Developing a Coding System to Track Newspaper Coverage of Tobacco Issues

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• Introduce the *Youth Smoking and the Media* project.

• Outline our development of a coding system for newspaper coverage of tobacco issues.

• Report findings from a pilot study of Australian newspaper coverage of a recent successful ETS lawsuit.
Project Aims

- Map newspaper coverage of tobacco issues.
- Develop methodology to assess news content and slant.
- Relate newspaper coverage within communities to Monitoring the Future survey data of teens’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviors relating to smoking.
- Improve understanding of the relationship between media coverage of tobacco issues and youth smoking levels.
YSM Outcome Measures

- MTF survey data regarding youth attitudes, beliefs and behaviors relating to tobacco.
- YSM maps newspaper coverage of tobacco issues across MTF communities. Patterns of readership and coverage across communities estimate exposure.
- New ‘newspaper’ variable for explanatory model relating to MTF data
- Over 400 newspapers being monitored. Yield approximately 2000 articles per month.
- Prominence Variables: Front Page, Image, Article Type, Size.
- Content Variables: Overall Theme, Primary Topic.
- Position Variables: Slant & Frame.
• Building on strong existing research e.g. ASSIST tracking

• Seek to incorporate both content and frame analysis approaches. Both important in our model. What is being covered and how?
Themes, Topics, Slant & Frames

Themes: Health Effects, ETS, Advertising and Promotion, Economic Issues, Farming (13 in total).

Topics: Addiction & Quitting, Youth Access, Cigarette Content & Regulation, ETS Health & Comfort, Societal Costs of Smoking (34 in total).

Slant: Pro-Tobacco, Anti-Tobacco, Neutral or Mixed.

Frames: Support for Formal Intervention, Smoking as Socially Unacceptable, Government Keep Out, System Cynicism (14 in total).
Youth Smoking and the Media
Funded by the National Cancer Institute

• Spent 12 months developing the coding system.

• Consensus approach to developing the code book. 2 initial developers and then 6 member coding team.

• Need a robust model able to handle volume that is fairly easy to learn.
• Topical and confined case study

• On May 1st 2001 a non-smoking barworker (Marlene Sharp) was awarded $A466,000 for damages for throat cancer that she claimed resulted from years of bar work.

• The research team collected and coded all Australian newspaper articles dealing with this story in the month following the decision.

• Two members (MW & KS) both coded each of the articles in order to ensure concordance and develop consensus.
• 100 newspaper articles relating to the Marlene Sharp case in May 2001.

• Only 7 received front page coverage (all in the days immediately following the trial).

• Mostly ‘hard news’ coverage (74/100). Only 3 editorials, 7 columns and 13 letters to the editor.

• All of the articles have the “ETS” Theme.
Results II

- Reports of the outcome of the case (success for the plaintiff) and the possible implications for future bans were the most common primary topic (38 & 33 articles).

- Only 22 of the articles had at least one paragraph dealing with the substantive issue of the case: ETS as a cause of cancer. Only 5 articles had this as their primary focus.
Results III
– Frames & Slant

• Predominantly positive coverage for tobacco control.

• 45 coded with one of the ‘positive’ tobacco control frames, 42 were neutral – only 13 were negative.

• ‘Support for Formal Intervention’ (29) and ‘Smoking as Socially Unacceptable’ (10) were the most common frames.

• ‘Government Keep Out’ (5) and ‘System Cynicism’ (5) were the most commonly occurring negative frames.
The central issue to the case (damaging health effects of ETS) was largely ignored.

The policy implication of the trial was deemed very newsworthy. Bans in pubs and clubs seen as inevitable.

Overall, Marlene Sharpe received sympathetic coverage and regulation was supported.

The ‘tipping point’ for ETS in Australia may have been reached.
Conclusions

• Developing a robust and meaningful coding system for news coverage of tobacco is challenging.

• Coding scheme successfully applied to a case study – provided valuable data about news coverage. Good news for embarking on our main study.

• News coverage can be both surprising and enlightening for tobacco control. Coverage can offer insight for Tobacco Control.