Barlow, Pepita; Serôdio, Paulo; Ruskin, Gary; McKee, Martin; Stuckler, David; (2018) Science organisations and Coca-Cola’s ‘war’ with the public health community: insights from an internal industry document. Journal of epidemiology and community health, 72 (9). pp. 761-763. ISSN 0143-005X DOI: https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2017-210375

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Science organisations and Coca-Cola’s ‘war’ with the public health community: insights from an internal industry document

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ABSTRACT
Critics have long accused food and beverage companies of trying to exonerate their products from blame for obesity by funding organisations that highlight alternative causes. Yet, conclusions about the intentions of food and beverage companies in funding scientific organisations have been prevented by limited access to industry’s internal documents. Here we allow the words of Coca-Cola employees to speak about how the corporation intended to advance its interests by funding the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN). The documents reveal that Coca-Cola funded and supported the GEBN because it would serve as a ‘weapon’ to ‘change the conversation’ about obesity amidst a ‘growing war between the public health community and private industry’. Despite its close links to the Coca-Cola company, the GEBN was to be portrayed as an ‘honest broker’ in this ‘war’. The GEBN’s message was to be promoted via an extensive advocacy campaign linking researchers, policy-makers, health professionals, journalists and the general public. Ultimately, these activities were intended to advance Coca-Cola’s corporate interests: as they note, their purpose was to ‘promote practices that are effective in terms of both policy and profit’. Coca-Cola’s proposal for establishing the GEBN corroborates concerns about food and beverage corporations’ involvement in scientific organisations and their similarities with Big Tobacco.

INTRODUCTION
Food and beverage companies have long been accused of trying to exonerate their products from blame for increasing rates of obesity by implicating declining physical activity instead.1 2 In August 2015, these concerns reached a new audience when the New York Times revealed how Coca-Cola had spent $1.5 million to create the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN) to disseminate messages about obesity focused on the role of ‘energy balance’.3 This portrayed obesity as about whether caloric intake was out of balance with exercise, rather than what or how much food and beverages people consume. Crucially, it was easier to achieve ‘energy balance’ with high levels of exercise and caloric intake.4

 Commentators draw comparisons between organisations like the GEBN and tobacco industry-funded organisations, so-called ‘Merchants of Doubt’ who diverted attention away from second-hand smoke as a cause of disease by challenging research showing its risks and invoking other causes of observed associations.3 5 6 Food and beverage industry executives and the researchers they fund reject such comparisons, arguing that corporate funding does not mean that recipients advance corporate interests.7 8 While this view has been challenged, industry intentions have so far only been inferred from what they fund rather than established with certainty.9–11 There has been relatively little access to the industry’s internal documents, as was the case with Big Tobacco through legal challenges, where this definitively exposed the many ways that it promoted its business interests in scientific debates about tobacco—at the expense of public health.12 13

Here we allow the words of employees of a food and beverage corporation—Coca-Cola—to speak about how it intended to advance its interests by funding a scientific organisation. This unique source is Coca-Cola’s proposal to establish the GEBN, obtained in 2016 by US Right to Know, a consumer and public health group, through a state Freedom of Information request.1 The proposal was attached to an email sent by Rhona Appelbaum, former Chief Health and Science officer at Coca-Cola, to a small group of academics on 9 July 2014. The emails show how Coca-Cola intended to use the GEBN to: (i) reframe obesity as a matter of addressing ‘energy balance’; (ii) portray the GEBN as an ‘honest broker’ in the obesity debate; (iii) promote obesity reduction strategies that are commensurate with Coca-Cola’s interests via an extensive advocacy campaign.14–16

STRATEGY 1: ADVANCE ‘ENERGY BALANCE’ AS THE RIGHT FRAMEWORK TO DEAL WITH OBESITY
Coca-Cola’s proposal for establishing the GEBN shows how the company wanted to use the GEBN to ‘change the conversation’ about the causes of obesity. To reorient the debate, the GEBN was proposed to ‘advance ‘energy balance’ as the appropriate framework for addressing obesity’. Coca-Cola’s proposal portrays the interests of public health as in conflict with their own. This is evident in the proposal from the argument that the science of ‘energy balance’ could be deployed as a ‘weapon’ in the ‘growing war between the public

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Received 11 December 2017
Accepted 1 March 2018
Published Online First 14 March 2018


The source documents were made available to JECH to verify the accuracy of our quotes and characterisations of them, but they are not legally publishable in their original form.
health community and private industry’ over obesity. Coca-Cola
was concerned that the company was losing this battle. As the
proposal states, the company had ‘failed to develop… an alter-
native to strategies being proposed’. In spreading the ‘energy
balance’ message, the GEBN would help ‘to counter the voices
touting extreme solutions to the obesity problem, for example,
food is tobacco’. By referring to ‘extreme solutions’ or ‘unrea-
sonable views’, Coca-Cola referred to government regulations to
tax or ban foods that are considered unhealthy.

Importantly, the proposal stated that the GEBN should not
aim to attack directly these ‘unreasonable views’. Instead, Coca-
Cola sought to promote a narrative that could challenge the view
that diet played a leading role in obesity: the GEBN would ‘play
offence with alternative solutions’ rather than ‘defending the
status quo’.

STRATEGY 2: ESTABLISH AN OSTEOSISSTING INDEPENDENT
BROKER WITH ASSISTANCE FROM SCIENTISTS
SYMPATHETIC TO ITS GOALS
Coca-Cola’s GEBN proposal aimed to establish ‘a credible
‘honest broker’ in this battle who can be a reliable and trusted
source for a balanced, science-based view’. However, this
presupposes that such a broker would be fully independent
of corporate interests. Indeed, Coca-Cola made a concerted effort
distancing itself from the GEBN to conceal its involvement.
As Appelbaum wrote to GEBN academics Steven Blair and James
Hill on 6 March 2014, “We need to be hands-off as the GEBN
begins to take off. This is essential… A labor of love, but we need
to make sure you are as independent as soon as possible.” Yet, as
the documents show, the GEBN and its message were not inde-
dependent, as Coca-Cola was promoting a scientific standpoint to
academics and offering funding.

The documents also reveal Coca-Cola’s attempts at influ-
encing the scientific community. First, the proposal states that
the GEBN would ‘facilitate new thinking within the science of
energy balance’. This would build on previous experience in
‘engaging experts… to frame problems differently’. The GEBN
would develop white papers to ‘guide the field towards solu-
tions to obesity based on the science of energy balance’. Second,
the GEBN would ‘empower them (the scholars) to promote this
energy balance’. This would build on previous experience in
the science of cancer.6 The comments of those involved in the GEBN
also show efforts at casting doubt about the links between smoking and
cancer.6 The comments of those involved in the GEBN also show
a less balanced view, as when one of its leading members said
that diet played a leading role in obesity: the GEBN would ‘play
offence with alternative solutions’ rather than ‘defending the
status quo’.

The proposal states that this ‘advocacy campaign’ would
target five main groups. First, the GEBN would educate policy-
makers about ‘why the energy balance framework is the right
way to approach obesity’. The proposed education tactics were
‘one-on-one meetings with policy makers’, ‘meetings focused on
energy balance’ and ‘policy and white papers targeted toward
policy-makers’. The GEBN would also attempt to access policy
domains that might otherwise be inaccessible as they sought to
nominate GEBN scholars for key government panels.

Second, Coca-Cola proposed that the GEBN would create
a ‘programme for using the energy balance approach to teach
healthcare professionals how to address obesity’. Third, the
GEBN would expand its efforts in educating ‘health and wel-
ness journalists’ and ‘national fitness and health bloggers’ about
‘energy balance’. This involved workshops, internships and
‘annual education conferences’. Ultimately, Coca-Cola aimed to
establish the GEBN ‘as the place media goes to for a comment
on any obesity issue’.

Fourth, Coca-Cola proposed that the GEBN would develop
a website and use social media to ‘provide information and
resources about the energy balance approach’ and to disseminate
research studies to the public. Finally, the GEBN would look
to ‘establish partnerships with global organisations’ such as the
American Society for Nutrition, the International Life Sciences
Institute, and others that ‘would be sympathetic and supportive
of’ Coca-Cola’s initiative. This would be vital for disseminating
the GEBN’s message ‘through a variety of channels that reach
the public, academic, industry and government audiences’.

CONCLUSION
Coca-Cola’s own proposal states: “We propose to establish
The Global Energy Balance Network to serve as a focal point
for a new collaborative initiative to reduce obesity with strat-
egies that are based on the science of energy balance and on
an understanding of both individual and social/cultural behav-
ioral motivation.” One might infer from this a noble inten-
tion to establish the GEBN purely in the interest of improving
public health. Yet, closer inspection of Coca-Cola’s proposal
for establishing the GEBN corroborates long-standing concerns
about food and beverage corporations’ involvement in scientific
organisations and their similarities with the tobacco industry’s
efforts at casting doubt about the links between smoking and
cancer.6 The comments of those involved in the GEBN also show
a less balanced view, as when one of its leading members said
that ‘there’s really virtually no compelling evidence’ that fast
food and sugary drinks contribute to obesity, despite extensive
evidence to the contrary.3

Ultimately, the emails suggest that Coca-Cola proposed and
supported the GEBN because it would serve as a ‘weapon’ to
‘change the conversation’ about obesity in its ‘war’ with public
health. Despite its close links to Coca-Cola, the GEBN was to
be portrayed as an ostensibly ‘honest broker’ while advancing
the ‘energy balance’ framework and actively advocating this
approach among policy-makers, scientists, health-professionals,
journalists and the public. As they note, their intention was to
‘promote practices that are effective in terms of both policy and
profit’ (emphasis added).

Correction notice This article has been corrected since it published Online First. The
Open access licence has been changed to a CC BY licence.

Contributor GR obtained the data. GR, DS, PS and PB planned the study, PB, PS
and GR analysed the data. PB wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors
contributed revisions to the manuscript and approved the final version submitted for
publication.
Funding PB is supported by the Wellcome Trust. DS is supported by the Wellcome Trust and ERC Grant 313590. GR is funded by the Organic Consumers Association, Dr. Bronner’s Family Foundation, Westreich Foundation, Panta Rhea Foundation and the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina.

Disclaimer The funders had no involvement in the design of the study, collection, analysis and interpretation of data, writing of the manuscript or decision to submit for publication.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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