Print media coverage of California’s smokefree bar law

Sheryl Magzamen, Annemarie Charlesworth, Stanton A Glantz

Abstract

Objective—To assess the print media coverage of California’s smokefree bar law in the state of California.

Design—Content analysis of newspaper, trade journal, and magazine items.

Subjects—Items regarding the smokefree bar law published seven months before and one year following the implementation of the smokefree bar law (June 1997 to December 1998). Items consisted of news articles (n = 446), opinion editorials (n = 31), editorials (n = 104), letters to the editor (n = 240), and cartoons (n = 10).

Main outcome measures—Number and timing of publication of items, presence of tobacco industry arguments or public health arguments regarding law, positive, negative, and neutral views of opinion items published.

Results—53% of items published concerning the smokefree bar law were news articles, 47% were opinion items. 45% of items regarding the smokefree bar law were published during the first month of implementation. The tobacco industry dominated coverage in most categories (economics, choice, enforcement, ventilation, legislation, individual quotes), except for categories public health used the most frequently (government role, tactics, organisational quotes). Anti-law editorials and letters to the editor were published more than pro-law editorials and letters. Region of the state, paper size, presence of local clean indoor air legislation, and voting on tobacco related ballot initiatives did not have an impact on the presence of opinion items.

Conclusions—The tobacco industry succeeded in obtaining more coverage of the smokefree bar law, both in news items and opinion items. The tobacco industry used historical arguments of restricting freedom of choice and economic ramifications in fighting the smokefree bar law, while public health groups focused on the worker protection issue, and exposed tobacco industry tactics. Despite the skewed coverage, public health groups obtained adequate attention to their arguments to keep the law in effect. (Tobacco Control 2001;10:154–160)

Keywords: content analysis; politics; passive smoking; smokefree bar law; California
## Table 1 Smokefree bar law media framing categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Tobacco industry framing categories</th>
<th>Health groups frame</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Economic</strong></td>
<td>Hurt business</td>
<td>No negative effects/good for business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Decreasing revenues and tips</td>
<td>Usual adjustment period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforcement</td>
<td>Inconsistent/no enforcement</td>
<td>Non-smokers’ rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government role</td>
<td>Need to create state standards</td>
<td>Public supports the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics</td>
<td>Bills to repeal or delay law</td>
<td>Legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil disobedience</td>
<td>Purposefully disobeying law</td>
<td>通风</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace hazards</td>
<td>Employees should accept workplace hazards</td>
<td>Employees should not be subject to workplace hazards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We coded the publications by geographic area codes of the city of publication to give us six regions using pre-1 November 1997 telephone area codes of the city of publication to give us six regions.

Items that appeared in different editions of a single newspaper (for example, the San Diego County *North County Times* publishes six local versions of the paper) were counted as one item. When the copy provided by the clipping service was incomplete, we contacted the publisher, and searched the microfilm archives at the University California, Berkeley, and the internet for the full item. There were only four instances in which we failed to find the full item; these were excluded from our analysis.

We used previous research on the political battle over the smokefree bar law to identify the major arguments for and against the law, together with previous work by Menashe and Siegel and by Cardador and colleagues to design a coding scheme to classify arguments for and against the law (table 1). We analysed each item for the presence of these arguments, and counted the amount of distinct arguments that appeared in each item, allowing us to quantify the frequency of the appearance of these arguments for all of the items in the analysis. If an argument was present more than once in an item, it received only one “present” code. Opinion items were additionally scored as “pro-law”, “anti-law”, or “neutral”. We did not score news articles in this manner.

Aside from the themes, we also included categories for groups or individuals cited in the items. The anti-law organisational quotes category included cigarette manufacturers, the National Smokers Alliance, and restaurant/bar associations. Anti-law individual quotes included bar patrons, employees, employers, politicians, and enforcement officials. The pro-law organisational quotes category included voluntary health organisations, state and local health departments, local enforcement agencies, academic institutions, and unions. The pro-law individual quotes category included patrons, employees, employers, and politicians supporting the law.

The items were coded by two individuals (SM and AMC). To test for consistency, both coders evaluated the same 47 items, selected using a table of random digits. The median agreement (both raters coding a category present or both coding it absent) for the 22 categories between the two raters was 93% (range 81–100%; interquartile range 84–94%). The median value of $\kappa$ was 0.74 (range 0.47–1.00; interquartile range 0.63–0.84), excluding three categories in which $\kappa$ was 0 because of a very small number (<5) of positive results. (The per cent agreement for these three categories was 92%, 92%, and 92%).

We wanted to examine whether items that appeared in newspapers were related to the tobacco control sentiment of the communities and regions that they served. We utilised the circulation of the newspaper to approximate the exposure to an argument published in an opinion item, and coded the newspapers by city of publication. We were then able to measure the tobacco control sentiment of each city.
Table 2  Distribution of opinion items on California’s smokefree bar law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of item</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editorial</td>
<td>41 (39%)</td>
<td>49 (47%)</td>
<td>14 (14%)</td>
<td>104 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion editorial</td>
<td>17 (55%)</td>
<td>13 (42%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>31 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter to the editor</td>
<td>96 (41%)</td>
<td>122 (51%)</td>
<td>22 (9%)</td>
<td>240 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartoon</td>
<td>10 (0.1%)</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>20 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>154 (41%)</td>
<td>181 (49%)</td>
<td>37 (10%)</td>
<td>375 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

by two proxies: presence of a local clean indoor air law, and voting records on a state wide proposition concerning clean indoor air regulations.

To assess the existence of a local clean indoor air law before implementation of the state smokefree bar law was associated with coverage of the issue, we examined opinion items (editorials, letters to the editor, and op-eds) published in a specific locality as a function of whether the locality had implemented a general clean indoor air law or a smokefree restaurant law as of 1 January 1995, (when the state Smokefree Workplace Law, was implemented) using the Americans for Nonsmokers’ Rights local ordinance database. (Twenty communities had smokefree bar laws in place as of that date, but this number was too small to support meaningful analysis of any possible effect on media coverage of the debate over the state law.) We did a similar analysis based on how the locality voted three years earlier on proposition 188, a 1994 initiative sponsored by Philip Morris to repeal the smokefree bar law and pre-empt all local tobacco control ordinances in California.2 3 (The vote on proposition 188 provided a direct measure of public sentiment on the issues raised later in the public debate over the implementation of the smokefree bar law.) Public health advocates defeated proposition 188 in all counties in California. We ranked the 112 localities that had opinion items present in its newspapers by margin of defeat, then divided the localities into quartiles (measured by margin of defeat of proposition 188) to assess if there was an association between the tobacco control sentiment and arguments subsequently presented in local newspapers.

All results were tabulated using SPSS 8.0. To assess the number of media impressions (item frequency times publication circulation) for each item, we multiplied the circulation of each publication times the frequency of items using the “weight” function in SPSS. Since we consider the collection of items a census of the population rather than a sample, we did not compute any hypothesis tests or p values.

Results

We collected and classified 831 unique items (news articles, editorials, letters to the editor, op-eds, and cartoons) covering the smokefree bar law: 93% appeared in daily newspapers, 4% in weekly papers, and 3% in monthly publications; 14% of the items appeared in the Sunday newspaper, which is the highest readership day for newspapers, about 1/7 of all the items; 3% of the items appeared in trade or professional journals; 19% of the news articles appeared on the front page, the most frequently read page of the newspaper, indicating that the issue of smokefree bars was considered an important topic.

CLASSIFICATION OF ITEMS

News articles constituted the largest category of items (446/831, 54%). Opinion items included 104 editorials (13%), 31 op-eds (4%), 240 letters to the editor (29%), and 10 cartoons (0.1%). Most editorials and letters to the editor opposed the law, whereas op-eds tended to support the law (table 2).

TIMING

Appearance of items about the smokefree bar law was minimal throughout 1997, slightly increased in December 1998, the month before implementation, and reached a peak in January 1998, the first month of implementation (fig 1), when 41% of all items written about the law appeared. Presence of items about the law remained high for the following two months, and dropped precipitously by April 1998. Coverage continued to decrease throughout the year until December 1998, when there was a slight increase, reflecting stories reviewing the first year that the law was in force.


The timing of the arguments in the individual categories (table 1) followed the general pattern of frequency of all items in fig 1 except in two cases. The tobacco industry’s arguments that the law would be difficult or impossible to enforce peaked in December 1997, before the law went into effect, whereas general coverage peaked in January 1998, the month the law went into effect. The public health arguments criticising legislators for attempting to repeal the law reached its highest point in February 1998, after the California assembly voted to repeal the law, and before
Print coverage of California’s smokefree bar law

ARGUMENTS
Figure 2 shows the number of media impressions that presented public health or tobacco industry arguments. The argument used most frequently by the tobacco industry was choice (freedom of choice, smokers rights, adult decision), followed by economics (bar law would hurt business), and enforcement (law was difficult to enforce). The argument used least often by tobacco industry was attacks on academic studies (studies about secondhand smoke, economics, or the bodies that performed these studies).

The arguments used most frequently by the public health groups differed from the tobacco industry’s most frequent arguments. The most frequent public health argument was government role (government needs to protect workers from secondhand smoke). The second most used argument was attacking the tobacco industry’s credibility (linking industry activity opposing the smokefree bar law to the industry’s general pattern of disinformation). The third category of arguments by public health groups was choice (non-smokers rights and the majority of Californians supporting the smokefree bar law). Public health groups used the ventilation argument the least (countering tobacco industry claims that ventilation systems installed in bars would be adequate to protect workers from secondhand smoke).

BALANCE OF COVERAGE
Figure 2 also shows the balance of coverage. The tobacco industry perspective was represented more heavily in six of the nine categories (economics, choice/rights, enforcement, legislation, ventilation, and individual quotes). The public health perspective only lead the coverage in three categories (government role, and attacking credibility of the opposition, and organizational quotes).

REPRESENTATIVE VOICES
Public health dominated the organisational quotes. Organisational quotes were from voluntary organisations, academics and researchers, the state Department of Health Services, local health coalitions, departments of public health, and enforcement agencies. Tobacco industry organisations represented were infrequently cigarette manufacturers, but were more often bar/tavern alliances (both directly affiliated with the tobacco industry and not directly affiliated), the National Smokers’ Alliance, and enforcement agencies that were not intending to enforce the law.

Individual quotes were skewed towards repealing the law. In 60% of the news articles that had individual quotes present, there were only quotes from individuals critical of the law; 31% of the news articles with individual quotes had quotes from both a pro-law, and a pro-repeal perspective, while only 9% of the news articles with quotes had quotes from only a pro-law perspective.

IMPACT OF NEWSPAPER SIZE
We assessed newspaper size using the Newspaper Association of America’s circulation categories: under 50 000, 50 001–100 000, 100 001–250 000, and over 250 000. Six newspapers (Los Angeles Times, San Diego Union-Tribune, Orange County Register, San Jose Mercury-News, San Francisco Chronicle, Sacramento Bee) in the six largest media markets (Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange County, San Jose, San Francisco, Sacramento) in the state had circulations exceeding 250 000.

The largest number of items appeared in the small papers (under 50 000 circulation) (311). However, on a per paper basis, the smaller papers had 2.5 smokefree bar law items per paper, while the large newspapers (over 250 000 circulation) had 16.2 smokefree bar law items per newspaper. The larger newspapers covered the debate over the smokefree bar law more intensively than the small newspapers.

There was not a consistent pattern in opinion articles with regards to newspaper size. All newspaper sizes had more anti-law editorials than pro-law editorials, except for large (100 001–250 000) newspapers (five pro-law, two anti-law editorials). The smallest (under 50 000 circulation) and largest (over 250 000 circulation) newspapers ran editorials about two to one against the law (32/55, 58% and 12/18, 66%, respectively).

In every newspaper size category, there were more letters to the editor published opposing the law (119) than supporting it (96). Midsize papers (50 000–100 000 circulation) had the greatest number of pro-law letters to the editor (29), but also the greatest number of anti-law letters to the editor (38).

PROXIES FOR TOBACCO CONTROL SENTIMENT
We wanted to assess whether the presence of an existing local tobacco control ordinance was related to opinions reflected in local print media coverage, measured by the number of media impressions (defined by the number of
opinion items in a paper, multiplied by the circulation of the paper for all papers published in the same locality) for each locality. We divided general workplace (not including restaurants) local clean indoor air laws into three categories: no law or only public/government places, which would constitute a weak law; law present, but not 100% smokefree, which meant there were exceptions to the law; and 100% smokefree, which is a strong law. Regardless of the presence or strength of the local clean indoor air law, there were more opinion items published against the law than for the law (fig 3A). The largest disparity was in localities with 100% smokefree workplace laws.

Local clean indoor air laws dealing with restaurants were divided into three categories: no law, in which restaurants can apply for an exemption, representing the middle ground, and smokefree laws with no exemptions (strong law). As with general clean indoor air laws, more opinion items were published opposing the state smokefree bar law than supporting it, independent of the presence and strength of an existing local smokefree restaurant law (fig 3B). Thus, the community support that presumably existed in order to pass the local clean indoor air law did not seem to affect media presentation of local laws on the state law.

We also assessed local tobacco control sentiment by examining the percentage of each locality voting against Proposition 188.21 We compared the number of pro-law, anti-law, and neutral media impressions from publication of letters to the editor and editorials on the smokefree bar law to the quartile of the localities’ vote against Proposition 188 (with higher quartiles indicating stronger anti-tobacco sentiment). There was no systematic pattern between the local vote and letters to the editor and op-eds (fig 4A) or editorials (fig 4B) on the smokefree bar law, with most published opinion items opposing the law. However, it was interesting to note that for the localities in the lowest quartile of voting against Proposition 188, only negative editorials were present in the newspapers that served those communities.

Discussion

Despite strong public support for the smokefree bar law as evidenced in several public opinion polls2 and the resounding defeat of Proposition 188 a few years earlier, the tobacco industry claims dominated the print media coverage of the smokefree bar law. Nevertheless, public health advocates were able to convey the purpose of the law and their messages sufficiently to keep the smokefree bar law intact.

The tobacco industry used its usual arguments2 that the implementation of the smokefree bar would not work, restricted smokers’ rights and freedom of choice, would have negative economic impacts on bars, and would not be enforceable. News articles used quotes from bartenders, bar owners, and individuals in bars to oppose the law. The tobacco industry also introduced a non-traditional category, called patron habits. Individuals were quoted as saying “Drinking and smoking just go together” and perpetuating the idea that it

![Figure 3](http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/) (A) Despite the local smokefree workplace laws present, communities with 100% smokefree workplace laws had more opinion items against the smokefree bar law than supporting the law. Communities with no law/public places law or a smokefree workplace law that was not 100% smokefree also had more opinion items against the law. (B) For restaurants, communities with 100% smokefree restaurant laws had the most opinion items, but again, there were more items against the law than pro-law. Communities with no laws or with exemptions followed a similar pattern.

![Figure 4](http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/) There was no systematic relation between community sentiment against the tobacco industry, as expressed in the vote against Proposition 188, and opinion items related to the smokefree bar law. (A) Communities in the 75th centile regarding percentage of the community voting against Proposition 188 in 1994 was the only group to have more pro-law letters to the editor as opposed to against law. (B) This pattern changed for editorials where only communities in the 99th centile had more editorials present in community papers that were pro-law rather than against law.

www.tobaccocontrol.com
Print coverage of California’s smokefree bar law
does not want public health forces to change
the accepted cultural norm. Coverage of the
smokefree bar law was dominated by tobacco
industry issues. In no argument category did
balanced coverage predominate.
To disseminate their message, the tobacco
industry used public relations firm Burson
Marsteller to create press releases for the
media and legislators, organise press
conferences featuring bar owners opposed to
the law, and disseminate information through
its National Smokers Alliance. Public health
groups did not have the extensive media
groups did not have the extensive media
groups did not have the extensive media
resources that the tobacco industry did to
erate coverage, but were often sought out by
newspapers for quotes and information, and
wrote op-eds and letters to the editor in
support of the smokefree bar law. While the
tobacco industry received more favourable
coverage overall, public health groups were
also a substantial presence in the public
debate.
Public health groups stuck to the message
that the purpose of the law was to protect the
health and safety of bar workers in California
and the need to provide bar employees the
same protection every other worker in the state
enjoyed. Public health groups were also able
to refute tobacco industry claims of economic
hardship and freedom of choice by utilising
public opinion surveys, published research,
both economic and scientific, as well as citing
the success of the state smokefree workplace
law in general workplaces and restaurants since
those provisions went in to force in 1995.
In addition, examining the frequency that
items appeared in newspapers regarding the
smokefree bar law, there was an immediate
decline in items published shortly after the law
was in effect, and the state legislature decided
to table a major repeal effort and uphold the
law. Although the tobacco industry claimed
that the smokefree bar law would cause undue
financial hardship to bars, be difficult to
enforce, and strip adults of their freedom of
choice, it seemed that there was a short adjust-
ment period to the new law, after which the
public accepted the change in the bar environ-
ment around the state.
Our study did not include advertisements
that appeared in the print media. The tobacco
industry publishes advertisements promoting
smoking and bar promotions and the tobacco
control groups published a series of opinion
leader advertisements in newspapers likely to
be read by opinion leaders (Sacramento Bee and
the New York Times Western Edition) that
called attention to the tobacco industry’s
ttempts to repeal the law and calling on members
of the legislature to uphold the law. These
advertisements may have an impact on the
public and legislative perception of the smoke-
free bar law.

Opinion pieces published in the newspapers
did not match public sentiment regarding
smokefree bar law. Polling by the state Depart-
ment of Health Service, the American Cancer
Society, and the Los Angeles Times22-27 all
reflected high public support for the law. The
disparity in this situation could be the result of
editorial bias, or simply reflect the view that it
was better “news” to report on people who
were unhappy about the new smokefree bar
regulations. In the future, the tobacco control
community can identify individual advocates
and proponents of these laws who can act as
media spokespersons to give the public the
impression that clean indoor air laws have
broad based public support.
One might think that a community organis-
ing around a previously passed local clean
indoor air law would increase acceptance of the
state law. This situation did not turn out to be
the case: There was not a relationship between
opinion items and previous experience with
clean indoor air ordinances, region of the state,
or voting on tobacco control ballot initiatives.
There are several plausible explanations for
this situation. First, the tobacco industry pub-
lic relations effort to mobilise opposition to the
smokefree bar law was the most visible aspect
of the opinion items that appeared in newspa-
pers around the state. Secondly, although pub-
lic opinion polling demonstrated that the pub-
lc supported the smokefree bar law, relatively
few people felt moved to write and express this
opinion. It is possible that health groups did

What this paper adds
While there have been several studies of
media coverage of debates before passage of
tobacco control legislation, no one has studied
the public debate after the law goes into
effect. This paper assesses California newspa-
paper coverage of the state smokefree bar
law during the seven months before, and
one year following, the implementation of
the law in January 1998. The analysis
considered the number of items, trends in
their timing, prevalence of different frames
in the items, and correlation between anti-
and pro-law frames and level of local
support for clean indoor air legislation.
While anti-law arguments predominated in
the media coverage, the level of pro-law
arguments was high enough to sustain pub-
lic and policy maker support for the law,
which remains in effect.
This is the first article that analyses news-
paper coverage of a tobacco control policy
following implementation of that policy in
order to provide feedback to public health
practitioners on how well the policy is being
supported in the media. California’s smoke-
free bar law is so progressive that its success
will likely determine the success of similar
efforts throughout the USA. If not success-
fully implemented (and especially if
overturned), the California experience
might deter other states from taking similar
action. In contrast, if successfully imple-
mented (and not overturned), the
California experience could provide strong
support for other states to adopt similar
policies. Understanding the way in which
the law’s implementation is covered in the
print media provides important lessons for
public health practitioners.
not invest the same resources in generating letters to the editor and editorials with the same vigour as the tobacco industry did in generating opinion pieces in opposition to the law. Finally, the public considered the issue of smokefree public places settled with the defeat of Proposition 188, and felt the law was secure.

Several of the larger newspapers in California have staff writers and reporters that have covered tobacco control issues for some time, particularly the California Tobacco Control Program, and so have reporters who have developed expertise in tobacco issues. Smaller newspapers often rely on wire services or the larger newspapers for national stories, and reporters are more likely concerned with community events or occurrences. It did not appear that there was a systematic difference between news or opinion coverage in the large newspapers (Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee, San Diego Union-Tribune, Orange County Register, San Jose Mercury-News, San Francisco Chronicle) who had reporters who regularly covered tobacco compared to the smaller local newspapers.

The tobacco industry’s public relations effort was successful in generating media coverage sympathetic to the tobacco industry’s position on the smokefree bar law. Nevertheless, public health advocates were able to achieve enough coverage to prevent the law from being weakened or repealed.

We thank Matthew LeVeque of Rogers and Associates and the Tobacco Control Section of the California Department of Health Services for providing the results of the clipping service and Caroline Fichtenberg for comments on the manuscript. This work was supported by National Cancer Institute Grant CA-61021.


22 American Cancer Society California Division. Smoke-free workplace law: public opinion poll. Walnut Creek, California: Charlton Research Company. 25 March 1999.