

Press Coverage of Tobacco Issues: A Newsworthy Social Problem

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploratory project that begins to examine the trends in tobacco-related newspaper coverage beginning in Fall of 2000. Drawing upon previous work in the areas of public health, social problems and mass communication, several tactics are identified as means by which tobacco issues can be constructed as newsworthy social problems in local newspapers across the country. In organizing these tactics, three major themes emerge: the use of 'heartstring' issues to draw attention to a problem; the creation of antagonistic relationships among different tobacco-focused parties; and the use of American notions of rights and privileges.

INTRODUCTION

The 1964 Surgeon General's Report on the health effects of smoking presented a momentous initiation of tobacco issues into the public sphere, and research on smoking has dotted press coverage ever since. Most recently, extensive news coverage of the 46-state, \$206 billion Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) put tobacco issues in the spotlight. However, in the current media landscape, the breadth of tobacco coverage extends far beyond these historic events, each of which serve as one of many vehicles for putting tobacco issues in the political forefront.

And so how is it, after nearly forty years, that tobacco issues remain prevalent in newspaper coverage? Every day, newspapers from around the country report tobacco-related stories that range from the amusing to the depressing to the inspiring. This paper explores the concept that tobacco is given consideration in the press as a result of both its newsworthiness and its predilection to being constructed as a social problem.

Based on a highly exploratory investigation of current newspaper coverage of tobacco issues, this paper seeks to discuss some potential means through which smokers, non-smokers, tobacco farmers, the tobacco industry and tobacco control advocates work as both claims-makers (as per social problems literature) and news-makers (as per communications literature) to keep tobacco-related issues in the public vernacular.

This research is based on the first stage of a large project that analyzes newspaper coverage of tobacco issues. Grounding the research in literature from several disciplines (predominantly public health, sociology and communications), the project will track the breadth, scope and

content of tobacco-related news articles over the next four years. A primary goal of the research is to identify the types of tobacco issues that are constructed as newsworthy, as well as the means through which claims can be made about these issues as social problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tobacco in the Media Literature

A handful of studies have researched tobacco coverage in the print media. This body of research is often limited in that it uses a content analytic approach toward measuring coverage of a specific *type* of event that has already been established as newsworthy, such as cigar images (Feit 2001), California's ban on smoking in bars (Magzamen et al 2001), the tobacco settlement agreements (Lima & Siegel 1999) or passive smoking (Kennedy & Bero 1999). The present study differs in that it uses a more qualitative approach as a means of drawing out themes and topics from the entire universe of articles, rather than simply reporting on a single type of coverage.

Mass Media Literature

From a communications standpoint, this paper seeks to explore how tobacco-focused articles are constructed as newsworthy in U.S. newspapers.

For more than two decades, communications and mass media literature has addressed the notion that news stories, rather than just *reporting* an objective incident, instead *construct* the newsworthiness of an event (For example, see Molotch & Lester 1974; Lester 1980; Shoemaker

& Reese 1991). Or, as Lester (1980) writes, “News is a product of reality-making activities and not simply reality-describing ones.”

Following from this idea, the next step is to consider how events are constructed as newsworthy in and by the press. Media literature has long supported the contention that a key component of constructing an issue as a newsworthy story is the establishment of drama, or eliciting sympathy of human emotion. Research on coverage of dramatic events such as protests addresses this notion (see Gurr 1968), and recent research has confirmed the idea (Oliver & Myers 1999). While the concept may seem common-sensical, it is important to keep in mind when analyzing news stories.

Social Problems Literature

Like mass media research, literature in the area of social problems has witnessed a shift away from the idea of objective reality, instead focusing on subjective processes through which events are constructed.

Social problems literature of the past 40 years has emphasized the subjective, collectively defined nature of social problems. In the same vein of communications research on how an event can be constructed as newsworthy, Blumer (1971) advocated for studying the process by which a social problem is created. Following from this, Kitsuse and Spector (1973) defined social problems as, “the activities of groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions”, and sought to address how claim-making and responding activities emerge and sustain themselves in the public arena.

From a sociological standpoint, inherent in the process of constructing a social problem is *who* is working to construct such ideas. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) introduce the idea of claims-makers, those individuals who are in charge of claims-making activities. Similarly, constructionist literature discusses social problems in the context of “definitional activities of people around conditions and conduct they find troublesome” (Schneider 1985).

Where Mass Media and Social Problems Literature Meet

The means through which something is constructed as newsworthy seem closely aligned with the means through which something is constructed as a social problem. Our research therefore sits at the juncture of this communications and social problems research, and endeavors to apply these ideas to the realm of tobacco coverage, taking an exploratory look at the types of claims about tobacco that are formulated in the press. Two of the most prevalent of these processes are the construction of dramatic claims and discussions of a quest for a utopian ideal.

Rather than being drawn in by objective, detached stories and events, people by nature are attracted to experiences that elicit some sort of human sentiment: fear, sympathy, anger, pride, sadness. As such, drama is a key element in events that are either constructed as newsworthy or as a social problem (or, as is fairly common, as both). As discussed above, two main components in identifying the newsworthiness of an event are human drama and conflict or controversy (Shoemaker and Reese 1991). This sits alongside the proclivity toward drama that is articulated in social problems literature. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) placed social problems in the context of a public arenas model. Their work constructed a six-element model through which

social problems progress. One element, the selection process by which social problems remain in the public arena, includes a series of points that a successful claim must make – and add, “A fully articulated claim will dramatize each of these points”.

In addition to drama as a stand-alone component, the creation of an antagonistic relationship has also been addressed in both mass media and social problems literature. Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) public arenas model discussed patterns of interaction (or “feedback”) among claims-makers, adding that this feedback “either amplifies or dampens the attention given problems in public arenas”. The implication is that, in order for a given topic to remain relevant, (largely negative) interaction among competing groups must remain strong. In the case of this study, this can take the form of feedback between any combination of tobacco industry representatives, tobacco control advocates, tobacco farming organizations, smokers’ rights groups or public health activists.

Another relationship where antagonistic feedback is documented is between experts and lay people. Schneider’s (1985) work on the constructionist view of social problems discusses the conflicting relationship between lay claims-makers and traditional experts. An example of this type of clash can be seen in Aronson’s (1982) work on science as a claims-making activity. She identifies and describes how the definition of a specific social problem is likely when “scientists are confronted by social movements to restrict their research.” In this case, one can imagine the circumstances under which non-experts attempt to refute unpopular scientific claims.

Work in mass communications has also established the presence of drama and adversarial constructions in the media. Gamson, et al (1992) maintain that the media presents oppositional voices, and further that it generally advances cynicism in its audience. Oliver and Myers (1999) assert that, “the element of drama or contention is recognized as making an event newsworthy”.

In both communications and social problems literature, the presence of drama is prevalent as a method of constructing interest in a story or event. This can take the form of inducing sympathy or emotion, or of creating an adversarial relationship between two or more groups (or arenas).

A second place where social problems and mass media literature converge in the construction of an event is the discussion of an idealized model of public life. Williams’ discussion of constructing a public good (1995) addresses the “contract model”, a construction of public good that is built upon the notion of rights and justice. In parallel mass communications literature, Molotch and Lester’s (1974) analysis identifies how promoting occurrences for public use serves as one means of news making. Here, he offers the example of promoting a public health danger.

FINDINGS

While previous literature in the areas of social problems, mass media and tobacco have each clarified and furthered topics in their respective areas, little work has been done on the intersection of these three bodies of research. Using past work as a grounding, this paper begins very exploratory research into the ways in which claims-makers (and news-makers) define tobacco as a social problem in the news media. Hopefully, it can serve as a springboard for further research as our data collection progresses.

Our Data

This research, which is an extension of work already being done on another project, analyzes newspaper articles from around the country that discuss, in some capacity, issues surrounding tobacco. This is an all-inclusive area that incorporates tobacco farming, the tobacco industry, anti-smoking efforts, etc. All means of articles – including hard news, editorials, letters to the editor, question and answer, information pieces, editorial cartoons and columns – are included in the database. Newspaper advertising and comic strips have been excluded.

The articles are obtained from a news clipping service, which reads every daily newspaper in the country looking for tobacco-related articles. Data from these 1,400 papers produce approximately 4,000 articles per month. The clips are then sorted by date and stored in a searchable database.

Ultimately, one-third of these articles will be sampled and coded using a comprehensive 11-variable coding scheme. “Live” coding is expected to begin within the month. At this stage, however, observations about current trends come from a somewhat informal perusal of the articles and are therefore highly exploratory.

How are claims about tobacco issues created and documented in the American news media?

Both previous literature (for example, see Oliver and Myers 1999) and common sense suggest that newsworthy topics are those that, in some capacity, use drama or contention to capture the attention of the audience. To that end, this paper discusses three general means by which this

dramatic ideal seems to be applied to tobacco issues in the American press: “heartstring” issues; the creation of antagonists; and appeals to American perceptions of “rights”.

Pulling the Heartstrings

Youth

Appeals to human sympathy are a well-documented means by which the media captures the attention of the audience (see Shoemaker & Reese 1991). Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) noted that, in social problem claims, “officially certified ‘facts’ are coupled with vivid, emotional rhetoric” (p. 62).

One powerful example of this type of rhetoric can be seen through the inclusion of children or youth in the discussion. Children automatically provoke images of helplessness, sympathy and an inability to make informed decisions. These impressions prove extremely powerful when claims are being made about youth tobacco use. As an example, one article on youth smoking quoted a source as saying, ‘It is one thing to talk about grown adults making choices. With impressionable children, it’s another question.’ (Sunday Star-Ledger, 11/26/00) This presents a clear-cut example of tobacco being constructed as something that preys upon the inexperience of youth.

Similarly, whereas claims made that highlight the overall health effects of smoking are dramatic; claims that are made about the impact of these same effects on children can be exponentially more powerful. For example, a letter to a Colorado paper discussed the potential effects of taking children to places where smoking is allowed: “I know as a mother of three children that

kids who breathe secondhand smoke are more likely to get ear infections, colds, bronchitis and other health problems. A smoke-filled environment is not what I want for my children” (Ft. Collins Coloradoan, 8/30/01). Automatically, framing a discussion of the health effects of smoking around children rather than the general public evokes the image of innocent victims rather than ‘something that just happens’.

Drawing attention to the tobacco industry’s efforts to target children demonizes the industry to a degree that could only be possible through specific “heartstring” claims. In a highly publicized story last year, Philip Morris sent book covers to thousands of high schools across the country – book covers that many, tobacco control advocates and members of the general public alike, asserted were subliminal advertising for cigarettes. Suddenly, newspapers around the country were presenting the debate from the perspective of the schools, the students and tobacco control groups. In these articles, emphasizing the tobacco industry’s efforts to advertise to children provides a weighty claim that is difficult to disregard. Another story described a youth anti-tobacco group’s mission, “to inform teens about the lies put before them by the tobacco industry. We are tired of being the target of their marketing and will no longer be victimized by their need for profit” (Las Vegas Review-Journal, 11/24/00). Again, by emphasizing perceptions of children as victims or as specific targets of a multi-billion dollar industry, these stories draw upon dramatic, “heartstring” claims to construct the issue as being a newsworthy social problem.

Overall, what makes these type of claims powerful is their ability to create the image of an “every-child” who is in danger – a blameless target who could be anyone’s son or daughter.

Personalization of Disease

Similar personalization techniques can be seen in descriptions of smoking-related diseases. An aloof list of the negative health effects of smoking would seem to appeal to readers on an intellectual, rather than emotional, level. On the other hand, poignant pieces about someone watching their spouse or parent waste away in front of their eyes evokes a situation with which readers can easily sympathize. Personal accounts of stomas, the burden of oxygen tanks, the pain of lung removal or illness-related job loss are stories that can't help but induce sympathy from a reader. In a letter to an advice columnist, one woman described her sister (who smoked for 40 years), "sitting in a nursing home, hooked up to her 24-hour oxygen supply, having returned from yet another visit to the hospital with pneumonia and congestive heart failure" (Star-Tribune, 11/14/01). In other words, abstract notions of illness and disease are one thing; heart-wrenching personal accounts, on the other hand, are quite another. These claims not only present the intimate aspects of tobacco-related disease, but seem to shift the emphasis away from the smoker as an independent agent, and on to the product's harmful effects.

Addiction

In taking all the horrible consequences of disease and applying them to a specific person, such claims-makers are, in effect, creating a victim with which the reader can sympathize as a means of maintaining smoking as a social problem. Another way that victims are created in the news media is through the descriptions of tobacco addiction. By its very nature, addiction is something that *controls*, rather than *is controlled by*, the individual. As such, personal accounts of immediate and irrevocable dependence are not only powerful, but difficult to deny: "Despite

hacking her head off, Austin was hooked so fast and hard that even getting kicked out of three high schools for smoking didn't deter her" (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1/10/01). Relating to the youth issue, another article read, "Some 12- and 13-year-olds showed evidence of addiction within days of their first cigarettes." And finally, "...we offer support and all kinds of programs to assist the smokers in their almost hopeless efforts to quit, but in the end, that deadly lure, 'nicotine', and the tobacco industry win again and again" (Enterprise, 3/5/01). Here one can see how, through claims about the nature of addiction, agency is removed from the smoker and a more sympathetic situation is described.

Tobacco as local culture

Imagine you have a business that has brought prosperity to your family for years. Then, suddenly, circumstances change, and the business shrinks to a third of its size.

Imagine being seen as a villain for trying to save that business – having strangers from coast to coast working against you, and the power of Congress and the presidency against you.

That is what life has been like for Kentucky tobacco farmers (Courier-Journal, 10/16/00).

The preceding three examples of "heartstring" issues have focused, more or less, on the tobacco control side of the arena. The last example being presented comes from the opposite side of the spectrum: the tobacco farmer. Tobacco-growing states are placed in an interesting dilemma. They are the producers of a product that has been increasingly maligned over the past twenty-five years – and, in fact, is the only consumer product that is hazardous to one's health when used as intended (Napier 1995). And yet, their industry is a legal, legitimate farming business that suffers many of the same stresses as any other farm-based production. Given that

newspapers have limited space and write for specific audiences, local papers in communities that don't confront farming issues are not afforded the opportunity to read about these kinds of controversies. Thus, much of the country (most notably, the north and west portions) is not afforded the opportunity of learning about an integral part of the tobacco equation.

Several states (predominantly North and South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia) rely heavily upon tobacco production to maintain their local economies. Money from tobacco-related industry affects virtually every aspect of their day-to-day business dealings – and thus, serves as not only the *economic* foundation for their livelihood, but as the *social* and *cultural* foundation for their lives. One of the most prevalent claims-making activities that can be seen in news articles relating to tobacco in tobacco-rich states is the myriad ways that their lives and livelihood are slowly being decimated by external forces. Clearly, any claim that can illustrate the systematic degradation of one's own community has the ability to evoke powerful sentiments from readers.

In short, tobacco-dependent states have a large pool of claims from which to draw in order to identify and sustain their plight as a social problem. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) describe the ideal social problem claim as one that includes several features, the primary of which is *asserting the importance of a problem*. In communities that are under attack from a multitude of groups, establishing importance is a relatively simple task.

One example is the use of reminiscence and nostalgia as powerful tools that can establish the magnitude of a situation through appeals to “the good ol' days”. An article from North Carolina

begins, “Everything related to tobacco farming and manufacturing in North Carolina is shrinking – except for the memories” (News & Observer, 10/30/00). A South Carolina paper, reporting on the closing of a cigar factory, comments that “...Wheeling is also losing a part of itself” (Aiken Standard). Both of these highlight a contemplative set of claims that draw attention to an idealized past, and which go on to illustrate how claims about the death of a culture can be used in the creation of a social problem.

To summarize, several different means can be employed to “pull the heartstrings” of a given audience. In personalizing a given situation – that is, by making someone believe that it could (or will) happen to them – claims-makers drive home the import carried by a given situation. Using children as a vehicle for change, personalizing disease, constructing addiction as something of which one is a victim, and asserting that tobacco creates a culture (not just an industrial or economic base) are four ways in which it would seem that tobacco issues can emerge as social problems.

Creation of Antagonists

In Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) model of social problems, they suggest that a central feature of what keeps a social problem in the public arena is the feedback (that is, interaction) among different arenas. They propose that, “[t]his feedback either amplifies or dampens the attention given problems in public arenas”. Thus, in order for a social problem to remain in public discourse, it serves the best interests of the opposing parties to make claims that create an antagonist of the other group. In other words, to establish a sustained, aggressive debate between groups both establishes and maintains a situation of claims-making and responding as ongoing

activities. A number of such dichotomous relationships can be seen in the current news media surrounding tobacco.

As discussed in the previous section, tobacco-dependent states feel pressure from a number of different sides. Thus, in addition to framing sympathy-evoking situations, these claims-makers can also establish a number of adversaries as a means of creating a social problem.

Tobacco Farming vs. Cigarette Companies

One example of the creation of an antagonistic relationship is that between tobacco farmers and cigarette companies (e.g., the tobacco industry). For as long as tobacco has been mass produced in America, farmers have taken their crop to an annual auction for trade. Recently, however, the tobacco industry has begun negotiating with the farmer directly, rather than trading at auctions. The result of this has been the slow decline of the auction tradition, discussions of which can be regularly seen in newspaper articles in tobacco-rich states. From the tobacco industry's perspective, this step expedites the buying process.

What is reported in local papers, however, is not the "speeding up" of tobacco trade; rather, the shift is discussed as an attack on their business, livelihood, and traditions. Three major ideas arise from these claims. *First*, there is the loss of one more cultural staple of the farming process; historically, auctions were not just economic interactions, but social ones. For example, an article covering an annual tobacco auction reads, "As farmers across Kentucky gathered for the start of the annual burley auctions, many could not escape the feeling that they were watching a dinosaur plodding along to extinction" (Daily Independent, 11/17/01). *Second*, there

is the feeling that the tobacco industry is attempting to enslave the farmers by eliminating the free market system that the auctions provided: “Tobacco farmers are questioning cigarette companies about direct contracts and whether such deals will ruin the auction system and drive down the price of their crops” (Greenville News, 1/29/01). And *third*, by contracting directly with the farmers, they gain control over the quality of the crop, thereby removing any industry-wide quality control. An article in a Kentucky paper reads, “Here’s the catch: The tobacco companies will undo the price support program by unraveling the U.S. grading service.” Thus, there are three major claims that tobacco farmers consistently make against the tobacco industry.

Tobacco Farmers vs. Tobacco Control

The battle that farmers fight with cigarette companies is not the only one, however. Additionally, tobacco growers have also constructed tobacco control efforts as problematic. As discussed previously, tobacco farmers produce a legal, legitimate agricultural product. However, as luck would have it, they also produce one that kills nearly half a million people per year. Each time tobacco control advocates push for legislation that bans smoking, inhibits sales in certain areas, or restricts advertising and promotion, that counts as one more nail in the coffin for tobacco production. Similarly, as the number of smokers declines, the farming industry follows suit accordingly. As such, in newspaper-based claims from the tobacco-growing states, tobacco control supporters are made into enemies of the local economy. Often, claims about tobacco control advocates fall into the camp of ‘they just don’t understand’, or ‘what are they doing ruining our business?’. One Kentucky paper describes farmers as such: “They have paid a high price for growing an unpopular crop, and for being slow to face up to the need to change” (Greenville News, 1/29/01). Here, newspapers serve as a popular public arena for making

community-based claims against those who portray tobacco as an “unpopular crop” – tobacco control groups.

In response, tobacco control has a pool of statistics about the number of people that cigarettes kill, the amount of money “wasted” on cigarettes, the number of children who pick up smoking every year or every month or every day. And so, the adversarial relationship progresses relentlessly over the battle between the death of thousands vs. the death of the tobacco culture.

Smokers vs. Non-Smokers

The two previous examples have described relations between public institutions – the tobacco industry, tobacco farmers, and tobacco control groups. In discussing the effect of the mass media, Edelman (1988) notes that, “news about ‘public affairs’ encourages the translation of personal concerns into beliefs about a public world”. This is precisely the situation in the case of both smokers and non-smokers. Adversaries can be created through individuals aligning themselves with a specific behavior and thereby a *de facto* group: in this case, smokers or non-smokers. The claims that rage between these two groups are often highly charged and seem to speak not as an individual smoker or non-smoker, but on behalf of the group with which they have aligned themselves.

Smoker advocates most often attack the inclination of non-smokers to “tell them what to do”, and such claims are common in newspaper claims. The claims being put forth surround perceptions of oppression, unwarranted anger and being forced to feel ashamed of their choices. For example, an Iowa paper describes the smoking ban situation *in Los Angeles* thusly: “First

they were kicked out of workplaces. Then banned from bars and restaurants. About the last place Los Angeles smokers have left to light up is the outdoors – and now they may be banned from the city’s parks” (Des Moines Register, 10/31/01). Further, anti-smoking advocates are portrayed as pressuring others to do their bidding: “The non-smokers got half of what they wanted then, but now want to force their agenda on everyone” (Waco Tribune-Herald, 10/30/01). Among the most interesting trends in these claims is the proclivity for using the word ‘Nazi’, or some variant thereof to describe public health. For example, a Floridian columnist writes, “America’s cigarette Nazis, like any other tyrant, cannot be satisfied” (Cape Coral Daily Breeze, 12/14/01). If we accept the notion that solid claims in the public arena include the creation of an antagonistic body, there is seemingly no more powerful semantic weapon than to induce images of gas chambers and labor camps.

Another way in which smokers attack the non-smoking body is by refuting scientific claims. Schneider (1985), in his review of the constructionist view of social problems theory, discussed the medicalizing of problems, and the struggle between professional and lay claims makers for the ownership of a problem. One technique among smokers as claims-makers is to downplay the health effects of secondhand smoke, to the effect of ‘it’s not as bad as they make it out to be’, or ‘I’m the one who suffers the negative effects, not the people around me.’ This variety of claims can serve as a springboard for defending their practices and responding to attacks from non-smokers.

On the flip side, non-smokers employ similar tactics in their battle to create smoking as a social problem. These claims surround notions of smokers as selfish, polluters of the air, polluters of

the ground, etc. For example, a letter to a Texas paper comments, “I have never had the pleasure of knowing a smoker who did not view the sidewalk as an ashtray[...]Smokers live under the delusion that there is no consequence to their nasty leavings” (Houston Chronicle, 1/14/01).

Often, claims from this side focus on the idea of smokers as people who don’t care for anyone else, and whose habit is ruinous to the both the environment and other people: “My sister-in-law’s kids have allergies and asthma, but she smokes around them anyway. Parties at my in-laws’ are literally a cloud of smoke” (Boston Herald, 9/28/01). Or, more to the point: “[Smokers] are selfish, self-centered, self-destructive, self-appointed, self-assertive, self-interested, self-gratifying, self-indulgent, self-loving, self-ruling, self-seeking, self-regarding, self-righteous – and above all else very ignorant and non-caring” (Times Leader, 12/23/00). Such claims in the public arena (e.g., newspapers) powerfully situate one group against another.

To summarize, the creation of an antagonist can not only take several forms, but also seems to occur between two types of groups: institutional arenas such as tobacco farmers, tobacco control groups and cigarette companies, as well as individuals who align themselves with informal groups based on their own behavior – either as a smoker or as a non-smoker. Claims in this area create rivalries that purposefully involve both claims-making and responding activities as means of keeping the specific social problem in the public arena – and thus in the press.

American Rights

The creation of antagonists is one mechanism by which to ensure the establishment of a social problem as being newsworthy. Another approach is to ascertain a connection between the particular issue and liberties in a more general sense.

The sociopolitical climate in America allows for a significant amount of discussion of the notion of rights. Americans tend to display pride in the number of codified rights to which they are entitled. The right to free speech, the right to bear arms, the right to protest, the right to information, the right to freedom of movement – these are inalienable, non-negotiable. And further, to suggest that rights are being violated is considered a serious charge.

These rights are ostensibly defended because they are the way in which Americans assert claims of a public good. Williams (1995), in an analysis of construction of the public good, commented, “Everyone is in favor of the public good, but just what constitutes public good – or more accurately, *whose* public good is to be promoted – is a matter of political contention” (p. 125, emphasis in original). Thus, any deviations from this ideal can be constructed as a social problem. In considering the idea of rights as a measure of public good, one can perfectly apply this framework to the claims made by the three major players: smokers, non-smokers and the tobacco industry.

Right to Smoke

One way in which such claims are constructed in the news is by establishing rights of free movement as a foundation for the public good. In this instance, from the perspective of smokers, the notion of rights is imperative to their aforementioned claims of non-smokers as

“Nazis”. The crux of this entire argument is the idea that no one – not the government, not co-workers or employers, not landlords, not public health advocates, and certainly not other people walking down the street – has the right to prohibit a smoker from smoking. Smoking is a legal, valid act that every smoker has made the conscious decision to perform – and it is this right which comprises an important aspect of the public good. To infringe upon this act is a violation of a smoker’s right to personal movement, to spend their money on what they see fit, and to be allowed to accept responsibility for their own actions. In a Wisconsin paper that reported on the voting down of a smoking ban, they reported, ‘It means that people decided on freedom of choice’ (Leader-Telegram, 1/24/01).

Right to Breathe Clean Air

It is interesting that a very similar approach is adopted by non-smokers the rights of non-smokers; the rights of non-smokers is a strong claims-making stance adopted in the press. In this instance, the notion of rights takes the form of a person’s right to breathe clean air. Here, the claim about the public good means that the right to breathe a certain quality of air supercedes (or at least equals) any rights that the smoker perceives for themselves: “Non-smokers have as much right to dine in their choice of restaurant as smokers” (Free Lance-Star, 12/13/01).

Each side argues completely antithetical points by using the same rhetorical framework. The idea of rights seems to be such an important and inviolable one, that both sides can involve it in the claims they make against one another. Furthering the idea of continuous feedback among arenas, one Ohio paper takes a pre-emptive strike against smoking claims: “Non-smokers have

another piece of evidence to use against those who claim that no-smoking rules trample their freedoms” (Times Reporter, 3/18/01).

Right to Produce a Legal Product

The tobacco industry can also draw upon the notion of rights when making claims in the news press. As inviolable to America as ideas of rights is the conception of capitalism as a social structure. As mentioned above, an important dichotomy exists in the tobacco production – that a carcinogenic product is produced, in high volume, completely legally. In a guest column, a Philip Morris executive writes, “We believe regulation can bring greater stability and consistency to tobacco policy and predictability to our business” (Lexington Herald-Leader, 1/9/01). This quote exemplifies a powerful way that the tobacco industry can consistently establish their right to produce cigarettes.

In sum, claims made in the public arena about the idea of rights is a powerful one that, in America, is hard to contest because it uses our these liberties as a means of establishing the public good.

CONCLUSION

This highly exploratory work has begun to examine early developments in the newspaper coverage of tobacco issues, specifically the ways in which claims are constructed in order to present tobacco and smoking as newsworthy social problems. Sitting at the juncture of literature in social problems, mass communication, and media coverage of tobacco, three major patterns

emerged in this investigation of claims: “heartstring” issues, the creation of antagonistic relationships, and appeals to American notions of “rights” or liberties.

Appeals to human sympathy, or heartstring issues, are a documented means by which strong social problems claims can be made. Claims of youth vulnerability are particularly powerful, emphasizing innocence, inexperience and helplessness and evoking images of innocent victims. In the same vein, personalizing smoking-related diseases (that is, shifting away from hard statistics and instead focusing on the intimate, personal facets of disease) is a heart wrenching method of “pulling the heartstrings” of mass media consumers, and thus establishing tobacco use as a social problem. In short, identifying a personal victim upon which sympathy can be placed was identified as a relatively prevalent type of claim.

Establishing a victim can also be seen in discussions of addiction and farming as something beyond the control of the individual. Framing addiction as a preying entity provides a powerful structure of claims upon which to build. Similarly, patterns in newspaper portrayals of the tobacco farmer everyman who is just trying to do the right thing emerged. In such articles, the tobacco farmer is portrayed as the legitimate underdog who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Discussions of youth, personal disease, addiction and farming each evince a specific heartstring claim that can be seen in newspaper coverage.

In addition to heartstring issues, another pattern which seemed to emerge in the data was the establishment of antagonistic relationships. This model is based upon Hilgartner and Bosk’s (1988) discussion of feedback among different public arenas. In the instance of this project, the

public arenas through which claims are made include the tobacco industry, tobacco farmers, tobacco control advocates, smokers and non-smokers. Three of these feedback relationships were discussed. The first, tobacco farming vs. cigarette companies, addressed the ways in which tobacco farmers make claims against the tobacco industry as ruining their time-honored industry through various means. Such claims identify and maintain notions of the tobacco companies as antagonistic bodies.

Tobacco farmers have a similar “bone to pick” with tobacco control advocates. This antagonistic relationship sits at the heart of tobacco claims. Both parties are engaged in legitimate, legal activities that shape the world around them. And yet, it is difficult for the two groups to co-exist. As such, tobacco farmers often make claims against tobacco control groups as trying to ruin their business. Maintaining such claims in the press is a means of sustaining antagonistic perceptions between the two groups.

The final adversarial relationship discussed is the claims made between smokers and nonsmokers. Both groups appear to align themselves with a particular position given their own behaviors, and accordingly make claims against the other group. In short, the creation of antagonistic relationships can be seen in the claims made between: tobacco farmers and cigarette companies; tobacco farmers and tobacco control advocates; and smokers and non-smokers.

The final type of claim examined in this paper is the appeal to American notions of rights and liberties. America, as a whole, prides itself on the rights of its individuals. As such, claims made about the violation of these rights is a powerful approach to constructing something as a

social problem in the media. Three types of rights claims were discussed in this paper. The first, the right to smoke, addresses notions of freedom of movement and right to engage in a legal activity. As such, descriptions of non-smoking “Nazis” are powerful and strike at the heart of such discussions. The second rights claim comes from the opposing side, the right to breathe clean air. Here, claims about rights are framed from the perspective of public health and environmentalism, and appeal to notions of the greater good. And finally, the tobacco companies’ rights claims surround their right to produce a legal product. Until cigarettes are prohibited, they have as much of a right to manufacture their product as the local cookie factory. All told, these three claims exemplify the notion of appealing to American rights and liberties.

Hopefully, this paper will serve as a catalyst for further work in the area. The elements that make a newsworthy story are similar to the elements that maintain something as a social problem. As such, this work endeavored to begin the exploration of the ways in which tobacco issues are both constructed as newsworthy and established as social problems through a series of claims-making activities. Such work has only just begun, and has the potential to carry on far into the future.

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