

State Funding and Media Messages: SmokeLess States Money and Press Coverage¹

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Abstract:

Problem/Objective: The bulk of research on media advocacy has addressed specific, pragmatic questions such as the efficacy of particular tactics, the relationship between media advocacy and policy change at the local level, or the ways in which the structure of a single organization can garner press coverage. However, little attention has been paid to how tobacco control funding at the state level might be expected to contribute to overall coverage of tobacco issues, and the degree to which this coverage might be particularly favorable or unfavorable to tobacco control efforts.

Methods: Using SmokeLess States funding as a predictor and newspaper coverage as an outcome measure, this project assessed the degree to which a relationship exists between state-level funding (across a wide variety of tobacco control organizations) and news coverage. News data came from data collected through the SmokeLess States evaluation, which amassed approximately 150,000 tobacco-related newspaper articles over the course of three years. From this universe of articles, a random one-third were coded for a variety of variables intended to measure content, prominence, type and tone. Our analysis focused on one year (2002), and emphasized the relationship between funding and news prevalence.

Results: States funded by SLS were more likely to publish articles about SLS-related policies, more likely to have newspaper coverage that was favorable toward tobacco control efforts, and less likely to give the tobacco industry a voice. More sustained funding, as well as more dollars of funding, were positively correlated with sympathetic reporting.

Conclusions: From this preliminary analysis, we suggest that sustained, long-term funding for media advocacy can create an environment whose ‘sum is greater than the whole of its parts’. One project in an ongoing set of analyses, this project lays the foundation for a theoretically-grounded and pragmatic assessment of how money spent on media advocacy translates into achieving tobacco control efforts.

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