

# The Origins and Purposes of Alcohol Industry Social Aspects Organizations: Insights From the Tobacco Industry Documents

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**ABSTRACT. Objective:** This article describes the origins and purposes of alcohol industry “social aspects organizations” as portrayed in internal tobacco industry documents. **Method:** We systematically searched the Truth Tobacco Documents Library for information regarding alcohol industry social aspects organizations. Using content provided by industry actors themselves, we identified a series of episodes in their evolution from the early 1950s to the early 1990s. **Results:** Hill and Knowlton, a public relations company, developed and managed the tobacco industry’s scientific programs from the early 1950s onward. At the same time, the company performed a similar function for the U.S. distilled spirits industry, with research funding central to advancing what were conceived

as public relations goals. They sought to persuade the public and policy makers that the cause of alcohol problems was the people who drank distilled spirits, rather than the product itself. Facing the existential threat posed by the developing population-level understanding of alcohol problems in the 1980s, national and international trade associations collaborated with the tobacco industry in various ways. The largest companies sought to bring together the different sectors of the alcohol industry to support a global network of national-level social aspects organizations. **Conclusions:** Alcohol industry social aspects organizations were developed to advance long-term public relations goals to manage both policy and science. (*J. Stud. Alcohol Drugs*, 740–751, 2021)

THERE HAS BEEN a scientific consensus for decades that the most effective ways to reduce alcohol harms are by increasing price and reducing availability (Babor et al., 2010; Bruun et al., 1975; Edwards et al., 1994), as they reduce overall consumption in the general population, which in turn reduces a wide range of problems, from liver disease to homicide and other forms of violence (Babor et al., 2010). Alcohol companies deny the value of reducing overall consumption and instead propose targeted approaches (McCambridge et al., 2018). National governments across the world have been slow to implement known effective policy measures, in part because of industry influence (McCambridge et al., 2018; Mosher & Jernigan, 1989; World Health Organization [WHO], 2018; Lesch & McCambridge, 2021a). Currently, approximately 3 million people die globally as a result of alcohol, and the problem is getting worse, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (WHO, 2018).

Alcohol industry “social aspects organizations” are corporate social responsibility initiatives that claim to contribute to reducing alcohol harms even though they oppose effective

interventions, and subtly frame alcohol-related issues in line with industry interests (Mialon & McCambridge, 2018; Petticrew et al., 2018). Well-known examples are the Portman Group in the United Kingdom, Drinkwise in Australia, and the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD) at the global level, each differing in design. Public health-oriented scrutiny of such organizations indicates that they all manage issues that are detrimental to business interests, rather than reduce social and health harms (Anderson, 2004; Babor, 2009). For these reasons, they are sometimes referred to as social aspects and public relations organizations, and are heavily involved in both policy influencing and scientific activities (Babor & Robaina, 2013). There has not, however, been compelling evidence to refute the claims made by these organizations or to explain the gap between the rhetoric and activities, sufficient to persuade policy makers about their nature.

There has been extensive concern, stretching back over three decades, about alcohol industry involvement in science, although there has not been a well-developed tradition of study of this subject (Golder et al., 2020; McCambridge & Mialon, 2018; Mitchell & McCambridge, 2021). Alcohol industry use of evidence within policy making has attracted some research attention (Hawkins & McCambridge, 2014; McCambridge et al., 2013; Rossow & McCambridge, 2019), and existing studies have identified similar tactics as used by other industries whose activities harm health or the environment (McGarity & Wagner, 2012; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). The aim of this study was to investigate

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the origins and purposes of alcohol industry social aspects organizations. Note, this study is not an examination of the involvement of these organizations in policy making, which also involves other types of organizations (McCambridge et al., 2019); rather, the focus is on tracing their evolution over time.

### Method

This article examined the Truth Tobacco Documents Library, which offers a unique but necessarily incomplete window into hitherto confidential proceedings and communications. The data source is large and complex, with most material relating to the United States, following the litigation that mandated release of internal company documents as part of the Master Settlement Agreement of U.S. lawsuits against tobacco companies. Material involving the alcohol industry arises from cross ownerships and collaborations, individuals whose activities spanned both sectors, and third-party service providers working for both industries, such as legal firms. This data source permits a somewhat fragmented understanding of the object of this study. Its principal strengths are in accessing industry strategic thinking as articulated by individuals and organizations that may be important. Despite the data's strong face validity, care is needed in generating inferences.

Dedicated research methods for studying this data set have been developed over time (Malone & Balbach, 2000). We systematically searched for data using approaches that are now standard in tobacco documents research (Anderson et al., 2011), starting with a first wave of searches, then undertaking subsequent waves of data collection, snowballing to follow up on the most promising lines of enquiry. We began with a set of organizational names, which were later complemented by searches for named individuals, and a small number that linked individuals to organizations (see Appendix 1 for searches undertaken), working backward in time as we searched for earlier evidence. (The appendix appears as an online-only addendum to this article on the journal's website.) After piloting, JG performed most of the searches with the basic search facility, with no restrictions on time, document type, or other parameters imposed. JG screened the documents, downloaded, and made notes, before passing to JM, who further sorted by relevance and importance, reducing the data set for more in-depth study, and undertook additional searches.

The analysis involved producing a chronologically ordered and contextualized account of the origins of alcohol industry social aspects organizations, with related content on purposes, as articulated by the actors themselves, and as identified here in three overlapping phases. Because of the nature of the research aims, data saturation was not accomplished and the data set is most informative about events in the United States. There will undoubtedly be much further

substance to be uncovered in the history of social aspects organizations in the tobacco documents and elsewhere, so the interpretation requires specificity about the limitations of the inferences possible on the basis of the present data. This study, therefore, cannot purport to offer a definitive history of the origins and purposes of alcohol industry social aspects organizations, but to render access to internal organizational data capable of building such an understanding.

### Results

This study identified three major developmental periods in the evolution of alcohol industry social aspects organizations. In each of these three phases, a new major emphasis emerged, adding to rather than replacing the earlier concerns. We present data on each phase from the tobacco documents, before considering contemporary relevance.

#### *1. Shaping the science and defining the problem as alcoholism, not alcohol use, from the 1950s onward*

Following repeal of U.S. National Prohibition in 1933, distilled spirits companies refrained from advertising on television and radio and inaugurated self-regulation of marketing in other media. Hill and Knowlton (H&K) consulted for the distilled spirits industry organization Licensed Beverage Industries Inc. (LBI) from 1950 onward to develop a public relations strategy (Boxell, 1964). The LBI objectives were to fund scientific research to bolster the image of the industry and its products and to prevent distilled spirits from being regarded as the cause of alcoholism (see Box 1; Boxell, 1964). This approach was closely mirrored in H&K's well-known work for the tobacco companies from December 1953, for whom they set up and ran the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) to oppose scientific developments that threatened tobacco company interests (Brandt, 2007; Proctor, 2012a). In both cases it was the founder, John W. Hill, who led the early engagement with the industries. The H&K documents were archived in the Ness Motley Law Firm collection.

Similar to the TIRC, LBI formed a Scientific Advisory Council in 1959 under the stewardship of carefully chosen scientists, including the disciplines of medicine, biochemistry, education, physiology, psychiatry, psychology, and sociology (LBI, 1966). Like the TIRC, LBI identified itself as the "public relations and research organization of the liquor industry" (LBI, 1966), with funding scientific research central to the public relations strategy. By 1966 LBI had awarded 125 grants (LBI, 1966). The successor organization, the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S. (DISCUS), had cumulatively awarded 372 by 1979 (DISCUS, 1979). Although the program itself was heavily publicized, its objectives were not.

Internal H&K company information indicates that the LBI was originally slow to accept the H&K proposal for

**Box 1. Licensed Beverage Industries social research activities objectives 1959–1964 (Boxell, 1964)**

- “1. To support and encourage scientific research to bring this problem under control and reduce it to minimal proportions with a corresponding reduction in the impact of this problem both on the public and our industry.
2. To firmly establish in the public mind that ours is a mature and responsible industry deserving of public confidence and support both in this area and in general.
3. To establish and maintain proper public perspective toward these problems and to prevent misconceptions suggesting that liquor is the cause of alcoholism and should be treated accordingly.” (p. 14)

a “long range public relations program for [the] liquor industry” (Hill & Knowlton, 1954c). Thus whereas the initial engagement with the tobacco companies was shaped by earlier work on alcohol, the tobacco work developed much more quickly, with potential to shape later alcohol work. Recommendations originally made in 1953 for “medical” and “education” (see below) programs were not acted on until 1955/56 (Hill & Knowlton, 1955b, 1956a, 1956b). Like the TIRC, H&K staff designed LBI Scientific Advisory Council roles and interviewed candidates (Hill & Knowlton, 1955b, 1956a), with separate staff working on the tobacco and distilled spirits accounts, and information sharing including discussion of direct links between LBI and TIRC on matters of mutual interest (Darrow, 1954; Thompson, 1955). H&K produced agendas for the LBI annual meetings and wrote the annual reports (Hill & Knowlton, 1954b, 1955c). H&K also produced materials on illicitly produced alcohol (Hill & Knowlton, 1955c), which was regarded as the illegal competition (Hill & Knowlton, 1955b) and is still today an ongoing global industry concern (Babor et al., 2015). They also produced various “economic surveys” at the U.S. state level, making clear the contribution of the industry to the economy (Hill & Knowlton, 1954b, 1955a, 1956a, 1956b). In addition, H&K helped coordinate lobbying efforts to defeat a distilled spirits advertising ban (Hill & Knowlton, 1954a, 1955a) and assisted on efforts aiming at taxation reduction (Hill & Knowlton, 1954c, 1955b).

The “medical” program comprised the collection and dissemination of scientific information on alcohol. It provided seed funding to early career scientists in major universities with medical schools in the United States and Canada (Boxell, 1964; LBI, 1966). A 1964 H&K evaluation identified

extensive partnerships on alcohol education in schools and influence on legislation in the United States, alongside the research funding provided (Boxell, 1964). The latter produced a pilot study finding of a J-curve relationship between level of drinking and harm suggestive of a beneficial effect. This type of finding would later be the subject of a major and still unresolved scientific controversy about alcohol’s putative cardioprotective effects (Mitchell et al., 2020). In the 1960s, the proposed J-curve relationship was between drinking and driving, reporting, “fewer accidents among drivers who have had a drink or two than among totally-abstaining drivers” (Boxell, 1964).

The 1964 evaluation report concluded that “[f]inancial support of scientific research is the essential keystone of all the industry activities in this field. It provides conclusive evidence of our industry’s sense of responsibility and sincerity, establishing LBI and the industry as a knowledgeable leader in the field of alcohol studies and related areas” (Boxell, 1964).

Among the key stated conclusions were that the public accepted that alcoholism was a disease, and that prohibition or other restrictions on the industry were not appropriate responses (Boxell, 1964). The emphasis H&K placed on the importance of science as foundational to the industry’s public relations was thus very similar for both the distilled spirits and tobacco industries, and in both cases the programs were directed by H&K, although H&K stopped working with the tobacco industry in 1968 (Brandt, 2007). Science was mobilized to shape perceptions of the product, which in turn had key implications for public policy.

*2. Organizing the U.S. industry across beverages: The 1970s onward*

When DISCUS was formed in 1973 by the merger of LBI with the Distilled Spirits Institute (DSI) and the Bourbon Institute, Samuel D. Chilcote became the principal operating officer. He had worked briefly for LBI, and more extensively for DSI since 1967 (Florida State Courts System, 1993). He described DSI as a trade association, whereas LBI “was more a public relations arm for the distilleries” (Florida State Courts System, 1993). Chilcote became President and CEO of DISCUS between 1978 and 1981 (Chilcote, 1981). He was then recruited by the Tobacco Institute, a successor public relations organization to the TIRC, also devised by H&K (Brandt, 2007; Proctor, 2012a). Much of the material here originated from Chilcote’s own Tobacco Institute files, which included earlier DISCUS documents.

Chilcote himself believed he was recruited by the Tobacco Institute because “[w]e faced a lot of problems, similar to those faced by the cigarette industry . . . The industry wanted to become recognized as responsible citizens in the community; to co-operate with the government in positive programs; to make the community aware that abuse of the product was

**Box 2. DISCUS public service advertising campaign communication objectives and guidelines 1981 (Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, 1981)**

- “1. To clearly communicate that the liquor industry is actively interested and concerned about the problems of alcohol abuse.
2. To clarify public understanding that alcohol abuse rather than use is the source of alcohol related problems and that moderate alcohol consumption is fully compatible with other widely held social and health values.
3. Where possible, attempt to de-sensationalize the various issues related to alcohol abuse and to suggest that the problems are manageable through enhanced personal awareness and responsible behavior by the target audience.
4. Recognizing the dependence on free space and time any new campaign should be suitable for newspapers, magazines, radio and television and should lend itself to a variety of treatments so as to capitalize on fractional space and time availability in various media.
5. DISCUS has established a close relationship over the years with the major organizations representing alcohol beverage retailers. Campaign elements that would lend themselves to on-premise tie-ins would enhance the communication value of the total effort on behalf of the liquor industry since the public does not generally view the producer, wholesaler and retailer as separate and distinct elements when thinking about the industry.
6. Previous DISCUS messages have been widely accepted and reprinted by a variety of health, education and safety organizations, greatly expanding the total outreach of our campaign. It is desirable, therefore, that advertisements be so devised as to permit groups other than the liquor industry to identify themselves, in a sponsoring fashion, with our advertising.” (pp. 3–4) [all underlining in original]

warning labels (“Caution: Consumption of Alcoholic Beverages May Be Hazardous To Your Health”) on alcohol beverage containers in the United States in 1979 (Chilcote, 1981). According to H&K’s account, this was successfully blocked with a multi-sectoral alliance, and when the focus shifted to fetal alcohol syndrome, they proposed the formation of the Beverage Alcohol Information Council as the private sector response to the issue (Hill & Knowlton, 1979).

The Beverage Alcohol Information Council comprised 10 trade association members, representing all sectors of the alcoholic beverage industry, not just distilled spirits (Hill & Knowlton, 1979). Both beer and wine industry interests had similarly opposed the proposed measures, drawing in part on the experience of Prohibition (Maloy, 1979; Wine Institute, 1979). The Council led a national public education campaign, initially on drinking and pregnancy, and subsequently on other issues (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, & Firearms, 1980b; Licensed Beverage Information Council, 1982). It dissuaded the passage of the proposed regulation and secured partnerships in alcohol health promotion campaigns (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, & Firearms, 1980a, 1980b; Chilcote, n.d.). Warning label legislation was delayed until 1988 (Kaskutas, 1995) and remains in effect.

The internal DISCUS approach to public service advertising campaigns explicitly built on earlier historical continuities, defending the image of the product and denying the need for policy measures (DISCUS, 1981). The objectives in 1981 are presented in Box 2, and the fusions with marketing and sponsorship appear to be innovations (DISCUS, 1981).

There was some evidence of DISCUS reaching out to the Tobacco Institute under Chilcote’s leadership by Bill Prendergast (who led on federal regulations; Florida State Courts System, 1993; Prendergast, 1981), who subsequently joined the Tobacco Institute under Chilcote. H&K used Chilcote’s move to restart their work with the tobacco industry (Worden, 1981). A 1979 Wharton study identified the distilled spirits industry, focusing on DISCUS, as more robust in responding to its critics than either the beer or petroleum industries, including through the formation of coalitions such as the Beverage Alcohol Information Council (Wharton Applied Research Centre, 1979). Whereas LBI was similar to the TIRC and later alcohol industry research funding organizations, the Beverage Alcohol Information Council, although it folded, more closely resembled the alcohol industry social aspects organizations that were to emerge later, spanning all sectors of the alcohol industry.

a people problem and not a product problem; . . . [to be] an aggressive trade association . . . pushing for changes in regulations and protecting the industry” (Day, 1993).

Chilcote was the founding chairman of the Beverage Alcohol Information Council (Cameron, 1981). The council had been formed, after working closely with H&K, as a response to the proposed mandatory introduction of health

*3. Responding to the global existential threat posed by science since the 1980s*

The attempt to introduce warning labels was only one application of the developing scientific evidence base that demonstrated that alcohol use was damaging throughout the population and not just for so-called alcoholics (Bruun et al.,

1975). Chilcote's former colleague, the DISCUS Vice President for Research and Public Information, Paul Gavaghan, produced an analysis in February 1986 of the strategic challenge posed to all sectors of the alcohol industry by the "anti-alcohol lobby" (Gavaghan, 1986a). Internationally, he described a movement originating in the mid-1970s seeking to persuade governments that the availability of alcohol should be controlled with "goals that were antagonistic to the beer, wine and spirits industries" (Gavaghan, 1986a). His analysis specifically identified a range of researchers (including one author of the present study), treatment professionals, and advocates as comprising an international alliance which had successfully influenced the WHO with what was described as a "dangerous approach" (Gavaghan, 1986a). WHO was indeed important in communicating population-level ideas on alcohol, although it was at this time under severe pressure from the Reagan administration's threats to withdraw from WHO (Jernigan & Mosher, 1988). Under this pressure, WHO distanced itself from a major scientific report conducted under its auspices, which directed attention toward industry structure and the expansion of transnational corporations, in developing countries in particular (Jernigan & Mosher, 1988).

Gavaghan characterized the scientific consensus in the following terms: "Their availability hypothesis alleges that the rate of alcohol-related problems in any country can be proportionately reduced by . . . regulatory and economic sanctions" (Gavaghan, 1986a).

The analysis goes on to accurately specify price, availability, and marketing restrictions as key measures in line with the existing evidence (Gavaghan, 1986a). The global character of the threat, and the prospect that it "could gradually wear down individual industry associations and producers in most countries," was emphasized (Gavaghan, 1986a). Calling on the beer sector to join with wine and distilled spirits, it was stated that, "[i]f the control of alcohol availability agenda becomes worldwide public policy, there will be no industry as we know it. It makes sense to unite on positions opposing the co-ordinated worldwide anti-lobby on key alcohol/health issues" (Gavaghan, 1986a).

Predecessor organizations to DISCUS had been active in the *Fédération Internationale des Vins et Spiritueux* (FIVS), an umbrella group of trade associations, formed in 1959 (Chilcote, 1986b), which monitored policy issues in different countries (*Produktschap Voor Gedistilleerde Dranken*, 1980). By 1986 FIVS had well-developed position statements on the key policy issues (Box 3), which were elaborated and accompanied by supportive scientific and other bibliographies as a resource to national trade association members (Gavaghan, 1986a).

Correspondence between Chilcote and Gavaghan during 1986 indicates a close information-sharing relationship, particularly in connection with the activities of WHO and the European Economic Community (now the European Union;

**Box 3. *Fédération Internationale des Vins et Spiritueux* Key Position Statements circa 1985 (Gavaghan, 1986a)**

"The benefits of moderate consumption of wine and spirits are documented and need to be understood more widely." (p. 1)

"Restrictions on the availability of wine and spirits are not an effective or equitable means to reduce alcoholic abuse or its social and economic cost." (p. 7)

"The *Fédération Internationale des Vins et Spiritueux* (FIVS) respects and supports the desire of any government to reduce excessive drinking and alcohol misuse. These are related to important health and social problems, which cannot be solved by implementing HWL [health warning labels]. Moreover, HWL would only generate further problems." (p. 12)

"The best method for prevention of alcohol abuse is education. [underlining in original]

This education should be conducted at all levels:

- among potential consumers, particularly young people
- among consumers
- among institutions and the media[.]” (p. 15)

"The *Fédération Internationale des Vins et Spiritueux* (FIVS) respects and supports the desire of any government to reduce excessive drinking and alcohol misuse. These are related to important health and social problems, which cannot be solved by punitive and unrealistic restrictions on wine and spirit advertising, which would only generate other problems." (p. 21)

Chilcote, 1986a; Gavaghan, 1986b, 1986c; Kloepfer, 1986; Worden, 1986). Gavaghan affirmed the value of "intensive, continued monitoring" by H&K sources in Brussels and Geneva (Chilcote, 1986a), particularly in relation to "WHO monitoring for the American tobacco and liquor industries" (Worden, 1986). Gavaghan identified named individuals to whom retainers might be paid as consultants for such purposes (Chilcote, 1986a); however, the Tobacco Institute believed their existing "INFOTAB [a Tobacco Institute organization] stakeouts are quite adequate" (Chilcote, 1986a).

Tobacco and alcohol interests, particularly at the instigation of the former, conceived of themselves as facing a common enemy of anti-product forces, which they associated with the "colossal failure" of prohibition (of both tobacco and alcohol, as vividly illustrated in Anderson, 1996). They conflated any public policies seeking to influence the overall level of consumption with prohibition. INFOTAB

gathered data on leading figures and organizations in the alcohol research community (INFOTAB, 1984). Tobacco Institute monitoring of the alcohol sector identified various candidates for recruitment, for example as “interceders” on addiction (Duffin, 1983). As litigation became a problem for the tobacco industry, its lawyers were also working on legal risks in relation to alcohol (INFOTAB, 1988a, 1988b).

Although the DISCUS/Tobacco Institute/H&K axis maintained strategic connections between the two industries, it was not the only connection. British American Tobacco included a report on the WHO alcohol program from April 1984 in their monitoring, which identified the WHO staff member, Marcus Grant, who would become the founding president of the International Center for Alcohol Policies, the first global alcohol industry social aspects organization (British American Tobacco Company, 1984). Previous WHO investigations (Zeltner et al., 2000) have exposed the role played by a British American Tobacco consultant, Paul Dietrich, working with others, in attacking the organization. Dietrich also covered alcohol in the mid-1980s onward, arguing in a British American Tobacco-sponsored initiative that WHO should be fighting malaria and cholera rather than such first-world concerns as alcohol and tobacco (Boyes & British American Tobacco Company, 1991, 1993a; Lambro, 1985). He attacked publicly funded research designed to show that alcohol was “bad” (Dietrich, 1984). This was claimed to amount to a “scientific prohibition” that had led to raising the drinking age in the United States and presented a growing threat (Dietrich, 1984). A survey of ministers of health in developing countries claimed to show that alcohol was among the lowest ranked priorities (Boyes & British American Tobacco Company, 1993a). It is unclear how far such activities influenced the U.S. administration or otherwise increased the pressure on WHO. Correspondence does, however, suggest that Dietrich’s arguments were used successfully to overturn a ban on alcohol and tobacco advertising in Czechoslovakia (Bratinka, 1991).

Although the developing science was recognized as a major strategic threat across the alcohol industry, as well as by the tobacco companies, the organizational character of the responses needed had not been agreed between the major companies or trade associations, within the United States or elsewhere. A key informant account was given by Peter Mitchell, the former Strategic Affairs Director of Guinness plc, at the tobacco industry TABEXPO event in Geneva in 1998 in a presentation titled: “How the Alcohol Industry Handles Regulatory Changes” (Mitchell, 1998). Although he makes no direct reference to earlier U.S. social aspects organizations or other preceding material, Mitchell similarly identified WHO as having “extreme and overstated concerns” about rising alcohol consumption in the 1960s and 1970s, which had led to worrying policy developments in the early to mid-1980s whose “cumulative effect was threatening to the world-wide drinks industry” (Mitchell, 1998). These

stemmed from the “Anti-Alcohol Movement,” which posed “a genuinely serious threat to our freedoms to market our products” (Mitchell, 1998).

According to Mitchell: “The key reason my own company, Guinness, took the lead in this situation was the very fact that we were involved in all sectors [beer, wine and spirits] of the business” (Mitchell, 1998).

Mitchell’s account is that he personally set about persuading major company leaderships globally that a “joint effort was needed” because “at the apex [of the industry] is a handful of very large global players” (Mitchell, 1998). The outcome he described as the creation of an organizational model that was arms-length from the companies themselves, dedicated “to countering alcohol misuse and to encouraging sensible, moderate consumption” while also seeking to “demonstrate to political and public opinion that it was a responsible industry with sensibly regulated marketing practices” (Mitchell, 1998).

The Portman Group is today the oldest surviving alcohol industry social aspects organization in the world and appears to have played an important role at key moments in British policy development (Room, 2004). Mitchell described in detail the formation of the Portman Group as a first step: “Britain became the focus for the first major initiative . . . what those of us in the industry concerned with a global strategy needed to prove was that the concept could work elsewhere. We needed to show that the idea of an organization similar to the Portman Group but tailored to local market circumstances could have a wide application” (Mitchell, 1998).

Among key perceived benefits of the Portman Group model was to promote “a pan-industry approach to the alcohol debate” (Mitchell, 1998). As a result, according to Mitchell, the industry was seen to be better positioned to implement marketing self-regulation, having gained better relations with government on all aspects of policy, as well as being regarded more positively by the public (Mitchell, 1998). This retrospective account of the emergence of contemporary forms of alcohol industry social aspects organizations delivered to a tobacco industry audience, from a key figure involved, is consistent with the earlier data sources within the tobacco documents, although it does not directly cite them.

As Gavaghan had done, Mitchell (1998) recognized that the United States was vital to the development of a global strategy, and he reported that it took some time to persuade key players there to become involved. The Century Council was launched in the United States in May 1991, almost 2 years after the Portman Group. It was similarly headed by a high-profile figure with good political connections: John Gavin was a former actor who had been U.S. Ambassador to Mexico during the Reagan administration (Republican Eagles Newsletter, 1987).

The press release for the newly formed Century Council identified six programs being funded with \$40 million to

address community interventions, target drink driving and underage drinking, support treatment, and promote self-regulation of marketing (PR Newswire Association, 1991). Mitchell's efforts to bring together the different sectors of the alcohol industry were, however, only partially successful. Distillers were well represented among the founding members, with the president and chief executive of United Distillers (the Guinness spirits company) on the Board of Directors. More than 100 wineries were identified as associate members (PR Newswire Association, 1991), although this did not include Gallo, the largest U.S. wine producer (Brown & The Christian Science Monitor, 1991), or the largest beer producers, Anheuser-Busch, Miller Brewing Company, and Coors (Megalli & Friedman, 1991). By 1994 the Century Council was still mainly funded by six major companies; when Gavin moved on from this role the search for his successor solicited the assistance of Chilcote (Walker, 1994). The responsibilities of the post were fundamentally concerned with government and public relations, and the role description makes clear the highly political mission of the organization (Walker, 1994).

#### *Contemporary relevance*

The Century Council was renamed as the Foundation for Advancing Alcohol Responsibility in 2014 and focused on drink driving and underage drinking until 2019, when it closely aligned itself with DISCUS (2019). Alcohol industry trade associations such as DISCUS and FIVS continue to promote the policy positions they have advocated for decades in opposition to the existential threat posed by population-level alcohol science, while at the same time espousing rhetorical commitments to evidence-based policy. The successor to the International Center for Alcohol Policies as the global-level social aspects organization formed by the major alcohol production companies is the IARD. IARD operates similarly to the trade associations and national-level social aspects organizations as a plausible and effective vehicle for public relations management of science and policy that is contrary to the interests of industry (Box 4). The ongoing alcohol industry public relations enterprise has been successfully pursued for more than 60 years. Like the tobacco company strategy, it appears to have been successful in delaying the adoption of known effective policy responses for decades; unlike tobacco, that continues to be the case (McCambridge & Morris, 2019).

#### **Discussion**

This study provides a somewhat fragmented appreciation of the unknown history of alcohol industry social aspects organizations, using internal documents. The U.S. distilled spirits industry regarded the harms caused by use of their products as a public relations issue to be managed. The strat-

egy designed by H&K was founded on the importance of managing the science in highly similar ways to the approach they developed for the tobacco companies, reproducing a playbook of key messages that have endured for decades. The key tenets were accepted by other parts of the alcohol industry in facing the common enemy of public health and social welfare. The alcohol and tobacco industries have been deeply interwoven for decades in facing strategic threats to business interests. The science, which shows that the more alcohol consumed in a given society the higher the prevalence of a wide range of related problems (Babor et al., 2010; Bruun et al., 1975; Edwards et al., 1994), is unsurprising, yet it is still strongly attacked in alcohol industry public relations, as are the policy measures indicated by the evidence (Bartlett & McCambridge, 2021; Lesch & McCambridge, 2021b).

There are considerable strengths to the data, but also clear limitations. The nature of the data set, the precise focus on origins and purposes as articulated by the actors themselves, the identification of formal internal objectives and related material, are all helpful to an in-depth understanding of the motivations involved. We uncovered no material that challenges the narrative presented here, and the analysis involved the organization of the data, without overlaying it with our own interpretations. H&K and Chilcote are known to have been important actors in relation to tobacco, and Gavaghan (1977) and Mitchell (1994) have been prominent voices of the alcohol industry in relation to science. On the other hand, no claims can be made that all relevant data within the tobacco industry documents archive have been identified. It is also the case that there is little data from major alcohol industry organizations outside the United States, other than for Mitchell/Guinness and FIVS in this data source. The findings are, however, broadly congruent with what is known about U.S. policy during the period covered (Greenfield et al., 2004; Mosher & Jernigan, 1989), and it appears from the FIVS material that DISCUS played a leading role globally. Although it is possible that additional data would yield a substantially different picture, this appears unlikely. Triangulation with a broad range of external data sources fosters support for the internal validity of the analysis presented.

This study adds to existing lines of evidence on the policy-related functions of the International Center for Alcohol Policies (Jernigan, 2012). Social aspects organizations have been shown here to be designed to manage public policy issues in order to safeguard business interests and not to act in the public interest, as is claimed (Babor & Robaina, 2013; McCambridge et al., 2018; Mialon & McCambridge, 2018). It thus may be more appropriate to refer to them simply as public relations organizations, rather than to accept the industry designation and perhaps unwittingly imply that they fulfil any social rather than business purpose. Mergers and acquisitions mean that there are smaller numbers of companies dominating beer and distilled spirits production and

**Box 4.**

A) The publicly stated goals and practices of the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (International Alliance for Responsible Drinking, 2020)

“We are the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to reducing harmful drinking and promoting understanding of responsible drinking. We are supported by the leading global beer, wine, and spirits producers, who have come together for a common purpose: to be part of the solution in combating harmful drinking. To advance this shared mission, IARD works and partners with public sector, civil society, and private stakeholders.

“IARD actively supports international goals to reduce harmful drinking, including the target in the World Health Organization’s (WHO) ‘Noncommunicable Diseases (NCD) Global Monitoring Framework’ of reducing the harmful use of alcohol by at least 10% by 2025 and United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.5. IARD’s member companies also positively impact a broad range of SDGs and want to do more.” (p. 2)

“IARD’s work is informed by scientific evidence on alcohol and health, including alcohol policy. By bringing together data and research on drinking patterns, alcohol in society, and regulations at a national level, IARD examines practices around policies and interventions that reduce harmful drinking. IARD’s tools and resources are intended to support stakeholders in formulating approaches that can be adapted to local needs and contexts.” (p. 3)

B) IARD’s summary of their views on: “Challenges & Setbacks to implementation of the Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol” in response to WHO’s 2019 consultation exercise (International Alliance for Responsible Drinking, 2019)

7. Undue emphasis on reducing alcohol consumption per se, risks undermining Member States’ actions in priority areas such as underage drinking, drink driving, and heavy episodic drinking;
8. Over-emphasis on three ‘best buy’ policies [price, availability and marketing policies], can divert attention from other important evidence-based actions recommended in the GAS [Global Alcohol Strategy];
9. Lagging implementation and weak enforcement of enabling regulations, inhibiting supportive contributions from other sectors;
10. Barriers to a whole-of-society approach, particularly exclusion of the private sector from efforts or support public health;
11. Developments in digital technology which raise concerns for some, also bring opportunities to deliver better protection for minors and vulnerable groups, in line with the 2018 UN Political Declaration (PD) on NCDs [noncommunicable diseases];
12. Gaps in data collection and barriers to private sector support for increased data collection.” [numbers as they appear in original]

marketing (Jernigan & Ross, 2020), with presumably greater capacity to perform such operations. These observations suggest that further study must identify precisely the actors involved, their conceptions of their own interests, and how they act on them (Holden et al., 2012).

It is challenging to contemplate just how profoundly the alcohol industry may have biased what we think we know about alcohol. Ideas associated with the disease concept of alcoholism were foundational to the modern era of alcohol science (Rubin, 1979), and although they were not the sole prerogative of industry, they may have been particularly distorting of science, as well as to experience and understanding of the problems caused by alcohol in the general population. It is noteworthy that alcohol features

in the emerging literatures on undone science and forbidden knowledge (Frickel et al., 2010; Kempner et al., 2005). Obvious targets for further study include industry influence of the science of alcohol’s harms, benefits, and policy responses. The tobacco industry document archive is clearly an important resource to be more deeply mined in further studies. For example, closer study of historical issues may shed light on contemporary issues, and overlapping ownership and control, senior personnel movements, controversies in science, and important policy developments all provide targets for investigation.

There are also other less obvious targets for study. Tobacco industry actors successfully created ignorance about key issues for decades (Proctor, 2012b), and alcohol is clearly

an under-developed science in relation to the scale of the problem. For example, except for acute poisoning overdose risk, there is no compelling evidence that more potent forms of the drug, as found in distilled spirits, are more harmful to use than less potent forms (Mäkelä et al., 2011). This may be surprising when one thinks about intoxication-related harms and when comparisons are made with other drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, and opiates, even after taking account of mode of administration. Similarly, most study of alcohol's harm to others has only been since 2010 (Room et al., 2016). Major alcohol companies should be expected to have well-developed scientific programs, as with the tobacco companies. Yet we know little about internal research conducted by the alcohol industry (Golder, et al., 2020). Company scientists helped persuade car company leaderships that outright denial of the scientific basis of global warming was untenable, and encouraged genuine commitments to the development of less harmful technologies (Rothenberg & Levy, 2012). There is no evidence that alcohol scientists working for transnational corporations have acted similarly.

As alcohol companies seek to develop new markets in low- and middle-income countries, the limitations inherent in national-level policy responses become more apparent (Ferreira-Borges et al., 2017). There has been no progress globally in reducing per capita consumption, and projections indicate that further increases are likely, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where it will do the most damage (WHO, 2018). WHO is seeking to accelerate efforts to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. To do so, it must be recognized that alcohol is a potentially dangerous drug that will do damage to health and society in any population in which its use is widespread (Kypri & McCambridge, 2018).

Public health policy making relating to tobacco is protected from industry interference by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control section 5.3, which requires signatories to act to protect the formulation and implementation of public health policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry (WHO, 2012). The evidence presented here suggests that public health policy-making processes should also be protected from interference by alcohol company trade associations and public relations organizations in the same way, in some form of binding international agreement (Room & Cisneros Örnberg, 2020). This study provides ample reasons to regard the nature of the threat posed by large alcohol companies to health as essentially similar to the threat from the tobacco companies.

This study changes our understanding of the alcohol industry, elucidating similarities and inter-relationships with the tobacco industry. Public health interests should be especially vigilant in respect of the subversion of science through efforts to unravel the consensus reached in the research community, to undermine the integrity of science by using research funding as an instrument of public relations, and to aggressively challenge research findings in the public

domain. Contrary to the industry public relations narrative, enhanced personal awareness and attending to one's own behavior are not sufficient to address the nature of the problem. It is not best prevented by education (Babor et al., 2010). Policy measures are needed that influence the social determinants of individual behavior and manage the alcohol industry in the public interest.

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