Word wars and tobacco control: saying what needs saying that we don’t yet know how to say, or saying it better

Ruth E Malone

To help officially launch the Tobacco Control Blog, this month’s Editorial has also been posted to the blog and is ready for your comments. The aim of this blog is to stimulate debate, generate ideas and explore new and, at times, controversial ideas. Increasing the opportunities for interaction between readers, authors, and editors is essential to ensuring that the journal remains on the leading edge in today’s world of constant and rapid digital communication. In keeping with this theme, editor Ruth Malone raises the issue of how important language is in defining and framing the tobacco pandemic and challenges readers to share their own creative ideas for “language weapons.” To entice you to join the conversation and make a suggestion, the best idea will win a one-year online subscription to Tobacco Control.

The TC blog can be found here: http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/. We look forward to meeting you there.

Tobacco Control Editorial Team

Some of the most impressive work in the global tobacco wars is never noticed within the battlefields of city councils, legislatures, regulatory agencies or courtrooms. Instead, it is carried out much more subtly, on the front lines of everyday life. Words not only represent and describe, they also reflect and constitute our very understanding of what the issues are: they ‘make reality’. Smoking denormalisation and tobacco industry delegitimisation, so critical to 21st century tobacco control efforts, did not just naturally extend from an earlier focus on undermining tobacco companies’ preferred framing of ‘smoking and health’ issues, of cigarettes as a ‘risky product’ and of responsibility as comprised primarily of providing ‘information’ in a decontextualised way.

Instead, we should insist on talking about smoking and disease, deadly products and corporate responsibility as acting in a way that is consistent with being fully accountable for the effects of the products one sells when they are used as intended. We should also continue discussion of giving up smoking, a construction that makes becoming free of tobacco addiction a loss rather than a gain; we should stop calling our new pack labels ‘graphic health warnings’ and instead call them ‘graphic disease warnings’. We also ought to stop calling tobacco addiction a hobby, as though it were comparable to the habits of brushing one’s teeth, eating cereal each morning for breakfast, or staying up late at night reading in bed.

As Chapman argues, ‘epidemiologists’ currency in debate is probabilistic data on risk, but this is not how communities respond and not others.7 Instead, new ways of talking about tobacco addiction are needed. We should avoid old language in new ways. Language is ‘constitutive’: it shapes common understandings about our social relationships with one another, our practices, our aspirations and goals. Helping people understand that lung cancer was not always so common a disease, that we face an industrially produced epidemic, calls attention to the moral problem of corporations and individuals promoting and profiting from deadly products.

In too many places even today, tobacco use is still taken for granted and if problematised at all, is understood primarily as an individual ‘bad habit’ rather than an ongoing failure by governments to provide adequate public health-based constraints on the disease-promoting practices of powerful corporate interests.3–5 This is why it is important for all of us to attend to how our language serves or undermines tobacco companies’ preferred framing of ‘smoking and health’ issues, of cigarettes as a ‘risky product’ and of responsibility as comprised primarily of providing ‘information’ in a decontextualised way.

Second, language puts things into a public space where we can share understandings—beyond beyond that, Taylor says, it actually creates that public space or shared vantage point. This is not merely a matter of communicating ‘information’; it also creates an ‘us’. Taylor gives an example of two people riding in a hot train car. One turns to the other and says, ‘Whew, it’s hot’. Each person already knows this; the language is not conveying anything new. What it is doing is putting into words their shared experience, and in so doing, creating a new shared space. The laughing recognition of a then-common experience that followed comedian George Carlin’s quip that ‘a smoking section in a restaurant is like a peeing section in a swimming pool’ created a new space quickly shared by advocates in many places, who used it effectively to argue for 100% smokefree policies.

Finally, Taylor points out that language grounds our moral sense as human beings, enables us to draw distinctions about what is right and wrong, good and bad, useful and useless. Language is a moral problem of corporations and individuals promoting and profiting from deadly products.

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2. Chapman S. ‘Habits’ in a public health context. Instead, new ways of talking about tobacco addiction are needed. We should avoid old language in new ways. Language is ‘constitutive’: it shapes common understandings about our social relationships with one another, our practices, our aspirations and goals. Helping people understand that lung cancer was not always so common a disease, that we face an industrially produced epidemic, calls attention to the moral problem of corporations and individuals promoting and profiting from deadly products.

3. Taylor S. Articulating something: our very understanding of what the issues are: they ‘make reality’.


5. Chapman S. ‘Habits’ in a public health context. Instead, new ways of talking about tobacco addiction are needed. We should avoid old language in new ways. Language is ‘constitutive’: it shapes common understandings about our social relationships with one another, our practices, our aspirations and goals. Helping people understand that lung cancer was not always so common a disease, that we face an industrially produced epidemic, calls attention to the moral problem of corporations and individuals promoting and profiting from deadly products.


7. Chapman S. ‘Habits’ in a public health context. Instead, new ways of talking about tobacco addiction are needed. We should avoid old language in new ways. Language is ‘constitutive’: it shapes common understandings about our social relationships with one another, our practices, our aspirations and goals. Helping people understand that lung cancer was not always so common a disease, that we face an industrially produced epidemic, calls attention to the moral problem of corporations and individuals promoting and profiting from deadly products.
while reframing doing the same old thing as ‘responsible’.

Do you have other ideas for new language weapons in the word wars? A free online one-year subscription to the journal awaits the best suggestion received. Please share your idea (or ideas) by clicking on “post a comment” at the TC Blog. We eagerly await your insightful, inspiring ideas. The contest closes for submission on 1 October 2010. The editorial team will compile all the suggestions, choose a set of finalists, and put the final decision to a vote by TC Blog readers.

http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/

The lighter side

Competition interests Ruth Malone owns one share each of Philip Morris/Altria, Philip Morris International and Reynolds American tobacco company stock for research and advocacy purposes. She served as a tobacco industry documents consultant for the US Department of Justice in USA vs Philip Morris et al.

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