Sydney's 'last drinks' laws: A content analysis of news media coverage of views and arguments about a preventive health policy

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Abstract

Introduction. *News media representation of preventive health policies can influence public discussion and political decision making, impacting policy implementation and sustainability. This study analysed news media coverage of the contested 'last drinks' alcohol laws in Sydney, Australia, to understand the arguments made by different 'actors' (stakeholders) regarding the laws and provide insights on how preventive health policies are positioned within media discourse.* **Methods.** *We identified print and online news media articles discussing the laws from 2014 to 2020. Content analysis was used to quantify the arguments made to justify support or opposition to the laws.* **Results.** *A total of 445 articles were included for analysis. Four hundred and thirty-five actors were identified, with industry actors mentioned most (213 times) followed by health actors (136 times). There were more quotes from opponents of the laws compared to supporters of the laws (57% vs. 25%). The proportion of media mentions reduced for supporters (34% in 2014 to 14% in 2020) while mentions increased for opponents (47% in 2014 to 73% in 2020). Supporters used arguments about crime, safety and health. Opponents of the laws focused on issues such as Sydney's 'night time economy' and negative impacts of the laws.* **Discussion and Conclusions.** *Opponents of the laws strategically used the media to influence public debate. Opponents, including industry actors, also ignored the health impacts of alcohol and utilised campaign groups to advocate against the laws. These findings have implications for how governments and advocates communicate and build support for contested preventive health policies.* [Howse E, Watts C, McGill B, Kite J, Rowbotham S, Hawe P, Bauman A, Freeman B. Sydney's 'last drinks' laws: A content analysis of news media coverage of views and arguments about a preventive health policy. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2022;41:561–574]

Key words: media analysis, public opinion, alcohol policy, liquor laws, prevention.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption is a key risk factor for chronic disease, including seven types of cancers, and a range of other health harms, including road accidents, self-harm and interpersonal violence [1]. In Australia, alcohol is a major risk factor for injuries, road traffic, and increased violence and assault, particularly among younger adults [2]. Alcohol use is estimated to contribute between 5.1% and 12.2% of the overall burden of disease and injury in Australia and causes between AUD $1.1 billion and $6.8 billion in costs per year

[3,4]. Moreover, alcohol harm increases as consumption increases [1,5].

However, the drivers of alcohol consumption are complex, with many different factors involved. Alcohol is deeply embedded within many social and cultural contexts [6], including in Australia, and different 'drinking cultures' (norms and patterns regarding alcohol use) exist at the micro and macro levels across and within populations and subgroups [7]. Different public health strategies are therefore required to address the short- and long-term harms associated with alcohol use while also acknowledging the complexity of alcohol

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use, norms, contexts and behaviours. Public health interventions commonly include: individual-level, information-based approaches, such as education campaigns [8] and warning labels [9,10]; and population-level, regulatory measures, such as restrictions on the density of licenced premises within a geographic area [11–13], earlier closing hours of licenced premises and cessation of alcohol sales [14,15], pricing and taxation measures for alcoholic beverages [16–18] and restrictions on the advertising, marketing and sponsorship of alcohol and alcohol brands [16,19]. Accordingly, Australia's National Alcohol Strategy 2019–2028 aims to reduce harmful alcohol consumption by 10% through a combination of these different strategies [20].

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, some population-level strategies have been implemented to prevent alcohol-related harms. In 2008, earlier closing times for licenced premises were introduced in the city of Newcastle, resulting in a 37% reduction in assaults in the 18 months after implementation and maintained over time [21,22]. This was followed by a wide-ranging policy response to reduce alcohol-related violence in inner Sydney in 2014. This response included an amendment to the state's liquor laws to create 'prescribed precincts', the Sydney CBD Entertainment Precinct (which included the area of Oxford St, Darlinghurst, historically the cultural centre of Sydney's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer community) and the 'red light' district of Kings Cross; within these precincts, licenced premises were restricted to 1.30 am time of refusal of new patrons ('lockouts') and a 3 am cessation of alcohol service ('last drinks') [23].

Evaluations of the 2014 policy change in Sydney indicate there was a reduction in non-domestic assaults in the prescribed areas [24], and a reduction in emergency department presentations for facial injuries [25,26]. However, an alternative analysis queried whether the laws had reduced alcohol-related assaults [27]. Qualitative research also explored the possible issue of displacement of crime from the affected precincts to other areas of inner Sydney [28]. In addition, there was mixed evidence about levels of public support for the laws. While polling from the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education indicated consistently strong public support during the implementation period [29–32], an analysis of Australia's National Drug Strategy Household Survey indicated there was a significant reduction in support for late trading restrictions in NSW between 2013 and 2016 [33]. There were also social media posts and blogs from local figures rejecting the laws [34], as well as articles by academics reflecting on the negative impacts of the laws on Sydney's nightlife and concerns about intrusive

government regulation of people's pleasure and enjoyment [35,36].

A 2016 statutory review found the laws were likely effective at reducing violence; however, ultimately the same review suggested a relaxing of the laws [37]. Furthermore, a NSW parliamentary enquiry, the Joint Select Committee on Sydney's Night Time Economy, identified a range of impacts from the laws, both positive and negative, and recommended repealing the laws and provided 39 other policy recommendations [38]. After agreeing with the enquiry's recommendations and winning a third term of government, on 14 January 2020 the NSW Government repealed the laws in one of the two prescribed areas. The NSW Government later repealed the laws for the second prescribed area in March 2021.

A major barrier to the implementation of more effective preventive strategies, such as laws and regulation, is lack of public support [39]. Conversely, high levels of support amongst both the public and key stakeholder groups can increase and facilitate policy adoption and implementation [40]. Preventive strategies that target the whole population, such as increased taxation and reduced availability of alcohol, tend to be less popular with the public [41–43]. Given the social and cultural practices associated with alcohol use, this evidence may reflect the complexity of regulating alcohol use at a population level. This is further complicated by alcohol industry groups using tactics to resist and lobby against regulatory preventive strategies that control or limit the availability, sale and supply of alcohol [44]. Unhealthy commodity industries, such as the alcohol industry, are influential government and political lobbyists, and effective at using the media to promote industry-friendly views, such as using 'complexity arguments' to reject public health regulation of their products [45].

For highly contested preventive policies with opposition from vested interests, such as the last drinks laws, how these issues are discussed and framed in the media can influence community attitudes and opinions about such issues, and increase (or decrease) the likelihood that any proposed change will be adopted and maintained by governments [43,46,47]. Analysing how public health interventions are represented and discussed by media 'gatekeepers' is an important part of understanding how and why some interventions are implemented and sustained over time [48].

Previous studies that have examined how preventive alcohol control strategies are depicted in the news media have mainly focused on minimum unit pricing legislation and taxation in the UK [47,49–52], and alcohol taxation [53] and advertising restrictions [54] in Australia. These studies indicate that the alcohol industry is effective at driving certain views or

arguments in the media to influence public policy. Common arguments opposing preventive policies can include 'nanny state' frames [55], rejection of government regulation [54] and marginalisation of public health evidence [53]. Studies looking at public commentary of other contested prevention policies have found that stakeholders' views on the UK's soft drinks industry levy differed based on their position or vested interests [56,57]. Other media analyses of sugar-sweetened beverage taxation coverage have found that supportive arguments tend to focus on the health harms of the products, while opposing arguments focus on economic impacts and anti-government intervention [58,59]. Industry is also effective at using consistent messaging regarding individual responsibility and directing negative associations away from their products [58].

In comparison to news media analysis research on alcohol taxation and pricing strategies, no published study has analysed the media representation of the 'last drinks' laws implemented in NSW in 2014. This study analyses the arguments and evidence used by stakeholders ('actors') to support their views on last drinks laws in Australian print and online news media. It adds to a growing body of research on the role of news media in shaping public sentiment towards preventive health strategies and the implications for the successful implementation and sustainability of these strategies in the context of industry opposition [48,50,51,53,57,58,60,61].

Research questions

Three research questions were developed by the authors prior to and during the initial news media story search phase. These questions were:

- Which actors (individuals or groups) were referred to or quoted (directly and indirectly) in news stories, opinion pieces and editorials on the laws?
- What were the actor's or writer's expressed views on the laws (supportive, opposed, neutral or non-committal) and how did their use vary over time?
- What arguments were used to justify, support or inform these views?

Methods

Data collection

Two databases, ProQuest Newsstream International Database and Factiva global news (Dow Jones), were searched in May–June 2020 for print and online articles published by major news outlets within the 6-year period from 21 January 2014 to 21 January 2020. These dates cover the announcement of the laws by the NSW Government (21 January 2014) and a week after the repeal of the laws was announced (14 January 2020). The search terms used were: ((lockout* OR 'last drink*' OR liquor) NEAR/3 [adjacent within three words] (law* OR legislat*)) AND Sydney. Major daily news outlets were defined as those with a readership of greater than 1 million; these were: Fairfax (*Sun Herald*, The *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian Financial Review*); News Corp (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Australian*, news.com.au); the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC Premium News, an online news website) and Guardian Media Group (publishing *The Guardian Australia*, an online news website).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were included for analysis if they referred to Sydney's 'last drinks' laws introduced in 2014; were news stories, opinion articles or editorials, and published within the dates specified. Articles were excluded if they discussed liquor laws from any other state, region or city; discussed other types of liquor changes in NSW not directly linked to these laws; or were letters to the editor, news website reader comments, or radio or TV interviews. We excluded newswires (such as Australian Associated Press) as our focus was on original media articles rather than press release feeds or distribution services. We also excluded letters to the editor and online commentary to articles as the focus of this study was media reporting of the policy by journalists and news media outlets, rather than public comments.

Data collection and extraction

Initial screening of titles and the first paragraph of each article (where available from the database) was completed by two authors (EH and CW) to identify relevant articles and exclude duplicates, including any articles duplicated across both print and online media. This was followed by full-text reading of articles and extraction of all relevant data from the article (by authors EH, CW, BF, JK and BM; see Table S1, Supporting Information). Extracted data included both information about the actor's views on the laws as well as any further context to their views. During this stage, actors were identified in each article by the mention of their name, and additional information collected, such as the actor's position, role or organisation. Other extracted data

included quotes from the actor containing their arguments or evidence about the laws, any contextual information and their 'slant' about the laws [48,60]. At this stage, articles were excluded if they were not about the laws or did not mention any 'actor'.

For 'slant', actors' views were coded as being supportive, neutral (non-committal) or unsupportive/opposed to the laws, based on the authors' interpretation of their quotes in that article and the context in which they occurred. This meant that some actors could be coded as having multiple views about the laws, for example, if they had changed their views on the laws over time. For opinion pieces, the main actor quoted was generally the writer of the piece, while for editorials, the actor was the newspaper or media outlet. Multiple actors could be coded in each article. Actor quotes could be direct or indirect quotes; they could be brief quotes or longer phrases. Duplicate or repeated quotes used by the same actor across multiple outlets were coded each time.

Data were extracted using a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel, set up by the primary author in consultation with the other authors and tested using a small sample of articles. Any discrepancies or queries in data extraction were resolved between the five authors involved in coding. Only quotes about the laws were extracted.

After this stage of data extraction, the number of times the actor was mentioned across all news articles was summarised and the actors organised into descriptive categories (see Table S2, Supporting Information). Actors' mentions were only counted once per article; however, some actors had multiple quotes extracted within the one article. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the results, including the number and type of actors mentioned by name in each article along with the number of unique quotes.

Data analysis

The analysis stage (by authors EH, CW and BF) involved the iterative development and testing of a coding matrix for content analysis of the quotes from the data extraction stage. EH first developed a range of argument coding categories and definitions using an inductive approach to the data [47,48,60]. Following the development of these codes and matrix, validation involved all three authors (EH, CW and BF) coding the first 20 quotes (arranged alphabetically) from each of the three 'slant' groups, with the results compared and discussed by all three authors. Concordance of coding results were calculated, with >70% agreement between the three authors across the three 'slant' groups, a reliability level used in other media analyses

[62]. Any disagreements regarding allocation of codes were addressed through discussion and further editing of the coding matrix, such as combining or simplifying categories. This matrix was then approved by all three authors before further analysis.

For coding of quotes, given the 6-year timeframe of the included media and the large number of articles and unique quotes, the authors focused on content analysis of quotes from actors who had 20 or more unique quotes (i.e. most frequently or commonly quoted actors). These were actors who were identified as being most visible and cited in news media articles. These quotes were divided up equally for single coding by each author (EH, CW and BF); each quote could include multiple codes. A full description of the code definitions can be found in Table S3 (Supporting Information).

Ethics approval was not required for this study.

Results

A total of 445 articles were included for quantitative and qualitative analysis (Figure 1).

Descriptive statistics

The largest number of relevant articles on the laws was published in 2016 (138/445, 31%) and 2019 (129/445, 30%). Most articles (79%) were news articles, with the remaining articles being opinion or commentary pieces (17%) and newspaper editorials (5%) (Table S4, Supporting Information). Almost two-thirds of articles were published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Daily Telegraph*.

A total of 435 unique actors (individuals, organisations and/or groups) were identified as being mentioned at least once across the included articles. Actors most frequently mentioned by news articles came from 'industry' (213 mentions), which covered actors representing a hospitality or night time industry group, including pubs, bars, alcohol industry and lobby groups. Health/medical actors were also commonly quoted (136 mentions), politicians from the governing party (130 mentions), followed by local government (70 mentions), music or arts (68 mentions) and business (63 mentions) (Table S5, Supporting Information).

Of 1056 mentions, 25% (268/1056) of mentions by actors in news media articles demonstrated support for the laws, 57% (606/1056) expressed opposition to the laws and 17% (182/1056) were neutral or non-committal. Over the period of the study, a small number of actors expressed a different 'slant' in different articles or at different times; this group of actors tended to be politicians.
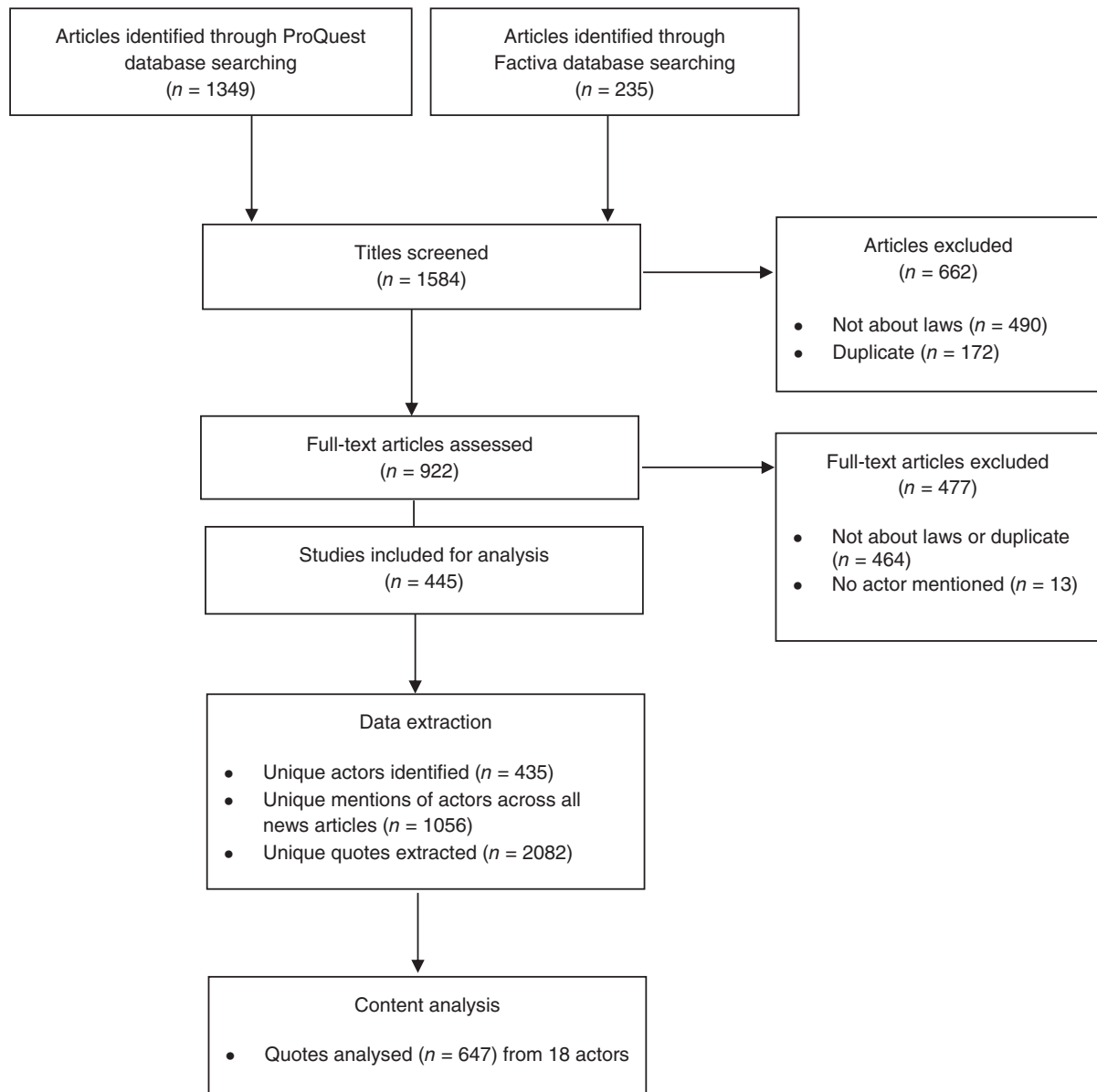
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┌─────────────────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│ Articles identified through │   │  Articles identified through│
│    ProQuest database        │   │   Factiva database searching│
│     searching               │   │        (n = 235)            │
│      (n = 1349)             │   │                             │
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┌─────────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────────┐
│      Titles screened         │───────▶│      Articles excluded       │
│        (n = 1584)            │        │         (n = 662)           │
└─────────────────────────────┘        │                             │
                                        │ • Not about laws (n = 490)  │
                                        │ • Duplicate (n = 172)       │
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│  Full-text articles assessed │───────▶│  Full-text articles excluded │
│        (n = 922)            │        │         (n = 477)           │
└─────────────────────────────┘        │                             │
                                        │ • Not about laws or duplicate│
┌─────────────────────────────┐        │   (n = 464)                 │
│  Studies included for analysis│       │ • No actor mentioned (n = 13)│
│        (n = 445)            │        └─────────────────────────────┘
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│           Data extraction                │
│                                          │
│ • Unique actors identified (n = 435)     │
│ • Unique mentions of actors across all   │
│   news articles (n = 1056)               │
│ • Unique quotes extracted (n = 2082)     │
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│           Content analysis               │
│                                          │
│ • Quotes analysed (n = 647) from 18 actors│
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Figure 1. *Flowchart of study process.*

Across the 6 years of analysis, the number of mentions of actors opposed to the laws was greater than actors supportive or non-committal about the laws. When each year was broken down by quarters, there were only two quarters where there were a greater number of supportive than opposing mentions (Figure 2). These quarters were during the first 2 years of implementation and could be temporally linked to certain events, such as Mike Baird, a supporter of the laws, becoming the Premier (political leader) of the NSW Government in 2014 and the release of statistics from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research detailing the positive impact of the laws in 2015.

Overall, the media mentions of actors opposed to the laws outnumbered those supportive of the laws (Table 1). There was also evidence of a temporal effect such that the proportion of media mentions of supporters fell over time, from 34% of overall mentions in 2014 to 14% in 2020 respectively, while the proportion of mentions from those opposed increased from 47% in 2014 to 73% in 2020.

Content analysis of quotes

A total of 2082 unique quotes were extracted from the articles. Of these, 559 (27%) were extracted from actors who expressed support for the laws when mentioned by the media, while 332 (16%) were extracted
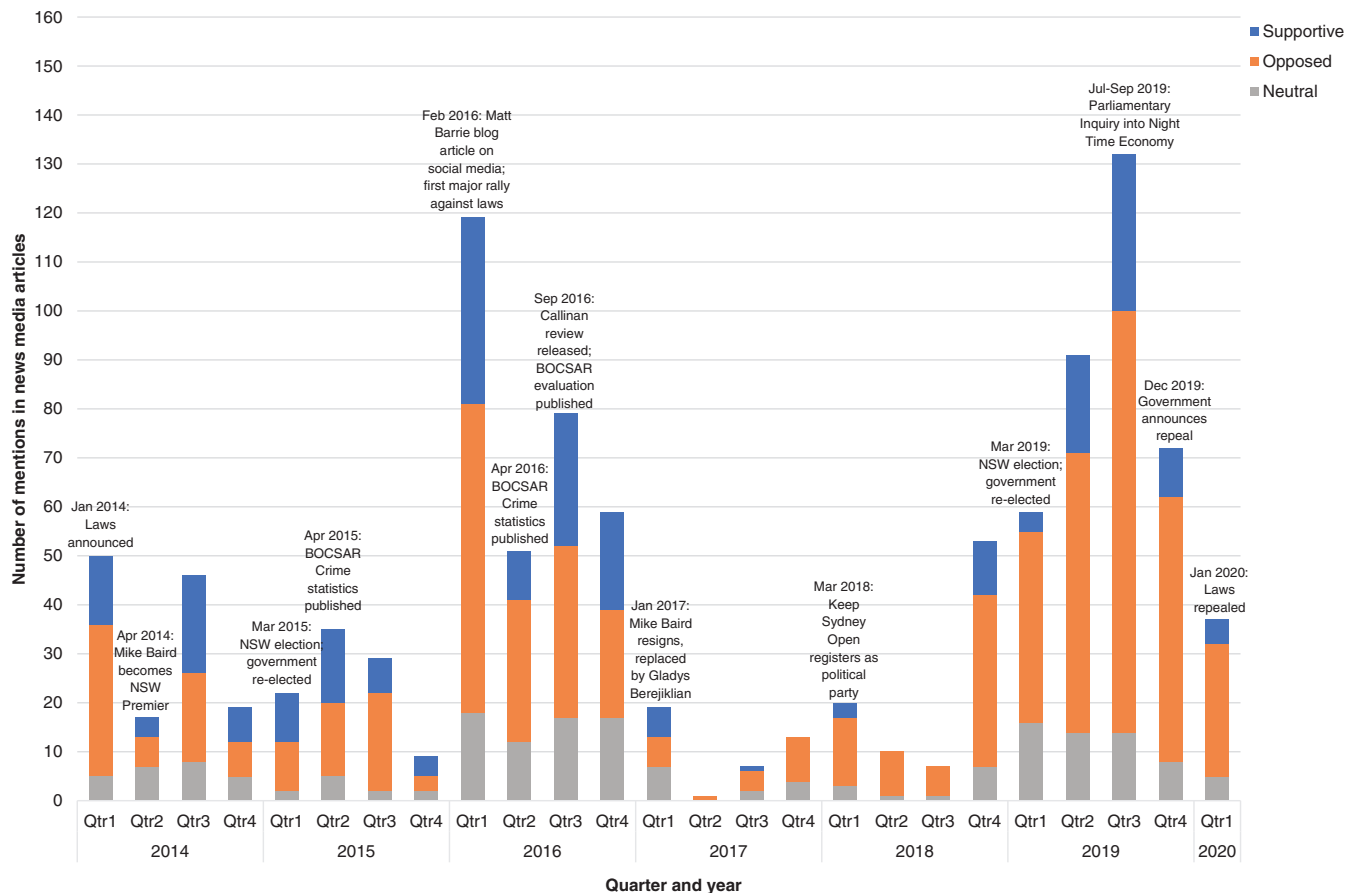
Figure 2. *Frequency of media mentions by quarter, year and actor slant, overlaid with a timeline of major events. BOCSAR, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.*

Table 1. *Frequency and proportion of media mentions by year and slant*

Year	Neutral, n (%)	Opposed, n (%)	Supportive, n (%)	Total, n (%)
2014	25 (19)	62 (47)	45 (34)	132 (100)
2015	11 (12)	48 (51)	36 (38)	95 (100)
2016	64 (21)	149 (48)	95 (31)	308 (100)
2017	13 (33)	20 (50)	7 (18)	40 (100)
2018	12 (13)	64 (71)	14 (16)	90 (100)
2019	52 (15)	236 (67)	66 (19)	354 (100)
2020	5 (14)	27 (73)	5 (14)	37 (100)
Total	**182 (17)**	**606 (57)**	**268 (25)**	**1056 (100)**

from actors who did not express a position or view on the laws, and 2082 (57%) of unique quotes were from actors who expressed opposition to the laws.

Eighteen actors were identified as most frequently quoted (i.e. 20 or more unique quotes). A total of 647 quotes were extracted from these 18 actors for content analysis: five actors supportive of laws (155 quotes), four neutral or non-committal

(134 quotes) and 10 opposed (358 quotes) (Table 2). One actor was coded twice for their views: the leader of the NSW Government from 2017, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian, whose 'slant' changed over the period studied, from neutral or non-committal to opposed.

The most common arguments used by actors, regardless of slant, were about crime and safety (239/647, 37%; Table 3). Other common arguments included references to the night time economy (181/647, 28%), policy alternatives (156/647, 24%) and economic and business impacts of the laws (148/647, 23%). Arguments relating to health occurred less frequently overall (71/647, 11%).

Supportive of laws. One hundred and fifty-five unique quotes were analysed from the most quoted actors who were supportive of the laws. These five actors included: two local doctors; two public health advocates from the not-for-profit sector; and the then NSW Premier (leader of the government in NSW). The two

Table 2. *Most frequently quoted actors by type, slant and number of quotes*

Name of actor discussing the laws	Actor type	Actor's slant about laws	No. of quotes included in analysis
Tony Sara (local doctor and advocate)	Health or medical	Supportive	42
Mike Baird (NSW Premier, 2014-2017)	Politician—governing party	Supportive	39
Michael Thorn (Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education CEO)	Health or medical	Supportive	28
Toby Hall (St Vincent's Health)	Health or medical	Supportive	24
Gordian Fulde (local emergency doctor at St Vincent's Hospital)	Health or medical	Supportive	22
Don Weatherburn (BOCSAR)	Government—department or agency	Neutral	43
Gladys Berejiklian (NSW Premier, 2017-present)	Politician—governing party	Neutral	33
Ian Callinan (former Judge)	Government—review or policy committee	Neutral	31
Troy Grant (Deputy NSW Premier, 2017-2019)	Politician—governing party	Neutral	27
Tyson Koh (Keep Sydney Open)	Politician—campaign group	Opposed	68
Justin Hemmes (Merivale)	Industry	Opposed	64
Clover Moore (Lord Mayor, City of Sydney Council)	Local government	Opposed	64
Gladys Berejiklian (NSW Premier, 2017-present)	Politician—governing party	Opposed	29
John Green (Australian Hotels Association)	Industry	Opposed	28
Matt Barrie (business owner and entrepreneur)	Business	Opposed	25
David Leyonhjelm (Federal Senator, 2014-2019)	Politician—minor parties or independents	Opposed	20
Elizabeth Farrelly (newspaper columnist)	Media	Opposed	20
Alex Greenwich (Independent MP, 2012-present)	Politician—minor parties or independents	Opposed	20
City of Sydney Council	Local government	Opposed	20

BOCSAR, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

Table 3. *Number of argument codes by quote and slant*

Argument code	Supportive (n = 155), n (%)[a]	Neutral or non-committal (n = 134), n (%)	Opposed (n = 358), n (%)	Total quotes (n = 647), n (%)
Crime and safety	85 (55)[b]	73 (54)	81 (23)	239 (37)
'Night time economy'	11 (7)	23 (17)	147 (41)	181 (28)
Policy alternatives	7 (5)	44 (33)	105 (29)	156 (24)
Economic and business impacts	20 (13)	22 (16)	106 (30)	148 (23)
Cultural and music	10 (6)	19 (14)	57 (16)	86 (13)
Health	59 (38)	6 (4)	6 (2)	71 (11)
Anti-regulation	0 (0)	3 (2)	64 (18)	67 (10)
Public support	13 (8)	11 (8)	24 (7)	48 (7)
No views or argument	4 (3)	7 (5)	29 (8)	40 (6)
Communities	5 (6)	2 (1)	24 (7)	31 (5)
Casino	0 (0)	7 (5)	12 (3)	19 (3)
Personal stories	5 (3)	1 (<1)	7 (2)	13 (2)
Gentrification	2 (1)	3 (2)	3 (<1)	8 (1)
Other	10 (6)	9 (7)	21 (6)	40 (6)

[a]Percentages may not add to 100% because multiple codes were possible for a single quote. [b]Shading indicates the most frequent arguments within each slant category.

most common categories of argument used by these actors to justify their views were crime and safety, and health.

Crime and safety: Over half (85/155, 55%) of quotes from supporters of the laws referred to reductions in crime and improved safety, such as assault statistics:

'*He* [Michael Thorn, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education CEO] *cited figures showing a 32 per cent reduction in non-domestic assaults in Kings Cross and 26 per cent reduction in non-domestic assaults in Sydney's CBD in the first six months after lockout laws came into force.*'

Supporters also referred more generally to alcohol related violence, including the then NSW Premier, Mike Baird, who appealed to the importance of protecting the community, particularly young people, from this violence:

'*These laws are about the moral obligation we have to protect innocent people from drunken violence.*' (Mike Baird, NSW Premier 2014–2017)

A reduction in violence against women was also cited by some supporters:

'*Our successful alcohol laws have also delivered a 50% drop in indecent and sexual assault in Kings Cross, meaning Sydney's streets are now a much safer place for women.*' (Dr Tony Sara, local doctor and advocate)

Health: The other main category for supporters' views about the laws was health arguments (59/155, 38% of quotes). This category included providing statistics, such as emergency department presentations, mortality rates or other health-related evidence like a reduction in injuries. These references to the serious health consequences of alcohol-related violence were commonly cited by local emergency department doctors, Drs Gordian Fulde and Tony Sara:

'*Dr Fulde described his department before the lockout laws as a "war zone" and the decrease in severe head injuries since then as "spectacular and terrific".*'

'*"We would think the facts are fairly clear that the lockout laws have been very successful, they've saved lives, they've prevented serious injuries," Dr Sara said.*'

Some advocates also compared the last drinks laws to other successful public health interventions and policies:

'*The lesson from Sydney's world-leading lockout laws is that alcohol harm has been reduced. The smart thing to do is to apply what we have learned more widely. As we have done with road safety, disease control and terrorism.*' (Michael Thorn, Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education CEO)

Additional arguments: Additional arguments used by supporters included referring to the positive impact of the laws on the economy and business (20/155, 13% of quotes), referring to public or community support for the laws (13/155, 8%), and discussing the 'night time economy', usually in the context of the law's improvements to both the safety and amenity of Sydney after dark (11/155, 7%).

Opposed to laws. Three hundred and fifty-eight quotes, from the most quoted actors opposed to the laws, were analysed. These 10 actors included: three politicians, two state and one federal, which included the current NSW Premier; the Lord Mayor and Council of the local government area of inner Sydney and CBD; hospitality business owners and industry representatives; and other local figures, including the lead advocate from Keep Sydney Open, a political campaigning group set up to oppose the laws and run in the 2019 NSW election.

Opponents of the laws employed a range of arguments to advance their position. The most commonly occurring arguments included: the importance of Sydney's 'night time economy' (147/358, 41% of quotes); the negative economic and business impacts of the laws (106/358, 30%); policy alternatives to the laws (105/358, 29%); crime and safety (81/358, 23%); anti-regulation arguments (which included arguments relating to personal freedom or responsibility, the 'nanny state' and being opposed to government regulation) (64/358, 18%); and the cultural, performing arts and live music scene (57/358, 16%).

'Night time economy': A key argument used by opponents of the laws was the negative impact on the city's nightlife (41% of quotes), which was often referred to using specific terminology of the 'night time economy':

'*Ms Berejiklian* [NSW Premier from 2017] *said there was always a need to find the right balance between community safety and boosting the night-time economy.*'

The term was used in a variety of guises to demonstrate the negative social, cultural and economic impact of the laws on Sydney's night time scene, particularly through the use of emotive words:

'*What is not clear is whether better results might have been achieved without wreaking carnage on the economy of Kings Cross. Is it really necessary to destroy Sydney's*

late-night culture to save it from alcohol-induced violence?' (David Leyonhjelm, federal Senator)

Actors emphasised that the laws had negatively affected an important 'ecosystem' of Sydney's night time culture, requiring a range of policy actions to address these impacts:

'*Sydney needed a committee or individual to oversee the sector and to help create a "night-time ecosystem of restaurants, bars, retail, arts, live music and entertainment to draw people into the CBD at night", he said.*' (Justin Hemmes, Merivale hospitality group CEO)

Under this code of the night time economy, some actors associated the laws with the 'death' of Sydney the city, an emotive framing of impact from the laws:

'*Killing the Cross to pre-empt violence is like draining the ocean to prevent a shark bite, or razing slums to end poverty. […] if it continues, we won't have a city. We'll have a ring of day-dead suburbs around a night-dead CBD.*' (Elizabeth Farrelly, newspaper columnist)

Economic and business impacts: Opponents commonly used arguments relating to the negative economic and business impacts of the laws (30% of opponents' quotes). This category included referring to employment statistics in the hospitality industry, or referring to a reduction in foot traffic after the introduction of the laws, with flow on impacts for the economy:

'*The lockout law has hurt Sydney's cultural life and had negative impacts on businesses, including live music venues, small bars and restaurants, and many people have lost their jobs. It's a significant sector - in 2013, late-night activities were valued at more than $17.8 billion and employed more than 30,000 people.*' (Clover Moore, City of Sydney Lord Mayor)

While supporters of the laws claimed there were positive economic and business impacts from the last drinks and lockout provisions, groups such as Keep Sydney Open cited significant monetary statistics to indicate negative impacts, particularly on the local economy and jobs:

'*The State Government's negligent handling of our night time economy costs us $16 billion per year, according to the ImagineSydney: Play report produced by Deloitte and supported by the NSW Government. More importantly it has cost jobs, damaged our music sector and hurt our international reputation.*' (Tyson Koh, Keep Sydney Open)

Policy alternatives: Actors opposed to the laws did not just criticise the laws; most quoted actors also described

and offered policy alternatives to address alcohol-related harms (29% of quotes). For example, the City of Sydney Council (local government) proposed numerous alternative policy approaches to the laws:

'*The city's submission will support the removal of the 1.30am lockouts and 3am end-of-service rules, but recommend that this is accompanied by wider reform of planning, liquor licencing regulation, governance and transport.*'

These alternatives were taken up by other actors, such as Keep Sydney Open:

'*Mr Koh and Keep Sydney Open's supporters believe the problem of safety could have been solved by investment in 24-hour public transport, anti-violence education and a different approach to policing.*'

Crime and safety: Opponents of the laws also discussed the importance of safety and reducing violence (23% of codes). However, while those supportive of the laws referred to crime statistics and protecting the community, actors who were opposed to the laws, such as Sydney's Lord Mayor and the local state MP, emphasised the importance of ensuring both community safety and Sydney's night time culture:

'*Well-managed late-trading premises are essential to our city's cultural life and economic growth – and people need to feel safe, no one wants to wake up to blood and urine on their doorstep*', she said. '*We need to get both right*'. (Clover Moore, City of Sydney Lord Mayor)

'*We need to make sure we have a safe and vibrant nightlife and that means looking at relaxing the lockouts but putting in place proper planning and licensing controls and supporting diversity over drinking.*' (Alex Greenwich, NSW Independent MP)

Other actors highlighted that safety and a 'vibrant' night life did not have to be in opposition to one another:

'*Unfortunately with this state government we've been forced into the dichotomy of safety or vibrancy. We've been saying this for years - you can have both*'. (Tyson Koh, Keep Sydney Open)

Anti-regulation: A smaller number of actors referred to anti-regulation arguments (18% of quotes) to claim the laws were representative of a 'nanny state' that destroyed fun and a sense of personal responsibility for Sydneysiders.

'*Far more disgusting than what goes on at Kings Cross is people being thrown out of work by nanny-statists and*

politicians seeking to impose their hypocritical standards on us all.' (David Leyonhjelm, federal Senator)

'*We've become known as a city of killjoys*'. (Elizabeth Farrelly, newspaper columnist)

Being opposed to regulation in this area was more broadly linked to the view that Sydney was over-regulated, with negative impacts for the local community and businesses, as well as being unfair on those doing the 'right' thing:

'"*The lock-out laws introduced by the O'Farrell and Baird governments six years ago were a sledgehammer blow to crack a nut,*" says Moore' [City of Sydney Council Lord Mayor].

'*Imposing additional blanket measures on everyone, regardless of whether they are a good or bad operator, is poor policy.*' (John Green, Australian Hotels' Association)

Cultural and music: The other key argument used by opponents of the laws related to discussing Sydney's cultural, performing arts and live music scene (16% of quotes). For example, opponents of the laws focused on the negative impact of the laws on the number of live music venues:

'[City of Sydney Council] *also noted reports that the laws have severely impacted 93 live music venues and employment opportunities for local musicians.*'

Additional arguments: A smaller number of other arguments were also referred to by opponents, including citing public support against the laws (7%) and concerns about the exemption of the casino and other gambling venues from the laws (3%).

Neutral or non-committal about laws. A total of 134 quotes were analysed from four actors who did not express a clear position in support of or in opposition to the laws. These actors were political leaders, a leading public servant from the government crime statistics agency and the judge conducting a formal review of the laws for the government.

The most common arguments referred to were crime and safety (73/134, 54% of quotes), and those proposing a range of policy alternatives to the laws, including relaxing the laws in certain areas (44/134, 33%). These actors also referred in much smaller numbers to the 'night time economy' (23/134, 17%).

Crime and safety: Actors neutral about the laws generally relied on crime statistics (54%), but in comparison to supporters of the laws, they were cautious about

making causal inferences and expressed ambivalence about the impact of the laws on crime and safety:

'*Assaults have been coming down in NSW since 2008, so you had this pre-existing downward trend*', he said. '*What the lockout laws did was accelerate the existing downward trend, so it fell even faster than before.*' (Don Weatherburn, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research)

Policy alternatives: Actors who were non-committal about the laws also referred to alternative policy approaches and interventions (33% of quotes); this was particularly the case for political leaders who combined an acknowledgment of the importance of safety for the government while referring to policy responses to better support local businesses:

'*During this period, we have also worked to relax certain aspects of the laws, such as extending trading hours for bars and clubs for major events, and making it easier for small bars, restaurants and cafes to start up and operate*'. (Gladys Berejiklian, NSW Premier)

The Chair of the review into the laws, former Judge Ian Callinan QC, also implied policy alternatives were acceptable to address the perceived negative impacts of the laws:

'*Mr Callinan said he did not buy the argument Sydney had been ruined by the changes, but believed that something could still be done to restore the city's vibrancy.*'

Discussion

This analysis adds to a growing area of research focused on understanding the role of the media in shaping public debate about preventive health policies. In the case of a politically and publicly contested policy such as the last drinks laws in Sydney, this was an issue with a high level of newsworthiness, with hundreds of articles over a 6-year period that met our criteria for analysis.

Based on our analysis, we have identified two key findings. These findings have implications for implementing and sustaining preventive health policies, particularly in terms of media and communications strategies used by governments and advocates to build support for policies and address industry interference.

Key Findings

Opponents of the laws were mentioned more frequently and used a range of arguments to influence media discussion

Compared to those who were supportive of or neutral towards the laws, opponents of the laws were more

frequently mentioned and quoted by the media. Given the relationship between news media reporting and public opinion, the larger number of stakeholders commenting on their opposition to the laws may have been a factor in the apparent reduction in public support of the laws over the period of the study [33], though establishing a causal relationship is difficult. Nevertheless, having a large number of opposing voices regularly mentioned and quoted by the media can affect and polarise public perceptions about preventive health policies [56]. We also note that while the political leader of the NSW Government, Mike Baird, was supportive of the laws when they were first implemented in 2014, the slant of his successor, Gladys Berejiklian, changed from being non-committal about the laws to being opposed; this shift could reflect the loss of support from government or political 'champions', both in the media as well as in the policy environment.

Those opposed to the laws also referred to a wider variety of arguments to support their view and shift public debate by discussing the negative economic and business impacts of the laws; the importance of music, culture and the performing arts; and offering policy alternatives that undermined the need for the laws. It is notable that opponents of the laws did not make explicit arguments referencing the social and cultural role of alcohol for many groups in terms of fun, pleasure, enjoyment and community connection. Others have highlighted the potential threat that laws like 'Last drinks' can be to such notions, which highlights the complexity of public health interventions and regulation [35,36,63]. Understanding why such arguments were not commonly used is beyond the scope of this paper but is an avenue for further research.

Opponents of the laws were particularly successful at reframing the issue as primarily a debate about Sydney's 'night time economy', rather than about alcohol-related violence and health, though we note the latter was a common theme early on during implementation. High-profile figures from a range of sectors deployed a public narrative about the night life and vibrancy of Sydney as a city. This also coincided with a number of incidents or events that likely increased media coverage, including: in 2016, a high profile social media post [34] and the statutory review of the laws [37]; and in 2019, the NSW election and the parliamentary enquiry [38]. In comparison, supporters of the laws deployed a smaller number of arguments to support their views, predominantly relying on crime and safety statistics and health-related impacts. Such arguments were reframed and undermined by opponents, who emphasised a 'balance' between a prosperous night life and community safety, and talked about economic and business impacts rather than health

impacts. Different actors therefore tended to use different types of 'evidence' to support their views on the laws, ranging from more 'academic' evidence (such as statistics) to anecdote and lived experience.

Given the laws were partially repealed in January 2020, our analysis suggests that opponents were persuasive in their numbers and arguments, particularly through the use of the narrative of the 'night time economy' and using it to influence the policymaking process at strategic points in the election cycle. For example, opponents used media coverage to push for statutory and parliamentary reviews of the laws that allowed for public submissions (including submissions from industry groups) and generated more media coverage. This was seen with the Callinan Review and the Joint Select Committee enquiry, the recommendations of which the NSW Government responded to, including those relating to relaxing the laws.

Our analysis also highlights the media and communications challenges for governments and advocates when introducing preventive health policies that are publicly contested. Effective media and communications strategies in public health may need to involve multiple actors, sectors and coalitions, using a range of qualitative evidence from outside of the health sector in order to tell a compelling story in the media at opportune times. However, sophisticated media strategies may be costly and resource-intensive for advocates, particularly if competing with misinformation and strategies from well-resourced industry groups with vested commercial interests [44]. Our results also raise questions about whether policy implementation is necessarily associated with an increase in public support [40], as our analysis could indicate that the public discourse (as represented by the news media) became less supportive during the period of policy implementation.

Industry groups used a range of tactics to promote their views in the media and influence policymaking

In our analysis, we identified that industry was the most mentioned type of actor and used a range of tactics to shape public debate on the laws. Other studies have also found industry actors tend to be commonly cited stakeholders and use a variety of arguments in opposition to preventive health policies [51,52,58]. However, unlike other media analyses that found alcohol manufacturers and lobby groups were the main opponents to minimum unit pricing of alcohol [47], we found that the industry groups and actors quoted on the 'last drinks' laws tended to include those from Sydney's major hospitality industry groups and local pub owners, rather than only traditional industry lobby

groups (such as the Australian Hotels Association). These opponents focused primarily on local-level business and economic impacts of the laws—a potentially persuasive argument for local political representatives.

Industry groups also spoke about Sydney's cultural life and 'night time economy' and emphasised alternatives to regulation, such as investing in public transport after dark and supporting live music and cultural activities. We identified less use of anti-regulation or 'nanny state' arguments that have been identified in other media analysis studies in prevention and public health [54,55]. Our media analysis suggests industry actors utilised the complexity of the policy problem and solution through highlighting the impacts on other sectors, including business and the performing arts. The media reporting on views of local hospitality industry groups and business owners added to this complexity and may have helped to focus the public discussion on the business and economic impacts of the laws at a local level rather than debates about government regulation and overreach. This helped to create doubt about the laws, provoke public controversy and may have influenced government to repeal or relax the laws. These findings reflect other research indicating complexity arguments can be used as part of an 'industry playbook' [45].

Another industry tactic is to use other groups or proxy organisations to advance opposition to preventive health measures, which has been seen in tobacco control [60,64] and food policy [65]. We identified through our analysis that one of the figures most frequently quoted by the media was the leader of a campaign group, Keep Sydney Open, which was established to oppose the laws. This group organised numerous events and rallies to demonstrate public support to repeal the laws, which were then reported in the media; the group later registered as a political party to run in the 2019 NSW election. Campaign groups like Keep Sydney Open used the media to direct attention away from the negative impacts of alcohol and focus on more positive messages, such as supporting the 'night time economy' and Sydney's live music scene. Health or medical arguments, such as referring to the health impacts of alcohol, rarely appeared in their quotes. In comparison, supportive voices and advocates for the laws put forth health evidence as one of their main arguments, but over time these voices became outnumbered in terms of media mentions. The marginalisation of public health evidence has been identified in other studies about preventive alcohol policies [53] and also linked to alcohol industry tactics [44].

It could be argued that the media tactics were effective strategies on the part of opponents, particularly industry, given that opponents were much more likely to be mentioned in the media articles and this proportion increased over time, with almost three quarters of media mentions in January 2020 from actors opposed to the laws. Furthermore, this could also reflect that public support shifted in NSW [33], as well as with politicians and the NSW Government. Given the relationship between news media reporting and public sentiment [43,46,47], it is possible the public debate, as reflected in the media reporting analysed in this study, was one of several factors that influenced the NSW Government's decision to repeal the laws.

Limitations

Limitations include that only quotes from those actors who had 20 or more quotes were thematically coded for content analysis; these actors' quotes were prioritised due to their visibility. However, this may mean those who were quoted less may have expressed different arguments. The interpretation of 'slant' was also based on the judgements of the authors, which reflects our own world views and perspectives as public health researchers. Additionally, only print and online media coverage of major newspapers with a large circulation were analysed; local community newspapers, blogs and social media platforms were not analysed, which may have used different actors and arguments.

Conclusion

News media is often used to shape public debate and opinion about preventive health solutions. This analysis suggests that demonstration of evidence that an intervention is effective in terms of health and social domains is not sufficient for policy sustainability in prevention, particularly for more contested policies. Public health policymakers and advocates must marshal a wide array of actors and evidence in support of an intervention, utilise non-health arguments, build a compelling narrative to support long-term implementation, and resource a strategic media and communications strategy. There is also a need to acknowledge that policies and laws are based on different values that are inherently contestable by different groups. As such, the nuances of introducing new policies and laws to address highly complex patterns, norms and behaviours need to be carefully considered, particularly where public opinion is divided or mixed.

The findings of this media analysis also suggest public health advocates, policymakers and communities need to be aware of the ways in which industry groups contest preventive policies through news media

channels. Understanding how industry groups utilise the media, such as distracting from health impacts, developing persuasive new arguments and using campaign groups, has implications for how governments and advocates implement, communicate and build support for preventive health policies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Table S1. Protocol for data extraction.
Table S2. Actor category definitions.
Table S3. Code definitions and illustrative quotes.
Table S4. Media outlet and type of included articles ($n = 445$).
Table S5. Number of mentions by actor type.