

TOBACCO CONTROL

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Editorial

Smoking in movies: is it a problem?

The belief that smoking is increasing in films has developed into almost an article of faith among the tobacco control community, as has the conviction that these depictions have a powerful influence in promoting smoking. Hillary Rodham Clinton¹ and US Vice President Al Gore have recently been outspoken in their criticism of the gratuitous use of cigarettes and cigars in movies, particularly by high-profile actors such as John Travolta, Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, Brad Pitt, Bruce Willis, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.²

Early concern about cigarette promotions in movies was raised in a 1985 article about Marlboro images and smoking scenes in the youth-oriented film *Superman II*.³ In the late 1980s the American-based organisation Stop Teenage Addiction to Tobacco (STAT) played a leadership role in drawing attention to this problem, in several articles in its newsletter and in congressional testimony.⁴

The Subcommittee on Transportation and Hazardous Materials, Committee on Energy and Commerce, US House of Representatives, conducted an investigation of tobacco product placement in movies. At a hearing in 1989, subcommittee chairman Thomas Luken revealed that cigarette companies had paid \$42 500 to place Marlboro (Philip Morris) in *Superman II*, \$350 000 to have Lark cigarettes (Philip Morris) appear in the James Bond movie *License to Kill*, \$30 000 to place Eve cigarettes (Liggett) in *Supergirl*, and more than \$5000 to have Lucky Strike (American Tobacco) appear in *Beverly Hills Cop*. Moreover, Philip Morris informed the subcommittee that it had supplied free cigarettes and other props for 56 different films in 1987 and 1988.⁵

Documents from the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, including a much-circulated letter from actor Sylvester Stallone to a film producer (requesting \$500 000 for using Brown & Williamson tobacco products "in no less than five feature films"), have shown that the tobacco industry has long understood the value of product placement in movies. The documents have also revealed that cigarette product placement in films was used as a mechanism to circumvent the ban on cigarette advertising on television, as movies are televised and distributed by sale or rental on videotape.⁶

In August 1989, Congressman Luken asked the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to review tobacco product placement in movies. The FTC, which collects information on tobacco advertising and promotion from manufacturers in a compulsory process, responded by requiring cigarette companies to report payments for tobacco product placement.⁷ Previously, product placement expenditures were reported within a broader category called "endorsements and testimonials", defined

as "all expenditures made to procure the use or mention of a cigarette product or company name, or the appearance of a cigarette product, name or package in any situation (such as a motion picture, television show, or public appearance by a celebrity) where such use, mention, or appearance may come to the attention of the public."⁸ Notably, cigarette companies have denied paying for product placement in movies since 1989, when the FTC began to ask for information on these payments.^{7,9} Reported expenditures on "endorsements and testimonials" were \$384 000 in 1986, \$376 000 in 1987, and \$781 000 in 1988, but no expenditures have been reported for this category since then.⁹

Ironically, a study examining the depiction of smoking in films between 1960 and 1990 found a continuing decline in instances of smoking.¹⁰ However, a study in this issue of *Tobacco Control*,¹¹ using the same methodology as the earlier study, now suggests that concerns may be well founded. The new study, examining a random sample of 35 leading films between 1990 and 1996, found that depictions of smoking in the 1990s rose back to 1960 levels. Both studies also found that smoking prevalence among lead characters was higher than that in the American population, raising questions about the role of films in amplifying notions of smoking being widespread and whether the tobacco industry is actively encouraging this.

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In the final scene of the 1994 Australian comedy *Muriel's Wedding*, the two central characters drive away from the bleak detritus of their past. As they head triumphantly into their future as independent young adults and joyous tears of rapport roll down the audience's cheeks, one character commandingly lights a cigarette in close-up. No heavily identifying teenager could be left in any doubt that smoking is meant to fit as naturally with freedom, cutting the parental chains, and the Authentic Discovery of Self, as mustard on a hotdog.

Yet the director had a choice: smoking is no more or less natural to such endings than if the heroes had flashed their American Express card, snapped open a Coke, or slapped on a U2 cassette. The power and hope of the ending could have been choreographed in a thousand different ways, with the cigarette option one that many would view as thoughtless, hackneyed, and ultimately irresponsible. For some there is a short leap from their dismay at such depictions to a stampede to regulate the artistic licence of film directors when it comes to showing smoking.

However, such actions ought not to be taken lightly. Despite Klein's thesis that cigarettes are almost intrinsically sublime,¹² most semioticians would describe

the cigarette as a classic “floating signifier”, meaning that it does not have one or even a small number of fixed meanings that can be unproblematically lifted into any context to produce the same meaning for any audience. Rather, depending on context and character, cigarettes can be used to signify a wide range of meanings, some of which might actually promote *negative* associations with smoking. As expressed by *USA Today*, “It’s often described as a prop that conveys character. In films, characters who smoke can indicate neurosis, insecurity, villainy, risk-taking, sexiness or danger.”² Throughout *Muriel’s Wedding* and many other films, many patently unattractive, gormless, or violent characters smoke, while other more appealing characters do not. Depicted often enough in such ways, cigarettes might come to signify a set of associations that could work against their proliferation, or at the very least balance out positive associations. As one writer noted about the Julia Roberts character in *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, “The Roberts character is deeply flawed, and smokes as a manifestation of being high-strung and nervous. That’s a legitimate use of artistic shorthand to tell us something about a character. And it’s hardly a positive portrayal of smoking.”¹³

Stockwell and Glantz¹¹ characterised those who smoked in their sample on gender, race, three grades of apparent socioeconomic status, and whether or not they were a major or minor character in the film. While they write that “tobacco use in the movies is associated with youthful vigour, good health, good looks, and personal and professional acceptance”, they provide no evidence to support this. In any case, these dimensions are ripe with polysemic signification¹⁴—that is, the capacity to connote a multitudinous variety of meanings depending on context—and cannot be simplistically dichotomised using the relatively crude tools of content analysis. Audience-centred, contextual methods are required to address questions of how meaning is mediated by audiences. These start with the question, “What do audiences do with media messages?” (rather than the long-discredited “hypodermic effects” question of “What do media messages do to people?”).¹⁵

Policy options

Any attempt to develop policy on the depiction of smoking in films needs to reflect first on the wisdom of attempting to do so. There might not be too many steps from regulating artistic expression in the name of public health to the suppression of a wide variety of allegedly pernicious influences on the community. History records regimes which persecuted novelists, dramatists, artists, and film makers through laws, doctrines, and *fatwahas* because they were said to have offended various moral codes. In the present debate on smoking in films, a variety of policy options have begun to be discussed.

BANNING PAID PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Commissioned product placement is obviously intended to be a form of tobacco advertising and therefore should come within the ambit of laws prohibiting tobacco advertising, which we would endorse without reservation. However, establishing money trails from the tobacco industry to second parties who then channel the money to film producers would be daunting. Under Australian law, such arrangements would be illegal, yet imported films—the great majority—with commissioned tobacco product placement are exempt, as is the case with imported magazines that contain tobacco advertising.

As noted above, American cigarette companies have denied paying for product placement in movies since 1989. However, the FTC notes that the lack of reported expenditures “does not indicate that the companies did not or do

not continue to make tobacco products and signage available to filmmakers free of charge in the hopes that they will be used as props”.⁷ In addition, cynics may wonder whether cigarette companies might achieve product placement or portrayal of generic smoking scenes in movies through non-monetary *quid pro quos*. Legislation would have to be crafted carefully to eliminate these promotional strategies.

If film and television producers are unashamed about assisting the tobacco industry in its ambitions by scripting positive smoking scenes in return for cash, then there should be no opposition to bold declarations to this effect in the credits, notwithstanding that very few moviegoers bother to read them. Tobacco control advocates, however, would do well to accelerate the use of shaming strategies to make these declarations more widely known. Being a willing sponge to tobacco dollars would become part of producers’, directors’, and actors’ profiles in community debate rather than allowing them to skulk behind noble virtues like freedom of artistic expression.

FILM CLASSIFICATION

There are murmurings in some health organisations about the possibility of film classifications based on whether or not a film portrays smoking in a positive light. In the same way that films depicting illicit drug use, high levels of violence, or explicit sexuality can carry “restricted—adults only” classifications, health groups are beginning to argue that tobacco—which annually kills more than all other drugs, alcohol, road trauma, murder, AIDS, and breast cancer combined—should not be seen as a trivial, ordinary behaviour exempt from the regulatory debate.

Whatever superficial appeal the classification argument may have, it invites legitimate concerns about where it might all end. Films can depict all manner of abhorrent characters, behaviours, and situations which those seeking to promote a civil, safe, and healthy society might find objectionable. By the same argument used for a “smoking” classification, should car chase scenes be kept from children? Shoot outs? Gluttony? Racism? Sexism? Such questions are as reasonable as affirmative answers to them are frightening.

ACCOMPANYING ANTI-SMOKING MESSAGES

Stockwell and Glantz¹¹ suggest that cinemas should screen anti-smoking messages before “any films that include smoking” and that declarations appear in the credits as to whether any monetary or other considerations have been provided by tobacco interests. If taken literally, this would require almost every film to be preceded by such a message and invites concerns about whether parallel warnings should accompany action dramas featuring guns, fast cars, and all manner of risk taking. Indeed, there would be many films where the duration of preceding “health warnings” might well exceed the length of the film credits.

SELF-REGULATION

Efforts to raise awareness among film directors of the consequences of their depictions of smoking seem the strategies least likely to bracket tobacco control with censorship in the eyes of the film industry and the public. To date, tobacco control advocates have done little to engage the film industry in its own forums, such as film journals and conferences. Efforts could be made to provide research evidence of the power of such images with young people, and to pose the creative challenge to them of using alternatives to the more clichéd use of cigarettes—such as the use of smoke for creating atmosphere, depth, or distance; or lighting up to focus attention on a character’s face.

Given that Stockwell and Glantz¹¹ found little evidence of branding in tobacco depictions, it is likely that much of the casting of smoking in films is a product of thoughtlessness by directors rather than any deal done with tobacco companies. If this is the case, it should be possible to influence film makers to reduce the incidence of smoking in films, particularly when it is used in contexts that glamorise smoking. Parallel advocacy by women, minority groups, and the gay community to diversify dramatic roles for these groups beyond narrow stereotypes have produced many applauded results.

A positive step occurred in October in Los Angeles (not far from Hollywood), when a state hearing was held on smoking in movies.¹⁶ In an editorial¹⁷ the *San Francisco Chronicle* provided a thoughtful commentary.

"Citing the strong influence on teenagers of glamorous celluloid characters who light up, state Senator John Burton, D-SF, the head of the Senate Judiciary Committee, held a Los Angeles hearing designed to make his case that stars and entertainment moguls owe it to the public to end the use of 'gratuitous' smoking in films and television programs. If such a bully pulpit works to prick the consciences of Hollywood movers and shakers, more power to Burton. However, he needs to hold to his promise to keep the government out of the business of film directing and allow Hollywood to do the right thing on its own. Even though Screen Actors Guild President Richard Masur says 'a cigarette is the single most expressive tool an actor can employ,' he is confident thespians can find substitutes. SAG is sending information to members about the impact of on-screen smoking on young people and offering suggestions on realistic portrayals of smoking as well as alternative choices to smoking. The entertainment industry can advance good causes simply by portraying reality, such as the widespread use of car seatbelts. If it better reflects the current anti-smoking fervor, it could well save the lives of thousands of teenagers."

We notice a character smoking in a movie. But just as we don't leave a cinema reflecting "mmm . . . did you notice that the female lead didn't drink wine/drive a sports car/ride a horse/eat a ham sandwich?", only the most obsessed would leave a film imbued with memories that various characters did *not* smoke. Policies that seek to censor or draw extra attention to smoking through pre-movie warnings risk attracting ridicule from many influential sectors that might ordinarily be sympathetic to tobacco control.

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The authors are grateful to Michelle Scollo for her comments on an earlier draft of this editorial. Photographs of many smoking scenes in movies have been published as "fillers" or elsewhere in *Tobacco Control* (1996;5:62, 198, 214, 296; 1997;6:68, 149, 187, 193, 241, 274, 363).

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- 17 Anon. Here's puffing at you kid (editorial). *San Francisco Chronicle* 1997 Oct 29.

Addendum

A few important developments have occurred since our editorial went to press. First, on 3 December 1997 Vice President Al Gore convened "the first ever White House meeting of entertainment leaders" to discuss smoking in movies. Participants in the meeting, besides Gore, included Richard Masur, president of the Screen Actors Guild; Jack Shea, president of the Directors Guild; John Romano of the Writers Guild; and Jennifer Perry of Children's Action Network, a non-profit consortium of entertainment industry leaders. Masur attributed the heavy portrayal of smoking in movies and on television to a new generation of younger film makers and TV executives who "have not had the benefit of the kind of educational process that many of us who are older had". He promised that "You're going to see a marked change in the very, very near future."¹⁸⁻²⁰

The following day, the Entertainment Industries Council (EIC), an alliance of industry organisations and creative guilds, announced a tobacco prevention initiative aimed at writers, producers, directors, and creative executives. The EIC announced plans to issue 1500 copies of its initiative, which suggests when smoking might be appropriate in a film, and when it would not be. "Unless a character's tobacco use truly reveals something important about the character, consider other unique behaviors that might convey the same information," the EIC recommended. "Avoid using smoking as an icon or to stereotype an individual."²¹

Finally, new information has been published by the *Baltimore Sun*²² about successful product placement efforts by cigar manufacturers in movies such as *Independence Day* and *The First Wives Club* (the promotional poster for the latter movie was reproduced in *Tobacco Control* 1997;6:241).

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