SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

When the tobacco industry controls the news: KKR, RJR Nabisco, and the Weekly Reader Corporation

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Abstract

Background – The Weekly Reader Corporation was acquired in 1991 by K-III Communications, whose majority shareholder is Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. (KKR), best known for its leveraged buyout of tobacco conglomerate RJR Nabisco. Among other student newspapers, Weekly Reader publishes *Current Events* for students in grades 6–10 (ages 11–16).

Objective – To explore how KKR's ownership might have affected the content of tobacco-related news stories in *Current Events*, which reaches students at the very ages when many begin to experiment with tobacco.

Methods – A content analysis was conducted of 182 issues of *Current Events*, 71 pre-acquisition and 111 post-acquisition. Tobacco-related news was reported in four articles in the pre-acquisition issues and in 12 articles in the post-acquisition issues.

Results – The content of tobacco-related news stories shifted after KKR's acquisition to portray tobacco as a "forbidden fruit" that is attractive to teenagers. This was done by focusing on new policies and programmes to discourage teenagers from smoking, the mythical threat of prohibition, and the supposed popularity of smoking, while giving relatively little attention to the health consequences of tobacco use.

Conclusions – After engineering a stock swap with Bordens in 1995, KKR no longer directly owns RJR Nabisco stock. This case study underscores the need for public health advocates to be watchful of the tobacco industry's efforts to control public access to news about tobacco.

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Introduction

Based in Middletown, Connecticut (USA), the Weekly Reader Corporation publishes periodicals and other learning materials for elementary and secondary school students. First published in 1928, *Weekly Reader* is sold in approximately 80% of all US elementary schools and has the highest circulation of any

student newspaper in the country.¹ The company publishes a similar newspaper, *Current Events*, for students in grades 6–10 (ages 11–16 years) with a circulation of 242 000 (telephone communication with Lisa LaPlante, The Weekly Reader Corporation, 3 January 1995).

Weekly Reader is a wholly owned subsidiary of K-III Communications Corporation. K-III's majority shareholder is the investment firm Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. (KKR), which is best known for its leveraged buyout of RJR Nabisco, the tobacco conglomerate that makes Camel and other cigarette brands.² KKR gained control of the Weekly Reader Corporation when K-III purchased its owner, Field Publications, Ltd. The sale was announced in December 1990³ and finalised in March 1991.⁴

Did KKR's control of the Weekly Reader Corporation make a difference in its coverage of tobacco-related news? K-III president William Reilly frequently denied that KKR's other holdings determined his operational decisions. "KKR is an investment company," Reilly was quoted in *Mediaweek* around the time of the acquisition. "Each part runs independently."¹ Public suspicions about Reilly's claims of editorial independence were raised when *Weekly Reader* ran an article in an October 1994 issue titled, "Do cigarettes have a future?" With its sympathetic portrayal of "smokers' rights," the article created an uproar of protest from public health advocates.⁵ Many parents and teachers learned for the first time that the Weekly Reader Corporation was financially linked to a tobacco conglomerate. It was just a few months later, in early 1995, when KKR announced a stock swap with Bordens that resulted in KKR no longer directly owning RJR Nabisco stock.

A content analysis revealed that, compared with *Scholastic News*, a competitor in the elementary school market, the *Weekly Reader* under KKR was less likely to mention short-term consequences of smoking or to give a clear "don't use" message, but was more likely to present the tobacco industry position on key issues.⁶ It is also important to examine how KKR's ownership may have affected *Current Events* (CE), which reaches students at the very ages when many youth begin to experiment with tobacco.⁷ Although the same managing editor directs both *Current Events*

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and the grade 5–6 edition of *Weekly Reader*, they are separate publications and do not run the same articles.

This review is based on an examination of 182 issues of *CE* dating from 16 September 1988 to 8–12 May 1995. Of these, 71 were pre-acquisition issues, and 111 were published post-acquisition, beginning with the 1 March 1991 edition (Vol 90, No 20). Tobacco-related news was reported in four articles in the pre-acquisition issues and in 12 articles in the post-acquisition issues. (The Appendix lists the titles and location of all 16 articles.) Copies of all materials dated before the 1993–94 school year were made available by the *Weekly Reader* Corporation.

Current Events before KKR

During the pre-acquisition period, *CE* published just four pieces on tobacco-related subjects, which ranged from about 200 to just under 900 words. Given the fact that many people begin smoking as middle school students,⁷ it is disturbing that this issue was not given greater prominence. Nevertheless, this handful of feature stories vividly described the health consequences of smoking and did serve to cast the tobacco industry in a negative light.

The longest of the articles was a feature story on US Surgeon General C Everett Koop's report on the health dangers of smoking⁸ (*CE*, 27 January 1989). The article provided extensive data on smoking-related deaths and the large numbers of smokers who have quit, all presented in terms that middle school students could understand—for example: "Smoking killed 100 times more people in 1987 than all illegal drugs combined" and "An estimated 87 percent of all lung cancer deaths in 1987 were caused by smoking."

Smoking, the article explained, is on the wane: "The percentage of U.S. men smokers declined from around 50 percent in 1964 to less than 33 percent today." Data presented for women and African Americans were similar. The article acknowledged that the percentage of people who begin smoking during their teenage years has been increasing, but also noted that only "one in five" high school seniors smoke, a clear minority. Having summarised Koop's report, the article concluded with a discussion of the pros and cons of a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising. The second article, published just two editions later, also tried to stimulate student debate on an advertising ban (*CE*, 17 February 1989). *CE* undermined the Tobacco Institute's position against the ban by running the story under a photograph of an old Lucky Strike advertisement, with the caption, "In earlier years, ads claimed that smoking was healthy."

The third pre-acquisition article described a new law to prohibit smoking on most domestic commercial air flights (*CE*, 10 November 1989). A sponsor of the law was Congressman Richard Durbin, whose father, a heavy smoker, died of lung cancer. Durbin's rationale, said the article, was to "save lives by encouraging other people not to smoke." This edition also had an

anti-smoking cartoon to remind readers that smoking increases the risk of cancer.

The last of the four articles from this period focused on a call by Dr Louis W Sullivan, Secretary of Health and Human Services, for the tobacco industry to end its sponsorship of athletic events. Accompanying the article was a photograph of children carrying protest signs to denounce Virginia Slims, with the caption, "Kids protest tobacco-company sponsorship outside the Newport, R.I., Tennis Hall of Fame." The newspaper's editorial stance was revealed in the supportive headline, "Athletes urged to shun tobacco 'blood money'"

Current Events under KKR

NEW POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES TO STOP TEENAGERS SMOKING

After the KKR take-over, *CE*'s editors chose to run several stories that focused on policies and programmes to stop teenage smoking. The overall impression created by the newspaper was that lots of adults in authority are doing whatever they can to force teenagers not to smoke.

For example, an article about a Tobacco Institute programme ran under the headline, "Antismoking campaign targets teens" (*CE*, 1 March 1991). More than four-fifths of the article was devoted to a pro-industry perspective on the campaign, which public health advocates tend to view as a public relations ploy.⁹ Three aspects of the campaign were mentioned, two of which involved efforts directed against teenagers, that is, pushing for new state laws that would forbid sales to people under age 18 (which is already prohibited in most states), and providing an educational booklet to advise parents "how to discourage children from smoking." What was not stated in the article is that the booklet fails to describe the health consequences of smoking.¹⁰ Indeed, according to the booklet, the major rationale for children not to smoke is that it is an "adult habit," which reinforces the idea of tobacco as a "forbidden fruit."¹¹

An article during the next school year focused on a new Iowa law that prohibits teenagers from buying tobacco (*CE*, 13 September 1991). Whatever the author's intent, the article surely had the effect of reinforcing at-risk teens' intentions to smoke.

- The article opened with a quote from a defiant Iowa teenager: "I know one thing. We won't stop smoking. We just won't do it in front of cops."
- After mentioning that 45 states ban cigarette sales to minors, the article reminded its teenage readers that "such laws are often not enforced." The reason? According to the article: "Police sometimes say they are too busy stopping more serious crimes such as robbery," a comment that obviously served to demean these laws.
- The article cited a drop in teenage smoking after Utah banned cigarette vending machines. Then, after mentioning an Iowa measure to reduce vending machine sales to teenagers, it concluded: "Still, some teenagers vow to keep on smoking."

A later article described new proposals to increase federal cigarette excise taxes: "Top government advisers are urging a 'monster' cigarette tax of \$2 a pack," the article said (*CE*, 15–19 March 1993). Noting that teenagers usually have less spending money than adults, the article stated that the American Cancer Society favours the tax because it would "hit young smokers the hardest."

In a news brief, *CE* informed its readers that Congress had proposed a "sweeping ban" on smoking in school buildings (*CE*, 4–8 April 1994). The only exception, according to the article, would be in areas "closed off from students" that had separate ventilation. Because many schools already have rules against student smoking, teachers are the ones most likely to be affected by this proposal, but the article implied instead that the measure is anti-student.

MYTHICAL THREAT OF PROHIBITION

In early 1994, Dr David Kessler, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), announced he was seeking guidance from Congress on whether his agency should regulate tobacco as it does other addictive drugs in the marketplace. By distorting Kessler's position, *CE* was able to reinforce its theme of government oppression (*CE*, 14–18 March 1994).

The article (figure 1) first asked readers to imagine that cigarettes could no longer be sold and that a "black market" had developed. "These events have not happened—yet," *CE* stated, "but they could happen in the near future" because of the FDA. This message was repeated in the caption for a photograph of two teenage girls smoking *outside* a news stand: "Smoking in public might be banned if the Food and Drug Administration has its way."

In fact, according to *US News and World Report*, Kessler had decided not to assert full FDA authority over tobacco, in part because

"if he seized the initiative over tobacco, he would be left with no alternative but to ban cigarettes outright as unsafe and unhealthy. And even the most ardent tobacco foes do not want that."¹² Ultimately, President Clinton announced on 10 August 1995 that the FDA proposed to regulate cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products as *drug delivery devices*, not as drugs themselves, which allowed the FDA to take action short of a total ban.

The tobacco industry often attacks the idea of banning smoking in public buildings by likening it to (alcohol) Prohibition. On this score, the same *CE* article quoted Tobacco Institute spokesman Charles O Whitley: "Such massive intervention in the private lives of our adult population recalls the extremism of Prohibition, the last national crusade against a supposed social evil."

SUPPOSED POPULARITY OF SMOKING

In the past, *CE* had briefly mentioned disturbing trends in teenage smoking, but it was in the context of detailed health warnings and in a way that made clear that only a minority of teenagers were electing to smoke. Under the new regime, however, data were presented in a way to imply that smoking is a popular practice among teenagers. One article, for example, noted that "teens buy close to a billion packs of cigarettes a year" (*CE*, 13 September 1991), with no reminder that choosing *not* to smoke is the norm.

Similarly, an article on proposals to ban tobacco advertisements opened by describing the "amazingly successful advertising campaign" for Camel, especially among underage smokers (*CE*, 6–10 December 1993). A photograph (figure 2) showed a Camel poster advertisement mounted above a New York City subway entrance, with the following caption: "Critics say 'Old Joe Camel' advertising like this billboard has been too successful, tempting teenagers to smoke." The clear implication is that this advertising produced a "bandwagon effect," making smoking more popular among teenagers than ever.

In one 12-month period, *CE* had no fewer than three separate news briefs on the increasing percentage of Americans who smoke. Under the headline "Smoking increases," the first of these briefs cited data from an unnamed government report that the percentage of Americans who smoked had increased from 25.5% in 1990 to 25.7% in 1991, *an increase of 0.2 percentage points* (*CE*, 19–23 April 1993).

The second brief, headlined "Smoking comeback," cited survey results showing the percentage of Americans who smoked in 1992 at 30% (figure 3). "For the first time in years," *CE* declared, "smoking seems to be making a comeback in the United States" (*CE*, 3–7 January 1994).

The third brief, "More marijuana," cited new data from the Monitoring the Future study, which showed an increase in reported marijuana use by children in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades (ages 13–14, 15–16, and 17–18, respectively). Cigarette smoking by young

NEWS BRIEFS

Cigarettes Branded as Drug

Imagine this. A federal law declares that cigarettes cannot be sold because they are an illegal addictive drug. People caught anywhere with cigarettes face stiff fines—even imprisonment. A black market for the illegal sale of cigarettes develops. At the same time, cancer and heart attack rates in the United States start to improve.

These events have not happened—yet. But they could happen in the near future. According to a recent Federal Drug Administration (FDA) report, smokers buy cigarettes, not simply to enjoy smoking, but to satisfy a nicotine addiction. In fact, the FDA charges, tobacco companies add nicotine to make cigarettes even more addictive. Therefore, the FDA believes that cigarettes should be regulated like other addictive drugs.

Is a Ban Wrong?

But cigarette companies and many smokers challenge the FDA proposal and other moves to curb smoking. Charles O. Whitley of the Tobacco Institute recently attacked a Clinton Administration call to make smoking illegal in all public buildings.

"This attempt to ban smoking is an example of social engineering on a vast scale," said Whitley. "Such massive intervention in the private lives of one quarter of our adult population recalls the extremism of Prohibition, the last national

crusade against a supposed social evil."

An Addictive Drug

Dr. David A. Kessler is chairman of the Coalition on Smoking or Health, a group of antismoking organizations. He agrees with the FDA. "Evidence brought to our attention... suggests that cigarette manufacturers may intend that their products contain nicotine to satisfy an addiction on the part of some of their customers," he said. Kessler added that confirmation of this evidence would support FDA regulation of cigarettes as an addictive drug.

What do you think? Are cigarettes so addictive that the FDA is right in calling them a drug and trying to ban them?

Smoking in public might be banned if the Food and Drug Administration has its way.

Taking a page from the Tobacco Institute, Current Events tells readers that the federal government wants to ban all smoking. Source: Current Events 1994; 93(2):14–18 Mar.

NEWS BRIEFS

CIGARETTE ADVERTISING: Does It Target Teens?

One of the best-known cartoon characters in the United States is "Old Joe Camel." Since its introduction in 1968, this symbol of Camel cigarettes has spearheaded an amazingly successful advertising campaign—especially among the young. Camel's share of the underage smokers' market has gone from 0.5 percent before the campaign to 32.8 percent now.

Joe Camel's popularity with smokers under age 18 has led several health groups to file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Their complaint has been joined by others. "If the tobacco industry had any shred of humanity or sense of business ethics, 'Old Joe' would have been set out in the desert back in 1991," said John L. Clowe, past president of the American Medical Association.

The maker of Camels firmly denies any intention of selling cigarettes to those below the age of 18. "It's not in our interest to have a campaign that encourages underage people to smoke because that would greatly increase the chance that the Government would step in," said a spokesperson for the maker of Camels.

But the Government may do just that. The staff of the FTC has recommended that a ban be placed on the Joe Camel ads because of their appeal to teenagers and young adults. Still, action may be many months away. The FTC will have to show that the ads are deliberately aimed at minors.

And critics attack not only Joe Camel but other cigarette ads that may entice youngsters to smoke. Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) has urged a complete ban on cigarette advertising to prevent this danger. What do you think? Would more restrictions on cigarette advertising, or even a ban, reduce smoking among those who are underage? Why or why not?

Critics say "Old Joe Camel" advertising like this billboard has been too successful, tempting teenagers to smoke.

Current Events reports that the "Old Joe Camel" campaign is "amazingly successful" in reaching underage smokers. Source: Current Events 1993; 93 (13): 6-10 Dec.

Smoking Comeback. For the first time in years, smoking seems to be making a comeback in the United States. According to a just-released survey, the percentage of Americans who smoke jumped from 25 percent in 1991 to 30 percent in 1992. The Princeton Survey Research Associates says this shows the highest level of smoking since 1983. Health experts are puzzled, since medical reports prove widespread harm from smoking.

News briefs are used by Current Events to tout increases in US smoking rates. Source: Current Events 1994; 93 (14): 3-7 Jan.

people "also increased during this period," the brief said (CE, 14-18 February 1994).

In a 1991 issue, CE presented a pie chart ("Kids and Smoking") displaying the grade in which those then in the 10th grade said they

"began smoking," as reported in a 1987 National Adolescent Student Health Survey (CE, 1 March 1991). In the chart, anyone who had ever smoked even one cigarette was defined as a smoker, leaving only 38.1% of boys and 35.9% of girls in the category "never smoked." This created a distorted impression about the actual prevalence of smoking. A standard measure used by researchers is the one-month prevalence rate, which was 29.4% for US high school seniors in 1987.

CE also conveyed the popularity of smoking among teenagers through its selection of photographs. Before the acquisition, two articles were found with photos that depicted smoking; in both cases, the smokers were adult women in unflattering poses. After the acquisition, photos of smokers showed young people who could easily pass for teenagers (CE, 13 September 1991; 14-18 March 1994). Such a photo was also used to illustrate a story about youth gangs (CE, 24-28 January 1994). It should also be noted that the article about the Tobacco Institute's anti-smoking campaign had a photo of a child's hand dropping a coin into a cigarette vending machine (CE, 1 March 1991).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF SMOKING
After KKR's take-over, CE gave relatively little space to describe the health consequences of smoking. No article similar in scope to the pre-acquisition feature story on US Surgeon General C Everett Koop's report on smoking (CE, 27 January 1989) was ever published during the postacquisition period.

What effect this change might have had on CE's readers is unclear. Studies have shown that knowledge of the health risks of smoking do not necessarily deter high-risk teenagers from smoking,⁷ but prevention advocates agree that young people must be taught this basic factual information.

Post-acquisition, stories on important new health data were relegated to news briefs. For example, a Harvard study that found lung damage among non-smoking wives of smokers was described in 66 words (CE, 19-23 October 1992). Similarly, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) report on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) was described in 49 words (CE, 18-22 January 1993). This news brief mentioned that ETS "causes bronchitis and pneumonia in thousands of children" and that "about 3,000 U.S. adults" die from ETS-caused lung cancer (although the fact that this is 3000 deaths per year is not made clear). Left unmentioned was the key fact that the EPA had classified environmental tobacco smoke as a Group A (known human) carcinogen, similar to asbestos, dioxin, and other cancer-causing toxins that have caused significant public alarm.

Because of their brevity, CE's recent articles avoided giving specific details on the health consequences of smoking. Instead of data presentations, there were non-specific references to "smoking-related deaths" (CE, 1 March 1991) or "widespread harm from smoking" (CE, 3-7 January 1994). An article on cigarette taxes

mentioned that “smoking is the leading cause of preventable deaths in the United States” and is “responsible for about one-fifth of all the deaths,” but it did not say how many deaths that entailed (*CE*, 15–19 March 1993).

It is also interesting to note that Surgeons General Antonia Novello and Joycelyn Elders were never quoted after the takeover. Rather than these outspoken health authorities, the newspaper instead cited vaguely defined specialists such as “health experts” (*CE*, 3–7 January 1994) or “health groups” (*CE*, 6–10 December 1993). Also noteworthy is that *CE* failed to do a story on the 1994 Surgeon General’s report on preventing tobacco use among young people.⁷

In a fascinating “sidebar” to one article, the Puritans were said to consider tobacco “a dangerous, addictive drug” (*CE*, 15–19 March 1993). During the 1500s, doctors used tobacco as a medicine “to help nervous people relax.” “It wasn’t until the 1960s,” the sidebar concluded, “that modern researchers found that the Puritans, after all, were right!”

What is behind this declaration? Consider a 1994 *USA Today* editorial by Tobacco Institute Vice President Brennan M. Dawson: “Stop picking on smokers.”¹⁴ “Puritanism,” Dawson wrote, “is based on the impulse that punishment is the only recourse against those who have the capacity for happiness. Puritanism, it seems, by the steady and loud drumbeat against smokers and smoking, is alive and well in the United States.” Is it just coincidence that *CE* chose to tell its teenage readers that the Puritans were the ultimate health authorities?

DANGERS OF ALCOHOL VERSUS TOBACCO

After the takeover, *CE* tried to create the impression that alcohol is a more worrisome drug than tobacco. For example, in an article on predictions for 1993, the following statement appeared: “Alcohol, the most dangerous drug according to many experts, remained a major U.S. problem” (*CE*, 8–12 February 1993). Who these “experts” are is unclear, but public health professionals are well aware that tobacco-related deaths are estimated at more than 400 000 per year,⁷ whereas alcohol-related deaths are about a quarter of that level.¹⁵

Graphs were also presented to deliver this message about the lesser dangers of tobacco. Before the takeover, in an article on President Bush’s attendance at a “drug summit” in Colombia, *CE* published a chart on drug abuse in the US that included cigarettes and smokeless tobacco (*CE*, 9 February 1990). In contrast, in an article published after the takeover, a graph showed the percentage of Americans aged 18–25 who used alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and hallucinogens during the past year (*CE*, 4 October 1991). Notably absent from the chart was tobacco.

Discussion

To understand the changes in *CE*, we first need to review why some teenagers choose to

smoke. In moving from childhood to adulthood, teenagers are in the process of developing an identity distinct from their parents. They therefore seek independence and autonomy, which is often manifested in a rejection of parental values and a thwarting of authority and conventional society. At the same time, they want to appear grown-up and will imitate what adults do. In this society, the act of smoking can satisfy both sets of needs for some young people, because it is seen as more “acceptable” for adults but is generally prohibited for minors.⁷

Image advertising by the tobacco industry exploits the need that many teenagers have to be their own person. The “Marlboro Man,” for example, is portrayed as a man of inner-strength – self-confident, tough, straightforward, and independent. He is, in essence, the embodiment of American individualism and potency. Because these themes resonate with adolescents, it is not surprising that Marlboro is the most popular brand among underage smokers.⁷

Maintaining meaningful connections with a peer group or clique is also a key element in this developmental process. Because being accepted by the group is of utmost importance, peers can be a powerful motivator of behaviour and a primary influence on the self-definition of the group’s members. For many young people, tobacco use is a shared activity that strengthens group bonds and contributes to group members’ common definition of self, a dynamic that can overwhelm any concerns about long-term health risks.⁷ Tobacco advertising also exploits this need, by associating smoking with personal popularity and group acceptance. This has been a common theme used in advertising for Camel, which features the cartoon character “Old Joe Camel.”

Do these advertising messages appeal to every teenager? Of course not—but these messages do resonate with a large market segment of high-risk teenagers. Such teenagers begin smoking at a rate of 3000 new smokers per day in the US,⁷ a level sufficient to make the tobacco business among the nation’s most profitable commercial enterprises.

Hence, if we wanted to use a student-oriented newspaper to increase the likelihood that high-risk teenagers would take up smoking, we would do so by reinforcing the central messages used in the industry’s carefully crafted image advertising. To begin, we would emphasise facts and themes that threaten high-risk teenagers’ sense of personal autonomy. First, we would inform high-risk teenagers that adults in positions of authority are busily implementing policies to prevent young people in particular from smoking. Second, we would declare that these authorities are motivated by the idea that teenagers are vulnerable and need special protection.

Simultaneously, we would let high-risk teenagers know that the authorities are inconsistent about preventing teenagers from smoking, which is made clear by the fact that laws to prohibit tobacco sales to minors are so seldom

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enforced. We would also tell high-risk teenagers that those young people who are intent on smoking will do so, no matter what adults try to do about it.

Finally, we would remind high-risk teenagers that smoking can be a highly pleasurable and relaxing activity, one that is enjoyed by many teenagers despite any long-term health consequences there might be. Whenever possible, we would try to create the impression that vast numbers of teenagers, perhaps even the majority, are smokers.

Unfortunately, these are the very messages that *Current Events*, after its acquisition by KKR, seemed to be delivering to its pre-teenage and teenage readers.

The content of *Current Events* after the KKR takeover is a classic example of what communications experts call "strategic ambiguity," a presentation of information that is expected to mean different things to different audiences (or market segments) (Atkin CK, DeJong W. Private service: a critique of public service advertising by the alcohol and tobacco industries. Unpublished manuscript, Michigan State University, 1994). For many teenagers, the fact that adults disapprove of smoking because of its health consequences is an important reason for them to refrain. But for high-risk teenagers who might see tobacco use as a way of asserting their independence or connecting with a peer group, *CE*'s stories may have served to increase the lure of tobacco rather than to discourage its use.

In its statement of editorial policy, *Current Events* declares that its mission since its founding is "to connect students to the world" (*CE, Teacher's Guide*, 16 September 1988). To this end, the newspaper seeks to "provide sufficient background for students to understand the critical issues and events in the news" (*CE, Teacher's Guide*, 15 September 1989). When KKR took over control of the newspaper, it failed to live up to that promise.

Did the shift in the newspaper's content actually increase tobacco's appeal to high-risk youth? There is no easy way to test this, for without special training in media literacy, young people are not especially astute in recognising propaganda or judging the true impact of advertising on their motivations.¹⁶ What is critical to note here is that this shift in content is consistent with the themes of tobacco industry advertising, which leads to the recruitment in the US of about 3000 new smokers per day.⁷

As noted above, KKR engineered a stock swap with Borden in early 1995 and no longer directly owns RJR Nabisco stock. Has this ushered in a new era of editorial independence for staff at the Weekly Reader Corporation? Will this mean a return to the way in which *Current Events* covered tobacco before 1991? Time will tell.

This case study underscores the need for public health advocates to be watchful of the tobacco industry's efforts to control public access to news about tobacco. It has been said that "freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one." That statement is a pointed reminder of a basic fact of American life: our access to accurate information depends very much on who owns the printing press.

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Appendix

LIST OF *CURRENT EVENTS* ARTICLES THAT MENTION TOBACCO, SEPTEMBER 1988-MAY 1990 Before K-III acquisition

- 1 Vol 88, No 16, 27 Jan 1989. The most deadly habit: new government report says smoking caused 390,000 US deaths in 1987.
- 2 Vol 88, No 18, February 17, 1989. Should cigarette ads be banned?
- 3 Vol 89, No 9, November 10, 1989. Congress broadens law against airline smoking.
- 4 Vol 89, No 23, March 23, 1990. Athletes urged to shun tobacco "blood money."

After K-III acquisition

- 5 Vol 90, No 20, March 1, 1991. Anti-smoking campaign targets teens.

- 6 Vol 91, No 1, September 13, 1991. Teenage smoking: should laws be tougher?
 - 7 Vol 92, No 7, October 19–23, 1992. In the news this week: a warning on secondhand smoke.
 - 8 Vol 92, No 16, January 18–22, 1993. Also in the news: secondhand smoke danger.
 - 9 Vol 92, No 18, February 8–12, 1993. Crime and drugs.
 - 10 Vol 92, No 22, March 15–19, 1993. Smoking: on its way out?
 - 11 Vol 92, No 25, April 19–23, 1993. Also in the news: smoking increases.
 - 12 Vol 93, No 13, December 6–10, 1993: Cigarette advertising: does it target teens?
 - 13 Vol 93, No 14, January 3–7, 1994. Also in the news: smoking comeback.
 - 14 Vol 93, No 19, February 14–18, 1994. Also in the news: more marijuana.
 - 15 Vol 93, No 21, March 14–18, 1994. Cigarettes branded as drug.
 - 16 Vol 93, No 23, April 4–8, 1994. Also in the news: school smoking ban.
-