Turning free speech into corporate speech: Philip Morris’ efforts to influence U.S. and European journalists regarding the U.S. EPA report on secondhand smoke

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Available online 18 March 2004

Abstract

Background. Previously secret internal tobacco company documents show that the tobacco industry launched an extensive multifaceted effort to influence the scientific debate about the harmful effects of secondhand smoke. Integral to the industry’s campaign was an effort to derail the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) risk assessment on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) by recruiting a network of journalists to generate news articles supporting the industry’s position and pushing its public relations messages regarding the ETS issue.

Methods. Searches of previously secret internal tobacco industry records were conducted online and at the Minnesota Tobacco Document Depository. In addition, searches on the World Wide Web were conducted for each National Journalism Center alumnus. Lexis-Nexis was used to locate news stories written by the journalists cited in this paper.

Results. Philip Morris turned to its public relations firm Burson Marsteller to “build considerable reasonable doubt . . . particularly among consumers” about the “scientific weaknesses” of the EPA report. A Washington, DC, media and political consultant Richard Hines was a key player in carrying out Burson Marsteller’s media recommendations of “EPA bashing” for Philip Morris. In March 1993, Philip Morris’ vice president of corporate affairs policy and administration reported to Steve Parrish, vice president and general counsel of Philip Morris, that their consultant was “responsible for a number of articles that have appeared in . . . major news publications regarding EPA and ETS.” In addition to placing favorable stories in the press through its consultant, Philip Morris sought to expand its journalist network by financially supporting a U.S. school of journalism; the National Journalism Center (NJC). Philip Morris gleaned “about 15 years worth of journalists at print and visual media throughout the country . . . to get across [its] side of the story” resulting in “numerous pieces consistent with our point of view.” The company planned to “design innovative strategies to communicate [its] position on ETS through education programs targeting policy makers and the media” via the NJC. Finally, journalists associated with think tanks that were financially supported by Philip Morris wrote numerous articles critical of the EPA.

Conclusions. This is the first report, from the tobacco industry’s own documents, to show the extent to which the tobacco industry has gone to influence the print media on the issue of the health effects of secondhand smoke. Unfortunately, what we report here is that even journalists can fall victim to well-orchestrated and presented public relations efforts regardless of their scientific validity. It is not clear how various professional media organizations oversee the ethical conduct of their members. Certainly, on the topic of the health effects of secondhand smoke, more scrutiny is warranted from these organizations for articles written by their members lest the public be misinformed and thus ill served.

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Keywords: Tobacco industry; EPA; Environmental tobacco smoke; Journalists

Introduction

Previously secret internal corporate tobacco documents show that the tobacco industry launched an extensive public relations effort to influence the scientific debate about the harmful effects of secondhand smoke [1–20]. The adverse health consequences of secondhand smoke exposure, also
known as environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), have been reported by regulatory agencies and published research for decades [21–30]. Although previous government reports such as the 1986 National Academy of Science (NAS) report on ETS [31] and the 1986 Surgeon General’s Report on Involuntary Smoking [24] considered ETS a human carcinogen, neither report included a comprehensive risk assessment. In 1987, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was authorized by Congress to research indoor air pollution. Accordingly, the agency released its first draft risk assessment on ETS in June 1990. After an EPA Science Advisory Board, an independent scientific board made up of nine standing members and nine consultants reporting directly to EPA Administrator, reviewed the report, made recommendations, and the standard public comment hearing occurred, a revised draft was released in May 1992. The majority of the submissions received by the EPA during the public comment period that claimed the draft conclusions were invalid were submitted by individuals affiliated with the tobacco industry [32]. Nevertheless, the final EPA risk assessment, Respiratory Health Effects of Passive Smoking: Lung Cancer and Other Disorders, was finally released in December 1992. The EPA classified ETS exposure as a human carcinogen and estimated that ETS caused approximately 3000 lung cancer deaths per year in adult nonsmokers [27]. ETS exposure has also reported to be causally associated with low birth weight and SIDS in infants, acute lower respiratory infections, asthma attacks, middle ear infections in children, and heart disease in adults [29]. In June 2002, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the cancer research arm of the World Health Organization (WHO), corroborated the EPA’s findings from 9 years earlier that ETS is a human carcinogen [30].

In this paper, we expose the tobacco industry’s substantial media efforts, using a select group of individual journalists, to influence public opinion on the validity of the EPA report and tobacco control measures in general. Philip Morris carried out the following: (1) recruited a unique network of journalists through an independent political and media consultant; (2) supported internship programs at a U.S. school of journalism to train and place upcoming reporters; and (3) worked with journalists associated with think tanks financially supported by the industry which promoted free market and antiregulation ideals. Through these initiatives, future journalists developed their ability and propensity to write articles criticizing the EPA’s risk assessment on ETS and tobacco control in general, and the industry’s financed public relations effort allowed for publication and wide dissemination.

Methods

Search terms used for researching the internal tobacco industry documents included all terms listed in Tables 1–3. Searches were conducted online and at the Minnesota Tobacco Document Depository [33]. The British American Tobacco depository in Guildford, UK, was not specifically searched as our intention was to concentrate on the U.S.-based companies’ response to the U.S. EPA report. In addition, searches on the World Wide Web were conducted for National Journalism Center alumni. Lexis-Nexis® was used to locate news stories written by journalists cited in this paper. Accessing the now publicly available but previously secret internal corporate tobacco documents and the limitations inherent in their use as a data set has been previously reported [14,15,34–36].

Findings

Integral to the tobacco industry’s campaign to dispute the emerging public and scientific acceptance of adverse health consequences associated with secondhand smoke was an effort to derail the EPA risk assessment by exacting extreme political pressure through the first Bush administration and former congressman Thomas Bliley (R-VA) [20]. To protect its profits from the 1992 EPA risk assessment findings that secondhand smoke was carcinogenic, Philip Morris turned to its public relations firm Burson Marsteller to “build considerable reasonable doubt . . . particularly among consumers” about the “scientific weaknesses” of the report [37]. This is reminiscent of the tobacco industry’s public relations efforts to “create doubt about the health charges without actually denying it” developed to confront the health reports relating smoking to lung cancer and heart disease in the 1960s and 1970s [38]. Burson Marsteller recommended media messages should be “part of a larger mosaic that concentrates all of the EPA’s enemies against it at one time” [37] and assured Philip Morris that EPA credibility was “defeatable,” but “not on the basis of ETS alone” [11,39]. Media strategies would concentrate on “one-on-one opportunities with journalists and editorial writers rather than focus[ing] on the herd of daily journalists” [37]. These “opportunities” would be “supplemented by carefully tailored, authored, placed pieces” [37]. The public relations firm also suggested that Philip Morris generate articles on EPA that would highlight “general EPA bashing by credible, authoritative sources” as well as “EPA ineptitude, and when possible, corruption” [40].

Philip Morris’ primary messages were that (1) the EPA had abused its regulatory power; (2) the agency did not adhere to a scientifically rigorous process in determining the health risks of ETS; and (3) that evidence of the dangers of ETS remained controversial.

Philip Morris media consultant

Documents show that Philip Morris’ aims to influence journalistic coverage of “EPA bashing” and “corruption” were carried out discreetly, in part, by a Washington, DC, media and political consultant Richard T. Hines. Hines served
as a state legislator in the South Carolina House of Representatives and held several executive positions in the Reagan administration. Hines also assisted the second Bush administration’s presidential campaign [41]. In fact, the Wall Street Journal reported that Hines may have helped candidate George W. Bush win the South Carolina primary by funding the “Keep It Flying” Political Action Committee, a pro-Confederate flag group that sent out 250,000 letters criticizing Senator John McCain before the primary election [42].

In March 1993, Thomas Collamore, Philip Morris’s vice president of corporate affairs policy and administration, reported to Steve Parrish, vice president and general counsel of Philip Morris, that “Richard [Hines] is responsible for a number of articles that have appeared in … major news publications regarding EPA and ETS” [43]. Hines worked with Philip Morris to develop “a network of receptive journalists, television commentators, and editorialists” thereby getting Philip Morris’ messages out to a “selected network of journalists” [44]. Hines asserted that by using this approach, “[W]e have been able to get favorable articles/commentaries in major publications … and reach millions of the public through numerous syndicated columnists that are in our network” [44]. Another Philip Morris internal memo stated that Hines “works with Tom Borelli [director of science and environmental policy at Philip Morris] to generate articles critical of EPA science including ETS” [45]. Hines invoiced Philip Morris at least US$200,000 in 1992 [46], the year the last draft and final risk assessment was released, and was budgeted for US$140,000 in 1993 [47].

Table 1 lists news publications from “selected” journalists which Hines was credited with generating that were critical of the EPA and its report. Many of these journalists have authored articles that are also critical of tobacco control and those works are also included in Table 1. This is not meant to be a complete list, nor do we imply that these selected journalists were paid directly by Philip Morris, as the nature of this sort of information would not be in the public record. However, the majority of the articles mirror the scientific criticisms set forth by Philip Morris’ public relations strategy detailed by Burson Marsteller.

Many of the articles also quote tobacco industry consultants, widely discovered only after the public release of the tobacco companies’ corporate records, such as Gary Huber at the University of Texas Health Science Center, Gio Batta Gori, former director of the National Cancer Institute, Alvan Feinstein of Yale University [19,48], and Allan Gross of the Medical University of South Carolina [49]. Industry consultants such as these were part of a larger worldwide scientific consultant program created and managed by external lawyers to promote the industry’s position on ETS that the adverse health consequences associated with ETS exposure were questionable [15]. In addition to media and litigation support, consultants were used to gain political influence, organize, and attend scientific conferences, create indoor air technical groups, and carry out scientific research that was backed by the tobacco industry [15].

The work of Gary Huber is of particular interest as it was well cited by other journalists and eventually became part of two tobacco industry advertising campaigns. R.J. Reynolds used a Sullum Op-Ed piece published in the Wall Street Journal entitled, “Smoke & Mirrors: EPA Wages War on Cigarettes” [50] in its extensive advertising in which the company paid Sullum US$5000 for reprint rights [51]. Handwritten marginalia on a letter from Hines to Philip Morris indicates that the Wall Street Journal/Sullum article was one of the “favorable” publications that Hines and Philip Morris were responsible for getting in the press [52]. Sullum also cited Huber’s work for the industry in an article entitled, “Passive Reporting on Passive Smoking” appearing in Forbes MediaCritic in June 1994 [53]. A document found in the files of Philip Morris executive Tony Andrade illuminates Philip Morris’ role in this article that would be the eventual advertising campaign for the company.

“Tom Borelli [director of science and environmental policy for Philip Morris] has put a good deal of time into developing not only a relationship with the author, Jacob Sullum, but also into developing some of the articles Sullum quotes in the [Forbes MediaCritic] piece” [54].

Philip Morris reprinted Sullum’s article in a series of five full-page ads in several newspapers, including The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, New York Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Richmond Times-Dispatch, Louisville Courier, and Charlotte Observer [55]. A Philip Morris communication plan reported that “the ad series would create an ‘event’ and allow us to ‘merchandise’ the story through news coverage” [56].

An excerpt from Sullum’s Forbes MediaCritic article was additionally exploited in a 1995 Philip Morris advertising campaign entitled, “Where We Stand,” which highlighted the company’s public positions on industry issues such as restricting youth access to cigarettes, the infringement of individual rights, and questioning of the harmful health effects of secondhand smoke. The ads were to initially run 6 months in the most widely circulated national and weekly newspapers and magazines, as well as in ethnic newspapers and government trade publications [57–59].

Brochures sent to respondents of the ads included the following from Sullum’s story:

“Forbes MediaCritic reported that ‘almost without exception, the coverage [of the EPA report] has been one-sided, credulous and superficial. Even before the EPA released its report, journalists were quick to accept the claim that secondhand smoke kills… In so doing, not only have they exaggerated what is known about the effects of [secondhand smoke] but they have missed an important story about the corruption of science by the political crusade against smoking’” [60].
Philip Morris budgeted US$7.6 million for this advertising campaign in 1995 [58]. Although the publicly available tobacco industry documents show no further information of any payments made to Sullum, he was the managing editor of the libertarian publication Reason magazine put out by the Reason Foundation, which received thousands of Philip Morris’ corporate contribution dollars from 1991 to 1998 [61–65].

Given the sensitive nature of these relations, the specifics of how the journalists were courted are not clearly indicated in the publicly available documents reviewed here. The documents, however, do shed light on Hines’ efforts to have anti-ETS articles published in the monthly publication EPA Watch. The publishers of EPA Watch, The Countdown Foundation, also known as the American Policy Foundation, received US$50,000 from Philip Morris in 1995 [66]. Burson-Marsteller described the publication as being both the “media and messenger” [39] and stated, “we believe that there is tremendous currency in establishing Bonner Cohen [editor of EPA Watch] as a principal source for other journalists and as a direct voice on EPA matters” [39].

Cohen is quoted in the Sullum and Fumento articles published in the Wall Street Journal and Investor’s Business Daily, respectively, listed in Table 1.

National Journalism Center

In addition to placing favorable stories in the press through its media consultant, Philip Morris sought to expand its journalist network by funding the National Journalism Center (NJC) [67]. Still in operation today, the NJC was founded in 1977 by conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans [68] and has worked to “train budding journalists in free market political and economic principles” through internships, seminars, and job placement programs in conservative media outlets [69]. The NJC is a program of the conservative outreach group Young America’s Foundation [70].

A 1994 report entitled “Tobacco Strategy,” found in the files of Philip Morris’ vice president and general counsel Steve Parrish, stated the following of NJC:

“As a direct result of our support we have been able to work with alumni of this program … about 15 years worth of journalists at print and visual media throughout the country … to get across our side of the story … which has resulted in numerous pieces consistent with our point of view” [71].

Several NJC graduates wrote articles criticizing the EPA, risk assessment methodology, the scientific rigor at EPA, and tobacco control in general (Table 2). At least one NJC graduate, Michael Fumento, was invited to speak at a Philip Morris-sponsored Latin American journalist conference in 1994 but for reasons unknown did not present his scheduled talk entitled “La Ciencia bajo Fuego (Science Under Fire)” [72,73].

NJC founder M. Stanton Evans also published the periodical Consumers’ Research, which ran articles criticizing the EPA’s risk assessment written by NJC alumni, such as John Merline, Michael Fumento, and Peter Spencer. Consumers’ Research also sponsored a 1991 symposium entitled, “Science and Regulation: What Are the Data Behind the Rulings” in which industry consultant Gary Huber presented a criticism of the draft EPA risk assessment at the Dirksen Senate Office Building [74]. Huber’s criticisms of the EPA report were also published in Consumers’ Research [75].

Philip Morris planned to “design innovative strategies to communicate [its] position on ETS through education programs targeting policy makers and the media” via the NJC [76]. Richard Hines asserted, “One successful approach we have employed is our work with the National Journalism Center … NJC conducts ongoing intern programs for college students and recent college graduates and also assists their graduates to obtain jobs in major media organization” [52].

As part of its seminar series for training journalists, Tom Borelli, director of science and environmental policy at Philip Morris, presented a speech entitled “Who’s Blowing Smoke: Political Science and Government Regulation” at the NJC’s Monday Club Luncheon, pushing the tobacco industry’s position that the EPA was unfairly evaluating the scientific evidence on the risks of ETS exposure [77]. This occurred 6 months after the first draft of the EPA risk assessment on ETS had been released in 1990. Recently produced internal documents show that “journalists seminars,” like those described in part here, were still being carried out as of September 2000 [78].

The European journalist intern programs

As the U.S. EPA released its risk assessment on secondhand smoke at the end of 1992, the cancer research arm of the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), was in the middle of the largest European epidemiological study on lung cancer and ETS to date [79]. Philip Morris communicated its concern that the IARC study would mirror EPA’s findings that ETS is carcinogenic and worried that worldwide public opinion would be swayed against the tobacco industry’s position that secondhand smoke exposure is not harmful in adults [16]. In response to the growing concern of smoking bans resulting from the EPA and IARC studies in the United States and Europe, respectively, Philip Morris headed a “sound science” campaign and enlisted public relations firms to create grass roots organizations to support its position on ETS [16,17]. After initial attempts to influence IARC’s budget and research priorities failed, British American Tobacco and Philip Morris collaboratively sought to discredit the agen-
Table 1
News publications from journalists in which Richard Hines was credited with developing for Philip Morris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and affiliation</th>
<th>Articles critical of EPA</th>
<th>Additional articles written by authors that are critical of tobacco control</th>
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cy’s findings by disputing the study’s scientific rigor via front groups and by promoting the tobacco industry’s own counter research [80]. This multifaceted approach was carried out while publicly concealing the companies’ role in the campaign [80].

Philip Morris again turned to consultant Richard Hines to replicate U.S. media efforts in Europe, such as those through the NJC, via European journalist internship programs. Hines told Philip Morris that European think tanks “serve as the link to identify journalists” that could be used to “sponsor journalist internship programs” [81]. Hines also recommended that the European journalist intern program should facilitate the “care and feeding” of trained journalists who would write articles supporting the industry’s position, a phrase used internally for paid scientific consultants [15].

“[I]n a manner similar to our approach in the U.S., Philip Morris should fund special programs by the Adam Smith and Krieble Institutes to conduct journalism programs. These would consist of intern programs and policy forums focusing on regulatory threats to industry and...
The Adam Smith and Krieble Institutes are conservative think tanks devoted to the promotion of free market ideals and the downsizing of regulatory government in the UK and the countries of the former Soviet Union, respectively. In 1992, Philip Morris’ senior vice president of corporate affairs and former chief of staff to Vice President Bush, Craig Fuller, reported to then Philip Morris CEO Mike Miles that he had met with the Adam Smith Institute, the UK-based conservative think tank mentioned by Hines:

“Met with the Adam Smith Institute to discuss preliminary plans for an International Journalism Center based on the model successfully employed by the PM-supported National Journalism Center in Washington. The Institute would conduct training for print and electronic journalists on free market principles that would be ideologically consistent with PM’s issues and interests” [67].

Documents reviewed relating to the Adam Smith Institute do not further elucidate the think tank’s involvement in journalism training programs in 1993. The Krieble Institute, however, conducted free market trainings throughout Eastern Europe for political and business leaders as a program of the Free Congress Foundation, which received US$150,000, US$500,000, and US$500,000 from Philip Morris in 1994, 1995, and 1996, respectively [82].

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Article(s)</th>
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<td>Will other vices be targeted? After tobacco score, lawyers might seek others. Investor’s Bus Dly 1998 (February 12);14:A1</td>
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<td>The data that went up in smoke. Investor’s Bus Dly 1998 (April);A1</td>
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<td>Fighting the tobacco wars. Insight Mag 1997 (June 16);13(22):8.</td>
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<td>See Table 1.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Fumento</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Fall 1985)</td>
<td>Junk science will clutter the courts again.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fellow at Competitive Enterprise Institute (1994)</td>
<td>Orange County Register 1995 (July 19);B8.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When common sense goes up in smoke.</td>
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<td>Steven Hayward</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Spring 1981)</td>
<td>The Sacramento Union 1993 (May 16).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Senior fellow, Center for Environmental Studies,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pacific Research Institute</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fellow at the Heritage Foundation</td>
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<td>Thomas Holt</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Summer 1984)</td>
<td>Consumer groups and trial lawyers: an unholy alliance.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Assistant editor of The Heritage Foundation</td>
<td>The ETS controversy. Organ Trends 1994 (September).</td>
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<td>Pests’ attacks on smoking threaten individual freedoms.</td>
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<td>Insight on the News 1993 (October 18);9(42):30.</td>
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<td>Environmental smoke screen. Wash Times 1993 (September 21).</td>
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<td>Pests with power: EPA should lighten up.</td>
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<td>Florence Morning News 1993 (August 15).</td>
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<td>Smoking in the bathroom? Pest class may get you.</td>
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<td>Post Register 1993 (August 10).</td>
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<td>John Merline</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Fall 1984)</td>
<td>EPA’s case of missing data.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Washington Bureau Chief of</td>
<td>Investigator’s Bus Dly 1997 (February 21).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Investigator’s Business Daily</td>
<td>Experts question science behind health and safety regulations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competitive Enterprise Institute</td>
<td>PR Newswire 1991 (May 21).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dan Murphy</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Fall 1988)</td>
<td>Passive smoking: how great a hazard?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>Science behind recent regulations questioned.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Director Citizens for a Sound Economy</td>
<td>Consumer’s Research 1991 (July);74(7).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sean Paige</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Spring 1988)</td>
<td>Fudging the science government style:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fellow at Competitive Enterprise Institute</td>
<td>Antismoking crusade relies on questionable data.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Competitive Enterprise Institute Editorial Director</td>
<td>Investigator’s Bus Dly 1994 (June 14).</td>
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<td>Peter Spencer</td>
<td>NJC graduate (Spring 1985)</td>
<td>Diverting federal cancer funds.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Editor Consumer’s Research</td>
<td>Guesswork continues: health and nutrition regulatory actions;</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>calling all consumers. Consumers’ Research 1998 (February);81(2):43.</td>
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<td>Backtracking at EPA. Facts catch up with ‘political’ science.</td>
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<td>Consumers’ Research 1993 (May);76(5):10.</td>
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Table 3
Journalists or columnists affiliated with think tanks receiving funding from Philip Morris who also wrote articles criticizing EPA and tobacco control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journalist</th>
<th>Think tank</th>
<th>Article(s)</th>
<th>Financial support (US$)</th>
<th>Year of support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lance Izumi</td>
<td>Claremont Institute</td>
<td>No-smoking bill example of government ‘nannyism’. Sacramento Sunday Union 1993 (March 28).</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although Hines provided Philip Morris with a list of 65 recommended European think tanks [83], little was found in the documents on further communication between the groups. The majority of the think tank’s Web sites are in a foreign language, further inhibiting researching their mission. Thirty-five of the suggested 65 (54%) think tanks had “ties to the Heritage Foundation,” a think tank heavily supported by Philip Morris. Similar to cultivating media relationships to safeguard European markets against possible smoking regulations, British American Tobacco and Philip Morris also created media seminars and courted journalists in their Latin American market in the early 1990s [73,84].

Journalists connected with U.S. think tanks

“[A] number of the strongest criticisms of the ETS science and the EPA report specifically have come from U.S. think tanks and policy groups,” stated Philip Morris’ director of international regulatory affairs, Matt Winokur [85]. In 1995, more than 50 think tanks were supported by Philip Morris, which budgeted more than US$3.5 million for this purpose [66]. Speaking of supporting media relations via third parties, Philip Morris’ manager of industry affairs Roy Marden stated that Philip Morris would “take[ ] special precautions to ensure that [its] carefully cultivated alliances are protected and used in the appropriate manner” [86].

Several journalists associated with think tanks supported by Philip Morris wrote articles critical of the EPA. Columnist Lance Izumi, then with the Claremont Institute, wrote a column in March of 1993 criticizing the EPA’s risk assessment scientific procedures [87]. In 1994, the Claremont Institute was included in a US$500,000 Philip Morris budget to “develop and promote accommodation in restaurants” [88] and was the recipient of a US$25,000 Philip Morris grant in 1995 [89]. Izumi went on to be a senior fellow in California Studies at the conservative think tank, Pacific Research Institute (PRI), in 1998. PRI was also an organizational recipient of US$25,000 in 1991 and US$55,000 in 1995 from Philip Morris and its board of directors included Philip Morris’ manager of industry affairs Roy Marden [86,90,91]. Columnist and author of several “ETV bashing” works, Steven Hayward was also the director of research at PRI in 1993. In addition, the Alexis de Tocqueville Institute published an article entitled “Science, Economics, and Environmental Policy: A Critical Examination,” criticizing the EPA’s scientific methods due to its “zeal to abolish smoking” [19]. Documents show that in 1995 Philip Morris gave this institute US$75,000 [89]. A list of journalists who wrote articles criticizing EPA, the think tanks in which they are associated, and the amount of known financial contributions to the think tanks from Philip Morris is shown in Table 3.

The tobacco company’s corporate documents and other public documents reviewed here do not reveal the extent to which Philip Morris or tobacco industry representatives continue to use the NJC or U.S.- and European-based think tanks to criticize public health efforts and push its messages on antiregulation. We are led to assume that, as in other areas, the industry continues to use strategies that work and retools or abandons strategies that do not work [84]. As Philip Morris gleaned at least 15 year’s worth of “favorable” media stories, there is no reason to think that this successful strategy was abandoned. Philip Morris’ apparent success in developing a network of sympathetic journalists is an extraordinary large investment and one that appears to be continually productive for the company given numerous articles critical of tobacco control authored by the journalists who enabled the company to get its messages in the print media.

Discussion

This is the first report from the tobacco industry’s internal corporate documents to show the manner in which the tobacco industry has influenced the print media on the issue of the health effects of secondhand smoke. Though in keeping with the tobacco industry’s strategies to thwart the truth about the health consequences of smoking, this report provides rather dramatic evidence of the techniques the industry used to cultivate media articles to make sure its messages were heard. In addition to influencing individual journalistic coverage of the EPA through political and media consultant Richard Hines, Philip Morris supported a school of journalism to ensure that favorable stories were reported in the press. Individual journalists associated with Philip Morris supported think tanks also extensively criticized the EPA and its risk assessment on ETS. Articles stemming from Philip Morris’ campaign through NJC and the U.S. think tanks ranged from criticizing the scientific merit of the risk assessments to political corruption at EPA and the threat of a “nanny” state unduly protecting the health of its citizens. Unfortunately, this is only part of the story. The gaps may never be filled, as thousands of documents remain privileged and countless others have been destroyed or concealed for public scrutiny [92].

Findings from the internal tobacco industry documents have also shed light on previous observations on media coverage of secondhand smoke issues. Such observations include that as scientific research on ETS increased from 1981 to 1994, print media coverage of research on secondhand smoke concluded that research on ETS was “controversial” [13]. In addition, representatives of the tobacco industry were quoted significantly more frequently in newspapers than in magazines [13]. Findings such as these support Philip Morris’ corporate document evidence on generated messages through conservative think tanks pushing free market and antigovernment ideology. An analysis of major U.S newspaper coverage of ETS issues showed that moral facts, such as individual liberties versus public health protection, were often more important than scientific facts for journalists reporting on this topic [93]. This finding...
is in direct conflict with the Sullum Forbes MediaCritic article turned Philip Morris advertisement asserting that journalists readily accepted the scientific validity of the EPA report rather than scrutinizing “the political crusade against smoking.” Finally, a strong association between a magazine’s revenue gained from cigarette advertisements and the probability that it would not include articles covering the health consequences of tobacco use has also been well established [94].

The literature on how news is generated (constructed) shows the considerable influence of public relations practice even in routine situations [95–97]. Much of what is news is influenced by news releases, staged events, and other efforts provided by public relations practitioners. In many ways, the efforts of Philip Morris documented here are standard in public relations and their influence is not unexpected. At the same time, very few other public relations campaigns involve a product that kills over 440,000 Americans [98] each year, and therefore the efforts by Philip Morris in this case are worthy of review. The work of Philip Morris in influencing journalists may have been at odds with what professional associations in public relations consider to be appropriate behavior. Additionally, the activities of the journalists themselves seem suspect, given the standards set by professional journalistic associations to govern journalistic actions. Finally, the subject matter—the accurate reporting of scientific findings about health, and, in this case, a most serious illness such as cancer—is so important as to require particularly careful journalistic scrutiny.

At a minimum, proper behavior, according to the Code of Professional Standards of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) should ensure that members “disseminate accurate information and promptly correct any erroneous communication for which they may be responsible” [99]. It is not possible to know, given the documents at hand, exactly how Philip Morris agents represented themselves and the information they released. The behavior of the journalists who were “developed” by Philip Morris’ efforts also raise questions, given the Statement of Principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), the Code of Ethics of the Associated Press Managing Editors (APME), and the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) [100]. Members must “disclose unavoidable conflicts.”

That the coverage of the link between secondhand smoke and adverse health effects is crucial to society is obvious. Journalists presented here should have exercised particular effort to properly assess the “controversy” and to sort out the best scientific evidence on this difficult and important topic for their readers. Perhaps the clearest standard for media coverage is that the information used in reporting about the science surrounding the linkages between secondhand smoke and adverse health effects should have been presented to the media audiences in a fair and unbiased way. Given that the science is never fully unambiguous, different positions are not surprising. The journalists should have labeled the sources of the information, particularly when citing industry consultants conducting counter research, and examined and explored the biases of those releasing it. What they knew about the link between Philip Morris and its agents and the information they used in their reports should have been part of the story. Unfortunately, what we report here is that even journalists can fall victim to well-orchestrated and presented public relations efforts regardless of their scientific validity. It is not clear how the various professional media organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communications, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the Associated Press managing editors, or the Society of Professional Journalists oversee the ethical conduct of their members. Certainly, on the topic of the health effects of secondhand smoke, more scrutiny is warranted from these organizations for articles written by their members lest the public be misinformed and ill served.

Philip Morris’ influence of journalistic coverage of EPA bears striking resemblance to the pervasive nature of the tobacco industry’s efforts to influence worldwide public opinion on ETS through its Washington, DC, law firm, Covington & Burling’s, lawyer-run ETS Consultants Program [2,5,15,17,80]. Industry-hired scientists and their orchestrated opinions were used in the media to safeguard the industry against international threats of smoking restrictions and to promote a scientific backdrop supporting the industry’s position on ETS that differed from regulatory agencies and published research worldwide [2].

Our findings of journalistic influence make it possible for local, national, and international public health practitioners and regulators to rebut claims by the industry of their interest in the science as their interest clearly resides elsewhere. For policymakers and the local health practitioner who is trying to promote clean indoor air policies, our findings can help fight for clean indoor air policies, as they expose the industry efforts at manufacturing its public relations messages through a selected network of journalists. More document research is needed in this area, particularly the tobacco company’s influence of journalists in developing countries as the issue of adverse health effects of secondhand smoke has increased substantially in these regions over the last decade. These regions are also the most lucrative markets for the transnational cigarette manufacturers such as Philip Morris and British American Tobacco.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Laine Bergeson for her document and Internet research, Pat Erwin and Nadine Leavell for their library research support, and Ann B.
Peterson and Rhonda Baumberger for their help with the manuscript preparation. This work was supported in part by NIH grant R01 CA90791: “Tobacco Industry Documents on ETS—The Next Front.”

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