Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 6, S.1

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:24:23

Louis

Welcome to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, a weekly podcast from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath. We are an international and award-winning group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

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Multiple speakers

The health issues are massive. Globally, each year, tobacco kills 9 million people. That's the equivalent of wiping out the population of London each year. Corporations are out for profit. Anything that is going to harm those profits is going to be unpalatable to them. This is a massive issue globally because if you look at global deaths just four corporate products, cause between a third and two thirds of all global deaths.

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Louis

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In this episode, we're looking at the tobacco industry's marketing tactics and strategies around both traditional cigarettes and newer tobacco products. We're going to discuss how companies promote their products, the threat of digital marketing, and the cross-border problem of sports sponsorship. I'm joined today by Jorge Alday, director of STOP, a global tobacco industry watchdog. Welcome Jorge.

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Jorge

Hi. How are you?

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Louis

Good. Thank you. Let's start off with a quote from Fritz Gahagan, who was a former marketing consultant for five of the big tobacco companies. I read this in an Action on Smoking and Health report. He said "When it comes to advertising cigarettes, the problem is how do you sell death?"

Maybe you could tell us how you feel about that quote, and maybe give an example of exactly how the tobacco industry is selling death.

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Jorge

Sure. I mean it is certainly a problem for the tobacco industry that their products, their main products, kill 50% of the people who use them and make a lot more sick. The advantage they have in the product is that it's inherently addictive. And so once people try it, the likelihood of them trying it and using it again, gets a lot, lot, lot easier for the user.

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That, however, doesn't mean that they don't need to market the product. And the fact is that there's a reason why every company on earth markets its products. That's because marketing, especially if it's done well, it works. It drives sales, drives consumption. And when you pair that with an addictive product, it creates large populations of people that are using something that's incredibly dangerous.

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Louis

If they are indeed selling death, then why do you think the tobacco industry is so successful at marketing its product?

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Jorge

They're very, very good at it. They've been doing it, since, I looked this up, since the 1700s. The Time Magazine did a great piece on the history of cigarette advertising. And their research showed that the first print ad for tobacco was believed to date from 1789, when, what is now the Lorillard Tobacco Company in the United States, advertised its snuff in a New York City newspaper.

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So they've had a long time to figure out how to market. And the product, to be clear, has not changed that much, in that time frame. So they've learned how to hone their message and deliver that message extremely effectively over time to large populations of people all over the world.

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Louis

That's obviously a huge amount of time over which they've honed that message, as you say, and you're based in the US and that's probably what a lot of people think of when they think of tobacco advertising is, in particular, the sort of Mad Men years, 60s, tobacco advertisers, these kind of innovations in marketing. Maybe you could take us through a bit of that historical context, kind of from where we were then to where we are today.

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Jorge

Sure. Tobacco marketing kind of tracks with the evolution of advertising, marketing and media in general. So as media and marketing has gotten more sophisticated, tobacco company marketing has got more and more sophisticated. So, for example, we talked a little bit about the first kind of advertising. Advertising was essentially invented in the United States, right. And so it's not that surprising that on a mass market level was perfected by industries that have been doing it for such a long time.

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But so it's not just advertising in a, in a, in a newspaper, right? As early as the 19th century, cigarette packs started containing trading cards with photos of celebrities from that period of time creating engagement with the product at a packaging level. When we look back, even to World War One and World War Two, tobacco companies were giving cigarettes to soldiers that were coming back from war, which not only created a huge population of men who are addicted to the product, it created affinity with the product, created loyalty and brand affinity for specific products.

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This is very early product promotions, giveaways that we still see happening today.

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Louis

At what point did governments in the US, for example, or elsewhere in the world, start cottoning on to this advertising as a problem or something that needed regulating?

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Jorge

Well, so as people became sceptical of smoking, especially after the Surgeon General's report in 1964, the products and the marketing continued to evolve. So you started seeing…

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Louis

Just to jump in there, which is the Surgeon's report you referred to. Maybe you could give us a bit of context for that.

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Jorge

Sure. The Surgeon General's report was the first major scientific analysis of smoking and its potential impact. And it was the first government's, major government, documents to assert that smoking is linked to cancer and other health impacts. And that was the starting point of unravelling the sort of mystique behind what tobacco companies has built in their image of the product and what the actual facts were for what it did to your body.

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And so, with the Surgeon General's report, we start at the very, very, very beginning of the scientific basis for linking this product with health harms, which I think people suspected because they were probably coughing after using this product for many years. But tobacco marketing continued aggressively with product innovation - filters, low tar products, light products etc. that were intentionally marketed to try to ease the concern that was starting to build around the harms of these products.

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And so the marketing continued, despite the increasing knowledge that these products are terribly, terribly bad for you.

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Louis

Presumably these companies were also reacting to these new restrictions on their marketing as well. What sort of ways were they trying to circumvent this new regulation?

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Jorge

Well, so eventually, as the marketing started to be addressed in a mass level. So eventually TV marketing, for example, was banned. It has been banned around the world. The companies adapted to different media. Remember, tobacco companies were among the first to be advertising for mass

media. They were sponsoring radio programming before there was TV, they were sponsoring TV programming

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before there was the internet. Right. And so as they the number of channels for media expanded, industry marketing expanded into those channels. And that was always ahead of where regulation was going to be. Right. So the evolution and the pace of the marketing or the media landscape was always ahead of and continues to be ahead of where regulation is.

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So tobacco companies just move, they move faster, they move into different media and they move. They change the tactics so that they can continue to get their products and their messaging in front of people in ways that are not necessarily covered by the regulations.

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Louis

Maybe we could start to talk about some of those specific tactics. I know there's some of the research that's happened here at TCRG and more widely within the STOP project has been about sports sponsorship. I suppose people will be most familiar with that, Formula One, for example, Marlboro cigarettes on Formula One cars. Why do tobacco companies target sports in this way?

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Jorge

Well, if we go back to thinking about creating associations that would blunt the messaging around health harms. Associating the products with healthy activities like sports helps to create an air that these products are not as bad for you as they actually are. And so tobacco companies have a keen interest in creating those associations so that if you think about sport, you think about cigarettes, despite the fact that it's absolutely terrible for any athlete and any human.

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Louis

Is that something you see with other industries too? Presumably this isn't just tobacco. The thing that came to mind was McDonald's sponsoring sports events too.

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Jorge

Sure. At, at Vital Strategies, where I work, we recently, launched a campaign challenging the long-term sponsorship of the Olympics by Big Soda. And it's precisely the same story, right. In that sugary beverages are not going to make an athlete better. In fact, if you consume enough of them, they're going to make you sick. But Coca Cola has been sponsoring the Olympics for 100 years.

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There is a link between people's sort of association of the Olympics and that particular product brand that is deep and long and benefits the company, right. Creates more consumption because of this positive association between an inherently unhealthy product and sport.

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Louis

Has there been regulation brought in to specifically prevent sports sponsorship?

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Jorge

There has been, it's, sports are generally governed by their own administrations, by their own rules. And so it would be, for example, the Olympic Committees, right, or in the case of football, the FIFA organisations that would create the rules that would ban sponsorship of the unhealthy commodities tobacco, soda, etc., within their sports.

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So that's less regulated by government. Government can regulate what's put on the air, what's actually marketed. But within the sport, the governing bodies of those sports have the ability to create rules and ban products from being put forward in marketing context and in the sport.

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Louis

Is it something that's also addressed? We've spoken in earlier episodes about the WHO. Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, is advertising and more specifically, advertising in sports covered by the Framework Convention.

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Jorge

It is. So the Framework Convention, which is the treaty that governs sort of tobacco control around the world, has very specific provisions around restricting tobacco marketing, sponsorship and advertising. The question is always what counts as sponsorship? What counts as advertising, what counts as marketing and the best practice, the guidelines suggest that it should be all inclusive, including sport in all marketing channels, etc. but those guidelines are not necessarily implemented at the strictest level, in every country.

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Louis

And are there ways that the industry has responded to the FCTC restrictions, for example?

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Jorge

Well, yes, in that they challenge the actual implementation of those restrictions in every country as best as they can, either to stop them from being implemented altogether or to delay them as long as possible, to preserve the status quo in the marketing environment. And then they move. They move on to other platforms. They move onto, onto other media, which is increasingly complex, increasingly fragmented and increasingly global.

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So it becomes more difficult to track and regulate marketing as the industry shifts to platforms that are new and not necessarily imagined when restrictions are put into place in the first place.

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Louis

I think it's really interesting, as you mentioned, this shift towards, I guess, more contemporary advertising, especially things like social media. I think we'll come back onto that because it's because it's something worth exploring in more detail. Before we do that, maybe we could talk about one of the other aspects of this kind of targeted advertising. We've spoken about sport, but there's also, I know, ways that tobacco companies target advertising at specific communities, specific ethnicities.

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Maybe you could talk a bit about that and why they do this. What's in it for tobacco companies?

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Jorge

Sure. So the basic principles of marketing is the more specific you can get to an audience, the better you know them, the more effectively you can target that audience, the more efficient your advertising and your marketing is going to be. And the more effective it's going to be. And so tobacco companies look at subsegments of the population, and they tailor their marketing to those subsegments so that they can drive consumption in very specific groups that may have, for example, lower uptake.

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And so that results in targeting by gender, targeting by race, targeting by ethnicity or socioeconomic level, and delivering marketing messages through media and through platforms that are being consumed by those audience segments very specifically. And that becomes very sinister because, it plays off of the structural vulnerabilities and health inequities that already exist by further driving health harms into populations that are suffering from health inequity in the first place.

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Louis

Are there any specific examples you could give us, maybe from the US context?

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Jorge

Sure. The obvious context in the United States is the targeting of the black population in urban areas in particular. And for a very long time, tobacco companies have been marketing very specific messages in very specific media that are consumed by the black population and trying to create affinity with brands to generate uptake. And it's resulted in the use of particular products, menthol cigarettes for example,

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by many more people in the black population than in the broader population. And menthol cigarettes are particularly sinister in that they are, they sooth the effect of initiating smoking. They make it actually easier to start. And they have the same health impact. So what that results in is the black population in the United States having an overall higher rate of smoking, a higher rate of initiation in a community that is already suffering from other structural inequity and health inequity.

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So it just makes everything worse.

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Louis

So this disparity in use, particularly of menthol, that is specifically a result of this kind of this choice to target advertising.

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Jorge

Oh, absolutely. I mean, you're driving uptake in a population with a product, a very specific product that is easier to get addicted to. And if that product is marketed more aggressively to one population versus another, then it's going to create more inequity and more harm within that community.

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Louis

If this has been established, then as what the industry are doing, how is it being combated?

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Jorge

Well, it's not being combated enough. At this point, you know, that's aggressive lobbying from the industry. Again, longstanding relationships that with media, and with influential people that help keep the status quo. We've had for a long time an effort to try to get menthols banned in the US. It's got pretty far in our legislative process here in the United States, but has been deferred, from the from the executive's desk.

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So it still hasn't happened. And that preserves the status quo.

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Louis

Presumably, as you mentioned before, with more modern forms of advertising, online social media, digital advertising, is there an increasing risk of the ability for tobacco companies to kind of hyper-target specific sections of the population?

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Jorge

Oh, absolutely. It's even easier to be more targeted now that we have very sophisticated data analytics available to companies that are either sourcing the data themselves or buying it from somewhere else. So it's easier for tobacco companies to be more precise, not only in their targeting, but also in their messaging.

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Louis

And when they are advertising online, what products to they tend to focus on?

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Jorge

Well, I think that it depends on the market and on the country and sort of what they can get away with. And remember, a lot of this can also be indirect. So a tobacco company doesn't have to put up an ad that says buy the cigarettes or buy this Heated Tobacco Product. They can hire a social media influencer to talk about it.

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And that is an indirect way of getting the message out to a large number of people. And so it is done with great skill and great deception. The people don't realise that they're actually absorbing industry messaging through, you know, through these indirect and third-party channels. And it can be Heated Tobacco Products, it could be vaping products, it could be cigarettes, depending on, what the priority is and what the restrictions look like in, in the country.

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Louis

Is it hard to regulate this form of advertising, particularly the indirect kind of influencer-based advertising?

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Jorge

It is hard because the, first of all, digital advertising is somewhat ephemeral. It appears in front of the user and then it's gone, and it gets served many times, then it's gone. And so it is not easy to track, even for those that are placing the ads can have difficulty tracking it. Never mind the government tracking it,

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Right? And then when you get to this level of working through other parties that if it's not, there's no mechanism to document it, no transparency about the sponsorship, and then it can be very, very difficult to try to differentiate what is an actual influencer's preference or something that they're being paid to do.

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Louis

Are there any particular examples you'd highlight of influencers paid by tobacco companies?

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Jorge

Yeah, sure. I mean, tobacco companies sponsor, they sponsor artists, they sponsor musicians, they sponsor people that are interested in fashion. You know, the Philip Morris International IQOS marketing campaign has tried to position that product very specifically as a cool technology product that can be a fashion accessory.

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Louis

So that's IQOS, their kind of flagship Heated Tobacco Product.

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Jorge

Correct. So and that is the product that Philip Morris is staking its future on, essentially driving more people to use a heated, electronic tobacco product and using the qualities of that product, its design features, its technology to create an aura of cool, that it's a good product to use, that it's, from a branding perspective, aspirational.

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It's shiny and more attractive.

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Louis

So these kinds of new products, Heated Tobacco Products like IQOS and obviously e-cigarettes, would you say this is a kind of a whole new way that the industry is marketing products? How does that differ from the more traditional cigarette advertising of the past and still present?

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Jorge

I think because they're electronic devices. I think they're fundamentally designed differently. They're packaged differently, they're used arguably somewhat differently, and that they need to be charged, they need to be, you know, they're pods that need to be replaced, they're not, you know, being lit in the same way as cigarettes. They're also product registered so the company can collect data, on a user, if the user decides to provide that data, in the end, the companies may incentivise the user to give them data.

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Louis

So the devices themselves can provide that data?

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Jorge

They can provide data and the user can give the company permission to access data. They can also source data, from use on the websites, from interactions with the company online and from interactions with the company in the store. You know, they may get an email address that would unlock, or a phone number that might unlock a whole host of other information about that user, and then give the company significantly more information to use in targeting.

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That's very different from cigarettes. It's creating a sophisticated brand environment based on profiling the users in a way that we haven't seen or wasn't even possible ten, 20 years ago.

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Louis

And presumably some of these products may well fall under different regulation to traditional cigarettes as well. Is that the case? Like, do they fall within the same kind of advertising regulation?

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Jorge

Well, it's a goal of tobacco companies to create differentiation between these products and traditional cigarettes because they don't want them to be either thought of as cigarettes, which have these associations of health harms and also have been regulated much more heavily. So, you know, we see in recently released, leaked documents from Philip Morris International in Japan that they had a very specific goal of creating product differentiation between their IQOS Heated Tobacco Product and traditional cigarettes.

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They want it priced differently, taxed differently, treated differently from a regulatory perspective, you know, whether or not it's qualified to smoke, so could it be used indoors. And all of these theoretical differences, you know, are based on the idea that they want to create a new generation of people that are not thinking of this as tobacco, but as something else.

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Louis

And just for the listener, Jorge mentioned there these leaked documents from Philip Morris Japan, that's something we touch on in the Influencing Science episode with Dr. Sophie Braznell, we get into that in more detail. Speaking of this kind of new paradigm, you could call it, I suppose, of product advertising around e-cigarettes, Heated Tobacco. I think a lot of people's concern is around kind of youth use of these products.

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Is there, is some of this targeting specifically young people?

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Jorge

Well, there's no doubt that the design of the products and the marketing is oriented towards getting younger people to use the products. The fact that we see flavours, which have always been a way that the tobacco industry has recruited new customers, being baked into these products suggests that they are going to be more attractive to youth, which suggests a design and a goal, to get as many new users as possible.

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Remember from a tobacco companies perspective, you have an addictive products, the longer, the earlier someone uses it, the longer they can be a customer so they have every incentive to get people hooked as soon as possible.

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Louis

In your view, how can we maybe protect young people or old people from this kind of online targeted advertising of new products and of old?

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Jorge

That's a great question. The most recent meeting of the countries who discussed the treaty agreed on new guidelines for how to address digital advertising, digital marketing and cross-border marketing, which are increasingly important issues to address from a regulatory perspective. And essentially, the goal here is to make sure that all advertising restrictions apply to all platforms full stop.

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And all types of marketing, full stop, regardless of the platforms we have now or the platforms that we have in the future. When the treaty first came into, or when the treaty was first created, there was no such thing as an iPhone, right? There was no streaming of content. There certainly was no metaverse, right? And so, we don't know what the media is going to look like ten, 15, 20 years from now.

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We couldn't even have imagined the artificial reality that people are engaging with now. And so we have to write our restrictions extremely broad so that they are inclusive of anything that would qualify as marketing in the future.

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Louis

Speak about the future, though, how do you think the industry will respond to potential future technologies? Maybe that's hard to predict, but in your view, are there any signs we can see now that indicate which direction tobacco companies might be going in their future advertising?

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Jorge

Well, I mean, we have seen, in fact, in Vital Strategies, we published a report not that long ago that showed the first digital marketing within the metaverse of a tobacco company in India. And it was essentially, you know, inviting people to participate in or to, to come to a smoking lounge, a virtual smoking lounge.

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Louis

For those who might not know, could you maybe just explain what the metaverse is?

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Jorge

Sure. The metaverse is a digital environment that people can essentially plug into through headphones, through visual goggles and other materials that lets them participate and connect with one another in an environment that they see, and others see who are also participating, but is essentially, not reality.

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Louis

So it's a whole new realm of potential advertising opportunities.

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Jorge

And it's completely unregulated.

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Louis

Yeah, wow. One final thing I'd like to touch on is we spoken a lot about specifically advertising. There's also this, this element of kind of image management as a part of promoting products and promoting the company. How do tobacco companies engage in this kind of managing their own image, and how does that relate to their marketing?

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Jorge

Well it's extremely important for the companies to manage their image. I would say first and foremost, they're most interested in managing their products. And their product brands. However, when it comes to creating a favourable environment for selling the products, the companies themselves have to portray themselves as good corporate actors, despite the fact that they're selling harmful products.

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And so that means creating programs that are essentially marketing programs to engender themselves to influential people in the policy sphere, in the scientific sphere, in the regulatory sphere. And that often looks like what we call corporate social responsibility programs, charity programs, programs that are designed to profile theoretically positive corporate activity that is contributing to society as a way to distract from the harms of the actual products are causing.

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So, for example, we know that cigarettes are by far the most littered product on Earth. Cigarette butts by the trillions are deposited around the world, and that causes a lot of environmental damage. Tobacco companies, and we documented in the most recent Global Tobacco Index report in at least 15 countries, documented small cigarette butt cleanup efforts that would have absolutely no impact on the scale of damage that is being done to the environment through these products, but are a way of drawing in local officials, politicians, other companies and influential people to create an aura that they're actually trying to help clean up.

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Meanwhile, it doesn't begin to address the fundamental issue. Cleaning up one beach for one day is not a way to address the problem. But from a tobacco company's perspective, they get to tell a story that they're trying to help. And that becomes very dangerous because it's creates an image of the company as a positive actor and a distraction from the harm it's actually causing.

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Louis

And for those interested in finding out more about this kind of environmental corporate social responsibility, we have an episode with Dr. Rosemary Hiscock that goes into detail on tobacco and the environment. Just to wrap things up, Jorge, if there's one change, you think that governments on an international level could make to better counter industry advertising and marketing, what would it be?

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 6, S.1

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Jorge

It would be to ensure the regulations are as broad as possible to cover all manner of advertising, promotion and sponsorship now and in the future, regardless of platform, regardless of media.

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Louis

Jorge thank you very much for joining us today.

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Jorge

Thanks for having me.

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Louis

And as always, the sources for all of today's discussions can be found in the episode shownotes. We'll be back next week, where we'll be joined by Dr. Rosemary Hiscock to talk about the environmental impacts of the tobacco industry. From the Tobacco Control Research Group, you've been listening to Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, hosted by Louis Laurence, produced by Kate White, and edited by Sacha Goodwin.

00:33:39:12 - 00:33:53:01

The production manager is Jacqueline Oliver. You can email us at Tobacco-Admin@bath.ac.uk or find us on X, LinkedIn and Bluesky. This is a University of Bath production.