

AD WATCH

Re-evaluating gender and smoking in Thunderbirds 35 years on

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The rescreening of a cult children's puppet show made originally in the 1960s, showing the main characters smoking on occasion, raises questions over the appropriateness of such images for today's young viewers

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While watching an episode of the digitally remastered and re-released cult puppet series, *Thunderbirds*, I was shocked to see the patriarch of family, Jeff Tracy, smoking while at his desk. The attractive and powerful images of secret agent Lady Penelope drawing on her long black cigarette holder in the back of her pink Rolls Royce remained from my childhood, but I had not remembered other characters smoking. *Thunderbirds*, a children's science fiction series set in the year 2065, was originally screened in Britain in 1965 and 1966. The 32 episodes catalogue the exploits of International Rescue, "a secret organisation dedicated to the saving of anyone in mortal peril". Rescue operations are coordinated by Jeff Tracy from Tracy Island, supposedly in the Pacific Ocean, and carried out by his five sons, aided by London Agent, Lady Penelope, and family friends, Brains and Tin-tin. The original screenings proved phenomenally successful in Britain and Japan, but the relaunching of *Thunderbirds* in 2000/1 sees it reaching a much wider market worldwide through the satellite station, Cartoon Network.

As all the *Thunderbirds* characters are puppets, any instances of smoking demonstrate some level of effort and intent on the part of the programme makers. Presumably each instance was intended either as a reflection of the normality of smoking, or a device for conveying subtle social meanings. However, there have been dramatic changes in patterns of smoking. In the mid 1960s, when the programmes were made, smoking was at its height for women in the USA (34% in 1964)¹ and Britain (42% in 1972),² and more than half of men were smokers. By 2000/1, when *Thunderbirds* was relaunched, sex differences had all but disappeared (23% and 28% in the USA in 1993,¹ 26% and 28% in Britain in 1998/⁹² for women and men, respectively). The social profile of the smoker also changed: by the end of the 20th century smoking, in Britain at least, had increasingly become "a habit acquired and sustained by those [in] disadvantaged positions within the social hierarchy".³

In 1996, tobacco companies spent over \$4.2 billion promoting cigarettes, and the industry has the benefit of 80 years of experience in enticing

women in developed countries to smoke⁴ and a longer history for men. There is concern about a smoking epidemic in developing countries, especially among women.⁵ Children and young people have also been identified as "vulnerable potential targets", susceptible to the "use of imagery and positive association" and a "key group for tobacco marketers".⁶ Despite the general downward trend in smoking in the developed world, levels of smoking in adolescent girls in Britain rose (from 22% to 33%) between 1988 and 1996, a cause for concern as over 80% of adult smokers start smoking in their teens.⁷

As the tobacco industry "has long understood the value of product placement in movies" and the value of films and videos as a means "to circumvent the ban on cigarette advertising on television",⁸ it seemed of interest to examine the portrayals of smoking in this puppet series created in the 1960s when it was re-released in 2000/1 on terrestrial television in Britain and internationally via the Cartoon Network, with accompanying videos and merchandise, computer games, and a plethora of websites for fans.

DOCUMENTING LEVELS OF SMOKING IN THUNDERBIRDS

All 32 episodes of *Thunderbirds* were scrutinised by the author. Instances of smoking were recorded on a standardised proforma. Note was taken of the sex, assumed ethnicity, and class of smokers, their character status, and the context, type and manner of tobacco use portrayed. The visibility or otherwise of smoke from tobacco products, and any verbal references to smoking, were noted.

At least one instance of smoking was recorded in over 80% (26/32) of episodes. Some featured numerous smoking scenes (fig 1), sometimes of protracted duration with several characters smoking together. Smoking among the central characters, the Tracy family and their close associates, is generally associated with high status, high self esteem, social and sexual desirability, and pleasure and leisure. Lady Penelope's status as *Thunderbirds*' most notorious smoker is confirmed as she is seen smoking in 10 of the 17 (59%) episodes in which she appears. She alone is identified as a smoker in the opening credits of each episode, which show her with her trademark cigarette in holder prominently displayed.

Jeff, the American millionaire, ex-NASA astronaut, who is the lynchpin of International Rescue, is *Thunderbirds*' second most prolific smoker, and smokes in a quarter of episodes. The younger Tracy sons appear not to be smokers, maybe as a

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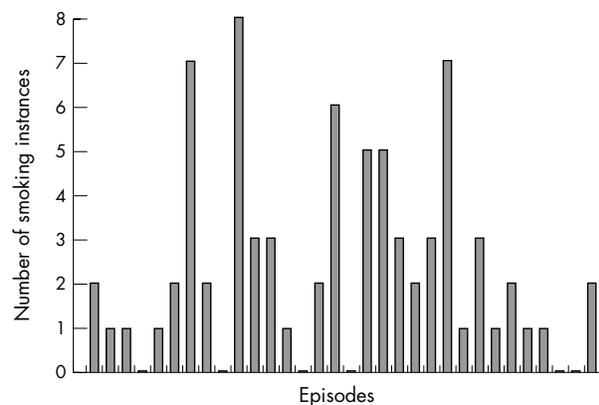


Figure 1 Number of smoking instances per episode of *Thunderbirds*, by episode order, in 2000/1 terrestrial rescreening of the programme in Britain.

marker of their lack of maturity,⁹ their isolation from peers¹⁰ or the closeness of their family set up.¹¹ Scott and Virgil, the two senior sons, dabble with smoking while relaxing out of uniform in around one in eight episodes (and a family portrait shows Virgil with a prominent cigarette), although their opportunities for smoking are limited by the amount of time spent in uniform on missions.

In other incidental male characters, the manner of smoking appears to be a key marker of identity within the series. Lady Penelope's chauffeur, Parker, is clearly a smoker (although he smokes in just two episodes) and is the only character to manifest any ill effects from smoking in the series (a typical smoker's cough while smoking off duty with Lady Penelope's cook). High status men (army generals, colonels, sirs, lords, chief of police, managers of multinational corporations) invariably smoke cigars (held in their hands rather than to their mouths). Those from the middle and lower ranks of society (journalist, newscaster, lead singer, chauffeur) smoke cigarettes, and those of most dubious social worth (such as Lil the cook and convict Light Fingered Fred) have a cigarette permanently positioned on their bottom lip. Cigarettes are occasionally used to mark a character as the "baddie" within the episode. In all 32 episodes only one man is observed smoking a pipe (the father of two boys who become the subject of a rescue), or using a cigarette holder (a fashion designer). Men are seldom portrayed smoking during the course of their work, the exceptions being journalists and film directors/producers, and the only men to smoke in uniform in the series are three senior army personnel discussing military strategy in the desert, and a chief of police.

Reflecting the more marginal status of women in the mid 1960s, many fewer female puppets feature either as major or incidental characters. There are two women within the Tracy household. Grandma, who supports her widowed son, Jeff, appears in a third of the episodes and is never seen smoking. Tin-tin, the daughter of Jeff's domestic help, occupies an ambiguous status (treated variously as adopted daughter, secretary, and occasional member of the International Rescue team). In addition to the three main female characters, only around a dozen women feature in the whole series and there are no additional female roles in three quarters of the episodes. Most of these women appear in their occupational roles (housekeeper, receptionist, stewardess, model, professor, and nurse) which may limit their opportunities to be presented as smokers. Three are clearly identified as smokers (Lil the cook, whose working class status is confirmed by the cigarette stuck to her bottom lip while cooking; Ma Tuttle, an elderly eccentric pipe smoking hillbilly in her isolated Arizona farmhouse; and a Duchess who smokes a cigar while gambling), with very different smoking styles to Lady Penelope.

The most striking feature of the portrayals of smoking is the glamour and high status of most of characters seen smoking. There is also a notable lack of consistency between episodes in the key characters' smoking and very variable amounts of smoke (from none to billowing clouds) generated by tobacco products in different scenes. The most inconsistent smoking behaviour is when Tin-tin, who appears regularly but never smokes in 31 episodes, is seen smoking on her own in an otherwise non-smoking episode.

Another feature is that smoking is rarely commented on. The taken-for-grantedness of smoking is underlined by the use of spy devices in the shape of tobacco paraphernalia (the ashtray on Jeff's desk which lifts up to become a communication device, and a fake lighter which a burglar uses to locate Lady Penelope's jewel collection). Almost all smoking scenes portray the smoker already in the act of smoking, although two scenes with Lady Penelope focus on her having her cigarette lit by an attentive male. Only two verbal references are made to smoking in the series (an airport announcement to "extinguish all cigarettes", and when Jeff smokes his only cigarette (rather than cigar) after being offered one to show off the technological wizardry of a gun-barrel-like cigarette dispenser). A "No Smoking" also sign appears as the backdrop to scientist Brains in his laboratory in the opening credits.

DOES SMOKING IN PUPPETS MATTER?

Screenings of *Thunderbirds* in the late 1960s and early 1970s took place against a backdrop of wider tolerance of smoking. Environmental tobacco smoke was yet to become an issue, and the promotion of tobacco was less restricted. Tobacco advertising was not removed from television until the early 1960s in New Zealand (1963),¹² 1965 in Britain, and 1971 in the USA (although such bans were followed by increased advertising in women's magazines¹³). The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of heightened efforts to promote smoking among women.⁴ Then, as earlier in the century,¹⁴⁻¹⁷ glamour, romance, and independence were prominent themes.

Why should the smoking habits of a group of plastic puppets be of concern? *Thunderbirds* is being much more widely viewed the world over with its relaunch, including in countries such as New Zealand which have a long history of control over tobacco promotion.¹⁸ Young children, aged 5-9 years, are identified as a "key market sector" for the series, in addition to fans in the 10-24 year age group who Grant Irwin, sales manager of Irwin Toys Ltd (which launched *Thunderbirds* merchandise in north America in 2001), claims "enjoy the campy style".¹⁹

As restrictions on tobacco promotion have come into place, the promotion activities of the tobacco industry have become increasingly varied.^{4, 6} This includes product placement in movies and other means of placing tobacco within popular culture. Kaufman and Nichter note that such strategies "send additional signals that make tobacco use appear normal and reinforce the marketing messages of more direct forms of advertising and promotion". They can also communicate exaggerated messages about the pervasiveness of smoking.⁴ The smoking prevalence among elite characters in contemporary Hollywood films was around three times that in the general population between 1960 and 1990,^{20, 21} and exposure to smoking in films is associated in adolescents with trying smoking.²²

The images of smoking in *Thunderbirds* largely concur with the tobacco industry's efforts to associate tobacco consumption with glamour and success, health and wealth, although the occasional portrayal is used to emphasise a lowly position in the social hierarchy or to "mark" "baddies". In this sense, the smoking characters bear an uncanny resemblance to the three peer groups of smokers identified by British school children, "top" girls, low status pupils, and troublemakers.²³ The kind of image projected by Lady Penelope (including her

smoking) is also remarkably similar to the associations which other forms of tobacco sponsorship seek to achieve. Sponsorship of Formula One racing, for example, promotes an image that is “international, glamorous, challenging, fast, furious, dangerous, living life to the full, and living life on the edge”.⁶

Although tobacco companies deny marketing cigarettes to young people, there is evidence that they are “hard at work to try and recruit young people to smoke”.²⁴ While direct promotion of brands to children through overt advertising is increasingly restricted, sponsorship and placement allow “covert or ‘subliminal’ messages that can get round the defences of their ‘wary’ and media literate young target”.⁶ The appearance of largely positive images of smoking (associated with glamour and relaxation, rather than poverty and stress) in a television series directed largely at children is presumably not wholly unwelcome to the industry. The scale of the unmet demand for Thunderbirds merchandise for Christmas 2000²⁵ is an indicator both of the series’ popularity with children, and a more aggressive link with consumption of branded products.

The sporadic nature of smoking among key characters also suggests lower levels of situational or physiological dependence on tobacco than is presumed to pertain today, even in light smokers.¹ Lady Penelope, perhaps the most addicted smoker of the team, does not always smoke in the expected situations. The most incongruous image is Tin-tin’s sole smoking moment which occurs, perhaps by chance, in an episode in which her sexual allure is heightened by the appearance of an ex-admirer. Bette Davis would presumably have been unimpressed by such inconsistencies as she is alleged to have “scoffed at scripts that called for a character to smoke one cigarette at a key dramatic moment” and said that a character who smoked at all “would be a regular smoker, and should therefore smoke throughout”.²⁶

Stanton Glantz is currently targeting efforts at Hollywood to stop “The big film studios . . . helping tobacco companies get around laws banning tobacco advertisements by having popular film stars . . . glamorise smoking on the screen”. Glantz, who like Jeff Tracy worked in the past for the US space programme, suggests that the real target is to change social norms.²⁷ Allan Brandt argues that the cigarette is “a flexible symbol, with a remarkably elastic set of meanings [and that] understanding the precise cultural meanings of cigarette smoking at any particular historical moment may offer opportunities to understand not just the process of recruitment, but also the process of reducing cigarette consumption”.¹⁴ It is presumed that the smoking scenes within Thunderbirds reflect attitudes and assumptions about smoking that were prevalent in the mid 1960s, rather than any attempt to promote smoking at the time. However, the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation criticised the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) for its failure to minimise the appearance of tobacco products in the digital remastering of the series²⁸ and was alleged to have accused the show of “blatant advertising”²⁹ of smoking. Smoke Screeners, an educational programme to “teach media literacy skills to young people” stresses the importance of enabling young people to “critically analyze the messages they receive about tobacco use in movies and television . . . by drawing attention to how smoking is often normalized . . . or glamorized . . . in the media”.³⁰ It is to be hoped that new young audiences will be able to enjoy Thunderbirds without any inadvertent advantage to the tobacco industry.

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