

Mis/Disinformation and the Tobacco Industry

Digital Media for Behavior Change Webinar Series
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Truth Initiative Schroeder Institute is a leading and trusted voice in tobacco research and our ground-breaking studies power everything we do. Our scientists and researchers use the best and most rigorous research to investigate the latest issues and trends in tobacco use, analyze policies that can protect communities and evaluate the impact of our efforts to make tobacco a thing of the past.

Overview

- Definitions & Examples
- The Tobacco Industry Playbook
- The Proposed FDA Menthol Ban
- Countering Anti-Regulatory Narrative

An ecosystem of bad information

- Three types (Grimes & Gorski, 2022)
 - **Misinformation: False but unintentional.** Spread by those who believe it is true.
 - **Disinformation: False and intentional.** Spread by **malicious** actors.
 - **Mal-information: Reality based.** Presented to **manipulate** and **malign**.

For Example...

- **True:** In April 2020 a review of COVID-19 hospital admissions in Wuhan found lower than expected number of smokers. (Farsalinos et al., 2020)
- **Disinformation:** Exaggerated conclusiveness and extrapolated claims (e.g. vapers protected against COVID; nurses using nicotine patches to protect from infection)
- **Misinformation:** Tobacco prevents/treats COVID shared broadly across social media (Kavuluru et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2021; Sidani et al., 2021)
- **Mal-information:** Industry funded scientists suggests that nicotine protects against COVID-19
 - Meta-analyses support increased risk (Gülseven et al., 2020; Karsanos et al., 2020; Pantanavich & Glantz, 2020; Gupta et al., 2021)
 - The continued propagation of the original fact (hospital admissions) absent the context that would negate the influence of the mis and disinformation constitutes mal-information—technically true but manipulatively presented so as not to discredit the false information that supports the broader strategic narrative

The Tobacco Industry Playbook



SPINNING A NEW TOBACCO INDUSTRY

HOW BIG TOBACCO IS TRYING
TO SELL A DO-GOODER IMAGE
AND WHAT AMERICANS
THINK ABOUT IT

Industry Strategies

1

Expanding product portfolios to attract new customers and retain existing ones

2

Marketing new products to youth and young adults who have rejected cigarettes

3

Changing the Narrative to improve industry reputation among influential audiences and the general public

4

Lobbying and Cultivating influence with policy makers against policies that strengthen tobacco control efforts

Tobacco Industry: Champions of Science?

The New York Times

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Embracing Science for Better: If Not Now, When?

By Dr. Moira Gilchrist, Vice President Strategic & Scientific Communications, Philip Morris International




Photo: Dr. Moira Gilchrist, Vice President Strategic & Scientific Communications, Philip Morris International

Lost Amid Misinformation: Real People, Real Science, Real Progress

- *As a scientist working for Philip Morris International (PMI), I see the spread of misinformation nearly every day—from poorly executed scientific studies and results skewed by bias to misleading headlines. I personally have been subjected to intimidation tactics grounded in misinformation that, unfortunately, have achieved their intended effect of shutting down debate and stifling free and open discussion. Too often and too easily, reason and fact are drowned out by skewed and hyperbolic voices.”*

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/brand-studio/wp/2021/05/25/lost-amid-misinformation-real-people-real-science-real-progress/>

WHAT BIG TOBACCO SAID

PMI claims “we have thoroughly transformed, taking great strides towards realizing our vision of replacing cigarettes, for good”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p42ZMNjRQ6k>

MEANWHILE, WHAT BIG TOBACCO DOES

Over 5.4 trillion cigarettes sold globally to 1 billion smokers. Marlboro (made by PMI) is the world’s top brand.

PMI announced the “Year of Unsmoke” in 2019.

PMI launches new cigarette brand, “Bold,” also in 2019.

<https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/tobacco-industry-marketing/seeing-through-big-tobaccos-spin>

The Menthol Narrative

FDA Proposed Menthol Ban

- **4/28/22:** The FDA announced new **proposed product standards**
 - **Prohibit** menthol as a **characterizing flavor** in cigarettes
 - **Prohibit all characterizing flavors** (other than tobacco) in cigars
 - **Ban on sale and manufacture only:**

“Importantly, the FDA cannot and will not enforce against individual consumers for possession or use of menthol cigarettes or flavored cigars. If these proposed rules are finalized and implemented, FDA enforcement will only address manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers, importers and retailers who manufacture, distribute, or sell such products within the U.S. that are not in compliance with applicable requirements. **These proposed regulations do not include a prohibition on individual consumer possession or use.**”

-FDA fact sheet regarding proposed product standards

Fact v. Fiction: The FDA's Menthol Ban

- **Fact:**

- Menthols are cigarette of choice for AA/B smokers. (Cadham et al, 2020)
- Tobacco has been impetus for salient examples of police violence. (Baumgartner et al., 2022)
 - Eric Garner was selling loose cigarettes
 - George Floyd was buying menthols
- Criminalization of illicit drugs has disproportionately harmed AA/B communities. (Schoenfeld, 2012)

- **Fiction:**

- **Disinformation:** Criminalization of menthol possession.
- **Misinformation:** Menthol ban will harm rather than benefit AA/B communities.



Racializing the Narrative

- **Mal-information:** Tobacco control is an extension of the “War on Drugs”
 - **Illicit market:** Menthol distribution via drug cartels
 - Direct mailing
 - **Over-policing:** Increased police violence against AA/B communities
 - Lobbying AA/B leaders and community outreach (Baumgartner et al., 2022)
 - Racialized narrative online (Allem et al., 2023)

Marlboro

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health.

HELP STOP A MENTHOL BAN

Federal regulators have proposed a ban on all menthol cigarettes sold in the United States. Banning menthol cigarettes unfairly limits Adult Smokers 21+ choice for tobacco products that are already highly regulated and age-restricted.

These flavor bans can create underground markets that increase crime, reduce tax revenues and hurt small businesses. Adult Smokers 21+ should be allowed to buy menthol cigarettes if they want to.

Don't let regulators take away your choices. Submit a comment to the FDA and tell them you oppose this ban. It takes just 30 seconds!

MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD AT

[TOBACCDRIGHTS.COM](https://www.tobaccorights.com)





The FDA's proposed ban on menthol cigarettes is based on faulty claims

None of the FDA's claims about the proposed menthol ban hold up.



FDA Announces Proposed Rules for National Menthol Cigarette Ban

“ Many civil rights groups oppose the prohibition as a continuation of the War on Drugs, saying it is likely to increase interactions between Black people and the police.



CASAA: THINK BIGGER THAN A MENTHOL BAN



In New York City, which sees more than 60% of cigarette sales occurring in the illicit market due to excessive taxes, the penalties for selling tobacco products without a license are expensive and can lead to more severe consequences. But in between the witnessing of a tobacco crime and the penalty phase, citizens are at an increased risk of imprisonment, injury, or death at the hands of law enforcement. The murder of Eric Garner is just one example of such encounters with police. His death is one of thousands in a reckless, expensive, and racist drug war that has never really been about improving public health.

Today, there are brave men and women in law enforcement who are speaking out against increasing activist pressure to add more substance use-related crimes that officers are sworn to enforce. Ostensibly, a ban on menthol will benefit Black Americans the most by pressuring them to quit smoking, but the prohibition gives police one more directive to be suspicious of citizens' behavior. This strategy is already failing as a means to controlling any other substance use; there is no reason to assume the outcome will be different based on flavor.

Countering Anti-Regulatory Narrative

- **Racialized narrative** amplified on social media **about** but not necessarily **by** AA/B voices (Under review)
- **Mal-information bigger than menthol**
 - Identifying master narratives, opinion leaders (Silver et al., 2022; Under review)
 - Industry heavily involved in mis/dis/mal information
 - Not always clear
 - Opposing FDA with mal-information (Silver et al., 2023)
 - Anti-regulatory interests leverage Surgeon General's "pre-bunking" strategy through "quote tweet function"
 - "Quote tweets" disseminated more broadly than original tweets
- **Addressing mal-information requires addressing the broader narratives and the mouthpieces that amplify them**

Questions?



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