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## How the News Media Influence Tobacco Use

*News media coverage is an important source of health information and can frame discussions of tobacco-related issues among both policymakers and the general public. As a result, media coverage has the potential to affect individual attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes regarding tobacco use. This chapter examines the impact of news coverage on tobacco control and presents the following information:*

- *Summaries of descriptive studies examining tobacco-related news coverage, including the volume and nature of news stories, content analysis of specific tobacco-related topics, and contextual issues*
- *Issues and early research into relationships between news coverage of tobacco issues and individual and policy outcomes*
- *Tobacco industry efforts to influence news coverage of tobacco issues*

*This research indicates that media advocacy is an important but underutilized area of tobacco control. The impact of such media coverage on tobacco use remains a critical area for further study.*

### Introduction

This chapter examines the influence of the popular news media on issues surrounding tobacco use. It first looks at key concepts in the study of tobacco-related news coverage and corresponding audience reception. Next, it summarizes conclusions from literature examining the news media's coverage of tobacco, smoking, and tobacco control, including studies that sought to assess the impact of such news coverage on behavioral, policy, and legislative outcomes. This chapter also reviews published accounts of tobacco control media advocacy efforts to increase and improve the quality of news media reporting on tobacco. Finally, evidence is reviewed from tobacco industry documents to illustrate the industry's attempt to shape news coverage.

The news media are recognized as among the world's most influential and powerful institutions. George D. Lundberg, M.D., editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for 17 years, remarked, "In our society ... public media are irreplaceable as a mechanism for moving a problem to a solution."<sup>1(p.113)</sup> Alan Otten, a long-time reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, noted, "Well-done investigative reporting produces public outrage (or policymaker outrage) that forces new regulations and laws or tougher

enforcement of existing ones." Otten quotes a health consultant saying, "Ten-thousand-watt klieg lights turned on a situation focuses the minds of policymakers very fast."<sup>1(p.112)</sup> Page and Shapiro's seminal analysis of 50 years of trends in Americans' policy preferences concluded, "Short-term movements in public opinion can largely be accounted for (and predicted) by quantitative analyses of what news, from what sources, appears in the mass media."<sup>2(p.386)</sup> Authoritarian governments invariably control the news media, but in democracies with historically independent news media, those in government, politics, industry, popular culture, and special interest groups work to obtain positive and extensive news coverage.

In the wider field of public health, research has established that the news media serve as an important source of health information for members of the general public<sup>3-8</sup> who rely on it particularly for information about issues lying outside of their immediate realm of experience.<sup>5</sup> A 2001 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Harvard School of Public Health found that more than one-half of Americans name national, local, or cable news as their most important source of health information, rather than a health care provider or public health source.<sup>9</sup> In addition, 42% of those polled reported that they closely follow health news stories.<sup>10</sup>

#### A Changing Media Mix

Today's news media extend beyond newspapers, radio, and television bulletins. New technologies such as the Internet, handheld computers, and mobile telephones have revolutionized the ways people obtain their news, and news increasingly resembles entertainment. Industry groups, nongovernmental organizations, and community groups target audiences via direct mail and e-mail, selecting, synthesizing, and thereby selectively emphasizing a limited range of news that may be editorialized. These developments have attracted relatively little research attention of direct relevance to tobacco use or the use of these media tools by either tobacco control or tobacco industry interests, suggesting an important gap in knowledge. Regardless, in whatever form they take, news sources are an important and often unparalleled source of information for both the general public and influential decision makers.

Tobacco issues have become increasingly newsworthy as organized public health efforts to reduce tobacco use have grown and tobacco issues have become more politicized. Reporting on links between smoking and adverse health outcomes increased after the release of the 1964 Surgeon General's report on smoking and health.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, many other facets of tobacco control also have fallen under the news media spotlight. Over the last 40 years, the news media have paid significant attention to the tobacco-caused deaths of famous people; attempts to increase cigarette taxes, introduce and uphold smoke-free laws, and mount antismoking campaigns; criticism of tobacco industry advertising, promotions, and conduct in opposing effective tobacco controls; and private and state efforts to recover smoking-related health care costs from the tobacco industry. Much of the increase in news coverage results from a rise in the number of newsworthy tobacco-related events in the United States and internationally. However, this increase also reflects explicit efforts to create newsworthy events and stories and to shape news coverage by those working to promote or to undermine tobacco control progress.

The newsworthiness of tobacco control should not, however, be measured solely by the volume of news coverage. Efforts to incorporate measures of audience engagement also are important. To this end, research conducted using the Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard School of Public Health's *Health News Index*<sup>10</sup> listed tobacco use as one of the top three health issues to draw public attention between 1992 and 2002, after bioterrorism and abortion clinic violence. In this study, health stories were broadly defined as being those relating to national health policy, health issues or specific diseases and treatments, or social policy issues indirectly related to health, including elections, economic policy, gun control, poverty, welfare, and Social Security.

Overall, 55% of respondents reported that they closely follow news on tobacco.

The presence and prominence of tobacco control material in the news are indisputable. However, the tobacco control research community has largely neglected studying news coverage and the response to and influence of this coverage on smokers, on the broader community, and on policymakers. For instance, very few papers focused on news media at World Conferences on Tobacco OR Health held from 1983 to 2003 (table 9.1).

This low level of research effort, compared with the relatively high level of media coverage of tobacco issues and its potential impact, points to the need for a greater focus on media issues in tobacco control. This chapter examines concepts in news media coverage of tobacco, summarizes research on such coverage and its influence on tobacco use, and outlines a future research agenda based on trends found in existing data. By understanding the nature and potential impact of the news media, tobacco control stakeholders can gain a promising new area of knowledge in the fight to reduce the public disease burden due to smoking.

## Perspectives on News Story Selection and Content

General news coverage can be viewed at a superficial level as a reflection of observable events happening in the world at a given time that are deemed newsworthy. Using this narrow definition, a change in the volume of coverage of an issue such as tobacco use could be considered to reflect a change in the occurrence of relevant, newsworthy events. In this vein, one research tradition focuses on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of news coverage<sup>12</sup> and how they might be improved. One study specifically attempted

**Table 9.1 News Media Papers Presented at World Conferences on Tobacco OR Health, 1983–2003**

Conference	Abstracts or proceedings	Total papers or abstracts published	Total papers or abstracts focusing on media campaign descriptions, planning, and evaluations		Total papers or abstracts focusing on tobacco coverage by news media	
			Total	%	Total	%
Winnipeg 1983	Proceedings	178	4	2.2	1	0.6
Tokyo 1987	Proceedings	189	12	6.3	8	4.2
Perth 1990	Proceedings	280	23	8.2	3	1.1
Buenos Aires 1992	Abstracts	412	6	1.5	2	0.5
Paris 1994	Proceedings	233	5	2.1	4	1.7
Beijing 1997	Proceedings	428	15	3.5	10	2.3
Chicago 2000	Program	574	16	2.8	11	1.9
Helsinki 2003	Abstracts	1,911	75	3.9	18	0.9

*Note.* These numbers are approximations because of incompatibilities in conference publications' inclusion of papers, seminars, workshops, and posters and because only one coder assessed each paper and abstract. The reliability of categorizations has not been determined.

to compare news coverage of an issue or event with some a priori criteria, such as quality of the study designs or involvement of commercial sponsors.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, the social problems perspective<sup>14–17</sup> treats the news media as an institution of power, rejecting both the “just the facts” notion of journalism and the idea that media content can ever accurately represent the “real world out there.” Instead, proponents of a social constructionist or social problems perspective consider public attention a scarce resource for which advocates of various issues are in constant competition. The news media cannot simply reflect the external world because of its sheer vastness and complexity and because the media are a critical part of the mechanism through which that world is both assembled and understood.

## Agenda Setting

From a social problems viewpoint, the news media constitute a vital institutional arena within which competition for public attention to a given problem can occur. However, only a limited number of problems

or issues can be presented by the news media at any given time.<sup>15</sup> All potential issues of interest must compete with hundreds if not thousands of events and issues that come before the news media each day. According to agenda-setting theory, the degree of emphasis the mass media place on an issue influences the priority the public affords to that issue.<sup>18</sup> This theory essentially suggests that the influence of the news media is due to this capacity to set the public agenda—to determine, for example, which issues people discuss.

The relative scarcity of space for news highlights the importance of determining a topic's newsworthiness. This designation suggests to the public that a topic is important or interesting enough to receive media attention, thereby implicitly contributing to public notions of the relative importance of issues and events.<sup>19,20</sup> From this perspective, news does not merely mirror society or passively reflect preexisting concerns at a particular time, but helps shape both individual and community concerns about what is worthy of public attention. Further, the news media can choose, create, sustain, and

shape an issue for public consumption by influencing how issues are presented or framed for consideration by the public and decision makers.<sup>21–23</sup>

Embedded in this power to introduce and reinforce issues to the public is the notion that news media treatments influence perceived solutions to a given problem.<sup>24</sup> Iyengar<sup>25</sup> also argues that news discourses can implicitly question who or what is responsible for problems and their solutions. The result is that audiences can be presented with an account of a problem as well as perspectives for thinking about it and potential avenues for its resolution. Indeed, Menashe and Siegel<sup>26</sup> concluded that tobacco-related news coverage guides people's thoughts about tobacco and plays an important role in determining how people address the issue of tobacco use as a social problem.

Some research has found that stakeholders who seek to shape media coverage in an effort to guide or oppose social change can instigate news coverage of an issue.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, allegations have been made that some journalists may tend to collaborate with rather than criticize the most influential societal elites. For example, one study found that medical science reporting is based on regular journalistic review of a very limited number of top science journals.<sup>4</sup> This practice reinforces the established hierarchy of knowledge. Analyzing mainstream news coverage as a reflection of powerful societal institutions as well as an instigator of change may, therefore, be most appropriate.

Similarly, the identification of stakeholders in news media coverage of tobacco use issues is worthy of critical analysis. For example, Wakefield and colleagues<sup>28</sup> analyzed Australian news coverage of a liability trial involving a nonsmoking worker with laryngeal cancer and her employer at a bar. They found debate shaped around worker

inequity, smoking bans, and employer liability that made it difficult for the tobacco industry to publicly assert that the issue is one of personal responsibility or accommodation of smokers.

## Framing

As part of the power of news resides in gaining attention for particular issues, understanding *which* issues are considered and *how* they are shaped for public consumption is important to analyzing news coverage. Researchers have long used the core concept of framing. At its most basic level, Goffman's<sup>29</sup> notion of framing emphasizes people's reliance on a structure within which to understand their experiences. Goffman argues that this structure always is necessary to facilitate social interaction.<sup>30</sup> To frame news discourse is to "*select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient ... in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation...*"<sup>31(p.52)</sup>

News coverage necessarily frames an issue for consumers as the language used, the sources consulted, and the opinions cited (as well as those omitted) provide the context for a news story.<sup>32</sup> This context tells the reader whether the issue is of local or national importance, for example, or may link the topic to salient ideological debates on larger issues such as human rights, industry responsibility, or the government's role as protector or standard setter. A story may also define how the issue was instigated or interests that need to be considered in solving a problem.

One useful application of the framing concept is to distinguish between episodic and thematic contexts for news coverage.<sup>25,33</sup> An episodic story isolates an event as newsworthy, such as an outbreak of a particular disease or the outcome of a court case or policy decision. Thematic

stories address a general issue or emerging pattern that may require broader public and political attention. Public health advocates often seek more thematic news coverage or provide thematic contexts for coverage of newsworthy events. Researchers need to distinguish between episodic and thematic news coverage in studying how consumers may develop different perceptions and understanding of health issues, the responsible parties, and potential solutions.

The notion of framing providing the interpretive schema for a particular news story is useful. However, framing can be considered an active process that seeks to move an issue in a particular direction. Social movements literature has developed an idea of framing as an action whereby advocates for issues seek to use widely accessible cultural ideologies to draw people's attention to particular issues and to gain public support for specific courses of action.<sup>34,35</sup> Pan and Kosicki<sup>30</sup> argue that framing an issue in the news media essentially provides the parameters within which the public will debate the nature of a problem and what should be done about it. A frame implies the structure within which something is viewed, somewhat like a photograph or window frames. The importance of framing suggests that public health issues, which can lead to social developments such as the breast cancer movement Kolker<sup>35</sup> studied, may benefit from reframing to encourage change in the dominant public perception of an issue. The success of the breast cancer movement is seen at least partly as the result of a change away from framing breast cancer as an individual, stigmatized condition toward prominent and powerful notions of survivorship and camaraderie. Such potent concepts, in turn, suggest the need for public and financial support for prevention and treatment.

The crucial role of reporters and editors in constructing news frames and the brevity

of news reporting require those seeking media coverage to present their issues so they resonate for journalists. In highly competitive news environments, journalists come to learn which news frames are more likely to be deemed newsworthy and strive for optimal positioning for their news offerings within these frames. Those working in tobacco control also need to be acutely aware of how groups opposed to tobacco control can successfully frame their arguments to capture news attention.

Press articles and television bulletins are constructed to guide interpretation of the messages and make sense of events and how they relate to the social world. By referring to certain news discourses and narratives, news producers attempt to provide signposts to guide audiences in understanding a text. As Morley explains, "While the message is not an object with one real meaning, there are within it signifying mechanisms which promote certain meanings, even one privileged meaning, and suppress others: these are the directive closures encoded in the message."<sup>36(p.21)</sup> Media analysts refer to this construction as the preferred or dominant meaning of a media text.

Descriptive analyses of the inclusion of tobacco issues within the news and the framing of tobacco within such coverage can improve the understanding of both the successes and limitations of public health efforts and campaigns in relation to tobacco use.<sup>26</sup> An appreciation of which tobacco issues receive news media attention helps to provide context for understanding changes in public attitudes and behavior as well as the success or failure of policy initiatives. Furthermore, analyses of any temporal and geographic variations in the volume and focus of news media coverage of tobacco issues enhance the understanding of the evolution of tobacco control and its popular and political reception. Analyses of the news both inform and are informed by an understanding of societal values and

concerns at a given time.<sup>16,37</sup> Decisions about what is newsworthy entail a contemporary understanding of the significance of specific events as well as commonly held perspectives on institutional behavior and motives.<sup>24</sup> Research in this area has focused on what the volume of tobacco coverage can reveal and what might be learned from the analogies, metaphors, and historical comparisons used in framing news stories.<sup>38</sup>

The total volume of unpaid news media coverage routinely outweighs even the most intensive antismoking advertising campaigns.<sup>39</sup> Because of its mass-reach nature, news can have a sizable impact on both individual- and policy-level outcomes. News coverage related to tobacco control gains importance when government funding for mass media campaigns decreases and as the public's exposure to explicitly formulated tobacco control messages declines.<sup>40</sup>

## Media Advocacy for Tobacco Control

As discussed, numerous studies have established news coverage as a primary source of health information for the general public.<sup>41,42</sup> Given the potential of the media as a channel of influence, media advocacy is an aspect of policy change that prioritizes strategic efforts to attract media attention toward a particular subject or specific aspects of a given topic. The intent is to shape consideration of the given issue in ways that are conducive to the interests of those advocating the policy in question. Advocacy has become an essential tool that stakeholders use to influence how the public and policymakers attend to and rank the importance of various issues.<sup>43–46</sup>

Media advocates work to reframe and shape public discussion of a policy objective through strategic use of the news media.<sup>47,48</sup> They bring attention to problems that might otherwise be considered private

(for instance, viewing lung cancer as the result of an individual's smoking), and they focus on important social and public policy dimensions (such as the societal costs of smoking and the influence of tobacco industry practices in promoting smoking). Redefined as a social problem, an issue warrants societal response through policy rather than remaining the concern of an individual or friends and family.<sup>15</sup>

Effective tobacco control programs encompass individual, interpersonal, and societal factors and approaches to addressing the problem of tobacco use. Media advocacy has become an important component of these efforts.<sup>43,49,50</sup> By working directly with news producers, advocates can influence the level of attention given to specific concerns and shape the consideration of potential solutions. Media advocacy includes publicizing data and study findings, planning events likely to attract coverage, and submitting letters to the editor and opinion articles (op-ed columns—named as such because they are generally opposite the editorial page) in support of tobacco control perspectives.<sup>51</sup> There is a growing need for an active research and evaluation agenda to ensure that advocacy efforts have the desired effect to improve future campaigns and maximize impact. Chapman<sup>46(p.361)</sup> outlined 10 key questions that should be considered in planning advocacy strategies to “build support for public policies and ultimately influence those who have the power to change or preserve laws, enact policies, and fund interventions that can influence whole populations.” These questions include the need for clear objectives for advocacy efforts, matching media advocacy objectives to meet these goals, and issue framing to promote outlined objectives.

News coverage that supports tobacco control sets the agenda for further change at the community, state, and national levels.<sup>52</sup> However, policy analysts and researchers seeking to understand how policies, laws,

and community attitudes against smoking evolve often neglect to consider news reportage and commentary. At best, news coverage tends to be acknowledged as a mere background factor compared with more proximate, specific factors such as lobbying, petitions to government or paid media campaigns that are seen to influence policy, and behavioral change. For example, as suggested by table 9.1, researchers routinely evaluate the impact of limited-duration, health-promotion, antismoking campaigns sponsored by governments and nongovernmental organizations. However, they relatively seldom examine the influence and impact of ongoing antismoking news reportage that may dwarf the duration and number of exposures provided to audiences and readerships of health promotion campaigns. Accordingly, news coverage needs to be brought more into the foreground of explanations about how community and political attitudes influence support for tobacco control legislation and programs.<sup>21,22</sup>

The news media are a primary source for information dissemination.<sup>53,54</sup> However, many working in tobacco control underuse this source. Individuals involved in public health research and practice should recognize that if decision makers are not made aware via mass media reportage of advances in knowledge and/or understanding, the potential impact of this new knowledge is greatly limited.<sup>53,55</sup> People can react only to information to which they have access. Yet, much research relevant to tobacco control is never brought to public attention via the news media. It remains relatively unnoticed, uncited, and unreported except in research journals that often have very low circulations compared to news audiences and readerships.<sup>44</sup>

The next two sections review existing literature on the nature and volume of news coverage of tobacco and their relationship with behavioral and policy outcomes.

Most of the studies reviewed focused on newspapers because of the ease and relative lack of expense involved in accessing archival material. Longitudinal studies of electronic media in tobacco control are rare because the 24-hour monitoring required is resource intensive and the costs of purchasing the necessary data are very high. Newspapers also serve as a major source of information for electronic media<sup>56</sup> and are considered by most researchers to be the official record for news events.

### Descriptive Studies of News Coverage of Tobacco Use

The literature on news coverage and tobacco consists primarily of descriptive studies. Researchers have focused either on analyzing variation in the volume and/or nature of news coverage of tobacco during specified periods, or examining coverage of one specific topic or type of coverage in isolation. As the literature has grown, an increasing number of studies have sought to go beyond simply examining the overall volume of coverage to consider more in-depth framing of tobacco issues in various news media. These descriptive studies can enhance the understanding of news coverage and are an important first step in informing efforts to improve future coverage.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, analyses of news coverage of a particular topic can provide insights into the public mood regarding that issue, making the news media a proxy source for public opinion. Indeed, research has established that public officials often use news data for exactly this purpose.<sup>30</sup> However, few studies (see below) have linked an analysis of coverage of tobacco to individual, policy, or legislative outcomes.

Chapman's<sup>58</sup> study of 30 Australian newspapers over 12 months was one of the earliest descriptive studies of tobacco-related

news coverage. This study considered the volume, content, and orientation of coverage. Chapman identified 1,601 articles on tobacco-and-health issues. Of those articles, 62% were positive, 17% were negative, and 21% were neutral in their orientations toward tobacco control objectives. Articles on secondhand smoke were found to be the most frequent of all subcategories.

Menashe and Siegel<sup>26</sup> studied the frames used in front-page coverage of tobacco issues in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from 1985 to 1996. In this more qualitative study of 179 front-page articles, the authors identified 11 protobacco frames and 10 tobacco control frames regularly used in press coverage. In contrast with the Australian study, Menashe and Siegel argued that the tobacco industry has been more successful than public health advocates in promoting a consistent, powerful, and clear message through the press. Over the 11-year period, tobacco control frames in these U.S. newspapers evolved from closely reflecting Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's message that tobacco kills and we must work to achieve a smoke-free society to focusing predominantly on combating youth smoking and restricting the tobacco industry's ability to target youth as potential smokers. By contrast, tobacco interest groups consistently emphasized the intrusion of tobacco control advocates into individual liberties and freedom of choice. The investigators argued that by having a tobacco control advocacy position that focused more on youth smoking—a frame that tobacco interest groups readily adopted—tobacco control advocates undermined the broader position that tobacco use is harmful to all.

Clegg Smith and Wakefield<sup>59</sup> analyzed newspaper editorial coverage on tobacco-related issues from 30 U.S. daily newspapers during 2001 as part of a comparative study of

coverage in the United States and Australia. Their descriptive analysis of 1,317 articles indicated a considerable fluctuation in the volume of news coverage of tobacco throughout the year. More favorable than unfavorable news stories were reported from a tobacco control perspective. Opinion coverage, less than 20% of overall coverage, tended to support tobacco control. The most prominent tobacco issue in the news during 2001 was secondhand smoke and smoking bans (17.6% of the coverage), followed by economic issues (such as cigarette taxation and price) and advertising and promotion issues. This analysis illustrated that U.S. print news coverage of tobacco issues was prominent in overall volume but fairly diffuse in its substantive focus. The analysis of the focus and tone of editorials, columns, and letters to the editor also allowed the authors to identify issues that elicited opinionated coverage.

Clegg Smith and colleagues<sup>60</sup> used the same methods in a subsequent study<sup>59</sup> to describe newspaper coverage of tobacco issues in the United States from 2001 to 2003. In a sample of 9,859 articles (approximately one-third of all articles published on tobacco) from the 100 leading daily newspapers, the majority of coverage reported on events that represented progress for tobacco control (55%), 23% reported on setbacks, and other coverage was mixed or neutral. Two-thirds of all articles were concerned with secondhand smoke and smoking bans (33%); economic issues (10%); education, prevention, and cessation efforts (10%); and the tobacco industry (9%). In opinion pieces such as editorials, columns, and letters to the editor, 56% expressed clear support for tobacco control objectives, while 26% expressed overt opposition.

Long and colleagues<sup>61</sup> studied news coverage of tobacco by daily newspapers, local and national television newscasts, and three national news magazines in the United States during 2002 and 2003.

The nationally representative sample was drawn from 56 days of news coverage and was stratified by day of week and season of the year. Of 335 newspaper articles, stories about government policy, law, and regulation applying to tobacco dominated coverage (between 44% and 58% of articles each year), and the negative health consequences of tobacco were the next most common (between 13% and 27% of articles each year). However, government action and negative health effects usually were not covered in the same article. Tobacco news coverage was placed fairly prominently in newspapers, with nearly 62% in the front section of the newspaper. Among newspaper articles mentioning government tobacco control, news and feature stories evenly reported opinions that expressed support (16%) or opposition (17%), while opinion articles were more likely to favor control efforts (55%) than to oppose them (29%). Finally, Long and colleagues found that newspaper coverage in the southeast, the main U.S. tobacco-growing region, did not differ from that in the rest of the country. The sample of television coverage of tobacco issues found only 21 stories from 550 television news programs, averaging 0.38 stories per sampling day or one tobacco story every 25 news programs. The sampling period also identified 17 news magazine stories or about one story every four magazine issues. The allocation of television news coverage to tobacco-related topics was similar to that found in newspaper coverage. Magazines, however, tended to publish a relatively greater proportion of articles about health effects and were more likely to report about both government action and health effects in the same article.

In 2007 Nelson and colleagues<sup>62</sup> published the findings of a news surveillance system for tracking tobacco news stories in the United States from January 2004 to June 2005. Tobacco news stories were coded from 10 newspapers selected according to circulation estimates and geographic

diversity, 4 national news wire services, and 7 national broadcast or cable television networks. The number of newspaper and wire stories fluctuated over time, averaging 71 per month, meaning that a tobacco story was present virtually every day in these newspapers and newswires. Television news stories were less common, with an average of 29 tobacco stories per month. Three main tobacco themes accounted for more than 70% of newspaper coverage: policy or regulation (31%), legal news or lawsuits (24%), and health effects or statistics (16%). By contrast, 49% of television news stories concerned health effects or statistics, with policy or regulation stories (19%) a distant second. This study suggests that television coverage is more common than observed by Long and colleagues.<sup>61</sup> The difference is likely to be explained by the fact that Nelson and colleagues<sup>62</sup> continuously sampled CNN television, which contained one-half of all televised news stories on tobacco, whereas Long and colleagues<sup>61</sup> sampled only one hour of CNN per day.

These studies sought to describe news coverage of tobacco in general, rather than focusing on any particular issue of interest to tobacco control. Other descriptive research has focused more specifically on the coverage of particular topics of interest, such as tobacco farming, secondhand smoke, or cigars. Altman and colleagues,<sup>63</sup> for example, conducted a content analysis of news coverage of tobacco farming issues from 1995 to 1997. They concluded that diversification away from tobacco farming was underrepresented in news coverage of farming topics. These data indicate that there is a discrepancy in tobacco topics being covered by the media and suggest that public health practitioners need to track coverage of specific tobacco issues to ensure that media advocacy goals are achieved.

The resurgence in cigar smoking and cigar bars in the middle to late 1990s prompted Wenger and colleagues<sup>64</sup> to analyze news

coverage of cigars. The authors sought to characterize the role of the news media in the increasing consumption of cigars that accompanied a decline in the use of other forms of tobacco. Cigar-focused articles increased substantially over the study period, paralleling increased cigar consumption. Articles focused on cigar business (39%) and events (19%). Only 4% of articles focused on health effects. Sixty-two percent portrayed cigars favorably. The tobacco industry was mentioned in 54% of articles and portrayed positively in 78%. Forty-two percent of the individuals quoted or described in articles were affiliated with the tobacco industry, whereas only 5% were government/public health figures. The study concluded that the news coverage failed to communicate health risk messages and contributed to positive images of cigars.

In focusing on news coverage of tobacco policy, Lima and Siegel's<sup>38</sup> analysis of coverage of the 1997–98 national policy debates found that 55% of articles relating to tobacco policy portrayed the problem of tobacco use as smoking by youth and identified a “kids” frame as the dominant position relating to tobacco policy. This frame publicly established tobacco use as a problem on the basis that minors should not smoke. Thus, the news coverage did not frame the problem in terms of issues such as the long-term health harms to adult smokers, the economic costs of smoking to either the individual or society, or tobacco industry strategies to promote cigarette use. The authors recommended that the public health community should work to frame tobacco use as also relevant to the general population rather than continuing to frame it as primarily a youth issue.

Clegg Smith and Wakefield's<sup>65</sup> textual analysis of press coverage revisited the subject of discourses about youth in news coverage about smoking. The researchers applied an agenda-setting approach to their analysis of more than

600 youth-focused tobacco news stories from daily U.S. newspapers over a one-year period (2001). The presentation of smoking as a youth issue was a dominant component of tobacco control media advocacy efforts. News articles more often presented education as a solution to youth smoking, rather than calling on policy approaches to reduce the demand for tobacco among youth.

Three descriptive studies examined how secondhand smoke has been covered in the press. In a content analysis, Kennedy and Bero<sup>66</sup> found that newspaper and magazine coverage of secondhand smoke issues generally increased from 1981 to 1994. However, most of the articles (62%) suggested that research on secondhand smoke remained controversial, with the implication that decisive policy to restrict public smoking would move ahead of the supportive research evidence. As with the studies discussed above, tobacco industry spokespersons frequently were given voice in the articles and the industry perspective was often prominent, as evidenced by the tendency of stories to challenge the science of studies of secondhand smoke and to suggest continued controversy among experts over the issue. Magazines accepting tobacco advertising were significantly more likely than those refusing such advertising to publish stories suggesting that the harmful effects of secondhand smoke continued to be controversial.

Malone and colleagues<sup>23</sup> examined journalistic accounts and rhetorical devices used in representations of secondhand smoke as a news issue. Their analysis revealed a tendency to present the secondhand smoke issue as a moral argument between the tobacco industry and tobacco control advocates. Furthermore, they concluded that news coverage tended to treat science indicating harm from secondhand smoke as an area of controversy. Magzamen and colleagues<sup>67</sup> conducted a quantitative content analysis of press

coverage relating to California's proposed smoke-free policy for bars. Their study focused on the topics and nature of the coverage. The extent to which space on the editorial and letters pages of newspapers was allocated to this topic led the researchers to believe that secondhand smoke remained controversial in the public's mind. Nearly half of the press coverage of secondhand smoke was commentary. Tobacco industry representatives and public health advocates promoted their own perspectives by focusing on different aspects of the proposed policy. Moreover, tobacco industry representatives were more successful in gaining consistent coverage of their viewpoints.

Champion and Chapman<sup>68</sup> analyzed media reportage of the final years of public debate before Australian state governments announced smoke-free bars. Those seeking to retain smoking in bars were quoted in the press more often than others. However, more articles cast ongoing smoking in bars as a

problem that needed solving. Health advocates promoted the themes of occupational health inequity. Tobacco industry frames emphasized smoking in bars as an important cultural tradition and commercially important to bar owners.

The relationship between news coverage on tobacco and coverage of other public health issues is an important subject that largely has been ignored, particularly as it pertains to the potential impact on behavioral and policy change. The competition for space within the "news hole" is likely to be most fierce across topics that public health advocates would ideally treat as complementary (such as coverage of obesity and tobacco). Clegg Smith and colleagues<sup>69</sup> analyzed how the daily press described the allocations of Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) funds to areas other than tobacco control. This is an example of a study examining news coverage of one public health issue (or perspective) in competition

### **Tobacco Control Efforts and News Coverage: ASSIST Evaluation**

Engaging in effective media advocacy is an established objective for many tobacco control programs. Therefore, monitoring the volume and nature of news coverage is an important part of evaluation efforts. The American Stop Smoking Intervention Study (ASSIST) was implemented to reduce tobacco use primarily by using policy-based approaches to change the socio-political environment. Seventeen ASSIST states formed coalitions to increase tobacco control media coverage, strengthen tobacco control policies and laws, and increase demand for smoking cessation services.<sup>a</sup> Stillman and colleagues<sup>b</sup> analyzed the volume and slant of news coverage of tobacco policy issues as an outcome variable in studying the impact of ASSIST in relation to the first objective. The authors conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage of tobacco policy issues from 1994 to 1998 and compared the volume and content of coverage between ASSIST and non-ASSIST states. While the overall rate of increase in the volume of articles did not differ between ASSIST and non-ASSIST states, the rate of local stories in ASSIST states was greater than in non-ASSIST states. In addition, a state's ASSIST status did not predict the nature of editorial coverage. However, letters to the editor in ASSIST states, compared to non-ASSIST states, were more supportive of tobacco control.

<sup>a</sup>National Cancer Institute. 2005. ASSIST: *Shaping the future of tobacco prevention and control* (Tobacco control monograph no. 16, NIH publication no. 05-5645). Bethesda, MD: National Cancer Institute. <http://cancercontrol.cancer.gov/tcrb/monographs/16/index.html>.

<sup>b</sup>Stillman, F. A., K. A. Cronin, W. D. Evans, and A. Ulasevich. 2001. Can media advocacy influence newspaper coverage of tobacco: Measuring the effectiveness of the American Stop Smoking Intervention Study's (ASSIST) media advocacy strategies. *Tobacco Control* 10 (2): 137-44.

with others. The issue of “tobacco money” (a term that many news articles used to refer to MSA funds) is considered newsworthy without necessitating any discussion of tobacco control. Proponents of various causes (public health and others) use the news media effectively to illustrate the extent to which they deserve the MSA funds. However, others often conceptualized MSA funds as state property, requiring little or no justification for allocation outside of tobacco control.

Similarly, Caburnay and colleagues<sup>57</sup> situated tobacco use as one element in an analysis of news coverage of health behavior in local newspapers. Their study compared the nature of newspaper coverage of diet, exercise, and tobacco over one year. Health behavior stories occurred infrequently, and few were prominent or had a local focus. The authors concluded that more concentrated efforts need to be made in translating health behavior research into media content for local journalists.

The studies summarized so far have described the nature of coverage given to specific events or considered variations in the volume of coverage during particular periods. There is, however, also a need for analyses to consider the relative value and/or role of certain types of press coverage around tobacco. Clegg Smith and Wakefield’s<sup>59</sup> study of editorial coverage of tobacco topics in detail is one example of these types of investigations. This qualitative study treated editorials as evidence of engagement on the part of key media gatekeepers. It attempted to relate the salience of various tobacco-related frames to these opinion leaders. The authors examined 162 newspaper editors’ perspectives on tobacco issues as a way of assessing the relative success of those involved in seeking to promote or curb tobacco interests in the news media. They concluded that editors largely promoted tobacco control efforts, particularly structural innovations.

They also cautioned that there is little coverage of key issues such as health effects and addiction related to tobacco use and emphasized the need to reestablish these topics as newsworthy.

## Relating News Coverage of Tobacco to Individual Attitudes, Behaviors, and Policy Outcomes

As outlined in the previous section, much can be learned from descriptive analyses of news coverage of tobacco use issues. However, if media advocacy is the powerful public health tool that it increasingly is assumed to be, research is needed to establish the relationship between coverage and key policy and behavioral outcomes. A large body of research literature spanning many different fields of public health indicates that news coverage informs the public about particular issues,<sup>10</sup> and this information can influence behavior. Research has linked news coverage to behaviors such as using contraceptives,<sup>33</sup> having mammograms,<sup>70</sup> and using hormone replacement therapy in New Zealand<sup>71</sup> and the United States.<sup>72</sup>

News coverage of the health effects of binge drinking has been associated with greater self-reported disapproval rates for these behaviors among adolescents.<sup>73</sup> Likewise, Stryker<sup>74</sup> drew on evidence relating to breast cancer, mammography, and colorectal cancer screening to argue that a compelling societal event (such as a celebrity diagnosis) can produce enough news coverage to bring about at least a temporary change in health-related behaviors. People are highly sensitive to the contextual cues they gain from sources such as television news when they make decisions and formulate judgments.<sup>25</sup> In this light, news coverage of tobacco

issues could cue particular behavioral and attitudinal responses (such as attempts to quit smoking cigarettes and support for policy initiatives). Comprehending the interactions between the nature of news coverage and the progression of key individual decisions and policy outcomes may be instructive for tobacco control.

One challenge to studying the influence of news coverage on behavior is establishing causal relationships. It is difficult to separate the impact of the news coverage of a policy or intervention (on smoking behaviors) from the effects of the policy or intervention itself that has been subject to reportage.<sup>75</sup> For example, in considering the effects of the passage of a municipal clean indoor air policy on smoking behavior, one might anticipate that the restrictions themselves will reduce smoking. To the extent that the policy receives widespread news coverage, however, the coverage would communicate additional normative information and would support future policy efforts, thus having its own impact. The difficulty for the researcher is how to tease apart these effects. At the most basic level, the news media may have a direct influence on individual behavior via increased individual-level knowledge. News coverage may also have indirect effects on health behavior. For example, the news offers opportunities to change the nature of interpersonal influence relating to behavior. Finally, the news can influence the attitudes and behaviors of people in positions of power, which in turn may affect policy decisions and lead to behavior change.

Understandably, this latter effect is rarely studied. This is because the relationship among media coverage, individual attitudes, and policy outcomes is difficult to distinguish from the effects of other environmental and contextual factors.<sup>76,77</sup> Moreover, politicians and key decision makers in government are reluctant to act as research informants and to admit that news events influence their decisions.

However, one innovative study examined the contribution of four factors in explaining the rate of adoption of smoke-free bylaws (ordinances) in Canadian municipalities between 1970 and 1995.<sup>78</sup> These four factors were (1) the number of journal articles about secondhand smoke in major scientific journals, (2) the number of pages of parliamentary debate about secondhand smoke, (3) the release of the U.S. Surgeon General's report on secondhand smoke, and (4) the number of newspaper articles about secondhand smoke. By using event history analysis, Asbridge<sup>78</sup> determined that the amount of news coverage and the U.S. Surgeon General's report both significantly increased the rate of smoke-free bylaw adoption. In fact, the size of the effect for news media was such that each additional news article increased the rate of bylaw adoption by 5%. Strong evidence from other areas of public health indicates that news coverage can spur policy change. However, few published studies have explicitly linked news coverage—either positive or negative—to key tobacco use behaviors.

Nonetheless, the tobacco control community is beginning to make some advances in understanding the influence of the news media on key tobacco use behaviors. Warner's<sup>11</sup> analysis of the impact of publicity flowing from the release of the Surgeon General's 1964 report on smoking and health is one study that explicitly links news coverage and behavior. The report's release and subsequent news coverage caused immediate (though transitory) decreases (4%–5%) in annual per capita tobacco consumption. Unpaid media coverage of the health effects of tobacco use also has been credited for much of the 30% decline in smoking among British men in the 20 years after release of the first Royal College of Physicians' report on smoking and health in 1962.<sup>79</sup>

Laugesen and Meads<sup>80</sup> conducted a study in New Zealand that linked news coverage

### News Coverage, Policy Change, and Adolescent Smoking

Niederdeppe and colleagues<sup>a</sup> used data from the evaluation of the Florida Tobacco Control Program (FTCP) to relate news coverage of the FTCP to policy change (in the form of implementation of tobacco control policies at the county level) and then to investigate whether that policy change was related to adolescent smoking behavior within Florida. The authors conducted a content analysis of newspaper coverage between April 1998 and December 2001 and related the variation in tobacco news coverage to the enactment of tobacco product placement ordinances (specifically, policies to move cigarettes behind store counters) in 67 Florida counties by using event history analysis.

Greater news coverage of Students Working Against Tobacco events was associated with an increase in the likelihood of tobacco product placement ordinances being passed. However, passage of tobacco product placement ordinances did not lead to reduced smoking, as measured by 30-day self-reports by students up to one year after adoption of the ordinances. The authors conclude that the findings support the use of media advocacy as a tool to change tobacco policies but suggest caution in choosing policy goals that may not themselves influence tobacco use.

<sup>a</sup>Niederdeppe, J. D., M. C. Farrelly, and D. Wenter 2007. Media advocacy, tobacco control policy change and teen smoking in Florida. *Tobacco Control* 16 (1):47–52.

of tobacco with cigarette sales data as an objective measure of tobacco consumption. This study examined the relationship between the volume of news stories on tobacco issues in daily newspapers and aggregate weekly cigarette sales data, within a broader study of the impact of cigarette price, individual income, and level of cigarette advertising on weekly cigarette sales. Aggregate cigarette sales were inversely related to the number of press clippings on tobacco or smoking issues. By calculating the elasticity for news volume and cigarette sales, the authors estimated that a 10% increase in the weekly volume of news stories could decrease purchase levels in the same week in which the stories were published by 0.4%. Doubling news coverage of tobacco use issues could be comparable to a 10% price increase. Similarly, a U.S. study by Cummings and colleagues<sup>81</sup> found that a week-long newspaper series on smoking cessation had approximately the same effect on quit attempts (13% of smokers reported being prompted to attempt to quit, and 4% reported quitting for at least one week) as would participation in 380 dedicated smoking cessation clinics.

Pierce and Gilpin<sup>82</sup> explored the relationship between news coverage and key tobacco use behaviors by analyzing coverage of tobacco issues in the most popular U.S. magazines from 1950 to 1990. They related patterns of news coverage to tobacco use cessation and initiation data from the National Health Interview Surveys (1965–92). This study sought to uncover potential relationships between news media coverage on tobacco and rates of smoking initiation and cessation over the 40-year period. From observed trends over time, the authors concluded that, for approximately 30 years, “The annual incidence of cessation in the USA mirrored the pattern of news media coverage of smoking and health.”<sup>82(p.145)</sup> suggesting that news coverage was related to cessation but not to smoking initiation. They further suggested that efforts to create newsworthy tobacco issues could be most effective in settings in which cessation rates have begun to lag.

Only two studies have statistically examined the relationship between news coverage and youth smoking behavior. Niederdeppe and colleagues<sup>83</sup> assessed the relationship between exposure to tobacco-related

newspaper coverage in Florida counties and youth smoking, as measured by Florida Youth Tobacco Surveys administered between 1998 and 2002. Cumulative exposure to newspaper coverage on the Florida Tobacco Control Program (FTCP) with a one-year time lag (based on the assumption that news effects take time to diffuse) was associated with a lower likelihood of youth smoking (smoked in the past 30 days) among high school students. These results were found after adjusting for other FTCP policy and program efforts as well as individual variables associated with smoking participation. News coverage of youth advocacy efforts in particular contributed to lower rates of youth smoking in both middle and high school students. These findings provide persuasive evidence for the indirect effects of news coverage on smoking initiation.

Smith and colleagues<sup>84</sup> assessed the extent to which the volume and content of newspaper articles on tobacco were related to perceived smoking harm and smoking behavior among almost 100,000 American youth from 2001 to 2003, after adjusting for other individual factors and tobacco policy variables. The study found that each 10-article increase in newspaper coverage per community over the five-month period preceding survey administration was associated with increased odds of perceiving great harm from smoking (odds ratio [OR] = 1.04,  $p < .01$ ) and decreased odds of smoking in the past 30 days (OR = 0.93,  $p < .001$ ). However, no consistent association was found between the content or tone of coverage and youth smoking outcomes. The study suggests that gaining news coverage about tobacco issues may be an important tool by which to tackle youth smoking at the community level. Getting and keeping tobacco on the agenda is important, with volume of coverage, rather than detailed content, appearing to be the driving factor.

Another pathway through which news media affect attitudes and behavior is the

idea that general news coverage of tobacco control supports health communication campaigns that prioritize other forms of communication, such as paid mass media messaging. In this pathway, the news media are a secondary source of influence to the extent that the campaigns can be established as newsworthy and generate subsequent free coverage. For example, if a community were to invest heavily in tobacco control programs that generated newsworthy education or policy promotion events, news coverage of these events might generate additional awareness of and support for the goals of the overall program on the part of the general public and policymakers.

As noted above, some studies have suggested that news coverage on tobacco can lead to behavioral and policy change, but no sufficiently detailed, large-scale systematic study of such relationships has been conducted to determine how such an influence is achieved.<sup>22</sup> Little is known about the potential pathways between media advocacy efforts and changes in attitudes toward tobacco control policy. In addition, little is known about the role of news coverage in influencing key decision makers to support or oppose tobacco control policy and legislation. As illustrated in the previous sections, existing research offers valuable descriptive insights. However, further investigation is needed into the relationship between news coverage on tobacco and tobacco use behaviors and policy change. The challenge now is to apply the increased understanding of the nature of news coverage on tobacco to determining the mechanisms by which it influences individual-level attitudes and behavior and policy implementation. Qualitative methodologies will be important in this effort, as well as complex statistical methods such as multilevel analysis, time series, and event history analysis linking news coverage to change in tobacco policies and smoking attitudes and behavior.

## Tobacco Industry Influence on News Reporting

A key marketing tool, advertising requires a mutually beneficial commercial relationship between the advertiser and the media that carry the advertising. These relationships might afford the tobacco industry the ability to leverage editorial influence by favoring advertising in publications that downplay antismoking content or publish prosmoking articles. This effect is acknowledged in the Surgeon General's 1989 report<sup>85</sup>(pp.502,508-10) as one of the indirect mechanisms by which advertising and promotion might increase tobacco consumption. Evidence for this line of reasoning from industry documents is provided later in this section.

Tobacco advertising might influence a publication's coverage of tobacco and health in several ways. An agent of the tobacco manufacturer might advise the publisher or editor (verbally if not in writing) to avoid certain types of news coverage, or a manufacturer might cancel its advertising contract with a publication or pull advertisements from one or more issues following publication of an article unfavorable to the company or industry. Some publications might self-censor their coverage of tobacco and health to avoid offending an advertiser and losing its business. A study of internal tobacco industry documents demonstrated previous instances when tobacco companies punished corporations that acted against its interests.<sup>86</sup> The Surgeon General's 1989 report<sup>85</sup>(pp.509,510) provides several references for stating, "Writers, editors, and publishers have described numerous instances of purported censorship attributed directly to publications' fears of alienating cigarette advertisers."

While instances and impressions of the influence of advertising on editorial content

exist, a number of caveats need to be borne in mind. First, the degree of influence may vary by type of medium (television, radio, magazines, newspapers, etc.). Second, the relationship may be influenced by the geographical scope (national versus local) of the medium. Third, as discussed in chapter 2, news media companies are typically organized so as to separate and insulate business operations from editorial activities. Advertisers are serviced by marketing departments of media companies; thus, reporters rarely come into direct contact with advertisers in their media, although this may be more likely to occur in local news media. Finally, the degree of influence is likely to vary by the degree of the medium's reliance on advertising revenue. Controlled-circulation newspapers such as shoppers' guides or neighborhood newspapers that rely exclusively on advertising may be more susceptible compared to larger newspapers that rely heavily on subscription fees. In the case of larger newspapers and other media, it is possible that news coverage is more likely to influence advertising, rather than the other way around. In other words, an editorial environment that is not hospitable to a product is unlikely to attract advertising for the product, thus limiting the revenue stream for the news medium. With these general principles in mind, the remainder of this section discusses the relationship between revenue from tobacco advertising and publication of tobacco-related content.

As reviewed in chapter 10, early studies of news coverage of tobacco posed questions about the possible correlations between a publication's receipt of tobacco advertising revenue and tobacco-related content. For example, Whelan and colleagues<sup>87</sup> surveyed coverage of smoking in women's magazines with the objective of identifying magazines that published smoking-related articles, exploring a possible relationship between tobacco advertising and tobacco-related news content. They found few

smoking-related stories compared with other health topics. The authors concluded that the paucity of antismoking articles was related to the importance of tobacco advertising as a source of revenue for the magazines. They also concluded that magazine news coverage would adequately address tobacco issues only by restricting tobacco advertising.

A study of 99 U.S. magazines published over 25 years (1959–69 and 1973–86) essentially confirmed the summation by Whelan and colleagues that cigarette advertising in magazines was associated with diminished coverage of the hazards of smoking, particularly in magazines directed toward women. In women's magazines, the probability of publishing an article on the risks of smoking in a given year was 11.7% for magazines that did not carry cigarette advertisements compared with 5.0% for those that did publish these types of advertisements (adjusted OR = 0.13; 95% confidence interval [CI], 0.02–0.69).<sup>88</sup> For all magazines, when the proportion of revenues derived from cigarette advertising was the independent variable, the probability of publishing an article on the risks of smoking in a given year was reduced by 38% (95% CI, 18%–55%). This relationship was particularly strong in the case of women's magazines. Studies examining British,<sup>89</sup> Irish,<sup>90</sup> and European<sup>91</sup> women's magazines reached similar conclusions. Furthermore, DeJong's<sup>92</sup> analysis of the nature of tobacco coverage in student newspapers before and after acquisition by a tobacco company revealed a possible relationship between ownership and content. Similar studies have not yet been conducted to determine whether the presence of tobacco advertising influences editorial coverage in daily newspapers, radio, or television. However, anecdotal evidence about the influence of advertising over editorial coverage exists for newspapers and the broadcast media before the removal of cigarette commercials,<sup>85(p.520)</sup> and occasional examples of industry claims of

influencing news coverage or plans to do so have surfaced within formerly private internal tobacco industry documents.

The internal tobacco industry documents made public through the MSA and other settlements and investigations provide insights into tobacco industry efforts to influence media coverage of tobacco matters. These insights often are fragmentary because documents made public represent an undefined sample of all documents ever produced within the industry. They also frequently raise questions that cannot be addressed because related documents are missing. However, many documents demonstrate the tobacco industry's awareness of the importance of news coverage favorable to industry interests. For example, Philip Morris used the InfoFlow measure to “understand what the public is reading, hearing and seeing in the news related to tobacco and ... to determine the impact this has on the general public's overall view of the tobacco industry.”<sup>93</sup> A negative InfoFlow score indicates that members of the public listen to news that influences their opinion about the tobacco industry “in a negative direction.” To that end, by its own accounts, the industry fares less well than it would like in attempts to control the nature of coverage. In 2000, Philip Morris reported to its staff, “Despite some minor movement, InfoFlow has remained decidedly negative.”<sup>93</sup>

Thomas Lauria from the now-defunct U.S. Tobacco Institute lamented the nature of news coverage of the industry: “We are forever dogged with being at the bottom of the story in a chip shot quote that's taken out of context. I've counted as many as 13 anti-smoking activists in one *Los Angeles Times* article, with one recycled comment of mine at the bottom.”<sup>94</sup> The importance the industry places on news coverage also was illustrated when the New South Wales (Australia) government declined to support the

national introduction of health warnings on cigarettes packages in the early 1970s. One local Philip Morris operative in Australia reported to his U.S. head office, “Our first task is now to protect the New South Wales Government from too much adverse publicity — by exerting pressure on media chieftains. This is being done presently, so far with some success.”<sup>95</sup>(Bates no. 2015047984)

Similarly, an anonymous speaker at a 1985 meeting of Philip Morris’s “top management” suggests that the news media could be “exploited” to “write articles or editorials positive to the industry position on the various aspects of the smoking controversy.”<sup>96</sup> It is not known whether Philip Morris or other tobacco companies adopted this strategy. However, the following comments illustrate that industry representatives were aware of the potential influence of messages delivered within the media arena.

The sixth point I want to make is that we are not *using our very considerable clout with the media*. [emphasis in original] A number of media proprietors that I have spoken to are sympathetic to our position - Rupert Murdoch and Malcolm Forbes are two good examples. The media like the money they make from our advertisements and they are an ally that we can and should exploit.

In most societies in the world today public opinion is formed, to a significant extent, by the news media and I believe we should make a concerted effort in our principal markets to influence the media to write articles or editorials positive to the industry position on the various aspects of the smoking controversy. I can’t speak for the U.S. but I can tell you all that we are not doing enough in this area in International.<sup>96</sup>(Bates no. 2023268336)

A 1985 unsigned document commenting on a memorandum written by Philip Morris senior official Hamish Maxwell stated:

Another area we intend to exploit more fully is the ad agencies and media proprietors. We have already been helped a great deal by the agencies in Hong Kong for example, in our efforts to resist advertising restrictions. As regards the media, we plan to build similar relationships to those we now have with Murdoch’s News Limited with other newspaper proprietors. Murdoch’s papers rarely publish anti-smoking articles these days.<sup>97</sup>(Bates no. 2023268390)

However, a 1989 Australian study somewhat contradicts this claim. The study found that newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch published 55.7% of articles on tobacco control that were judged positive and 23.7% that were negative to tobacco control objectives, compared with 68.0% positive and 13.7% negative articles in the other large chain of Australian newspapers.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the tobacco industry’s desire to influence media coverage, a growing number of studies (such as those reviewed above) have found that the news media often publish and broadcast news that is unfavorable to the industry’s interests. Indeed, internal tobacco industry documents demonstrate corporate officials’ frustration about negative news coverage. For example, in 1994, a Philip Morris official wrote of the news situation in Australia:

There is a vast amount of material published in the media which is predominantly negative. For example, in May 1993 1,659 national daily’s, metropolitan daily’s, suburban regional newspapers were published. These contained 450 unfavourable mentions concerning tobacco not including negative mentions in classified advertisements. In the same month, an examination of 460 magazines published during the month revealed 181 unfavourable articles.<sup>98</sup>(Bates no. 2023248099)

An undated Brown & Williamson document lamented the news media's "lack of balance" in favoring anti-smoking coverage:

This case illustrated the problem we have in presenting to the public an alternative and balancing viewpoint to the anti-smokers [sic] strident claims. The media is biased and sensational, so that Industry responses do not get the headlines that the anti-smokers achieve.<sup>99</sup> (Bates no. 620215679)

Like other types of manufacturers, the tobacco industry generally seeks to maximize positive and minimize negative news coverage germane to its interests. Research shows that, on average, magazines that accept tobacco advertising tend to provide less coverage of smoking and health.<sup>87-91</sup> However, this relationship has not been noted for newspapers. As more nations ban tobacco advertising after ratifying the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, tobacco industry influence on magazine content pertaining to smoking and health is likely to diminish.

### Future Directions

Research on the volume of coverage of tobacco issues, particularly compared with other health topics, firmly establishes tobacco control as a highly newsworthy issue. News media coverage of tobacco control could have a significant impact on tobacco policy and individual tobacco use. Milestones in the epidemiology of tobacco use and disease (such as U.S. Surgeon General's reports) have attracted intensive news coverage during the past several decades, as have policy changes pertaining to curbing the tobacco epidemic and litigation aimed at tobacco industry activities. Over time, this has broadened to the extent that tobacco has long been one of the most covered issues in health reporting. Indeed, in June 2004 the *Wall Street Journal* deemed newsworthy a

finding that obesity "had eclipsed coverage of passive smoking" in global reportage in a news-monitoring study.<sup>100</sup>

At the same time, the tobacco industry is no different from any institution in pursuing its strategic objectives in public communications and attempting to maximize the likelihood of news coverage favoring its economic interests. Some evidence suggests the industry may try to leverage its considerable advertising contributions to influence editorial coverage in magazines. However, a growing body of research focused on newspapers indicates that several decades of strong and continuing coverage of the negative aspects of tobacco issues is incompatible with any hypothesis that industry influence can seriously affect the ways in which the news media (except for magazine content) approach tobacco matters. As the tobacco control community continues to make strides in limiting the acceptable locales for print advertising, the influence of the tobacco industry even on magazine content is likely to diminish.

Further work needs to be done to elucidate the nature of tobacco-related news coverage and its broader impact on public health. The results of this work can, in turn, inform future efforts of the tobacco control community pertaining to the news media, including media advocacy, framing of key issues, and appropriate use of media channels in broader policymaking efforts. Five specific areas for future discussion are outlined here.

- 1. The tobacco control community has yet to give sufficient research attention to efforts to shape the nature of news coverage and understanding the impact of these efforts.** The public health research community has given relatively little research attention to the news media in tobacco control studies. This is despite the prominence given

in the news media to matters directly relevant to tobacco control and the acknowledgment of the importance of the news media in generating public and political interest in all aspects of public life. The tobacco control field could gain an important understanding of the role of news in advancing and retarding tobacco control objectives by studying three broad areas: the production of news accounts, the influence of news accounts on individual behaviors, and the impact of news coverage on policy outcomes.

**2. Research is needed on the process for producing news coverage of tobacco issues.**

News is produced by the decisions of those working in news organizations who—on a daily basis—apply precepts of newsworthiness to their selection and treatment of what will be published or broadcast. Studies examining this selection process and how news media gatekeepers interpret information presented for their consideration could bring important insights to those working in tobacco control. This could help frame news in ways that are more likely to interest journalists in tobacco control stories and to avoid engagement in news events and actions likely to attract coverage that is negative to tobacco control.

**3. Better and more systematic research is needed on the nature of news coverage of tobacco and the relationship between this coverage and key behavioral and policy objectives.**

More studies are needed to examine news texts that are published and broadcast about tobacco. This research ideally should move beyond content analysis studies that simply enumerate instances of categories of stories and into more text-based studies that examine matters

such as the dominant frames used to convey tobacco news, differences in how reportage positive to the tobacco industry or tobacco control is constructed, and predictors of news coverage. There appear to be few longitudinal studies of the coverage of tobacco and tobacco-control-related material in the news. Those running health promotion media campaigns routinely evaluate them. However, detailed examinations of tobacco-as-news tend to occur only irregularly and opportunistically. Therefore, this widespread and ongoing source of public discourse about smoking remains relatively unexplored.

**4. Researchers need to explore how smokers, potential smokers, the general public, and key policymakers decode and interpret news about smoking.**

Several research areas might enhance knowledge of the ways that news on smoking influences contemporary public thinking about tobacco use and its control. They include qualitative research among these groups seeking to explore how different styles of news are interpreted, how audiences understand key concepts such as risk as they apply to smoking, what people think of the credibility of tobacco control advocates and spokespeople for the tobacco industry, and how people assess policy debates covered by the media.

**5. Systematic study beyond the newspaper is needed to understand niche market news, the emerging news media, and the role of infotainment.\***

Again, largely due to pragmatic considerations, most studies of news coverage of tobacco issues have focused on print sources (primarily newspapers). While this provides valuable insights, there also is a growing need to include television, radio, and Internet

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\*A type of media broadcast program that provides a combination of current events news and feature news or feature stories.

news sources within studies to more accurately reflect the myriad sources of coverage. Thus, studies are needed that focus on the nature of news coverage and the influence of this coverage from a wide variety of news sources and a range of settings. The studies summarized here were intentionally those conducted using mainstream daily newspapers published in the United States. However, a few seminal studies from other developed countries (such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand) and studies using magazines also were included. The applicability of the findings to other news media sources is uncertain in terms of the framing of tobacco issues, the influence of various stakeholders, and the influence of coverage on behavioral and policy outcomes, particularly in developing countries, but this is clearly an important area for future investigation. Furthermore, in an increasingly global and postmodern environment, studies are needed that examine patterns of coverage across both national and media boundaries, as well as niche media, to fully understand the impact on attitudes, behavior, and policy progression.

### Summary

The news media represent an important area of influence for both tobacco policy and individual smoking behavior, yet they have not been adequately investigated. The volume of coverage of tobacco issues in news media may outweigh that in other communication vehicles such as paid advertising and promotion. Advocacy contained within this news coverage can form a key component of an overall tobacco control strategy.

Research shows that tobacco control interests often are favorably covered in the news media. Generally, the media focus on topical news stories such as secondhand

smoke, policy interventions, or economic issues such as the use of MSA funds. Content analyses of specific issues show that protobacco interests can sometimes be successful in framing issues or expressing their views. The tobacco industry has enjoyed the leverage of paid advertising in areas such as print media, especially magazines. However, studies have shown that this influence has not affected editorial coverage in other media such as newspapers. Proposed advertising restrictions—stimulated in many cases by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control—hold the promise to further limit such influence in other communication channels.

Challenges for the future include further research to better establish the relationship between news media coverage and tobacco use outcomes as well as the social attitudes and public policy issues surrounding tobacco consumption. More information is needed about the impact of the changing landscape of media channels on tobacco control issues and advocacy. The existing base of research points to a promising role for leveraging news media efforts to help reduce tobacco use and improve overall public health.

### Conclusions

1. The news media represent a key source of health information for the general public. More important, they serve as a framing mechanism for issues surrounding tobacco control. As a result, news coverage is a frequent aim of stakeholder activity on both sides of tobacco-related issues. However, only a small proportion of tobacco control research has been devoted to news media issues to date.
2. News coverage that supports tobacco control has been shown to set the agenda for further change at the community, state, and national levels. Despite this,

organized media advocacy efforts on behalf of tobacco control issues remain an underutilized area of activity within public health.

3. Key issues covered as news stories include secondhand smoke, tobacco policies, and the health effects of smoking. Studies of tobacco-related news coverage often show that the majority of stories favor tobacco control progress, including opinion pieces. Other studies have shown the tobacco industry to be successful in gaining consistent coverage for selected issues.
4. Content analyses of tobacco-related news articles have revealed some trends that remain favorable to protobacco interests. These trends include the underrepresentation of tobacco farming diversification in the farming press, a tendency of articles to challenge the science behind secondhand smoke issues, and positive coverage of the growth in cigar smoking.
5. Numerous factors can affect the volume and nature of tobacco news coverage. The American Stop Smoking Intervention Study found more support for tobacco control in letters to the editor in participating states, and editors largely support tobacco control efforts. However, news coverage often focuses on specific areas such as tobacco control policies, the outcomes of tobacco lawsuits, or the disbursement of Master Settlement Agreement funds.
6. Large-scale studies have yet to be undertaken investigating associations between tobacco-related news coverage and attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes related to tobacco use. These studies face challenges in separating the effects of news coverage from those of the interventions or policy changes they describe. Research shows potential evidence for such an impact, including a drop in per capita cigarette consumption after news coverage of the 1964 Surgeon General's report on smoking and health, a relationship between tobacco-related news coverage and cessation, and a link between news coverage of specific tobacco control efforts and lower adolescent smoking prevalence and consumption.
7. Paid tobacco advertising tends to suppress or reduce news coverage of tobacco-related issues, particularly in magazines. However, bans on tobacco advertising that accompany ratification of the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control may impair the tobacco industry's ability to exert editorial control over published content.

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