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Where there's smoke

(there's advertising revenue)



BY MANETTE MARAIS

ARE THE MEDIA "helping" the tobacco industry in its efforts to keep the public in the dark about the real health risks of smoking by not divulging too much about the health dangers of smoking out of fear of losing advertising revenue?

Advertising plays an important role in influencing the ways in which health information reaches populations in developing countries.

According to Wallack and Montgomery in "Advertising for All by the year 2000" (in the *Journal of Public Health Policy* no 13) tobacco advertising, in fact, distorts public health messages and is particularly successful in influencing poor and uneducated people to start and continue smoking.

Health professionals and critics of the media have charged that magazines that depend on revenue from cigarette advertisements are less likely than others to publish articles dealing with the hazards of smoking for fear of offending cigarette manufacturers.

This "censorship phenomenon" has already been proven in Europe and the United States.

This paper investigates the relationship between tobacco advertising and the amount (or lack thereof) of articles and references related to the dangers of smoking in six South African magazines, namely *Cosmopolitan*, *Sarie* and *Bona* as compared to *Living & Loving*, *Longevity* and *Your Baby*.

During 1996 these six magazines had a collective circulation of 740 000 and an estimated readership of 4.5-million. The combined readership of *Cosmopolitan*, *Sarie* and *Bona* was nearly 4-million readers, while the other three magazines had an estimated readership of 545 000.

While the first three magazines did accept cigarette advertising, stating that advertisements placed by cigarette companies are a huge source of income, they also claimed that they do not encourage readers to smoke. They would therefore never feature a model smoking in a fashion story or on an editorial page.

Longevity, *Your Baby* and *Living & Loving* indicated that they will not accept advertising for products which pose a potential health risk to their readers. Adel Conradie, marketing coordinator of *Your Baby* said: "Smoking is definitely not advised for our target market. Our magazine rather aims to publish credible information about health and nutrition, giving our readers all the facts and then the option to choose."

In 1996 the South African tobacco industry spent R180-million on cigarette advertising, the equivalent of R35 per second. Almost R75 million, or 41%, was devoted to tobacco advertising

in the printed media, with magazines receiving R35 million.

Overall, R1,96 million was spent on tobacco advertising in *Cosmopolitan*, *Sarie* and *Bona*.

In absolute terms *Sarie*'s income from these advertisements was the highest at just more than R1 million, with *Cosmopolitan* earning second highest with R791 600 and then *Bona* with R649 900. However, for *Bona*, the proportion of advertising expenditure on tobacco was the highest at 6,3%, with *Sarie* at 5% and *Cosmopolitan* 3,5%.

A statistical analysis of these magazines strongly supports the belief that they have restricted their coverage of the dangers of smoking out of fear of losing advertising revenue.

Magazines like *Longevity*, *Your Baby* and *Living & Loving*, who refuse tobacco advertising, were four times more likely to publish articles or references on the health implications of smoking than *Cosmopolitan*, *Sarie* or *Bona*.

The articles in these three magazines were also of a better quality and carried more prominently than in *Cosmopolitan*, *Sarie* or *Bona*.

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With the exception of *Bona*, which carried a short article on the danger of smoking in November 1996, the references to the health hazards of smoking were short, obscure and often in the last sentence or paragraph of fairly long articles. In some instances the health danger of this habit was played down and used out of context. For example, *Sarie* published an article on high blood pressure in its January 17, 1996 edition. Although it is a proven medical fact that smoking can be potentially lethal for people with this condition, smoking is mentioned in the same sentence as "drinking too much cof-

fee". In medical terms these two health hazards are not comparable.

What is even more worrying is the fact that smoking is not mentioned at all in other articles where it is supposed to be on top of the list and where other less important measures to improve one's health are discussed at length and in great detail.

Whether magazines are systematically "punished" by the withdrawal of cigarette advertisements is difficult to prove. But it remains a possibility. For example, in November 1996 *Bona* published an article "Smoking can kill" in the education supplement, sponsored by *Mondi*. In that specific month the magazine derived R92 500 from four tobacco advertisements. In December 1996, subsequent to the article, *Bona*'s income from tobacco companies dropped by 80% to R74 100 with only one tobacco advertisement.

Cosmopolitan was the only magazine to portray smoking as "something everyone does". In the October 1996 edition the cigar is described as "the hottest new accessory in Hollywood" (p21). In April 1996 an article about the contents of a woman's handbag features a photo with different articles men can expect to find in a woman's handbag and includes a packet of *Camel* cigarettes.

Cosmopolitan earned some R790 000 in 1996 with 42 full-page tobacco advertisements, while only about 20cm of editorial space was allocated to health information on tobacco.

In contrast, *Living & Loving*, *Longevity* and *Your Baby* contained interesting, informative and also controversial and very newsworthy articles on tobacco-related illnesses.

For example, in September 1996 *Longevity* published a three page-article entitled "Tobacco wars", a controversial cloak-and-dagger story about the tobacco companies' strategies to keep the scientific findings that smoking causes cancer and heart disease from the public.

This allegation was later proven true with the promulgation of the *Brown & Williamson* documents (an admission from one of the US's biggest tobacco companies that it had deliberately manipulated the nicotine levels of cigarettes) in the first half of 1996. This would have been an article within the scope of *Cosmopolitan*'s range of articles.

Other examples of new and obviously newsworthy information in 1996 regarding the dangers of tobacco include medical findings of a relationship between smoking and leukaemia and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. These were reported only in *Longevity*, *Your Baby* and *Living & Loving*.

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These findings obviously question the integrity of journalism practised by magazines accepting tobacco advertising. Less obvious, however, is the implication of this journalistic taciturnity for public health.

Millions of South Africans are still uninformed and underestimate the health dangers of tobacco. A study, conducted in 1992 by researchers Yach, McIntyre, and Saloojee, ("Smoking in South Africa — health and economic impact"), showed that 17% of smokers thought that active smoking was not bad for their health, while 20% were unsure about the dangers. Twenty-eight percent did not think passive smoking was a health risk.

However, a total ban on tobacco advertising in South Africa, particularly in magazines, will have far-reaching effects. For some magazines, especially new titles catering for previously disadvantaged readers, a cut in advertising income may be too much of a brunt to bear.

Thus, the vehicle that could potentially carry information on the health hazards of smoking to readers could be stopped in its tracks by such stringent legislation. Measures to ensure that tobacco advertisers cannot penalise or punish publications by, for example, taking away their business, could be a better solution.

Such a system could have tobacco companies paying for the publication of the dangers of their products. This idea is not at all far-fetched when the agreement between the United States' attorney and this country's tobacco industry is examined.

In June 1997 the American tobacco industry agreed to pay out \$368.5-billion over the next quarter century in compensation and to drastically alter their marketing programmes.

As part of the agreement the US tobacco industry will fund programmes to help smokers stop and launch a campaign to reduce smoking by youths by 50% within seven years. The industry will pay an \$80-million penalty for each percentage point that the industry falls short of the target (*Time*, 30 June 1997).

This idea could be the starting point for discussion and negotiation between the South African legislature and the tobacco industry.

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To smoke or not to smoke

IN response to Health Minister Nkosazana Zuma's anti-tobacco bill 10 first-year journalism students at Rhodes University decided to conduct a survey of their peers on smoking. They interviewed 25 students who had begun smoking in 1997 and found that peer pressure, boredom and stress were the most cited reasons for beginning to smoke. Other reasons given were curiosity and because smoking was seen as "fun" and "cool".



said advertising affected choice of brand. When asked to rate five brands (Gaulloises, Benson&Hedges, Camel, Peter Stuyvesant and Gunston) on a "coolness" scale — Gaulloises came out tops. Yet, a majority smoked Camel and Peter Stuyvesant. Many said they smoked whatever was cheapest and available.

One person said he doesn't buy his own because "dad sends them".

Despite Stuyvesant promotion of music concerts

and Gunston's promotion of the surf circuit, most people rated their advertising "uncool".

"The most difficult thing about the survey was finding people on campus who had started

to smoke this year," the class reported.

Because of this they then widened their survey and spoke to a further 67 people to ascertain the average age at which university students begin to smoke. They found that students in the age group 18 to 22 had been smoking for between one and seven years. The average age at which students had started smoking was 15.

The Tobacco Product Control Amendment Bill aim is to reduce smoking among the young by banning all forms of tobacco advertising.



Everyone else was and I wanted to try it out.



"I started smoking because I got too nervous after my initiation experience earlier this year," one smoker said. A few blamed the stress of exams. Drinking and parties were

often the cause for young

people experimenting with tobacco:

"Everyone else was and I wanted to try it out," one said. "I used to smoke at parties when I was drunk and then it became a habit," another said.

None of the respondents cited advertising as a reason. It was only when questioned closely that six said advertising had been a factor in their decision. Seven



I used to smoke at parties when I was drunk and then it became a habit



Is it hot or is it cool?