outspoken in favor of passing the

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

tax (Hall, 2019; Fisher, 2016). However, other leaders railed against the tax because it was

regressive, i.e., it would have a greater impact on low-income people (Broadnax, More, &

Felton, 2018). Such delicate tension is not uncommon when health advocates work to pass “sin

taxes” and other types of measures that can affect consumer choices of poor and often minority

groups. For example, in 1989, the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company test-marketed a cigarette

called *Uptown*. The cigarette was designed and marketed to appeal to African American

smokers, especially young men. In just two weeks, a coalition of health organizations, and more

importantly, community groups and leaders from these Philadelphia neighborhoods vehemently

protested and convinced the company to abort the sale of the cigarette. During the strategic

planning sessions, the participants discussed how best to message the protest against *Uptown*,

because some leaders in the African American community did not think it was appropriate to tell

adult smokers what to do. Consequently, the message became somewhat of a boycott: “Don’t

smoke *Uptown!*” (Gambescia, Godshall, & Sklaroff, 1995; Gambescia, LePera, & Robinson,

1990).

What may not have been predicted in the impending “soda war” was the *synergy* of more groups aligning and coalescing against an industry that has the money and influence to kill an unfriendly bill, especially one that would hit the pocketbooks of consumers. The list of advocates for the tax grew from parents wanting a good head start for their children, to preschool workers and provider organizations, to neighborhood leaders and groups wanting better parks, recreation opportunities, and community experiment schools and libraries. Local affiliates of highly recognized health groups, such as the American Heart Association, who naturally had an interest in the cardiovascular and stroke problems experienced by overweight children and adults, joined

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

the former groups who would receive direct benefits with the taxes collected (Philadelphians for

a Fair Future, 2020; Voices for Healthy Kids, 2020).

The formation of a coalition of health, educational, and welfare groups in the city was impressive. Not surprisingly, the business interest groups formed their own grassroots advocacy group to fight against the sweetened beverage tax, which was set at 3 cents per ounce. Their creative, but some would say disingenuous, name was “No Philly Grocery Tax.” Given the high stakes with such a large city to pass a sweetened beverage tax (Terruso, 2016), any group related to the economic interests of selling more drinks pitched in money to run an anti-tax campaign (Nadolny & Terruso, 2016). This campaign was replete with full-page advertisements in the city’s two major newspapers and a very visible commuter tabloid; television, and radio ads; and store signs, and buttons with a “no grocery tax” message. These messages could be used by advocates who packed the committee and full city council hearings when council members were discussing the merits of the bill.

The anti-tax businesses involved in beverage production, delivery, sales, and related businesses had the compelling argument of lost jobs. Added to this was the overall message of the city taking yet another hit for the tax being perceived as “bad for business.” In addition, the city had a record of poor tax collection practices. Finally, whereas the tax on low-end consumer products is usually pennies, this 3-cent per ounce tax would take a 20-ounce soda from about \$1.29 to about \$4.40, a two-liter soda would go from about \$2.00 to about \$6.00, and a 128-ounce jug of ice tea would go from \$2.90 to about \$9.60.

The Case for Making This a Good Case Study for Checking for Newspaper Bias

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

This standoff between the economic interests of big business and all the good that goes along with “making good money,” and the health and welfare groups wanting all good things for the people of the city, especially the youngest and in many cases poorest, created the classic *political balances of health* against economic progress and the individual’s right to choose (Gambescia, 1996). This public policy issue qualifies as an acutely contentious issue. It meets the criteria of a salient issue, i.e., the policy is something that identifies a need (in this case several deficits); it identifies an issue that people are aware of; is an issue that people care about; and qualifies as an issue that people expect government to take action on—one way or another (Longest, 2016, p. 138).

The issue provides a good case for determining journalism bias because it is void of political partisanship. In Philadelphia at that time, and actually for many decades, the Democratic Party had a super majority in the city council. At the time, four of the 17 council members were Republicans and the president of city council was a majority party Democrat. The mayor was a Democrat. (The last time Philadelphia had a Republican mayor was 1951.) Seventy-eight percent of the registered voters in Philadelphia are Democrats. It is fair to say that the mayors and councilpersons in Philadelphia during the last few decades saw themselves as progressive. Furthermore, this topic is a good case study: It is the perfect opportunity for newspapers and their journalists to take a side because the income from the tax would benefit several public goods. The journalists and editors could easily take on an *advocacy role* and invoke the influence of what has become known as “public journalism” (Levin, 2019; Rosen, 1999).

It is important to note that Philadelphia is one of the largest US media markets and that the newspaper under analysis is one of two daily newspapers offered in this major US city. However, in recent years, because of ownership changes, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* funders and

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

leaders ostensibly see their role as covering local news. They have made a major commitment to

covering local news for the city and region and in doing so have left much of the national, especially political, news, to other news sources (Editorial Board, 2020; Egger, 2019; Jackson, 2014; Wischnowski, 2019;).

In summary, the issue to be covered is a classic economic interest versus community interest of a common good, involves a novel tax levied on a large group of consumers on a popular product, is void of political partisanship, and measures the types of printed articles that the editors select. The newspaper qualifies as a long-standing, credible local newspaper from which to judge newspaper leadership bias.

Analytic Method

To measure bias or any sense of out-of-balance treatment of those for and those against the sweetened beverage tax, this descriptive study tracked commentaries (op-ed and opinion pieces) published in the city's major newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Commentaries were tracked from 3 March 2016, the day that the mayor called for the tax, when presenting his proposed budget to city council, that he wanted to add a 3-cent per ounce tax to distributors on a line of sweetened beverages sold in the city. This study covers a full four-year period, which is an adequate amount of time to judge any bias from the newspaper. The study is not a content analysis of the actual news stories, for which there are scores of other sources, but an examination of the content of the commentaries because they are written by the movers and shakers, interest group leaders, and those most affected by the policy. Furthermore, commentaries are read by movers and shakers and other readers who take public policy issues seriously. In addition, commentaries give an in-depth account of those "taking sides" on a public

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu
policy issue, especially one that is contentious, versus a few-sentence quote in a news story or a letter to the editor.

Analysis of Those Supporting the Sweetened Beverage Tax

For each commentary published leading up to the passage of the bill by city council on 16 June 2016, the author and author's title/affiliation, headline, and date published were identified and logged. The commentary was read, and determination was made of *why* the author *supported* the sweetened beverage tax. The reasons for support included (a) health benefits, (b) support for prekindergarten for low-income families, (c) improvements to parks and recreation, (d) support for "community schools," (e) support for public libraries, and (f) other.

There were eight commentaries published by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* from 5 March 2016 to 20 June 2016 on this issue. A four-month period from the announcement of support for a bill by a mayor, to passage by a big-city legislature is remarkably fast, especially for a contentious consumer tax increase of this magnitude. As with most pieces of legislation, the bill worked its way through several public hearings, posturing by councilpersons, calls for support and non-support by stakeholders and residents of the city, comments from subject matter experts on both sides of the issue, and close reporting by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* news reporters and some columnists. The issue was followed in national and beverage trade news publications--given that Philadelphia was the first major city to pass such a tax. In the end, two major amendments were made to the bill. One was to add diet drinks to the list of beverages taxed to "spread the consumer pain" (Sapatkin, 11 June 2016). Another major amendment was to reduce the tax from 3 cents to 1.5 cents per ounce (Sapatkin, 9 June 2016).

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

In these eight articles, the reason that received the most votes for support (seven mentions) was providing prekindergarten for children from low-income families in the city. (See Table 1.) Health benefits followed closely with six mentions. It is interesting to note that the mayor and those in the administration did not use a health benefit rationale for the tax either at the launch of the request or during the debates; however, a health rationale was used by several authors. Subsidizing parks and recreational activities received four mentions and community schools and libraries each had three mentions. The category of “other” was negligible.

There were no repeat authors. The authors were affiliated with health groups and educational and religious institutions; one commented regularly on the national economy; two were general-topic syndicated columnists; and three city councilpersons collaborated on a commentary. The headline writers took the liberty of using a shorthand version, calling the tax a “soda tax,” which was not wholly accurate but did not appear to be bias or hyperbole.

Table 1

Reasons for and against and number of mentions in commentaries published in The Philadelphia Inquirer during introduction of and debate on bill to tax sweetened beverages in Philadelphia (4 March to 16 June 2016).

Reasons <i>for</i> the tax and number of mentions				
Pre-K	Health	Parks & Recreation	Community Schools	Libraries
7	6	4	3	3
Reasons <i>against</i> the tax and number of mentions				
Store sales	Regressive	Jobs manufacturing	Jobs delivery drivers	Bad for overall city economy
6	6	2	2	2

Analysis of Those against the Sweetened Beverage Tax

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

In examining the commentaries *against* the sweetened beverage tax during the debate for its passage, this study captured the author and author's title/affiliation, headline, and date published. After reading the commentary, determination was made of *why* the author *was against* the sweetened beverage tax. The arguments against the tax included (a) revenue and job losses by beverage manufacturers; (b) delivery personnel job losses, including Teamsters Union concerns; (c) store owner revenue loss; (d) regressive tax hurting those with low incomes; (e) overall city economy; and (f) other.

Ten commentaries were identified as published by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* during this same four-month period. In these 10 commentaries, the claim that the tax would hurt in-store sales and the regressive nature of the tax were the two most common themes, each at six mentions. (See Table 1). The next three arguments given against the tax were far behind, with only two mentions each around beverage manufacturer and delivery personnel concerns and concern about the effects on the overall Philadelphia economy. The "other" concerns were plentiful and broad in range, from why attach the sugar problem to one industry, the unsustainable flow of money for prekindergarten as the consumption of overtaxed drinks drops, people buying their drinks outside the city, government encroachment in private lives, children used as pawns to bring in revenue for the city, to the constitutionality of the law.

One author had two commentaries published—a Republican ward leader and representative for the Philadelphia Republican Committee. Authors came from a range of stakeholders, such as those wanting to protect jobs along the beverage drink economic stream, a fair citizen tax organization, a grocery store activist in underserved neighborhoods, a restaurant owner, several city Republican Party leaders, and a former District Attorney lawyer who pledged

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu
to sue the city for an unlawful act. There were no citizen-affiliation-only authors; authors were

affiliated with some organization or interest group.

Assessment of Evidence of Newspaper Commentary Selection Bias during the Sweetened Beverage Tax Debate and Passage

In tracking and reading the commentaries published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during the introduction, debate, and final passage of a sweetened beverage tax for Philadelphia distributors, one can conclude from this content analysis using the constructs described above that the newspaper was *balanced* in publishing commentaries for and against the tax. The commentaries were written by a range of stakeholders. The commentaries reflected the several concerns and arguments offered from each side of this novel and contentious tax. The extent of the commentaries was not out of balance. Those in favor had eight commentaries published, and those against the tax had 10 published. The editorial board of the newspaper favored the tax and published six editorials on the issue. The paper published a few more commentaries from authors who were against the tax. In addition, three authors represented the political party opposing that of the mayor and the super majority of city council members, thus allowing party opposition, if you will, to communicate their concerns.

This analysis demonstrates the important role that *local newspapers* still play in our public policy debate. Although there is much concern about bias and favoritism by journalists covering specific legislators and government officials at the national level, local newspapers can facilitate the voices from a range of perspectives and be balanced in effecting which “voices” are heard.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

Analysis of Those Supporting the Beverage Tax—Three Years and Eight Months after

Passage

Another analysis was made of each commentary published from the passage of the sweetened beverage tax (16 June 2016) until 3 March 2020—three years and eight months later. As with the analysis of articles published before the tax, for each article published after passage of the tax, the author and author's title/affiliation, headline, and date the commentary was published were recorded. After the commentary was read, the reason(s) *why* the author *supported* the sweetened beverage tax were determined. The reasons for support included the same constructs noted during the debate on the bill: (a) health benefits; (b) support for prekindergarten for low-income families; (c) improvement of parks and recreational opportunities; (d) support for “community schools”; (e) support for public libraries; and (f) other.

During this period, 12 commentaries showed continued support for the beverage tax. (Note that diet beverages were added to the list of drinks taxed; thus “sweetened” becomes less accurate as the descriptor.) The reasons were spread across all five constructs, with improvement of parks and recreational opportunities receiving the most mentions (10), followed by nine mentions each for prekindergarten, community schools, and health. Eight mentions were made to support libraries. (See Table 2). The “other” category included evidence that the tax was “working,” doing the things it was supposed to do, blasting the beverage industry anti-tax campaigns and lobbyists trying to repeal the tax, claiming that stores were not closing because of the tax, finding no problems with the Philadelphia economy, and “calling out” those groups filing an injunction and law suit against the city claiming the tax was unlawful.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Two authors each had two of their commentaries published. One was the city health commissioner and one was the executive director of a nonprofit food trust. Several commentaries were authored by representatives from health organizations or health care professionals. Several administrative officials, including the mayor and the secretary of public health, wrote commentaries. The mayor co-authored a commentary with the president of the city council. A Baptist minister and a freelance journalist each wrote in support of the tax.

Table 2

Reasons for and against and number of mentions in commentaries published in The Philadelphia Inquirer after the law passed to tax sweetened beverages in Philadelphia (17 June 2016 to 3 March 2020).

Reasons <i>for</i> the tax and number of mentions					
Parks and Recreation	Health	Pre-K	Community Schools	Libraries	
10	9	9	9	8	
Reasons <i>against</i> the tax and number of mentions					
Store sales	Regressive	Bad for consumers	Bad for overall city Economy	Projection on Income	Jobs Manufacturing
7	6	5	4	3	2

Analysis of Those against the Beverage Tax—Three Years and Eight Months After Passage

In examining the commentaries *against* the city's beverage tax for a three-year, eight-month period after the tax was passed, this study captured the author and author's title/affiliation, headline, and date published. After reading each commentary, determination was made for *why* the author was *against* the sweetened beverage tax. The reasons against the tax included five of the same constructs examined during the tax bill's debate: (a) beverage company manufacturer revenue and job losses; (b) delivery personnel job losses, including Teamsters Union concerns;

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

(c) store owner revenue loss; (d) regressive tax hurting those with low incomes; and (e) the

overall city economy. Two additional reasons emerged: (f) displeasure by consumers and (g)

poor projection of actual money collected by the tax to fund benefits. An “other” category was

accounted for as well.

The Philadelphia Inquirer published 10 commentaries during this almost four-year time period after passage of the tax law. The most common reason against the tax was store owners losing money (seven). (See Table 2). The next most common reasons and somewhat related were the regressive nature of the tax (six) and consumer spending complaints (five). The last three categories were a taint on the city’s economy (four): complaints that the projection for the money raised was “way short” (three), and two complaints about the loss of manufacturing jobs. There were no complaints related to the loss of jobs of those delivering the beverages or members of the Teamsters Union. The “other” category comprised a mixture of complaints—government mismanagement, another example of government’s misunderstanding of city priorities, and the suggestion that the mayor was making paybacks to a union that did not support him in the past election. Both the mayor and city council members were “spared” from any election recourse because of the tax (Brennan, 2017).

During this period, one author appeared twice. This individual wrote a commentary as the sitting city controller who was against the tax. He wrote again upon leaving his job with the city to challenge the mayor in the fall 2019 mayoral election. Several commentaries were from storeowners or the beverage market industry, subject matter experts on the economy, one syndicated commentator who wrote about this issue, and three religious leaders who collaborated in a commentary against the tax.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

Assessment of Evidence of Newspaper Commentary Selection Bias after City Legislators

Passed a Beverage Tax

In tracking and reading the commentaries published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* after the passage of a controversial beverage tax (3-year, 8-month period), one can conclude from this content analysis using the constructs described above that the newspaper was *balanced* in publishing commentaries for and against the tax. The commentaries were written by a range of stakeholders. The commentaries reflected the several concerns and arguments offered by each side of this novel and contentious tax. Most of the reasons for support or reasons against remained the same, with a couple of new categories for those against the tax. The extent of the commentaries was not out of balance. Those in favor of the tax had 12 placements; those against had 10. As stated previously, the editorial board of the newspaper favored the tax and published seven editorials on the issue. The paper published a fair number of commentaries from those who were opposed to the tax, thus being open to publishing views that opposed those of the editorial board.

This observation demonstrates the important role that local newspapers still play in our public policy debate. Although there is much concern about bias and favoritism by journalists covering specific legislators and government officials at the national level, local newspapers can facilitate the voices from a range of perspectives and be balanced in what “voices” are heard. The analysis showed that those opposed to the newspaper’s official position had more than equal play during the post-tax period.

Summary and Conclusions

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

The public policy issue selected for analysis of newspaper coverage is a good case study because it involves a classic battle between economic interests and the good of the community. Issues related to community good are ripe for *public journalism* advocacy. The issue meets the criteria of public policy saliency and is salient for many residents of the city. The issue is void of political partisanship. The specific artifacts under study are the commentaries selected by the editors and run in a newspaper devoted to local issues. Commentaries give voice to a range of individuals and groups who provide insight and express opinions on the news of the day, especially on salient, contentious issues. This study tracked and reviewed commentaries published both during and after passage of the beverage tax, for a robust period of four years. The review included the author and author's affiliation, the headline, and date of the article, and the *reasons* for or against the beverage tax.

In conclusion, there is no evidence of bias in the nature or extent of commentaries published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about a controversial sweetened beverage tax during the four-year period from the proposal of the measure to several years after its enactment. The number of commentaries, both for and against the tax, was not skewed. In fact, given that the newspaper's editorial board was strongly for the tax, as determined from several editorials published both during and after the passage of the tax, there is no evidence that those writing in support of the tax were favored. The commentaries were written by a range of authors with a range of opinions either for or against the tax. No author or group received favored treatment in terms of the number of commentaries published. The study demonstrates that, in the face of declining trust of news in the media, including major newspapers, residents may feel confident that local newspapers remain fair and balanced in giving space to citizens and groups' voices (opinions) during the policy-making process.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

#####

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University

sfg23@drexel.edu

References

Abernathy, P. M. (2010). The news landscape in 2014: Transformed or diminished. *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, 2(2), 9-30.

Abernathy, P. M. (2018). *The expanding news desert*. Chapel Hill, NC: Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media.

Arkoosh, V. (1 Nov. 2017). Local news disappearing [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Bishop, G. (11 May 2016). Better health for city starts with soda tax. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Bostic, A. (25 March 2016). Beverage tax: More harm than good [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Bowden, M. (10 June 2007). Best news source: It's newspapers [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. D7.

Bozell, B., & Baker, B. H. (1990). *And that's the way it isn't*. Reston, VA: Media Research Center.

Brennan, C. (7 March 2016). With soda tax, everything old is new again [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. B1, B2.

Brennan, C. (9 Jan. 2017). Will beverage tax outrage bubble over? [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Broadnax, J., More, W. B., & Felton, J. L. (27 Nov. 2018). Tax hurts city's vulnerable [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu
 Bunch, W. (25 Feb. 2018). We need more Cronkites today [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer, pp. C1, C3.

DeFelice, J. (14 June 2014). Last-minute flip on purpose of hike [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

DiStefano, J. N. (9 May 2006). Shrinking only on paper. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. D1, D4.

Editorial Board. (5 Jan. 2020). A change: Your input [Editorial]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. C4.

Editors. Poll: How does the public think journalism happens? *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/special_report/how-does-journalism-happen-poll.php

Egger, T. (15 Dec. 2019). A letter from the publisher. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. A4.

Fisher, K. (27 April 2016). 'Soda tax' an investment in city's children [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Friedlich, J. (17 March 2019). How newspapers can thrive [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Gambescia, S. F. (1996). Tobacco and politics: The public's response to policy making. (Doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1996). Dissertation Abstracts International, 57, DAI-A-1302.

Gambescia, S. F. (18 March 2019). Journalists would do well to go back to basics. [Commentary]. *InsideSources*.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...
 Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu
 Gambescia, S. F., Godshall, W. T., & Sklaroff, R. B. (1995). Pennsylvania's contribution to
 tobacco control. *Philadelphia Medicine*. 91, 14-20.

Gambescia, S. F., LePera, P., & Robinson, R. G. (1990, June 14). Uptown is out-a-town in
 Philadelphia. Society for Public Health Education's National Mid-Year Scientific Conference.

Gammage, J. (2006). Newspapers as a public trust [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp.
 E1, E4.

Goldberg, B. (2003). *Bias: A CBS insider exposes how the media distort the news*. New York:
 HarpPeren.

Goodwin, M. (2017). The 2016 election and the demise of journalistic standards. *Imprimis*, 46,
 1-7.

Gramlich, J. (2020). Q&A: How Pew Research Center evaluated Americans' trust in 30 news
 sources. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/24/qa-how-pew-research-center-evaluated-americans-trust-in-30-news-sources/>

Hall, J. S. (23 Jan. 2019). Beverage tax helping children, families who need it the most
 [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Healthy Berkeley. (1 March 2020). *First City in the United States: Berkeley's Tax on Sugar-Sweetened Beverages*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthyberkeley.com/about-berkeleys-tax-ordinance>

Hewitt, H., Jarvis, J., & Stengel, R. (23 April 2006). Can we live without newspapers?
 [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. D1, D3.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Hill, M. (14 May 2006). The future of papers? Untapped [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer, pp. E1, E3.

Ingram, M. (2018). Most Americans say they have lost trust in the media. *Columbia Journalism*

Review. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/trust-in-media-down.php

Isaacson, W. (Feb. 2009). How to save your newspaper: A modest proposal. *Time*, pp. 30-35.

Jackson, H. (2 June 2014). A new forum for readers' comments and criticism. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer.

Jacobs, J., Rando, R., Satulo, C, & Schudson, M. (26 Sept. 2004). The erosion of the fourth estate? [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. E7.

Johnson, P. (6 March 2007). More reporters embrace an advocacy role. *USA Today*, pp. 1D, 2D.

Kanaley, R. (8 Nov. 2005). Sales dropping for newspapers. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Kitty A. (1998). Objectivity in journalism. *Skeptic* 6(1). Retrieved from

https://www.skeptic.com/reading_room/objectivity-in-journalism-should-we-be-skeptical/

Kurtz, H. (23 June 1997). Journalists, heal thyself. *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, p. 29.

Kurtz, H. (15 September 2009). The big news is how we'll get our news. *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, p. 24.

Levin, M. R. (2019). *Unfreedom of the press*. New York: Threshold Editions.

Longest, B. B. (2016). *Health policymaking in the United States*. Chicago, IL: Health Administration Press.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Nadolny, T. L. (12 March 2016). Tax would hit fountain sodas hard. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A2.

Nadolny, T. L. (17 June 2016). Soda tax makes history. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A12.

Nadolny, T. L., & Terruso, J. (4 May 2016). Big bucks battling tax plan. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. B1, B5.

Nadolny, T. L., & Vargas, C. (4 March 2016). Kenney presents budget to Council. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A10.

Newton-Small, J. (10-16 Nov. 2008). Breaking news—and more. *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, p. 27.

Palan, E. (26 Sept. 2019). What's an op-ed and why do newspapers run them? *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Parry, A. (2 May 2016). Yo, Bernie, soda tax is exactly how socialism works [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

PEN America. (2019). *Losing the news: The decimation of local journalism and the search for solutions*. New York: PEN America. Retrieved from <https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Losing-the-News-The-Decimation-of-Local-Journalism-and-the-Search-for-Solutions-Report.pdf>

Philadelphians for a Fair Future (PFF). (1 March 2020). *About Us*. Retrieved from <https://www.fairfuturephilly.com/about/>

Reich, Z., & Godler, Y. (n.d.). *The skeptic in the newsroom*. The Israel Democracy Institute. Retrieved from <https://en.idi.org.il/media/6194/sheilon-madrih-engl.pdf>

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Ridenour, A., & Walsh, L. (27 Dec. 2016). Role of media in the age of Trump. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer, p. A11.

Rosen, J. (1999). *What are journalists for?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sabato, L. (1991). *Feeding frenzy: How attack journalism has transformed American politics.*

New York: Free Press.

Sabato, L. (2000). *Feeding frenzy: Attack journalism and American politics.* Baltimore, MD:

Lanahan Publishers.

Samuelson, R. J. (28 June 2004). Picking sides for the news. *Newsweek*, p. 37.

Sapatkin, D. (9 June 2016). Public health advocates see Phila. vote as ‘tipping point.’ *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer, pp. A1, A4.

Sapatkin, D. (11 June 2016). Diet add-on easy for some to swallow. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*,

pp. A1, A7.

Satulo, C. (13 March 2005). Serious journalists take duty seriously [Commentary]. *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer, pp. C1, C3.

Sepp, P., & Brouillette, M. (5 May 2016). Sanders right, mayor wrong on impact of the soda tax

[Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Sheehan, C. A. (26 Nov. 2016). Media, academics moonstruck over election results.

[Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Shieffer, B. (15 Oct. 2017). Staying true to journalism [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Shin, A. (19-25 May 2005). Newspapers in trouble: Circulation declines accelerate. *The*

Washington Post National Weekly Edition.

Siklos, R. (1 Oct. 2006). How did newspapers land in this mess? *Wall Street Journal*.

Sims, J., Berthold, J. & Mittermaier, S. (20 June 2016). City pioneers a healthier path. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Sutel, S. (18 Nov. 2005). A Q & A explaining newspapers' crisis, industry challenges [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, p. D8.

Terruso, J. (8 May 2016). 'A lot of eyes' on fate of soda tax. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. B1, B5.

Terruso, J. & Nadolny, T. L. (3 March 2016). Soft drinks, hard lobbying. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A18.

Terruso, J., Nadolny, T. L., & Vargas, C. (1 March 2016). Kenney promotes soda-tax benefits. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A5.

Vargas, C., Terruso, J. & Nadolny, T. L. (29 Feb. 2016). Kenney to seek tax on soda. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, pp. A1, A5.

Voices for Healthy Kids. (1 March 2020). Voices for Healthy Kids. [Website]. Retrieved from <https://voicesforhealthykids.org/>

Von Bergen, J. (27 March 2016). Daniel Grace: Why the mayor's proposed soda tax would hurt the industry. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Assessment of Bias in the Commentaries Published in a Local Newspaper...

Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, Professor, Drexel University sfg23@drexel.edu

Wallack, L., Dorfman, L., Jernigan, D., & Themba-Nixon, M. (1993) *Media advocacy and*

public health. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Wischnowski, S. (19 Dec. 2019). You help put journalism in focus [Commentary]. *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer, p. A19.

Wolfe, M. (3 June 2016). Philly-only taxes are the problem, not a solution [Commentary]. *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer.

Zito, S. (24 May 2017). Lack of faith in journalism helps no one [Commentary]. *The*

Philadelphia Inquirer, p. A15.

Zito, S. (16 Oct. 2017). Local news reporting still a vital need [Commentary]. *The Philadelphia*

Inquirer, p. A13.