Smoke and Mirrors

Unmasking disinformation from the tobacco industry

November 2025

Tobacco use kills up to half of users, resulting in over 8 million deaths a year.[1] It remains one of the world's leading causes of preventable death. Driving this epidemic is the tobacco industry – companies that manufacture, distribute, market, and sell tobacco products.[2] Despite declining smoking rates resulting from successful tobacco control measures, tobacco company profits have continued to increase.[3]

Nonetheless, as tobacco control efforts continue to grow, they pose an existential threat to the industry.[4] The industry's response has included efforts to renormalize its business practices and products under the guise of "transformation".[5] **Tobacco companies have promoted potentially misleading narratives** related to their purported "smoke-free transformation", newer nicotine and tobacco products, industry involvement in science and policy, and drivers of illicit trade.

Disinformation threatens our ability to improve public health, muddying the information water. It can aggravate debates and exacerbate divides within the tobacco control community, as well as impede the development and implementation of life-saving public health initiatives. Ultimately, **disinformation can be used by the tobacco industry to serve its interests**, often at the expense of public health.

INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION

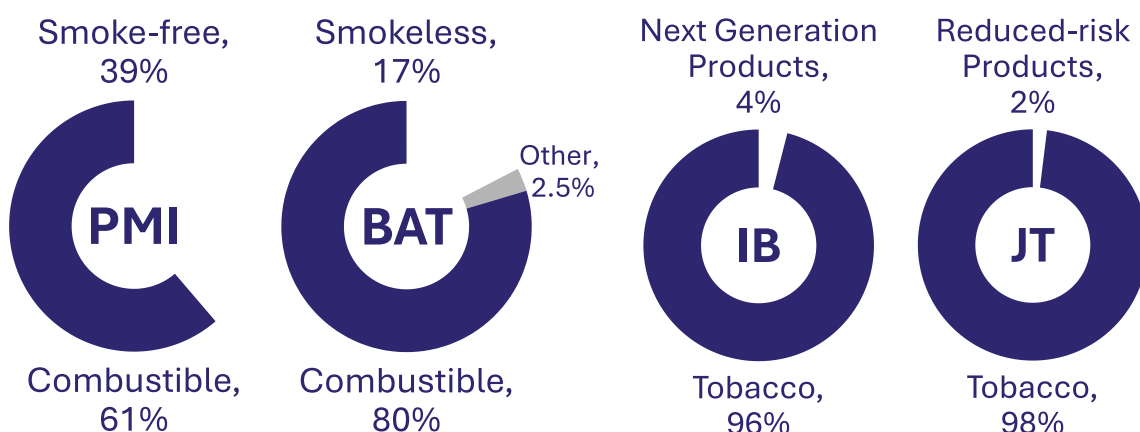## *Industry Argument: The tobacco industry has transformed*

The Evidence: Some transnational tobacco companies say they are "transforming" from cigarette businesses to "smoke-free" ones.[6-8] Common "smoke-free transformation" campaigns include Philip Morris International's "Unsmoke Your World" and British American Tobacco's "A Better Tomorrow". These companies use a "transformation" narrative to appear aligned with public health, repair their reputation, and justify their interference in policy and science. However, the reality is that the **tobacco industry has not made substantial progress towards eliminating combustible tobacco products**, like cigarettes.[5] As they have done for decades, tobacco companies continue to:

- Block, weaken, or undermine tobacco control policy and manipulate science in ways that prioritise profits over public health (for more on these see "Trust in Industry")
- Target vulnerable people with their addictive products, despite claiming to only market to adults who smoke (see "Newer Nicotine and Tobacco Products")
- Make unsubstantiated claims that tobacco control efforts are the leading driver of illicit tobacco trade (see "Illicit Trade").

Industry Argument: The tobacco industry is moving away from cigarettes

The Evidence: Some tobacco companies claim they are replacing their combustible products (e.g. cigarettes) with newer nicotine and tobacco products (e.g. electronic cigarettes, heated tobacco, and nicotine pouches).[6-8] To the public they tout their commitment to change, but to investors they stress that their cigarette business remains strong and they continue to drive it forward.[9] Though cigarette sales are dropping, **combustible tobacco products remain extremely profitable for the transnational tobacco companies, accounting for most of their revenues**.[10-13] They continue to promote cigarettes, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and places where its newer products are banned.[14, 15] Further, analysis of data from the biggest transnational company, Philip Morris International (PMI) revealed the company was behind on its own, very modest target to reduce cigarette shipments by 2025 and was on track to exceed the target by over 10%.[16] This casts serious doubt about the intention behind their proclaimed "transformation".

Figure 1. Proportion of net revenues (PMI, BAT, IB) or units sold (JT) in 2024 from tobacco and nicotine products.[10-13]

Smoke-free, 39%

Smokeless, 17%

Next Generation Products, 4%

Reduced-risk Products, 2%

Other, 2.5%

PMI

BAT

IB

JT

Combustible, 61%

Combustible, 80%

Tobacco, 96%

Tobacco, 98%

NEWER NICOTINE & TOBACCO PRODUCTS

Industry Argument: *Heated tobacco products are like e-cigarettes (also known as vapes)*

The Evidence: Heated tobacco products (HTPs) are sometimes mistakenly confused with electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes, also called vapes or electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS)). **E-cigarettes and HTPs are different products and the evidence on their health risks differs too.** They can look similar as both use an electronic, battery-powered device to heat substances to be inhaled. In e-cigarettes liquids or salts (typically containing nicotine) - is the heated substance. In HTPs, it is tobacco leaf -[17] a deadly substance which in cigarettes is linked to at least 16 different types of cancer.[18]

Much of the research on HTPs comes from companies manufacturing them and there are concerns over the quality of key clinical studies.[19] The risks from HTPs and whether they can truly help people quit smoking remains uncertain.[20, 21] WHO guidance says HTPs are tobacco products and should be regulated as such.[21]

Tobacco companies seem to confuse or distinguish these products as best suits them. They confuse in countries where they can use the existing popularity of one product to promote another. For example, PMI likened HTPs to e-cigarettes in a 2021 campaign in the UK, probably to piggyback off the growing popularity of e-cigarettes.[22] They distinguish where people are worried about product harms or strict(er) regulation is being considered. Between 2019 and 2021, PMI distinguished HTPs and e-cigarettes in its US marketing, likely due to increased attention on EVALI (e-cigarette or vaping use-associated lung injury).[23]

Table 1. Newer Nicotine and Tobacco Products. *Abbreviations: PMI (Philip Morris International); BAT (British American Tobacco), IMB (Imperial Brands); JTI (Japan Tobacco International). Adapted from: Tobacco Tactics, 2023 and 2024.[17, 24]*

	E-cigarettes	**Heated Tobacco**	**Nicotine Pouches**
Main Components	Liquid or salt (typically containing nicotine) + electronic heating device	Tobacco leaf + electronic heating device	Dehydrated nicotine inside permeable pouch
Associated terms	Vape, Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS), Electronic Non-Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENNDS)	Heat-not-burn, tobacco vapour, tobacco heating system	Oral smokeless products, modern oral, tobacco-free oral nicotine, white snus
Transnational Tobacco Company Brands	IQOS VEEV, VEEBA, Vivid, Solaris (PMI) Vuse, Ten Motives, VIP, CHIC (BAT) blu (IMB) Logic (JTI)	IQOS (PMI) Glo (BAT) Pulze (IMB) Ploom (JTI)	Zyn (PMI) Velo (BAT) ZoneX (IMB) Nordic Spirit (JTI)

Industry Argument: *Regulate newer products like a particular country, e.g. Japan, Sweden, the UK, the US*

The Evidence: Tobacco companies have a long track record of using countries as case studies to push for regulatory change in other countries. Such examples tend not to accurately depict the reality of the situation in the relevant countries.

For example, tobacco companies claim Japan is a success story for HTPs, pointing to falling smoking rates and fewer hospital visits for smoking-related diseases.[25] Yet, they often fail to mention: pre-existing preferences for low-tar and innovative products; limited competition, especially from e-cigarettes; many HTP users continuing to smoke; and school children using HTPs.[26, 27] In Sweden, snus is often used to refer to traditional oral tobacco pouches and nicotine pouches.[28] The "Swedish experience" promoted by tobacco companies similarly attributes reductions in smoking rates with snus use rather than decades of strong tobacco control policy. They also tend to overlook that the snus use is growing, largely due to nicotine pouch uptake among young people, particularly women.[28, 29]

Similarly, the industry uses industry-favourable policy outcomes in specific countries to lobby for such measures to be introduced in other countries too. For example, after being granted a marketing order for IQOS in the US, PMI immediately used the decision to advocate for legislative changes in other countries.[30] This often did not explain how PMI had only been granted permission to claim IQOS reduced exposure to harmful chemicals but not the risk of disease and death.[30] Similarly, the industry commonly cites the UK's approach to e-cigarettes in marketing, lobbying, and policy submissions around the world.[31-33] Less commonly cited by industry is the UK's strong tobacco control laws and increasing regulation of newer products, particularly on heated tobacco products, which are included in the proposed generational sales ban on all tobacco products currently being discussed in Parliament.

Industry Argument: *Tobacco companies want to reduce harms caused by smoking and their newer nicotine and tobacco products are the solution.*

The Evidence: Such claims are co-option of a public health concept, known as "harm reduction" – strategies seeking to reduce harms arising from addictive behaviours while recognising that abstinence is not always achievable.[34] Globally, there are different interpretations on how this can be achieved and the debate within the tobacco control community is ongoing.[35, 36]

Transnational tobacco companies have co-opted harm reduction to rebuild their reputation, shape regulation and policy in ways that benefit them, and, ultimately, sell more products.[4] They achieve this by:

- positioning themselves as partners in public health by marketing newer products (i.e. e-cigarettes, HTPs, nicotine pouches) as the solution,[4] while continuing to drive the problem by selling cigarettes (see "The tobacco industry is moving away from cigarettes").
- over-emphasising the role of switching smokers from one industry product to another in addressing the tobacco epidemic, while ignoring other efforts, such as product regulation and cessation support, and the risks of newer products, particularly in those who never smoked.[4, 37]
- exacerbating the ongoing debate to divide the public health community and disrupt tobacco control discussions[4] – a known industry tactic to block, weaken or delay policy.[38]

These actions do not indicate true interest in reducing harm. Instead, it suggests the industry is exploiting harm reduction to boost profits in the face of declining cigarette sales and stronger regulation.

Industry Argument: Newer nicotine and tobacco products are the best way to speed up the decline in smoking

The Evidence: Tobacco companies present a simplified narrative that all newer nicotine and tobacco products are effective means of reducing smoking. **While some newer products might be helping to further lower smoking rates, this is not true of every product and country**. For example, in Japan, the introduction of HTPs was followed by decreasing cigarette sales.[39] But, in South Korea the introduction of HTPs coincided with the decline in smoking rates stalling and fewer people visiting smoking cessation clinics.[40] HTPs have not been proven to help people quit, and may instead encourage tobacco use by increasing the risk of relapse in former smokers and making HTP users consume more tobacco overall.[20]

In the UK, e-cigarettes helped 2.7 million people quit smoking over a 5-year period prior to 2024,[41] and tobacco use continues to decline, especially in people with larger increases in e-cigarette use.[42] At the same time, ever smoking rates have gone up in 11-17-year-olds[43] and the surge in e-cigarette use has caused overall nicotine use (which was previously declining) to rise.[42]

In Sweden, where nicotine pouches are increasingly popular, total tobacco and nicotine use increased between 2022 and 2024, use of nicotine pouches among young people has risen, and some research indicates more people who use e-cigarette or snus start smoking compared to non-users.[28, 29]

Additionally, tobacco companies have been fighting the global decline in cigarette smoking rates by intentionally targeting never smokers and young people in many LMICs with its cigarettes.[14] For example, a 2024 survey in Egypt found 99 out of 102 schools had at least one place selling tobacco within just 100 meters.[44] The industry also continues to push single-stick cigarettes, which are cheap and appealing to young people, in countries like the Philippines, Bangladesh and India.[45] Such efforts are cause for concern, with the global decline in smoking rates now slowing down.[46, 47]

TRUST IN INDUSTRY

Industry Argument: Tobacco industry science is credible, transparent, legitimate, and should be used to inform policy

The Evidence: The vested interests of the tobacco industry have led them to repeatedly trying to rig the evidence base in its favour, not in support of public health but to maximise its profits. **Tobacco companies have sought to hide the harms of their products and practices by manipulating and misusing science.**[48] Despite efforts to protect science, they have not stopped.

Research from the tobacco industry on harm reduction[36], e-cigarettes[49] and HTPs[50] have been demonstrated to be more likely to reach conclusions that benefit its business. Additionally, concerns have been raised over the quality, transparency and adequacy of the industry's clinical studies on HTPs[19, 51, 52] with PMI having secretly paid university academics[53] and funded third parties that claim to be "independent" (e.g. Global Action to End Smoking, formerly the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World)[54] to do research and indirectly promote the company's products on its behalf. The tobacco industry also tries to infiltrate and co-opt the scientific, medical, and public health communities to make itself and its science appear more credible.[53, 55-57]

These efforts are designed to prevent policy action and are not new. For example, in 2012 the tobacco industry funded and spread misleading research to fight against plain/standardised packaging legislation in the UK.[58] In response to emerging evidence showing the harms of secondhand smoke in the 1990s, the industry promoted criteria for critiquing science that it could use to discredit this evidence and prevent smoking restrictions across Europe.[48]

Industry Argument: Collaboration with tobacco companies is necessary in policymaking and they need to be part of the solution

The Evidence: The tobacco industry has a long, documented history of trying to influence policy that threatens its products and profits. Such influence often comes at

the expense of public health.[38] Governments around the world say **tobacco industry interference is the greatest barrier to progress in tobacco control**, and it seems to be getting worse.[59, 60]

Tobacco companies continue to oppose and undermine proven, life-saving tobacco control measures, like taxation, smoke-free laws, advertising and promotion bans, product restrictions, plain/standardised packaging, and more recently, progressive "endgame" policies (see "Examples of tobacco industry opposing or undermining policy" on next page). They also continue to intimidate members of the tobacco control community with public discreditation, legal threats, and aggressive messages.[61]

Industry-led solutions to tackle the tobacco epidemic are often ineffective. Take "Accommodation" programmes – a self-regulation approach repeatedly pushed by tobacco companies. This involved hospitality venues using designated smoking rooms and expensive ventilation, despite companies knowing these do little to reduce secondhand smoke and its harms. These programmes served to and helped to avoid, delay or weaken effective smoke-free laws, while simultaneously encouraging and normalising smoking.[62]

Examples of tobacco industry opposing or undermining policy

Taxation: In Africa between 2016 and 2020, the effectiveness of tobacco taxation was undermined by the sale of relatively cheap single cigarettes via informal channels and tobacco companies using other price-based strategies, like differential tax shifting practices, to keep product prices appealing.[63]

Smoke-Free: Since 2019, PMI has sponsored "smoke-free destinations" in popular tourist spots in Greece, Spain and the Canary Islands, which serve as promotion opportunities for its HTP, IQOS.[64]

Advertising and Promotion: After Colombia adopted a comprehensive advertising and promotion ban, tobacco companies took legal action in 2010. When that failed, they circumvented the ban by replacing large posters with attractive displays typically positioned near items targeted at children, like sweets.[65]

Product Restrictions: When the EU banned flavoured cigarettes in 2016, tobacco companies successfully lobbied for a long phase-out period until 2020 and have since circumvented the ban by selling flavoured accessories and non-cigarette products, like HTPs and cigarillos, to keep consumers.[65]

Plain/Standardised Packaging: In 2021, British American Tobacco and its subsidiaries sued the Danish Ministry of Health over its new tobacco control regulations that included plain/standardised packaging requirements for traditional and newer products, like e-cigarettes and HTPs.[66]

Endgame: In the UK, transnational tobacco companies made extensive efforts throughout 2023 and 2024 to oppose the proposed tobacco-free generation policy (generational sales ban),

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including lobbying MPs, threatening the Government with legal action, and making submissions to consultations arguing for HTPs to be exempt and weaker measures, like increasing purchase age.[67, 68]

ILLICIT TRADE

Industry Argument: Governments should enter into partnerships with the industry to reduce levels of illicit trade

The Evidence: Tobacco companies have engaged in a PR campaign to present themselves as solutions to a problem that they have largely been responsible for – illicit trade.[4] **Numerous investigations have brought to light extensive evidence of tobacco industry complicity in illicit trade**, in some cases leading to guilty pleas.[69, 70] Despite this, tobacco companies now portray themselves to governments as part of the solution to the problem.[71] This has resulted in the industry entering into memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with governments and often providing training and resources to customs authorities. Such interactions enable the industry to shape understandings of the problem and to lobby against tobacco control measures. Additionally, collaboration with governments on illicit trade normalises industry engagement, which in turn increases the risk of industry actors having opportunities to influence wider health policy.[4, 72] Research exploring MOUs between industry and government relating to illicit tobacco trade found that, despite at least well over 100 such agreements existing globally, there was no evidence of such agreements reducing illicit tobacco trade.[72]

Industry Argument: Tobacco control policies, such as tobacco taxation, fuel illicit trade

The Evidence: The tobacco industry argues that virtually all tobacco control measures lead to an increase in illicit trade.[73] The industry has a documented record of funding research which overestimates illicit trade and attempts to attribute the problem primarily to tobacco control policy, often taxation.[74] Such claims are disputed by numerous empirical analyses covering multiple countries.[75] For instance, global evidence demonstrates that countries with higher levels of tobacco taxation tend to have lower levels of illicit trade than countries with lower tobacco tax rates.[75]

In the UK, for example, the average price of cigarettes have been steadily increasing since the early 2000s but the amount of tax revenue lost due to the illicit trade has declined overall from £2.5bn in 2000/01 to £1.4 billion in 2023/24.[76] Further, price

increases in the UK have often been the result of the industry raising[76] its own prices over and above tax increases, demonstrating that tobacco companies have been happy for their prices to be even higher than required by regulation with seemingly little concern that this will negatively impact their business.[77]

These reductions in government revenue lost from illicit tobacco combined with industry willingness to increase prices further, despite the UK already having some of the highest taxes in the world, demonstrates both that there continues to be scope for increasing taxes in the UK and that the industry's argument that high taxes will inevitably create high levels of illicit trade does not align with the evidence base. Despite this, the industry has continued to use the threat of a potential increase in illicit trade as an argument against tobacco control measures in the UK, including most recently the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.[68]

CONCLUSION

The tobacco industry continues to use tactics that hinder public health.

Contrary to its claims, the tobacco industry has not transformed into a "smoke-free" business. Though their tactics constantly adapt, their goals remain unchanged. Tobacco companies continue to undermine tobacco control by: promoting cigarettes; targeting non-smokers, vulnerable people, and LMICs; and using familiar arguments to block or slow policy progress.

Do not let misleading narratives distract from core and essential tobacco control measures.

It's vital not to let the debate around newer products overshadow essential tobacco control policies – such as taxation, smoke-free policies, advertising, promotion and sponsorship restrictions, cessation support, etc. - which are foundational to reducing tobacco use. The focus should not be on solutions pushed by an industry that prioritises profit over public health, but on core strategies that have proven successful in advancing public health.

Utilise the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) to reduce tobacco use.

The WHO FCTC is a global treaty that outlines a comprehensive set of measures to effectively reduce tobacco use and protect future generations and it also encourages its members to adopt measures beyond the treaty. It is a powerful tool for governments and public health bodies. It has contributed to an accelerated decline in smoking, estimated to be associated with 24 million fewer young smokers and 2 million more quitters over the past decade.[46]

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