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Editorials

Upgrading the academic respectability of advocacy studies

Tobacco Control seems certain to become home to many important research papers on the effects of policies and interventions, ranging from the most comprehensive of national approaches to the most humble local initiative. Doubtless also, we will see the publication of further expert consensus statements and clarion calls by international leaders and agencies concerning priorities for implementation and research. These will increasingly be informed by a burgeoning corpus of research findings that will continue to adjust the contours of a battle plan that is now well known: price policies, total advertising bans, extension of smoke-free areas, large scale public information campaigns and school programmes, restrictions on youth access to tobacco, and policies on packaging, labelling, and tar-nicotine yields.

But this journal wants to attract a quite different sort of paper as well. We hope to receive papers that both research and critically analyse the processes that have lead to the passage of significant tobacco control policies. Post-mortems on significant failures will also be instructive provided that we remember that the tobacco industry will be numbered among our most diligent and eager to learn readers. Every student of public health learns early of John Snow's removing the handle from the Broad Street water pump and thereby stemming London's cholera epidemic of the 1850s.[1] Snow's action is remembered for his epidemiological reasoning and its dramatic consequences more than for the tactics he used or the opposition he faced in disengaging the pump. Yet without his action the epidemiology would have mattered little and cholera would have continued to spread.

Though the point of this historical analogy may seem obvious, it remains curious that academic interest in *how* the tobacco control equivalents of Snow's actions succeed or fail in different social and political contexts tends to be marginalised as "soft" and somehow unworthy of the name "research." The main reasons for this seem to lie in the slippery and uncontrollable nature of the subject and in the awkwardness of the questions it intrinsically poses for the positivist research traditions that have so far dominated research into tobacco control. Such questions, though, are real and can have profound consequences for progress in implementing tobacco control policies.

Consider the case, for example, of a government's passing legislation to ban tobacco advertising. Conclusions from a healthy and growing body of tobacco advertising research in the econometric,[2] epidemiological,[3] attitudinal,[4] and even semiotic[5] traditions are likely to have been fed to the politicians involved in the form of reports, letters, resolutions of support, and so on. Public opinion polls are likely to have been conducted showing support for the proposed government action. Such studies provide currency to be used (and abused[6]) by the parties to the debate in their efforts to argue their case. The role of the researcher here is to have addressed questions perceived to be critical to the evaluation of tobacco advertising and the likely consequences of its removal, the assumption being that government policy will be research driven.

Yet only the most naive would pretend that political decisions are always or even mostly determined in a way analogous to the way a piece of research might be scrutinised through a peer review process. The canons of scientific method allow research conclusions to be assessed against more or less agreed on standards. By contrast, a political decision to ban tobacco advertising (or to implement any arm of a comprehensive control policy) may depend only peripherally on the quality and consistency of the evidence presented in its favour. Though such evidence is likely to be necessary for success in placing tobacco control proposals on the political agenda, it is only rarely sufficient. The following factors are invariably also important yet remain in a research purdah in the mainstream literature.

The power of the tobacco industry

Any tobacco control policy or initiative that is not aggressively opposed by the tobacco industry will almost certainly be of little consequence to tobacco control objectives. Thus any policy worth pursuing will be characterised by both overt and covert opposition that varies in strength throughout the world. The real or perceived power of the industry exemplified through direct or indirect financial support to politicians and parties,[7] its ability to marshall equally powerful supportive constituencies in associated industries (advertising, agriculture, packaging, general retailing and small business, sport and culture), and its rating in national terms as an economically important industry may be critical to the preparedness of governments or individual politicians to support tobacco control initiatives.

Research examining the relation between such power and policy successes and failures is in its infancy. Outstanding questions include: has the power of the industry (or relative lack of it) been relevant in countries that have successfully introduced, say, advertising bans? Have tactics and strategies been used that have reduced or cancelled out aspects of the industry's power in such countries? Is the effect of the industry's power reduced if it is obliged to fight political battles on several fronts simultaneously? Are there manifestations of power which need to be nullified as preconditions to particular tobacco policies being taken seriously by politicians? For example, does tobacco sponsorship need to be replaced by govern-

ment or alternative sponsorship before wholesale tobacco advertising bans will be seriously considered?

The framing of debate

There is no "objective reality" that any platform of tobacco policy can be said to be really about. Reality is always a socially constructed notion[8]; the emphasis or framing[9,10] that is placed around particular events or issues that seeks to define what an issue is really about will represent but one of many competing meanings that jostle for public dominance. While health interests may frame the meaning of a bill to ban tobacco advertising in terms of the protection of children or the prevention of disease and addiction, the tobacco industry may choose to describe the bill in terms of the encroachment of the nanny state, paternalism, and other negative metaphors.[11] Some questions here include: how best can these different framings be assessed in terms of their reception by politicians and others who make decisions about policies? Are there important differences in the framings favoured by those working in tobacco control, and those which hold most public and political appeal? Do methods exist that are sufficiently sensitive to be reliably used in pretesting different framings used in advocacy? What examples are there where dominant framings which run against the interests of tobacco control appear to have been successfully reversed? Are there principles that characterise such reversals and that can be applied in practical ways in future debates?

In this issue Houston *et al* describe how strategically conducted and publicised research, cognisant of the news values of the popular press and of the need to anchor results to comparisons meaningful to the public, was able to generate widespread and productive news coverage on the RJ Reynolds Old Joe Camel advertising campaign (p 118).[12] Their study is an exemplary case of the way a simple piece of research can inspire news coverage and commentary that reframes an issue hitherto largely defined by the tobacco advertising dollar. Other of this genre include a survey showing that South Australian children were the main purchasers of Philip Morris's newly launched packets of 15 cigarettes[13] and an inspirational community survey in Western Australia which showed that the public rated the credibility of tobacco executives beneath that of the traditional low water mark, used car dealers (M Daube, personal communication.)

Pervasiveness of free market economic policy

The dominant international political and economic philosophy of the late twentieth century is free marketing. Milton Friedman, one of the apostles of contemporary economic culture, once wrote, "Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their shareholders as possible."[14] Most supply-side policies in tobacco control appear at least superficially to derive from a different set of values. Where does this apparent disjunction leave political arguments to restrict the tobacco industry? To what extent have arguments about tobacco taken on any exceptional status within contexts of overall free marketing government economic policies? What framings and arguments have enabled this to happen?

Editorial coverage and conflict of interests

The mass media are essential to efforts to foment a social and political climate that is antipathetic towards smoking and encouraging of its control. Evidence continues to accumulate on the way that acceptance of tobacco advertising by mass media is associated with reduced and sanitised coverage of tobacco and health and tobacco control issues.[15–17] What effect has publicity about this relationship had on media owners and editorial staff, political decision makers, and public opinion? What is known about the editorial processes involved in such circumstances? Does "censorship" of anti-smoking news and comment occur latently or overtly, and what implications does this hold for advocates? Can such censorship, in particular media outlets, be constructively sold as news value to others with more sympathetic editorial policies?

Public opinion

Tobacco control is one issue among many thousands about which citizens and politicians are invited to form opinions and to take actions. Little is understood about the relation between changing public opinion and political action over tobacco. Has tobacco control ever been a significant political issue, or is it generally perceived as low down among the electorate's concerns? How do politicians decide that single issues are worthy of the political spotlight? What do we know about the extent to which tobacco control issues are voiced to politicians by their electoral constituents? Are such constituents seen as fringe or marginal by politicians? Is there a critical mass of voters that needs to be active before a politician senses that an issue needs to be taken seriously?

Political leadership

Key people within governments are often strongly identified with the passage of tobacco control legislation. Little has been written other than the expected valedictory praise for such people. In circumstances where key people have been capable of influencing the political process concerning tobacco – for example, Madam Sadat in Egypt and Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore – what occurred to inspire their patronage? Are there generalisable lessons in such cases?

Academic upgrading

The knowledge that exists about these and many similar questions enjoys a paradoxical position in the tobacco control field. Though there are few who would not acknowledge the importance of such questions, there are just as few who have devoted themselves to anything like a systematic approach to addressing them. The status of most of what is considered "good practice" in successful tobacco control advocacy remains little more than oral history. When these histories are associated with particularly analytical and prolific individuals such as Stan Glantz in California,[18] Kjell Bjartveit in Norway, Judith Mackay in Hong Kong, and the Sweanor-Mahood partnership in Canada, the lessons involved can receive wide circulation. But in far many more cases, the passage of significant events are reported mostly in terms of the public relations glory of their simply having happened.

As someone who moves regularly between the two worlds of academic research and public health advocacy, I can attest that there is little incentive to try to combine the two in anything but a fleeting fashion. A recent editorial on the research agenda for "applied smoking research" failed to even allude to these sort of questions when calling for the strengthening and broadening of research.[19] The major public health funding agencies in my own country have no categories on their application forms remotely suggesting

that these issues might ever be addressed in legitimate, fundable research.

As yet there is very little that could be called a political *science* of tobacco control advocacy. Yet there is a great deal of acknowledged political *artistry* in this field, on both sides of the trenches. What are we to make of the shared intuition often acknowledged within our field about particular strategies being more or less valuable in advancing the political fortunes of tobacco control (or retarding them in the case of successes by the industry)? Or of particular individuals being "good" at advocacy? What are the precise questions that need to be asked about this more or less intuitive understanding of good practice if we wish to pass forward lessons from past events?

Some of the methods that will be useful in illuminating these processes seem likely to be quite foreign to many who work in tobacco control and its most usual adjunct or host disciplines. Discourse analysis,[20] depth interviews,[21] focus groups,[22-3] and the qualitative methods of ethnography are examples of disciplines and methods that might be used to make sense of the complex courses of events that characterise this field. We look forward to receiving papers that explore some of these challenging questions that lie at the very heart of tobacco *control*.

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