How much food advertising is there on Australian television?

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SUMMARY
The purpose of this study was to conduct a comprehensive content analysis of television food advertising and provide data on current levels of food advertising in Australia. All three commercial stations available on free-to-air Australian television were concurrently videotaped between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. on two weekdays and both weekend days in four locations across Australia to provide a total of 645 h for analysis. Each advertisement was categorized as ‘non-food ad’, ‘healthy/core food ad’ or ‘unhealthy/non-core food ad’ according to set criteria. Thirty-one percent of the advertisements analyzed were for food. Eighty-one percent of the food advertisements identified were for unhealthy/non-core foods. When comparing the results of this study with previous research, it was found that the number of unhealthy advertisements screened per hour had not changed over the past few years. On weekdays, the number of advertisements increased throughout the day to peak at more than five advertisements per hour in the 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. time slot. The early morning time slot on Saturday was the most concentrated period for advertising unhealthy/non-core food with more than six advertisements screened per hour. The regional areas screened a significantly lower level of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements (19.5%) compared with the metropolitan areas (29.5%). Fast food and takeaway was the most advertised food category, followed by chocolate and confectionery. A total 194 breaches of the Children’s Television Standards were identified according to our interpretation of the standard. It is well recognized that childhood obesity is a worldwide problem. The heavy marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods influences food choices and contributes to the incidence of overweight and obesity in children. Despite the recognition of this growing problem, little has been done to ensure children are protected against the use of large volumes of unhealthy/non-core food advertising.

Key words: children; food advertising; obesity; television

INTRODUCTION
Australia ranks as one of the developed countries with the highest number of food advertisements shown during children’s television viewing times (Morton, 1990; Dibb, 1996; Hill and Radimer, 1997; Young Media Australia, 1997; Morton and McDermott, 2004; Morton et al., 2005; Neville et al., 2005). Studies have shown that the vast majority of television food advertisements are for foods that are high in fat, sugar and/or salt, and of low nutritional value (Hill and Radimer, 1997; Hastings et al., 2003; Zuppa et al., 2003; Story and French, 2004; Neville et al., 2005). Studies have also found that intensely advertised unhealthy/non-core foods tend to be over consumed relative to dietary guidelines (Coon and Tucker, 2002; Hastings et al., 2003).

Over the last 20 years, rates of obesity in children have risen greatly in many countries, including Australia, leading some researchers to speak of an ‘international epidemic of obesity’ (Ebbeling, 2002). It has been estimated that over 1 in 5 Australian children are overweight or obese (Booth et al., 2003). A study looking at weight changes among Australian children over three decades found that between 1985 and 1997, the prevalence of overweight and obesity...
combined doubled, and that of obesity trebled, among young Australians. This increase greatly exceeded the rise seen over the 16 years prior to 1985 (Magarey et al., 2001; Booth et al., 2003).

Obese children have a 25–50% chance of progression to adult obesity and it may be as high as 78% in older obese adolescents (Must and Straus, 1999). The significant risk for childhood obesity to continue into adulthood makes it a priority for targeted preventive action.

The high volumes of unhealthy/non-core food advertising on television contribute to our ‘obesity—promoting’ environment. Although the causes and solutions of childhood obesity are multi-factorial, a reduction in food advertising is one important strategy for encouraging children to make healthy food choices (World Health Organisation, 2003).

The Australian television advertising regulations are complex and confusing and currently exist as a system of co-regulation. The Australian Communications and Media Authority Children’s Television Standards (CTS) (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2005) operate alongside a system of self-regulation described by the voluntary Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004), which applies to all commercial broadcasting.

The CTS and Industry Code of Practice both lack precise definitions with regard to breaches of either set of regulations. The type of food that can be advertised or the number of food advertisements that can be shown on television are not currently regulated in Australia.

Most of the research previously published on the level of food advertising in Australia has been restricted to metropolitan areas within a single state of Australia and has tended to concentrate on single and limited time slots (Morton, 1990; Dibb, 1996; Hill and Radimer, 1997; Young Media Australia, 1997; Zuppa et al., 2003; Morton and McDermott, 2004; Morton et al., 2005; Neville et al., 2005). Most of the published studies have examined the levels of television advertising prior to 2002. In recent years, particularly since the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit in 2002 where childhood obesity was highlighted as a serious health concern, there has been an increase in the debate about levels of food advertising to children. The broadcasting and advertising industry claim that there has been a decrease in the level of advertising specifically directed at children (Free TV Australia, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to conduct a comprehensive content analysis on television food advertising. This study provides updated and current data on the level of food advertising across Australia. The different levels of advertising in metropolitan and regional areas are compared, differences between time slots throughout the day examined and advertising trends on the weekend and weekdays compared. This study also identifies and describes suspected breaches to the CTS.

**METHOD**

All three commercial stations available on free-to-air Australian television were concurrently videotaped between the hours of 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. on 2 weekdays and both weekend days in four locations across Australia. The dates for videotaping were Saturday 4 June, Sunday 5 June, Tuesday 7 June and Wednesday 8 June 2005, which did not coincide with school holidays or any major event. The four locations included two capital cities (Sydney and Brisbane) and two regional areas (Tamworth in New South Wales and Ballarat in Victoria). A number of volunteers recorded the full range of hours and television stations in the four study areas. A total of 672 h of television programs and advertisements was videotaped.

Two project officers, who were qualified dietitians, each analyzed half the advertisements according to agreed criteria. At the start of the data analysis, both project officers viewed 4 h of the same video footage to resolve any inconsistencies in classification of the food advertisements. Thereafter, the project officers were in constant contact to allow discrepancies that arose regarding data analysis to be resolved. During analysis, advertisements were initially grouped into one of three broad categories: ‘non-food ad’, ‘healthy/core food ad’ or ‘unhealthy/non-core food ad’. A food advertisement was categorized as a ‘healthy or core food ad’ if the food advertised fell into the core food groups according to the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* (Children’s Health Development Foundation & Deakin University, 1998):

- Breads and cereals
- Fruits and vegetables
Dairy and dairy products
Meat and meat alternatives
Core foods combined (lean cuisine meals, lite and easy meals)
Baby foods

Unhealthy or non-core food advertisements were grouped into the following categories based on those used by previous researchers (Hill and Radimer, 1997; Young Media Australia, 1997; Neville et al., 2005). Some changes were made to provide a more comprehensive analysis and improve clarity when categorizing products. Additional categories for snack foods, infant/toddler formulae and miscellaneous were used from previous studies.

- Chocolate and confectionery (including regular chewing gum)
- Fast food and takeaway foods, e.g. McDonald’s, KFC, Red Rooster, Subway
- Cakes, sweet biscuits, savory biscuits
- Sweet breakfast cereals (total sugar content >27 g/100 g)
- Snack foods, e.g. chips, savory crisps, noodles, snack bars, museli bars and pastries
- High sugar drinks including soft drink and cordial
- Fruit juice
- Fats, spreads and sauces
- Frozen/fried potato products (excluding packet crisps, which were classified as a snack food)
- Desserts, e.g. ice cream
- Alcohol
- Infant and toddler formulae
- Other non-core foods or extra items, e.g. chewing gum (sugar free), tea, coffee

Station promotions for upcoming programs and newbreaks were not categorized as advertisements and were excluded from analysis. Supermarket advertisements were not counted as advertisements for food as they advertise the supermarket, and advertisements for vitamin or mineral supplements were also discounted as food advertisements as they are not actually food. These were placed in the non-food category.

An advertisement was considered to be directed at children if one of the following were utilized:
- Child focused premium offers such as giveaways, competitions and prizes
- Jingles and cartoon characters
- An emphasis on fun, happiness and excitement
- The implication that the product will make children special or superior
- Popular children’s celebrities and sports stars to promote a product
- Direct appeal to children

If a food advertisement was identified as being directed at children, reviewers then determined whether any of the CTS or Industry Code of Practice guidelines had been breached. The specific standards of the CTS relevant to food advertising are:

- CTS 17—No advertisement may mislead or deceive children
- CTS 18.1—A licensee may not broadcast any advertisement designed to put undue pressure on children to ask their parents or others to buy the advertised product or service
- CTS 18.2a—No advertisement may state or imply that a product or service makes children who own or enjoy it superior to their peers
- CTS 19.6—An advertisement for a food product may not contain any misleading or incorrect information about the nutritional value of that product
- CTS 20.2a—Any reference to the premium (special offer) must be incidental to the main product or service advertised

The lack of precise definitions in the CTS meant that there was some subjective determination in determining if there was a breach of the CTS. Both reviewers conferred on the advertisements that they classified as breaches. A breach of CTS 20.2a, where reference to premium offers must be incidental to the main product, was determined on the basis that a premium took up more than one-third of the total advertisement time, as used in a previous study (Morton et al., 2005).

The level and type of food advertising was compared across the three different television stations, four different locations, between metropolitan and regional areas and across time slots during the day. Four different time periods were chosen for comparison:

- 7 a.m. to 9 a.m.—(high content of children’s programs)
- 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.—(on weekdays low content of children’s programs)
- 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.—(high content of children’s programs)
- 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.—(low content of children’s programs but still high numbers of children
watching television) (Australian Broadcasting Authority, 2002).

Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SAS version 8.2 (SAS Institute, 2001) for Windows.

RESULTS

Of the total 672 h of television recorded, 27 h were excluded owing to technical difficulties or human error during taping, resulting in a total of 645 h available for analysis. A total of 10,593 advertisements were analyzed, of which 3,287 (31%) were food advertisements. Eighty-one percent of the food advertisements identified were for unhealthy/non-core foods, which equated to 25% of all advertisements screened between the hours of 7 a.m. and 9 p.m.

Advertising in metropolitan areas compared with regional areas

The metropolitan areas (Sydney and Brisbane) were found to screen a significantly higher proportion ($\chi^2 = 29.7, P < 0.0001$ with 1 degree of freedom) of total and unhealthy/non-core food advertisements than the regional areas studied (Tamworth and Ballarat) (Table 1). A similar number of healthy/core food advertisements were screened in each area.

Comparison of the level of advertising of different subcategories of food

Once a food advertisement had been categorized as being a core or non-core food advertisement, it was subsequently grouped into one of several subcategories (Table 2). Between the hours of 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. in all areas surveyed and on all three commercial television stations, an average of just over four unhealthy/non-core food advertisements were screened per hour, more than four times the number of healthy/core food advertisements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Sydney</th>
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<th>Mean for all areas</th>
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<td>Food ads as % of total ads</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>% of non-food ads</td>
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<td>65</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>Healthy food ads as % of total ads</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Unhealthy food ads as % of total ads</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
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Comparison of the different levels of food advertising during different time slots between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m.

The average number of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements screened per hour varied considerably over each day (Figure 1). On weekdays, the number of advertisements per hour increased throughout the day to peak at more than five advertisements per hour in the 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. time slot. On Saturday, the early morning time slot was the most concentrated period for advertising unhealthy/non-core food with more than six advertisements screened per hour. This was significantly different from both the weekday and Sunday levels at the same time ($\chi^2 = 6.89, P = 0.03$ 2 df). The 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. time slot screened the most unhealthy/non-core food advertisements per hour on Sunday.

The number of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements shown per hour decreased between the hours of 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. (Table 3), with the highest level occurring between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. (5 advertisements per hour). Advertising of chocolate and confectionary was highest between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m., whereas fast food and takeaway were advertised more in the evening time slots.

Comparison of the levels of food advertising on weekends and weekdays

Overall, the level of food advertising shown on weekdays compared with weekends was identical. On the weekend, more advertisements were screened on Saturday (2,852 advertisements) than Sunday (2,418 advertisements), with more total and unhealthy/non-core food advertisements shown on Saturday.

Advertising breaches

A total of 194 suspected breaches were identified during analysis of the food advertisements, the majority of which occurred in metropolitan areas (Table 4). Significant variation in
breach-frequency occurred over the specified time slots ($\chi^2 = 18.4, P = 0.001, 4$ df). Most (88%) of the breaches identified related to the misuse of premium offers to market a product, that is a breach of CTS 20.2a. Ten percent of the breaches related to the advertisement containing misleading information (CTS 17) and 2% were related to the advertisement implying the food would make the child superior to their peers (CTS 18.2a).

**DISCUSSION**

This study provides updated data on the levels and patterns of food advertising on free-to-air
Australian television. By obtaining data from three states and from both metropolitan and regional areas, the results obtained from this study provide a bigger snapshot of food advertising in Australia than previous studies.

This study found the vast majority (81%) of food advertisements were for foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt, and of low nutritional value. This intense advertising of unhealthy/non-core foods is reflected by the over consumption of non-core foods in relation to dietary guidelines (Coon and Tucker, 2002; Hastings et al., 2003). Previous Australian studies reported a range between 55 and 79% of food advertisements being for unhealthy/non-core foods (Hill and Radimer, 1997; Zuppa et al., 2003; Neville et al., 2005), which is consistent with the findings of the current study and provides evidence that levels of unhealthy/non-core food advertising has not decreased. Thirty-one percent of all advertisements were for food, a figure replicated by a number of previous studies (Hill and Radimer, 1997; Zuppa et al., 2003; Neville et al., 2005). The level of unhealthy/non-core food advertising far outweighed the advertising of healthy food, with only 19% of food advertisements and 6% of total advertisements contributing to the promotion of healthy/core foods. The number of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements screened per hour has seen no significant improvement over time, with our study finding an average of 4.13 unhealthy/non-core food advertisements and the most recent Australian study showing 4.4 advertisements per hour for foods high in fat or sugar (Neville et al., 2005).

The number of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements screened per hour was higher during times when children were home from school. A study that assessed the level of non-core food advertising during school holidays found that over 99% of food advertisements broadcast during children’s television programming were for foods high in fat, sugar and/or salt with little nutritional value, a level much higher than during the school term (Australian Divisions of General Practice, 2003). It is interesting to note that although the study period of the current study included the start of the National Fruit and

| Table 3: Food advertising on metropolitan and regional Australian television stations during certain time slots between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m on both weekdays and weekend days |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Food category                  | No. of ads per hour: | No. of ads per hour: | No. of ads per hour: | No. of ads per hour: |
|                                | 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. | 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. | 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. | 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. |
| Choc & confectionery           | 0.95        | 0.59        | 0.63        | 0.63        |
| Fast food & takeaway           | 0.98        | 1.19        | 1.88        | 2.01        |
| Cakes, biscuits                | 0.00        | 0.04        | 0.03        | 0.06        |
| Sweet B/fast cereals          | 0.41        | 0.29        | 0.27        | 0.32        |
| Snack food, savory crisps & pastries | 0.48  | 0.35        | 0.35        | 0.58        |
| High sugar drinks             | 0.00        | 0.12        | 0.02        | 0.04        |
| Fruit juice                    | 0.20        | 0.06        | 0.07        | 0.00        |
| Frozen/fried potato products  | 0.01        | 0.04        | 0.03        | 0.06        |
| Fats, spreads & sauces         | 0.20        | 0.24        | 0.33        | 0.29        |
| Desserts                       | 0.04        | 0.11        | 0.14        | 0.41        |
| Alcohol                        | 0.00        | 0.06        | 0.23        | 0.05        |
| Baby formulae                  | 0.00        | 0.08        | 0.05        | 0.01        |
| Miscellaneous non-core group foods | 0.69 | 0.53        | 0.32        | 0.50        |
| Total                          | 3.97        | 3.69        | 4.35        | 4.96        |

| Table 4: The total number of suspected breaches and number of breaches per hour in the four surveyed time slots between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
|                                | 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. | 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. | 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. | 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. |
| Sydney                         | 23        | 26        | 0          | 11        |
| Ballarat                       | 3         | 16        | 6          | 15        |
| Brisbane                       | 20        | 24        | 14         | 17        |
| Tamworth                       | 4         | 6         | 0          | 9         |
| Total Breaches                 | 50        | 72        | 20         | 52        |
| Breaches per hour              | 0.54      | 0.26      | 0.15       | 0.37      |
| Total                          | 0.33      | 0.33      | 0.33       | 0.33      |
Vegetable campaign funded by the Department of Health and Ageing, the proportion of healthy food advertisements shown on Australian television did not improve from previous studies (Neville et al., 2005). The National Fruit and Vegetable Campaign, therefore, did little to improve the proportion of healthy/core food advertisements shown on Australian television. If the fruit and vegetables campaign advertisements were not screened we could expect an even higher proportion of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements. The level of advertising of fruit and vegetables has been found to be limited in a number of studies (Coon and Tucker, 2002; Hastings et al., 2003; Story and French, 2004).

Despite being lower than in metropolitan areas, the level of unhealthy/non-core food advertising in regional areas is still high and of concern (19.5 cf. 29.5% of total advertisements). A possible explanation for this trend may be better access to the advertised products and higher population density in metropolitan areas.

Fast food and takeaway was the most advertised food category, followed by chocolate and confectionery. Previous studies have also found these food groups to be the highest contributors to unhealthy food advertising (Zuppa et al., 2003; Neville et al., 2005). The results revealed a trend that involved the advertising of unhealthy/non-core food at a time when it would generally be eaten. For example, items such as fast food, takeaway and desserts were advertised at a higher level during the late afternoon and evening time slots, times when they are commonly consumed, e.g. getting takeaway for the family dinner or having ice cream for dessert.

Particular television shows were identified, during which the advertising of total and unhealthy food was especially high. These were programs routinely watched by children, and were also commonly screened during G classification zones. According to the Industry Code of Practice, periods classified as G zones are times when children should not require parental supervision to watch television (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004). A program was considered to be of concern if total food advertisements exceeded 31%, and unhealthy food advertisements contributed more than 81% to food advertising within the program’s time slot. Saturday morning was consistently identified as a time during which an excessive number of unhealthy/non-core food advertisements directed at children were screened. The advertising of unhealthy/non-core foods did not appear to be regulated during this time slot, with the highest level of breaches (approximately 1 breach every 2 h) occurring between the hours of 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. It is interesting and also concerning to note that this is a G classification zone, when children should not require parental supervision (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004).

Material classified C (children’s classification) or P (preschool children’s classification) must satisfy the requirements of the Australia Communications and Media Authority’s CTS (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2005). Material classified as G may not necessarily be intended for children but must be very mild in impact and must not contain any matter likely to be unsuitable for children to watch without supervision (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004). During the week, the G classification zones are 6.00 a.m. to 8.30 a.m. and 4.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m. On the weekend, the G zone is 6.00 a.m. to 10.00 a.m. During G zones, only material classified G, C and P may be broadcast. The content of and advertisements screened during G programs are regulated by the voluntary Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004). According to the Industry Code of Practice, advertisements directed at children must comply with the relevant CTS (Australian Association of National Advertisers, 2004). So although not directly regulated by the CTS, G program advertisements can still indirectly be in breach of the CTS. The Industry Code of Practice and the CTS lack precise definition with regard to breaches, resulting in variable interpretation and ineffective regulation of food advertising. The excessive number of unhealthy food advertisements that continue to appear on Australian television confirms long held suspicions that current regulations are ineffective and require significant reform (Coon and Tucker, 2002; Story and French, 2004; Morton et al., 2005; Neville et al., 2005).

During the 645 h analyzed, 194 breaches according to our interpretation of the CTS and voluntary Industry Code of Practice were identified in this study. The majority of these occurred in metropolitan areas. The highest rate of breaches occurred during C and G classification zones when children are not at school. A recently published study found over one-third of food advertisements (36%) in C time contained a
premium offer compared with 17% in the less regulated G time (Morton et al., 2005). Thirty-one percent of food advertisements breached the standard during C programs (Morton et al., 2005). The majority of the breaches (88%) identified in this study did not comply with CTS 20.2a that states, ‘any reference to the premium must be incidental to the main product or service advertised.’ Breaches of CTS 20.2a occurred when more time was spent promoting the premium offered with a product than the product itself, a tactic strictly forbidden in other countries (Dalmeny et al., 2005).

This study recorded and analyzed a larger time period (7 a.m. to 9 p.m.) than previous studies, allowing comparisons to be made between different time slots throughout the day and avoiding the need for assumptions about typical children’s viewing periods. The number of hours analyzed totaled 645, a much higher number than any previously published studies. Data was collected from each of the four areas included in the study on the same day and date during the same recording week, allowing reliable comparisons to be made between each area. The two project officers responsible for analyzing the video footage were both qualified dietitians. By limiting the number of people involved in analysis, utilizing skilled nutrition professionals trained in the same field and allowing the project officers to discuss and resolve discrepant results, standardization of results was assured. Volunteers initially recorded a total 672 h across the four areas for analysis. Owing to a combination of human error and technical difficulties, 27 of these hours were excluded, leaving a final total of 645 h. The excluded hours were taken into account when calculating per hour results.

It has been suggested that the heavy marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods to children contributes to an ‘obesity-promoting’ environment that makes healthy/core food choices more difficult, with the World Health Organization concluding that the heavy marketing of fast food and energy-dense, micronutrient-poor foods and beverages is a ‘probable’ causal factor in weight gain and obesity in children (World Health Organisation, 2003). The following year, a systematic review commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Food Standards Agency, and probably the most comprehensive study of its type conducted to date, found that advertising does affect food choices and does influence dietary habits, with subsequent implications for weight gain and obesity (Hastings et al., 2003).

Before this study was conducted, the most recent data on the issue of food advertising to children was obtained from studies based on data collected prior to the NSW Childhood Obesity Summit held in 2002. The contribution of unhealthy food promotion on television to childhood obesity was acknowledged at the Summit. Healthy Weight 2008, the national action agenda for children, young people and their families, included a key objective of ‘better protection for young people against the promotion of high-energy, poor nutritional value foods and drinks and/or sedentary lifestyles through advertising and media that encourage unhealthy eating, inactivity and overweight’ (National Obesity Taskforce, 2003). To date there has been little progress on this objective.

Despite the recognition of the growing obesity problem, levels of unhealthy/non-core food advertising on television have remained critically high and deliberately targeted at children. The lack of healthy food promotion to challenge the excessive advertising of unhealthy foods provides children with a skewed perspective on healthy and ‘normal’ food choices, encouraging the selection of unhealthy options.

This study, along with many others, has revealed the lack of effective regulation that currently exists in Australia. The current system of co-regulation fails to protect Australian children from the large volumes of carefully targeted food advertising on television, with the voluntary code blatantly ignored and no punishment applied, e.g. clause 6.23.2 of the code states, ‘advertisements directed to children for food and/or beverages should not encourage or promote unhealthy eating or drinking habits;’ a standard that is obviously overlooked daily by food advertisers. It is important that the future health of Australia’s children be placed at the center of further policy development concerning the marketing of food to children. Effective regulations that can easily be interpreted and enforced are essential to protecting Australian children against the use of large volumes of misleading unhealthy food advertising that encourage poor eating habits.

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