

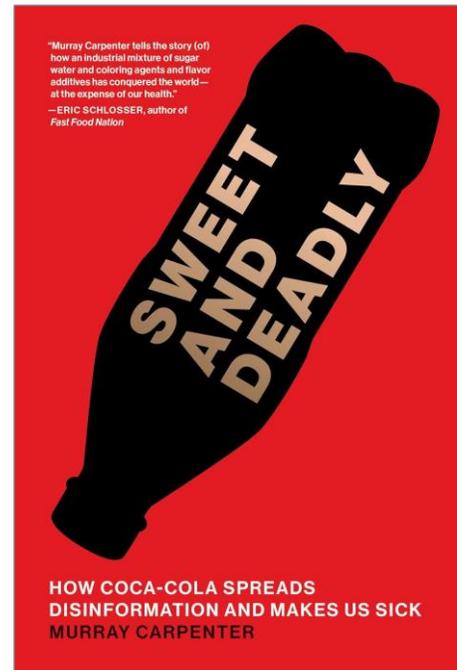
The dark side of soda

Book review by

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Review of *Sweet and Deadly: How Coca-Cola Spreads Disinformation and Makes Us Sick*, by Murray Carpenter. (2025). Published by The MIT Press. Available as hardcover, paperback, Kindle, and audiobook; 344 pages. Publisher's website: <https://direct.mit.edu/books/book/5934/Sweet-and-DeadlyHow-Coca-Cola-Spreads>



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In *Sweet and Deadly: How Coca-Cola Spreads Disinformation and Makes Us Sick*, journalist Murray Carpenter investigates how Coca-Cola used science, marketing, and political influence to obscure the health dangers of its products and protect profits at the expense of public health. Focus-

ing primarily on the decade 2010–2020, Carpenter documents how the company aggressively countered growing scientific evidence linking sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) to obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses. The result is a sobering account of how one of the world's most recognizable brands built and defended a global image based on deception, misinformation, and corporate power.

Carpenter begins by tracing the history of Coca-Cola and its rise to cultural dominance. The brand's logo is recognized worldwide, even in non-English-speaking countries, making Coke one of the most successful consumer products in history. Like the tobacco industry before it, the soda industry understood that its products were addictive and

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harmful. Yet, Coca-Cola successfully framed itself as a symbol of happiness, refreshment, and togetherness. This positive image allowed the company to deflect early concerns about sugar, health, and disease for decades.

The core of Carpenter's argument is built around four major strategies Coca-Cola used to suppress damaging scientific evidence and mislead the public. First, as research in the early 2010s increasingly demonstrated the biological harms of SSBs, Coca-Cola shifted the public conversation away from nutrition and toward "energy balance." Under the guidance of its chief scientist, Rhonda Applebaum, the company funded industry-friendly studies that emphasized a lack of physical activity rather than sugar consumption as the primary driver of obesity. Coke financially supported prominent researchers and created the Global Energy Balance Network (GEBN), which promoted the idea that "calories in, calories out" mattered more than the quality of those calories. In 2015, the exposure of Coke's financial ties to GEBN revealed the extent to which corporate funding had distorted scientific messaging.

Second, Carpenter details Coca-Cola's role in fighting soda taxes through well-funded political campaigns. The American Beverage Association—of which Coca-Cola is a leading member—spent millions to defeat local soda tax initiatives, particularly in California. Using tactics similar to those of the tobacco industry, the association threatened state leaders with costly ballot measures unless soda taxes were blocked at the local level. This aggressive lobbying effort successfully delayed or prevented public health legislation in many areas.

Third, Carpenter discusses lawsuits brought against Coca-Cola, including a case filed by two African American pastors who argued that the company targeted Black communities with deceptive marketing. These communities already experience disproportionately high rates of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. Evidence presented in the book shows that Black children see significantly more soda advertisements than white children, illustrating the deliberate nature of these marketing strategies.

Fourth, the book exposes how Coca-Cola built relationships with respected professional organiza-

tions to gain credibility and silence criticism. The company donated millions to groups such as the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the American Academy of Family Physicians. In return, these organizations often avoided taking strong public positions against sugary beverages, while Coca-Cola gained visibility at professional conferences and influence in policy discussions. Carpenter argues that these partnerships gave the company a powerful shield against public scrutiny.

One of the most disturbing aspects of *Sweet and Deadly* is its documentation of how long the health risks of sugary drinks have been known. As early as the 1940s, scientists were raising concerns about excessive sugar consumption. Over the following decades, evidence only grew stronger, yet Coca-Cola consistently worked to challenge, distort, or distract from this research. Carpenter demonstrates that the company's campaigns were not isolated incidents but part of a highly organized, long-term strategy to shape public perception and policy.

The book also highlights the unequal burden of Coca-Cola's practices on communities of color. Targeted advertising, higher consumption rates, and limited access to healthier alternatives have intensified the impact of chronic disease in these populations. Carpenter makes clear that this disparity is not accidental, but the result of deliberate marketing decisions based on profit at the expense of public well-being.

Despite declining soda consumption by 2020 and growing public awareness, Carpenter concludes that the harm done by decades of disinformation cannot easily be undone. Juice drinks, energy drinks, and other sugar-sweetened beverages continue to rise in popularity, often under the false impression that they are healthier alternatives. Had Coca-Cola been forced to act transparently earlier—through warning labels, advertising restrictions, sugar reduction, and widespread soda taxes—the global burden of chronic disease might be significantly lower today.

Sweet and Deadly is a powerful and unsettling exposé of corporate influence over public health. Carpenter skillfully weaves together investigative journalism, internal documents, court records, and scientific research to reveal how deeply Coca-Cola shaped health narratives for its own benefit.

The book ultimately argues that Coca-Cola's manipulation of science rivals that of the tobacco and opioid industries and has contributed to preventable illness and death on a massive scale.

For readers interested in nutrition, public health, corporate ethics, or social justice, *Sweet and Deadly* is both eye-opening and deeply troubling. 