

The performance of political narratives: How Australia and Britain's 'fat bombs' fizzled out

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bpi.sagepub.com**John Boswell****Abstract**

Although narrative has become an important concept in political analysis, the empirical focus has largely been limited to narrative as text. This article puts equal emphasis on narration as act. Drawing on tools and techniques associated with performativity, I analyse how actors perform a critical counternarrative on obesity as a policy issue across democratic settings in Australia and the United Kingdom. I show that this political narrative is watered down, muted and confused the closer it gets to formal governing institutions; this avowedly 'cohesive narrative' becomes fuzzy, inconsistent and overlapping, such that the ticking 'fat bomb' described in open public debate fizzles out before it even approaches these institutions. In concluding, I argue that these findings add considerable nuance to our understanding of how and to what effect narrative manifests in political affairs.

Keywords

health policy, narrative, obesity, performativity

Introduction

'Narrative' has become a fashionable term in political life. Media analysts and political actors themselves talk sagely about the importance of 'controlling the narrative' over any complex and contested issue and work accordingly to construct the narratives that make sense of and order political affairs (Boswell, 2013). This trend follows burgeoning politics and policy scholarship which has highlighted how narratives give shape to perceptions of political problems (see Ospina and Dodge, 2005). But within both realms—political practice and empirical political scholarship—attention has largely been on narrative as text. Instead, I build on the notion, elucidated at length by narrative theorists across the subfields of political science and beyond (e.g. Stone, 2002; White, 1980),¹ that political narratives do not exist simply as discursive artefacts. They consist of live 'acts' in that they must be reproduced and reinterpreted in, and for, specific contexts. Observing how

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narratives are brought to life in different political settings is crucial to developing a better understanding of narratives and their impact on politics and policy.

My analysis entails a rich case study of debate on the complex and contested political issue of obesity in Australia and the United Kingdom. It focuses on the key counternarrative on the issue in particular, labelled so as it represents the primary opposition to the dominant narrative affirming the status quo. This is the Regulatory Reform narrative, voiced mainly by public health academics, sympathetic media commentators and health charity representatives, which blames rising rates of obesity on the spread of 'junk food' diets and supports much stricter regulation of the food industry. By innovatively allying a more traditional narrative analysis to an appreciation of performativity, I track the way this narrative moves across political debate in the two countries, contrasting its performance in settings in the public sphere with those approaching formal governing institutions. I find that this narrative is watered down, with its emotional force blunted and its specific details fudged, as actors perform it in these institutions, to the point where its coherence across either debate is highly questionable. These findings reveal a complex role for narrative in political affairs, suggestive of a more nuanced understanding of narrative in empirical political analysis.

The article proceeds in four main sections. In the first, I explore in greater detail the conceptual underpinnings of the empirical research, whereby narrative is seen to be something comprising live acts rather than a dead text to be outlined by the analyst. In the second, I outline the approach I took to analyse narration in this way. In the third, I outline the analysis in two main parts, first describing how the counternarrative on obesity is narrated in open, public sites, before showing how it becomes watered down, muted and confused in formal governing institutions. In the final section, I conclude by highlighting what these findings imply for the study of political narrative more generally.

Narration as act

In the last three decades or so, there has been a surge of enthusiasm for talking about and studying narrative in political scholarship. Like most concepts across social scientific endeavour, its swelling popularity has also entailed a degree of concept stretching or slippage. At one end of the spectrum, narrative is seen as synonymous with anecdote, an everyday recounting of a specific sequence of events. At the opposite end, narrative is synonymous with what is more commonly called discourse, as a broad ensemble of ideas and symbols that order actors' understanding of social and political affairs, usually beyond their own apprehension. There is extensive work across the social sciences, and in politics and policy scholarship particularly, that theorises about, and makes empirical use of, narrative in these senses of the term (as outlined in Boswell, 2013). But the dominant usage of narrative in empirical politics and policy scholarship, which I also adopt here, sits in between these conceptions. Although, of course, it cannot be completely distinguished from them—developed as it is, in part, as an accretion of anecdotes (Ospina and Dodge, 2005) while at the same time as a 'surface textual' manifestation of a deeper underlying discourse (Schram, 2012)—narrative in this sense is a chronological account that helps actors to make sense of, and communicate about, a political issue (Fischer, 2003: 162; Roe, 1994: 1–4; Stone, 2002: 138).

Most of the empirical work adopting this notion in politics and policy studies has been either on uncovering the content of narratives on specific policy controversies (e.g. Boswell et al., 2011) or on identifying how political actors construct narratives to gain

consent or assure legitimacy for their actions (e.g. Dye, 2014; Grube, 2012). The former approach largely divests actors of their agency. The latter risks seeing them as masterly over the rhetoric they produce. Both potentially render narrative as something that can be ascertained as a singular text. I therefore favour a middle ground which recognises that political actors operate in the context of pre-existing narratives, but equally that they have capacity to reinterpret and reconfigure these narratives in context (Boswell, 2013). Narratives exist, but not independent of agents (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Stone, 2002).² They must be brought to life in and for a specific context, reproduced and rearticulated by embedded political actors. They require narration.

The closest work to the territory I hope to cover here is associated with empirical scholarship conducted, or inspired, by Bevir and Rhodes.³ This work has fruitfully applied narrative to shed light on how political actors make sense of governing dilemmas in the moment (see, for example, Clarke, 2007 or Rhodes, 2011). These insights, however, speak more to the personal or private reflections of actors and less to the sort of publicly articulated narrative accounts of action (or inaction) that are the focus of most narrative scholarship. Importantly, though, Finlayson's (2007) tweaking of Bevir and Rhodes' account moves us back towards this public dimension. He seeks to ally the turn to narrative with an older focus on rhetoric, in the process unpacking the agency that political actors exercise in giving voice to narratives. Crucially, such a turn refocuses the analyst's attention on where narratives manifest; rhetoric is always *situational*. Finlayson is at the forefront of a growing body of scholarship in Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) that draws on these insights to unpack elite speech acts in their political context (e.g. Atkins and Finlayson, 2013, 2014).

Although there are clear affinities with the RPA approach, the analysis I offer here augments this scholarship in important ways. First, while most RPA studies focus intently on the dynamics of speech acts in a particular setting or situation, my emphasis on performativity encourages me to focus across multiple political contexts and examine the similarities and discrepancies in narration across them. This enables this analysis to be turned back onto the conception and empirical analysis of narrative itself—a discussion I return to in the concluding sections. Second, and more fundamentally, a focus on narration moves beyond the rhetorical (what is said) to incorporate the performative (how it is said) as well. I expand on this latter point in outlining the method below.

Analysing narration

My analysis of narration centres on a detailed case study on the debate over obesity in Australia and the United Kingdom. Most experts across both countries bemoan the 'obesity epidemic' and the strain rising rates of obesity place on health services and the broader economy. Yet despite broad consensus that there is a problem, there is little consensus among experts, politicians, lobbyists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), among others, about its nature, its causes and, most especially, its appropriate public policy response. Its uncertain, complex and hotly contested nature means that a variety of competing narratives circulate in public debate on this issue. Moreover, in both Australia and the United Kingdom, the attendant debate has engaged a broad spectrum of actors, from lay citizens to celebrities, bureaucrats, experts of many different sorts, industry lobbyists and health NGOs, across multiple institutional contexts, from the mass media to expert taskforces, Parliamentary inquiries and stakeholder dialogues (see Table 1 for a breakdown). As such, the competing narratives on obesity have had to

travel across different sorts of dramaturgical stages. It therefore represents an ideal test case for how and to what effect actors perform narratives across debate.

These various institutions—identified as consequential in Britain and Australia’s obesity debates in a handful of initial ‘helicopter interviews’ (Hajer, 2006) with expert observers—are understood here not as essential or fixed objects. They are instead, as in Bevir and Rhodes’ (2010) account, entities iteratively constituted by embedded beliefs and practices. These embedded beliefs and practices are shaped and work to shape the perceptions and behaviours of the actors who interact with them. The key point for this analysis—and the point I return to in explaining my findings—is that the different institutional contexts in my analysis entail different embedded beliefs and practices and that these influence consciously (and perhaps unconsciously) how actors narrate within and across them.

I derived data from these institutional contexts in the form, first, of publicly available documentation and video footage. I then followed this initial analysis up with interviews with the policy actors engaged in these settings (politicians, civil servants, medical professionals, NGO and industry representatives, activists, academics and health journalists) in which I asked them to recount the experience of their participation and reflect on some themes of interest. I had set up the project with the expectation of finding important and illuminating differences in the architecture of the obesity debate between Australia and the United Kingdom. However, I determined that the findings with respect to narration across institutions displayed broad and compelling similarities; the initial logic of comparison rather melted away on this dimension of my analysis.⁴

To delve into the active process of narration in these political debates, I drew on and combined two streams of interpretive research. The first involved adopting the qualitative narrative policy analysis techniques of Emery Roe (1994) and Deborah Stone (2002). This helped to identify the competing narratives at play on the issue. I then allied this work to a performative analysis, drawing particular inspiration from recent work on governance by Maarten Hajer (2005, 2009). To clarify, my focus on performance, like his, is not intended to imply that political actors are inauthentic or manipulative, *per se*, but to stress that their actions are always context-specific and audience-oriented (Gottweis, 2007). Combining the narrative and performative approaches gave me vital insights into how narrative is brought to life in different political contexts.

In attempting to understand the performance of narratives on this issue, I viewed live or televised debate in several of the sites and read many more transcripts and articles after the fact. I also interviewed three dozen advocates involved in one (or usually multiple) settings of public debate, in order to garner their reflections on this issue. My analytical focus was not just on what actors were saying, nor just their perception of these discursive differences. Performativity goes beyond rhetoric to how language is translated into social action (Gottweis, 2007). Analysing how narratives are performed has therefore required equal focus on enactment. In person, this enactment can incorporate physical elements such as the speaker’s appearance, their body language and any props they use or refer to. It includes social components like the way they interact with the setting and the other actors around them (Hajer, 2005).

The analysis

In my analysis, I identified a range of competing narratives that actors subscribe to on the issue of obesity. Some perceive rising rates of obesity as a major problem for the health

Table 1. A summary of the debates on obesity in Australia and the United Kingdom.

	Australia	Britain
<i>Data gathered and analysed</i>	Approx. 1100 documents, 11 hours of video footage and 25 interviews with policy actors	Approx. 500 documents, 12 hours of video footage and 11 interviews with policy actors
<i>Mass media</i>	Approx. 500 articles from across <i>The Age</i> , <i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i> , <i>The Australian</i> , <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> and <i>the Sun-Herald</i> , interviews with 1 journalist and 14 public advocates	Approx. 250 articles from across <i>The Guardian</i> , <i>The Telegraph</i> , <i>The Daily Mail</i> and <i>The Sun</i> , interviews with 7 public advocates
<i>Taskforce</i>	<i>National Preventative Health Taskforce (2008, 2009)</i>	<i>Foresight (2007)</i>
Expert report commissioned by government on costs of and solutions to the obesity crisis	Reports and government response, submissions, consultation notes, interviews with 3 Taskforce members	Report and related documentation, interviews with 2 participants, interview with 1 member of expert advisory committee
<i>Collaborative network</i>	<i>Food and Health Dialogue</i>	<i>Public Health Responsibility Deals</i>
Involving government officials, food industry representatives and public health advocates	Communiqués, website, interviews with 3 Dialogue members	Website, interview with 1 Responsibility Deal member
<i>Democratic innovations</i>	<i>2020 Summit</i>	<i>Food Standards Agency's Open Board Meetings</i>
New institutional arrangements designed to foster public deliberation (with obesity one issue among many up for discussion)	Australia's 'best and brightest' discuss critical issues facing the nation, including a stream on health (of just under 100 members): Report and government response, session notes and 3 hours of video footage, interviews with 2 participants	The community board holds 10 'open' meetings every year broadcast live on television and archived on the Internet: Video footage, meeting agendas and minutes
<i>Parliamentary inquiries</i>	House of Representatives' Inquiry into Obesity (House of Representatives (HoR) Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, 2008): report and response, submissions, Hansard and interviews with 2 MPs and 7 witnesses Senate Inquiry into Protecting Children from Junk Food Advertising (2009): reports, submissions, Hansard, video footage and interviews with 1 senator and 2 witnesses	

MPs: Members of Parliament.

service and beyond and sought resolution alternatively in firmer regulation of the food and urban environments, cultural change across all sectors of society, greater investment in medical research and treatment technologies, or even broader reform to tackle social and economic inequality. Others blame the rise of obesity on the pervasive Nanny State, and others still question whether there is an obesity epidemic at all (see Boswell, 2014 for more details). Across these diverse accounts, I found that actors consciously narrate differently in different institutional contexts.

In general terms, they produce bold, urgent performances to attract media attention; their performance is much more measured and muted in formal governing institutions. Those who see obesity as a manifestation of broader inequalities wrought by modern capitalism, for instance, are careful when performing in formal governing institutions in Britain to avoid any ideological statements and promote pragmatic policy reforms; in Australia, they simply do not voice this narrative at all out of the perception that it is too radical (see Boswell, in press; Olsen et al., 2009).

The policy actors involved, especially the most experienced ones and those engaged in a range of institutional contexts, see this as *realpolitik*. They know that getting their concerns on the agenda requires the sensational; they know that then getting to an acceptable outcome requires the dispassionate and the 'reasonable'. They are absorbing and responding to the embedded beliefs and practices associated with the institutions they encounter. This is 'the game' (see Boswell and Corbett, 2015).

More interesting are the concerns among some of my more reflective participants about the dangers this poses for their advocacy efforts. They argue that conditioning due to perceptions of 'feasibility' presents significant risks: that their preferred narrative loses its potency and shape as they and their fellow adherents perform it across the debate, with adverse consequences for their cause.

These findings were consistent (more or less) across all six narratives I identify. However, in this article my emphasis (due to constraints of space) is on a single one—the Regulatory Reform narrative. Performed largely by public health researchers and practitioners, Regulatory Reform represents what Roe (1994: 5) would call the key *counternarrative* in the debate. A counternarrative in Roe's theory constitutes the primary threat to the dominant narrative (the one underpinning the status quo), in that it makes sense of the problem in a way that not only challenges the dominant narrative but also underpins an alternative policy prescription. In this sense, Regulatory Reform is highly critical of, and represents an alternative to, the dominant narrative of shared personal and societal responsibility for obesity that underpins the 'soft' obesity prevention measures, such as social marketing campaigns and voluntary codes of conduct for food manufacturers, which currently prevail in both Australia and the United Kingdom (with the support of politicians and parties, key stakeholders in industry and some prominent health actors). In contrast, the premise of Regulatory Reform is that the rise in rates of obesity is an alarming and potentially destructive consequence of a skewed and manipulative marketplace: a 'toxic' or 'obesogenic' environment where unhealthy choices are much cheaper and more convenient than healthy choices. What makes it such an interesting example through which to explore narration across debate is that, in line with the point made earlier about the rise of 'narrative' as a potent concept in political strategising, it is presented by its proponents as a 'concerted narrative' (interview with British public health expert, March 2012). It thus represents a 'critical case' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) through which to examine the manner in which political narratives are performed across different institutional contexts.

The regulatory reform narrative in the public sphere: a ticking bomb

As articulated in the press and in similarly open or public settings, Regulatory Reform portrays a ticking ‘fat bomb’ (Stark, 2008). The characterisation of this bomb typically begins with a nostalgic view of eating and exercise habits decades ago. The suggestion is that people used to be healthy primarily because they had control over what they ate. In both countries, this happy equilibrium is seen to have been undermined by various industries. The primary villain is Big Food—the fast food restaurant industry as well as processed food manufacturers and retailers. They are seen to have insidiously designed, manufactured and promoted their products to maximise profits at the expense of public health. A journalist sympathetic to the public health lobby from *The Age* suggested, for instance,

Not so long ago, it was easy to tell which foods were good for you and which were not—what was a staple, what was a treat. Now, it is less clear. And public health advocates will tell you, that is no accident; it is the result of clever marketing strategies by the powerful food industry. (Williams, 2011)

Perhaps worse still, in the public-oriented performance of this narrative, Big Food is presented as meddling in the political process to avoid the firm regulation that proponents of this narrative claim is so badly needed. Recent efforts to paint themselves as ‘part of the solution’ and to appear to be engaging in voluntary initiatives around marketing, labelling and product reformulation are dismissed as corporate public relations activities. As a consequence, recent government efforts to improve awareness of healthy lifestyles are decried as hopeless in public performances of this narrative. On the Australian government’s refusal to legislate on ‘junk food’ advertising, journalist Adelle Horin (2008) argued that ‘education can’t on its own compete with the massive advertising dollar of the junk food industry’. Indeed, in publicly oriented performances of this narrative it is claimed the conviction needed to go beyond these superficial actions and implement effective, population-wide policy is lacking due to fear of the ramifications from the powerful food industry. For example, in response to the announcement that the Coalition had set up a series of Responsibility Deals with industry actors in order to develop collaborative responses to public problems like obesity, a sympathetic *Guardian* columnist exclaimed,

[...] [the] revelation that fast food and drinks companies such as McDonald’s, PepsiCo, Unilever and Diageo have now been asked by ministers to draw up public health policy shows the corporate takeover of politics has reached a new level. This isn’t an issue of government consulting business. We’re talking about the same vested interests that have fuelled the obesity and alcohol abuse crises as good as dictating terms at the heart of government. (Milne, 2010)

Overall, the actions of various industries and the relative inaction of government are said to have resulted in skyrocketing rates of obesity. Proponents of this narrative publicly claim that ordinary people have become stuck in a ‘candy shop’ of temptation, with unhealthy choices so much easier than healthy choices. One expert witness at the House of Representatives (HoR) Standing Committee on Health and Ageing (2008) summed it up:

[...] our way of life has become very sedentary and our foods have become very energy dense. If you look at our society, it is almost a normal reaction for people, children and adults, to gain weight inappropriately. (p. 72)

With skyrocketing rates of obesity comes an ‘epidemic’ or ‘tsunami’ of lifestyle-related chronic illness (interview with Australian public health expert, June 2011). The notion is that rising obesity rates have already put increasing pressure on public hospitals, and as the situation deteriorates in the future, it will jeopardise the long-term sustainability of the health service.

In the media and public inquiries, adherents enact a sense of urgency at the scale of the problem. This is nowhere better exemplified than at a Senate Inquiry in Australia, where a long list of experts lined up to support a bill banning junk food advertising to children. The most striking presentation involved six advocates from various health NGOs, public research and health professional organisations. The panel of witnesses outnumbered the committee members by a ratio of 2:1 (most committee members themselves opting to stay away entirely from the controversial and short-lived Inquiry). They inundated the committee members with wave after wave of almost identical testimony. The effect was a relentless enactment of Regulatory Reform, reinforcing the perceived urgency and seriousness of the cause.

The open, public performance of this narrative, then, typically culminates in calls for a heroic intervention in the form of brave and urgent government action to protect the interests of consumers by regulating at the population level. Several specific measures are put forward in this vein, including regulation to clamp down on advertising and marketing of unhealthy food (especially to children), a legislated revamp of labelling to warn consumers about the dangers of such food (as has occurred with tobacco), revisions to subsidies around food production and tax incentives at point of sale and inclusion of obesity prevention in policy and regulation across a wide range of related areas such as planning codes and education directives. Renowned Australian public health expert Simon Chapman (2009) surmises,

The frightening speed with which obesity is increasing globally requires bold policy. The obesity epidemic will not be stalled or reversed by cosmetic initiatives like small community health promotion campaigns, but by policy reforms that reach every Australian.

Narrating regulatory reform in formal governing institutions: (mostly) a fizzle

As discussed earlier, there is a strong perception among the proponents of this account that it represents a cohesive, concerted narrative that is critical of the status quo and pushing for urgent change. Indeed, this desire to present a united front represents a conscious strategy on the part of the narrative’s leading proponents. Born partly out of resentment of the perceived power of the food industry to influence policy and partly out of fears over the damaging impact of ‘policy cacophony’ and a lack of clarity for decision-makers (see Lang and Rayner, 2007), these actors have consciously banded together to form a more united voice. Their belief is that in doing so they will have greater influence:

And the way we’ve attempted to strengthen our hand is to make sure that we are working with those other groups. Because our chances of getting better outcomes are always enhanced no end

when we have a series of health groups that are involved. (Interview with Australian public health advocate, April 2011)

Proponents of this avowedly ‘concerted’ narrative are conscious that they cannot perform in the same way across different democratic settings. They speak consciously of the need to reshape and target their advocacy to achieve greater impact on the different stages they encounter:

It all depends on what your objective in the debate is? If you are trying to influence policy, there’s a different source. If you are trying to influence the great unwashed—ie. everyone out there—and public behaviour, there’s a different media. If you are trying to inform systematic structural change, you will use a different format. So actually you pitch your targeting and your message based on your audience and your objective. So the submission we will make directly to the Minister will look very different to the one that we might make as a shell release. They won’t be contradictory but they will have a message that is relevant at that point. (Interview with Australian primary health expert, July 2011)

But this process of translation inevitably involves some transformation. A deeper analysis of how actors perform this account across different sites of debate in Australia and the United Kingdom reveals that the counternarrative loses much of its impetus and detail as it moves towards formal governing institutions in both countries. The ‘fat bomb’ of public debate very much fizzles out.

Watering down content

First, my analysis shows that the most critical aspects of this account are blunted in this process. While in private interviews and in the media, as well as within expert-dominated sites, the narrative is generally performed with great strength, in formal governing institutions, performances of this account are more equivocal.

This is most apparent in relation to the Taskforce (in Australia) and Foresight (in the United Kingdom) processes. These sites represented something akin to ‘enclave deliberation’ (Sunstein, 2000), as advisory bodies comprised mainly like-minded experts who, when deliberating together and in the relative absence of contradictory voices, pushed discussion in a more radical direction. Both featured a deliberately limited range of participants and points of view and, as a consequence, accommodated radical performances of the Regulatory Reform account in their deliberations. For instance, a reading of the notes taken from roundtable consultations (with experts) of the Taskforce shows that most participants pushed strongly for major legislative and policy changes around the production, taxation and marketing of food to cleanse the so-called ‘toxic’ environment. Accordingly, both the Taskforce and the Foresight processes have become closely associated with that account in their respective countries. But the outcomes of both these expert advisory processes, as they were fed into the government Ministries under whose auspices they were run, have been greatly moderated.

The Taskforce is universally held in high regard by those who subscribe to Regulatory Reform in Australia. The process was, for those involved, ‘gruelling’, ‘exhausting’ but immensely satisfying. The outcomes of these deliberations, likewise, are collectively seen as a kind of manifesto. Yet a closer inspection shows that while the Taskforce process fostered radical performances of Regulatory Reform in its internal deliberations, its external contribution to the broader debate has been far more constrained.

For a start, the public advocacy that surrounded the Taskforce was muted. Great care, for instance, was taken to crafting an outwardly cooperative relationship with the food industry rather than taking an adversarial stance—a point that became particularly strained when one of the members, Kate Carnell, subsequently switched her affiliation from the GP Network (the peak body for general practitioners in Australia) to the Food and Grocery Council, the food industry representative body. Although this shift prompted considerable anger among advocates of Regulatory Reform—which spilled over into some public condemnation—there was a remarkable effort behind-the-scenes to smooth over the relationship as evidence of a broader ‘partnership’ approach to tackling obesity. This approach and tone lie at odds with the righteous vilification of the food industry in the public sphere.

Moreover, despite the strong perception that the Taskforce’s final report demands the sorts of policy actions that adherents to Regulatory Reform support, such as food labelling rules, marketing restrictions and taxation changes, the document itself tells another tale. The wording of the report on all of these issues is much milder than that routinely used when this account is performed in the media. Instead of demanding regulations on junk food advertising, traffic light labelling or a ‘fat tax’, the report merely suggests that the government ‘restrict children’s exposure to unhealthy food advertising’, work collaboratively with industry to improve front-of-pack product labelling and ‘review the current system of taxes and subsidies’ (National Preventative Health Taskforce, 2009: 15–18). The Taskforce report, according to one of the few advocates to speak out against it, represented a ‘watering down’ of the prevailing expert wisdom. On the television debate show *SBS Insight*, Boyd Swinburn claimed,

Everything is being watered down. Even the existing documents that have been put together, the whole thing about reducing the intake of the unhealthy food and junk foods has been cleansed out of it. They talk about curbing inappropriate advertising to children during their children’s hours—that is way too weak, way too watery.

The same phenomenon was apparent in the United Kingdom with the Foresight process. Like the Taskforce, the Foresight process is closely associated with Regulatory Reform, with its report viewed as the clearest and most detailed account. Indeed, he claimed,

Most importantly [the Foresight process] exposed how actually the obesity thinkers hadn’t really got a good narrative. They hadn’t got a concerted—and I used that word advisedly, concerted, brought together in some harmonious way—a concerted narrative of what to do. And [bringing together that narrative] was the most useful thing about Foresight, through our celebrated diagram of the ‘obesity map’ as it is now called. (Interview with British public health researcher, March 2012)

Yet, again, the report was far less radical than adherents to this narrative imagine. Rather than demanding a raft of clear regulatory measures, the report suggests the following: redefining obesity an environmental and social problem, not an individual one; taking a comprehensive, system-wide approach to the issue; developing long-term, sustained interventions; engaging with stakeholders in and out of government; and effectively monitoring changes (Foresight, 2007: 14). None of these stated aims bear much resemblance to the strong rhetoric engaged in by proponents of Regulatory Reform in the media.

Muting tone

There is also a moderation of the critical tone of Regulatory Reform as it is performed closer to formal governing institutions. In the media, and in private interviews with me, several of the most high-profile proponents of this account have been vocal in their criticism of the food industry and the government. Some even spoke of the debate as being akin to a 'war'. Yet, their performances of Regulatory Reform in sites like the Food and Health Dialogue in Australia or the Public Health Responsibility Deals in the United Kingdom have been far more muted.

For some of my interview participants, this is simply part of the political advocacy 'game'. For example, one advocate of Regulatory Reform, in justifying her continued participation in the Public Health Responsibility Deals—which most Regulatory Reform advocates in Britain are hugely sceptical about—spoke in these terms: 'We publish reports criticising practices and trying to highlight the need for change but we also work within the system where it's useful to do that as well' (interview with British public health advocate, April 2012). A Regulatory Reform advocate in Australia made the point more starkly:

There will still need to be the screamers on the outside chucking bricks to keep the pressure up. If we all said yep, we want to work with industry, and we'll all be on advisory boards, and we'll all take funding for research and for conferences and stuff, then we're all going to be in the pocket of industry and there won't be enough independent people keeping things honest. (Interview with Australian researcher, June 2011)

But when engaged in formal governing institutions, proponents of this narrative inevitably highlight the more palatable aspects of their account. They emphasise collaborative points of convergence across the competing narratives on obesity. The best example is convergence over the issue of 'complexity'. Almost everyone in this debate acknowledges that obesity is a complex issue. Indeed, 'complexity' came up in nearly all contributions to sites of deliberation, as well as every interview I held. But the centrality of complexity disguised the fact that adherents to competing narratives had very different understandings of what this meant and what its implications for policymaking were. A striking example was when a senior British health bureaucrat, Will Cavendish, presented the department's obesity strategy at a Food Standards Agency (FSA) board meeting on 11 June 2008. Cavendish praised the aforementioned Foresight process and its celebrated 'obesity map', discussing the complexity of the issue at length in his justification of the strategy. It is important to recall that the Foresight process is closely associated with Regulatory Reform; for those engaged in the deliberations that led to the report, the complexity represented by that 'map' typically acts as an explanation for why interventions focused on individual agency will not work, and broader regulatory measures are necessary. However, Cavendish actually reproduced the status quo narrative; he deployed the Foresight process and its 'obesity map' to express misgivings about moves such as the regulation of advertising and labelling or the revision of tax and subsidy systems. Yet on the completion of his presentation, Chair Dame Deirdre Hutton, whose performances generally align with Regulatory Reform, did not challenge him on this apparent conflict. Instead she thanked him for providing such breadth and clarity of detail.⁵ The tone of her contribution to the exchange remained convivial, constructive and optimistic, replacing the urgent, critical, frustrated tone from the public sphere.

Confusing political identities

In addition to the fudging of demands and the blunting of critique, this also speaks to a degree of fuzziness in the performance of this narrative across different sites of debate. The result is a messy, overlapping set of interpretations. For example, in both Australia and the United Kingdom, many bureaucrats consciously align themselves with the public health lobby, drawing sympathetically on epidemiological evidence and other sorts of knowledge in similar ways. But they subtly reinterpret these knowledge claims to reproduce the dominant narrative rather than the critical Regulatory Reform one. Like Cavendish in the example above, they speak glowingly about the Taskforce and Foresight processes and outcomes and emphasise the complexity of the issue and need for ongoing investment in research. Privately, they concede the importance of public health advocates taking a strong stance on this key issue (interview with Australian health bureaucrat, June 2011; interview with British public health official, June 2012). Nevertheless, like Cavendish, their performances typically affirm the formal government position (as would be expected), reinforcing the complex nature of the social dynamics behind rising obesity rates and the need for a measured, incremental approach which requires positive engagement and agency from all relevant 'stakeholders'.

The temptation is to interpret this sort of narrative overlap as a deliberate and manipulative attempt to maximise acceptance and neutralise disaffection. Yet, in line with findings in other studies, my interpretation is that it relates to more complex dynamics of discursive power, as agency is both enabled and constrained by the narratives that order debate.⁶ Working as part of a broader 'discourse coalition' (Hajer, 1995) empowers and strengthens individual advocacy, but the inevitably diffuse nature of any narrative—even a consciously 'concerted' one such as Regulatory Reform—entails surrendering control over meaning. This is far from the popular image of constructing or controlling narratives with which we began. It is important to return to this popular image because in this final section of the analysis, and in the conclusion, I delve into what the fuzziness of narrative in practice means to the actors involved.

In line with important work in the fields of rhetoric and communication, my analysis reveals an important role for 'identification' in the contest of narratives in public debate (Kirkwood, 1992; Somers, 1994).⁷ Many actors who strongly identify with Regulatory Reform seemingly unwittingly perform another; in other words, some actors privately (in interviews and in what they convey of their private interactions with colleagues) profess to be proponents of Regulatory Reform, but do not perform it in formal governing institutions. One Australian NGO representative in particular did her utmost in our interview to associate herself with public health advocates and academics and distance herself from the food industry and even the health bureaucracy. For example, while casually discussing some of the personalities involved in the debate, I asked whether she saw herself as being on the side of Michael Moore (a proponent of Regulatory Reform) rather than Kate Carnell (the controversial food industry advocate). She replied instantaneously, 'Hell yes!' and throughout the course of our interview situated herself firmly in 'the public health camp'. Yet in her performance at a (then) private hearing with committee members on the HoR Inquiry, for instance, she powerfully echoed the dominant narrative associated with policymakers and food industry advocates both in her rhetoric and in the apparently collegial manner in which she engaged with the (status quo-oriented) politicians involved.⁸

More confusingly still, it is apparent that some actors are strongly identified with this narrative, when their public statements generally align with another. This was most clearly exhibited on a day when I was travelling intercity to conduct interviews with British obesity experts. At the end of an interview with a British physician, he spoke glowingly about an ‘ally’ who worked at a government agency devoted to public health—an expert who I was coincidentally scheduled to meet later in the day. However, while the physician was a passionate supporter of Regulatory Reform, the official in question—in both our interview and in his few public statements—is in my analysis clearly not. Where the physician openly vilifies the food industry and promotes regulatory shackles, his alleged ‘ally’ in formal governing institutions downplays the role of the food industry, cautions against the exaggerated claims of his colleagues in the public health community and urges a slow, incremental, pragmatic and collaborative approach to solving the obesity problem.

Conclusion

This last point begs the obvious question: if actors themselves are not always aware of what narrative they and their peers are actually supporting, what use is this analytical category anyway? Indeed, for scholars of political narrative, the analysis of narration here looms as potentially problematic. It presents an infinitely messier picture than some scholarly and most popular allusions to narrative tend to suggest (e.g. Grube, 2011). It shows that even the most consciously concerted of narratives engenders a considerable degree of fuzziness and incoherence as it moves across debate. Perhaps, the category of narrative itself can be seen to have frayed at the edges altogether.

But an argument which attacks the utility or relevance of narrative would be overly simplistic. Although narratives like the one in my analysis are not stable objects performed consistently across sites in practice, they continue to capture something important in an analytical sense. Narratives matter, most crucially, because they actually matter to the actors involved; narratives help to *make sense of* public deliberation on this issue because they *make sense to* the political actors engaged in the debate. For most of my interview participants, as well as actors whose testimonies or opinions I read or heard, the narratives that I have identified represent an important and meaningful analysis. Whether they referred to it as adhering to a ‘narrative’, ‘frame’, ‘discourse’ or ‘perspective’, or whether they described themselves as belonging to a particular ‘camp’, ‘coalition’, ‘team’ or ‘side’, their identity in relation to this issue was usually bound up in being aligned to one of the narratives my analysis uncovered, including Regulatory Reform (even if that self-claimed identity did not always match their advocacy efforts in particular sites). Several of my interview participants reflected on the strain of representing the radical views of their public ‘allies’ while at the same time sustaining pragmatic relationships with government and industry officials in formal governing institutions. One summed this up:

[Because of my involvement in formal institutions] I’m careful not to criticise the government when I think that could be misconstrued. All the comments I made about [obesity], well people are saying ‘well, why haven’t they gone further?’ This is a really difficult area.

There is, of course, a broad body of scholarship on how political institutions manage difficult political affairs (e.g. Thacher and Rein, 2004). My rich unpacking of the ‘fizzling out’ of the obesity bomb in Australia and the United Kingdom has deep resonance with the lessons of this work. It helps to flesh out how and why the ‘institutional fixes’ or

processes of ‘kicking the issue to the long grass’ operate and to what effect (see also Griggs and Howarth, 2013). It provides insights into the interaction between the discursive and the institutional within a broader policy context, adding to the toolkit of scholars focused on formal governing institutions in complex and contested policy debate. Further research, across different sectors and regions, can explore in greater depth the discursive dynamics of issue containment (and expansion) as actors narrate across institutional settings.

But as well as working to bring a focus on narrative to a relatively new domain of inquiry, this analysis also contains crucial lessons for the literature on political narratives itself. Specifically, in showing how this narrative loses its shape and force across policy debate, my findings should not be seen to challenge the legitimacy or importance of this category, but to point towards a more sophisticated understanding of narrative in political life. Indeed, the blunting and fudging of Regulatory Reform in formal governing institutions is not a corruption of the pure account; the experience in this case suggests that such flexibility and ambiguity are essential features of narrative and something on which its communicative power depends (see also Stone, 2002; Yanow, 1996). The normative implications of this ambiguity and how it is negotiated by the actors involved are important for emerging ideas about how claims are transmitted across democratic systems—and these ambivalent implications are something I explore in much more depth elsewhere (see Boswell et al., 2015). But, in any case, the approach adopted here, and the empirical findings unveiled, should encourage empirical scholars to confront more fully the complexities of narrative as a sense-making and communicative device in politics and policy-making and engage in further investigation.

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Notes

1. Hayden White, in reference to historical narrative, actually advocates the term ‘narrativise’ to understand the active process by which events are made to cohere by the analyst/actor. My preference here, given the affinities this account has with the popular and problematic notion of ‘constructing a narrative’ in politics, is for ‘narration’, which instead captures the contextual rehearsal of established scripts.
2. Van Hulst and Yanow (2014) make a similar argument with respect to issue frames and the importance of the active process of framing in an excellent recent analysis.
3. Bevir and Rhodes’ work on narrative is difficult to pigeon-hole into any of the three categories I lay out— anecdote, narrative or discourse—and at times cuts across all three, but their own empirical work and the empirical work which draws on them (e.g. Morrell, 2006) increasingly centre around the mid-way notion of narrative I focus on here.
4. I have argued elsewhere (see Boswell, 2014; Boswell and Corbett, 2015) that this is not problematic in interpretive research. Indeed it is common to the experience of rich immersion and ongoing induction that it requires.
5. Although the Food Standards Agency (FSA) board meetings are open, and broadcast and archived over the Internet, in practice they are seldom scrutinised (Hajer, 2009) and actors typically perform as if in a closed meeting setting.
6. Hajer (1995) makes this point in his work on ‘discourse coalitions’, noting that actors can affirm different ‘discourses’ (pp. 58–68) at different times and places. Other scholars have built on this work and examined these dynamics in closer detail (e.g. Szarka, 2004).

7. The term 'identification' is linked to the work of Burke (1969), which he explains thus, 'You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language [...] *identifying* your ways with his' (p. 55).
8. Unfortunately, I cannot provide greater detail about her advocacy in the hearing as it may allow her to be identified, and thus violate the conditions of the ethics protocol under which this research was conducted.

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