

Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep.8, S.2

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Louis

Welcome to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath, hosted by me, Louis Laurence. We are an international research 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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Louis

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Louis

Big tobacco is a global industry and one that reinvents itself to drive sales and maximise profits from its deadly products. In this episode, we're digging into how the industry tailors its strategies across different regions of the world and how it uses the tobacco control efforts of different countries as promotional material. We'll hear how companies take credit for reducing national smoking rates by claiming the industry products are responsible.

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Louis

In today's episode, we'll hear from in-country experts about how the industry is co-opting their success. I'm also joined remotely in the studio by Dr Gan Quan, senior vice president of tobacco control at Vital Strategies, to help us unpack how these localised stories are being used by the industry on the global stage to argue against regulation of its products.

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Louis

Welcome, Dr Gan Quan.

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Gan Quan

Thank you for having me Louis.

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Louis

To start off maybe as a bit of an introduction, you could possibly tell us about your experiences in tobacco control, the work of Vital Strategies in challenging the global tobacco industry.

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Gan Quan

Right. At Vital Strategies we work on tobacco control in over 50 countries around the world. And we help governments with tobacco control policies and implementation. And as you know, during the policy adoption process, tobacco industry interference is something we have to deal with all the time. So, one key area of the work, for us, is countering tobacco industry interference in almost every country we work in.

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Gan Quan

And, I have to say, we are very familiar with the traditional sort of tactics of tobacco industry lobbying the government. And over the past ten years or so, we started to observe this new tactic or strategy from the tobacco industry, which is they are really taking the opportunity of the emergence of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products to promote their so-called harm reduction and industry transformation narratives.

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Gan Quan

They're really using these tactics to whitewash their image and gain a seat at the policymaking table at the government which is very concerning. But also this strategy is very destructive for the government who should be focusing on tackling the issue of cigarette smoking.

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Louis

Thanks for that, it's obviously a real challenge for governments around the world. Maybe you could tell us a bit more about exactly how, well firstly, you know, what is Vital Strategies as an organisation and how exactly do you support governments when they're dealing with that kind of interference?

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Gan Quan

Yeah. At Vital Strategies, our primary mission is to help governments around the world to build public health systems. And as part of public health systems, policy is a very important part of it. And once you have passed the policies, the implementation of the policy is also a very important issue because if you only have the policy on paper without implementation, then the enforcement, you won't see lives saved as a result of the tobacco control policies.

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Gan Quan

So, in many countries, especially the low- and middle-income countries around the world, we Vital Strategies work very closely with government. We provide both technical and financial support to these governments, helping them adopt tobacco control policies, share the international best practices with these governments, provide trainings, capacity building trainings, to the government staff.

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Gan Quan

And also when it comes to countering tobacco interference, we also help these governments pass FCTC article 5.3 policies. And we also work with NGOs, empowering these NGOs with the skills to investigate and expose the tactics of the tobacco industry in their country, doing investigations and publish reports and generate media attention on this issue.

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Gan Quan

And eventually raise the awareness of government staff in terms of, you know, why they should stay away from tobacco industry, why they should protect public health policy making from the interference of the tobacco industry.

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Louis

So one of these kind of interference tactics, as you mentioned briefly before, is using the case of these newer products as a way to argue against other more traditional forms of tobacco control and tobacco regulation. We've seen how the industry uses, and we're going to hear a bit more in these case studies, about how the industry uses success stories in specific countries to support its own narrative, things like the use of snus in Sweden, vaping in the UK, and heated tobacco products in Japan.

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Louis

In your view, how much of this kind of messaging, these sort of narratives that the industry uses is a coordinated global effort, or how much is it kind of a more opportunistic response to local events?

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Gan Quan

I think is absolutely, very much, strategically coordinated globally from the tobacco industry. We should look no further than the Foundation for a Smoke Free World, which is an organisation launched with funding from Philip Morris International with the funding of around 1 billion US dollars in 2017. Of course, the Foundation for a Smoke Free World has pretty much failed and hasn't really achieved the desired purpose of PMI and their investment has reduced dramatically.

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Gan Quan

But if you look at the core strategies of the Foundation for a Smoke Free World when it was established, it was pretty much to promote the harm reduction narrative, harm reduction products and the associated industry transformation narrative from Philip Morris. And similarly for British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International as well. If you look at the tobacco companies themselves, for instance, for PMI, we know PMI's acquisition of several pharmaceutical companies, such as Vectura, Fertin and OtiTopic in the past few years,

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Gan Quan

these acquisitions are very much in line with this so-called transformation strategy, you know, which is really to brand the tobacco industry themselves as a new entity so that, you know, they can claim to be the solution for this tobacco epidemic, and they can gain a seat at the tobacco control policy making table inside the government.

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Gan Quan

When it comes to the low- and middle-income countries, such messaging has been delivered by a legion of front groups and many of them are supported by the Foundation for a Smoke Free World. They are active in many of the countries we work in especially Philippines, you know, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, so on and so forth and very, very often they're not only promoting this industry transformation and harm reduction narratives, they're also attacking tobacco control advocates who

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do not share the same position with them, who do not embrace the industry's transformation, harm reduction tactics.

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Gan Quan

And many of the tobacco control NGOs who work in these countries, including Vital Strategies, have been the target of these attacks by the front groups of the tobacco industry as well.

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Louis

You mentioned there the Foundation for a Smoke free World. It's an organisation we've heard quite a lot about in this and the last series of the Deadly Industry podcast now, of course, renamed to Global Action to End Smoking. We also heard about how Philip Morris had pulled funding to some extent. But are you still seeing them as a kind of active threat in these areas

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Louis

in particular countries?

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Gan Quan

Still they are very, very much active in many of the countries we work in. Even though their funding has been slashed by PMI, as you just mentioned, quite significantly. But over the past, almost ten years, they have really cultivated a group of harm reduction advocates who are very much well-coordinated across the country within the region and also globally in trying to sell this narrative that, you know, the smoking reduction in Sweden, this is due to snus use and the success story of vaping in the UK, and also the popularity of heated tobacco products in Japan and really try to push many

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Gan Quan

of the low- and middle-income countries to follow the sort success stories of these countries. You know, I think there's a lot we can talk about the products per se. There's, you know, for instance, when it comes to e-cigarettes, there is some evidence of the utility of e-cigarettes to help smokers quit smoking, but only in clinical settings.

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Gan Quan

And we know it's not the interest of the tobacco industry or the e-cigarette companies to produce e-cigarettes as cessation aids. Their main intention is to produce these products or promote these products as consumer products. Where the situation gets a lot more complicated, as we have observed, there's a lot of dual use among smokers and smokers who used to have the intention to quit smoking entirely, but now come back to use these products and become dual users.

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Gan Quan

And a lot of nicotine addiction among the youth. And I think one thing I really want to emphasise in the low- and middle-income country setting is the very or regulatory infrastructure. The marketing of these products, especially e-cigarettes, puts a lot of burden onto the government's regulatory body. And in every country, as we, you know, as we talk about thousands of different flavours and variations of the products, and we have seen how the FDA in the US has struggled with enforcement, and we have seen how the regulatory agencies in many LMICs failed big time.

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Gan Quan

So these advocates, these harm reduction advocates or front groups by the tobacco industry, really choose not to see the regulatory inefficiencies of the LMICs and try to sell the so-called success stories of some of the high-income countries. And I think the result is inevitably, what is going to be called a dual epidemic of both smoking and some of the use of some of the new products.

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Louis

You mentioned there the kind of selling of these success stories from high income countries to low- and middle-income countries by the industry on an international scale. We're going to hear in a moment a short case study interview from a Swedish tobacco control expert, Lisa Lennartsdotter Ermann, from the research group CancerFonden who talked to us earlier on about what is known as the Swedish experience.

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Louis

And she talks quite a lot in this case study about snus. Maybe you could give us a quick intro as to what snus actually is.

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Gan Quan

Snus is not a product you can smoke. It's made of tobacco leaves and it's a pouch and you can insert between your gum and inside your mouth. And the nicotine from these products will be absorbed through the blood vessels inside the mouth into the blood system and finally be transported into the brain.

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Gan Quan

And that's how you get that nicotine, the kick, the high from nicotine consumption.

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Louis

Thanks for that useful context, Gan Quan. And with that, let's hear from Lisa from Cancerfonden.

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Lisa

So the narrative that is promoted by tobacco industry advocates is that the Swedish experience have been using snus as a way of decreasing smoking tobacco, which is not true. Swedish politicians have been aiming at decreasing all tobacco use between 2003 and 2024. So the goal for the government in Sweden have been to reduce all tobacco use including snus.

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Lisa

That is something that is promoted as the Swedish way that we use snus which we haven't done. And so that's one thing. And the other is statistics on how successful Sweden have been. Tobacco industry advocates would a lot of times say we have a prevalence number of 4.5% in Sweden of tobacco use. And weirdly enough, that is Swedish born citizens.

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Lisa

So it's a true number, but it's used in a misleading way. So it's Swedish born citizens, not all citizens which I think it's a bizarre way of presenting statistics. So if you want to know how many people or how big the percentage is of tobacco users in Sweden, that is 11%. And that's a difference between a 4.5% and 11%.

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Lisa

So that is also using real statistics, but in a misleading way. A lot of time they put our Swedish born citizen number of 4.5% next to current use number, meaning total use from another country. And those numbers can't be compared. That is also very misleading. So to promote the Swedish experience or the Swedish model, they use statistics to make Sweden look even more successful than we actually have been.

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Lisa

I mean Sweden have been successful. And there are reasons to look at Sweden for what we've done. But that would be looking at classical tobacco control measures because that is what Sweden has really done to reduce tobacco use.

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Louis

Thanks to Lisa there. An interesting case in Sweden Gan Quan. One thing that stood out was this issue of the misuse of statistics, kind of unfair comparisons between, say, Sweden and other countries, depending on the population that the industry chooses to compare. Is that quite a common strategy, that kind of statistical misdirection?

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Gan Quan

Absolutely. We know from history, the tobacco industry really has a long record of manipulating science and, you know, dating back, I would say, dating back to the 1960/70s, especially when we realised how secondhand smoke could harm your health and how second hand smoke could cause lung cancer.

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Gan Quan

The industry is really spending a lot of money, supporting a lot of research, and employed many researchers to produce junk science to confuse the public about the issue of second hand smoke. So really very, very long history of manipulating science. And that's why, within the tobacco control community, we ask researchers not to work with the tobacco industry.

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Gan Quan

And, second of all not to receive funding from the tobacco industry, because we know from the inside documents from the tobacco industry, they do have a history of manipulating science and manipulating any research.

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Louis

That brings us onto our next case study, actually, which is in the Asian context. So this one, we're joined by Dr Ulysses Dorotheo, executive director at the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance. And he shared with us what kind of tactics the industry is using in his region.

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Ulysses

SEATCA, the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance, works throughout the ASEAN region which covers ten countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. So that would be Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and obviously the industry is in all of these countries, to varying extents. Maybe we'll focus a bit more on my country, the Philippines, because I know that best.

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Ulysses

And also, in the region, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand have the highest smoking populations. We also have the largest populations in the region overall. So that's where the industry is focused to try to expand its market not just for cigarettes, but also for its newer products. Electronic smoking devices, particularly heated tobacco products. But they conflate the two, heated tobacco and electronic cigarettes, and they will try and they have been trying to get both products into the market wherever the opportunity exists.

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Ulysses

So very recently, there was a Technovation expo where Philip Morris said "oh, you should follow the Philippines because it's leading in the region in allowing harm reduced products, safer nicotine alternatives into the market and they're doing quite well and so other countries should follow." And I can tell you, we're not doing well.

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Ulysses

We have a huge surge in e-cigarette use among our youth. Over time, we've been able to reduce our smoking prevalence among adults from

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Ulysses

around 33%. Now it's down to 19% as of 2021. And this is primarily because of our higher tax rates on cigarettes. And at the same time, smoking prevalence among the young has also reduced. But in the past, I'd say five years, we've seen an upsurge in e-cigarette use. And now our youth vaping rate is around 14% as opposed to our smoking prevalence among youth, which is 10%.

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Ulysses

And given that we know the way e-cigarettes are a gateway to smoking later on, there's a very high risk of that happening, we're seeing in the future possibly a reversal of the downward trend of the decline in smoking in our country and the industry also uses other countries as examples for our country to follow.

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Ulysses

And they still do this, even though e-cigarettes and HTPs are in our country already. They still point to Japan, you know, as a good example, where HTPs were introduced in 2014, and smoking rates have declined, supposedly because of HTPs. If we look at the evidence, obviously we're not seeing a further decline in smoking prevalence compared to before the entry of HTPs.

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Ulysses

It was already on the decline and the rate of decline has remained constant even in the UK, which they cite also quite often as being a model for the Philippines. You know, when we were still debating our vape law, they said the UK introduced these products into the market and they've seen a decline in smoking prevalence and we don't see a further decline in smoking prevalence

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Ulysses

despite the use of e-cigarettes, the trend has been pretty much the same.

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Louis

So Gan Quan in the case study we just heard, we heard Dr Dorotheo mention how e-cigarette policy in the UK is being used in the Philippines and Southeast Asia as one of these narratives by the tobacco industry to promote its business. The UK actually has a long, strong history of tobacco control regulation of tobacco products.

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Louis

But in recent years it has been praised by some quarters for embracing e-cigarettes as part of its smoking cessation strategies. To your mind, what complications arise when some of these products are then, you know, as we saw with Sweden as well promoted by the tobacco industry in other parts of the world.

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Gan Quan

Yeah, I think, starting from the UK and also the US as well as other high income countries, when these products are introduced into the market, the government will be facing enormous challenges when it comes to enforcing the policies and enforcing the regulations when it comes to the sales of these products, simply due to the nature of these products.

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Gan Quan

And there are many variations of each type of product. So a great challenge for the government and when it comes to some of the low- and middle-income countries that we are talking about here, especially in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam, we know the enforcement capacity of the governments in this part of the world is usually not optimal.

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Gan Quan

And when the sort of the very relaxed policy is being imposed by the tobacco industry and passed by the government, for instance, in the case in the Philippines, then what's going to happen is the

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enforcement agency, such as the FDA in the Philippines, will be overwhelmed by the marketing and by the simply the volume of these products available on the market.

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Gan Quan

And that's exactly where what we are witnessing, in these countries, and because of the, you know, popularity of these products, we are seeing problems among youth to be skyrocketing in the past few years. And, you know, we also have pretty solid evidence that when youth starts to use these products, especially e-cigarettes, then there's a very high chance that they will transition later in their lives to become cigarette smokers.

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Gan Quan

So that's really the underlying strategy of the tobacco industry to addict a new generation of e-cigarettes users with nicotine and then continue to let them use, you know, a plethora of products produced by the tobacco industry, be it cigarettes, e-cigarettes or heated tobacco products. So that's exactly what's going to happen in these countries.

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Louis

So kind of rather than acting as an off-ramp from cigarettes, these newer products are actually in some cases more of an on-ramp to smoking, especially amongst youth.

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Gan Quan

Exactly, exactly. And then at the same time, you know, I think we shouldn't forget that the tobacco industry is claiming they are transitioning away from producing cigarettes. But if you go to any of the countries in this region or, you know, Latin America, Eastern Europe or even in Africa, the tobacco industry is really trying everything they can to stop any meaningful tobacco control policies from being passed.

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Gan Quan

And these policies are really trying to address the issue of cigarette smoking. So that's here, that's why we are we're saying the tobacco industry is not wholeheartedly claiming that they are transitioning away from producing cigarettes.

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Louis

You mentioned, helpfully, Latin American context there. Our final case study, we're are a really international episode today, we're going over to Latin America, where we were joined by Daniel Dorado Torres, Director of Policy Organizing and Tobacco Campaign for Latin America at Corporate Accountability. And he told us a bit more about what was happening in that region and what kind of strategies the industry was using.

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Daniel

So overall, the tobacco industry is positioning its discourse or narrative around reduced risk products and alternatives for those consumers that want to have other options. Primarily, I am going to provide some examples of Philip Morris International where we have noticed that particularly this corporation, when they announce the launch of their heated tobacco product IQOS

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Daniel

in Colombia, South America back in 2017, well they came with all this narrative that positioned it globally but primarily also with its launch in Japan when they were also back in 2014, they were announcing that they were coming with this new alternative for adult smokers who want to have different options and also that these were a reduced risk product.

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Daniel

But what caught our attention at Corporate Accountability was that the launch of this product in Colombia was made in one of the largest Latin American music festivals. The name of this music festival is Estéreo Picnic and as you can imagine it is not only a festival that is targeted for adults, even though, well, the festival itself promote themselves as only people

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Daniel

that is over 18 years old could attend, but the way they promote the festival, they use youth influencers to promote the festival of course. Well, young adults, not only adults that are over the 30 years, you can imagine adults around 18 years, 19 years, 20 years attending this type of festival. So well here are those type of messages. Why you are launching a product like this in a music festival

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that convenes not only Colombian people now, many, many people for all over Latin America came to this festival.

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Daniel

And at subsequent editions of this festival, the 2018, 2019, 2020 and all of this is documented in a report that Corporate Accountability launched back in 2024 and show how particularly Philip Morris International, at some stages of this festival, was one of this sponsors of or co-sponsors of the festival. As the festival editions keeps evolving, they start to hide its participation.

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Daniel

We imagine that it was because of the civil society exposure, but they came with this strong public relations messaging that they were offering a new alternative. But another thing that captures our attention was that they were promoting advertising traditional products at the same festival, so they keep promoting Marlboro cigarettes, Marlboro is the top brand selling of cigarettes of Philip Morris International, they promote this in the first editions of the festival, inside the festival, but at later editions they were promoting the products outside the festival, where young audience is able to walk through, through the venue and through other locations.

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Daniel

So yeah, it is this contradiction between how you are positioning a product that since, or that you position as something that is solely addressed to adults, and then you see that you are promoting, you keep promoting other products because when they came with IQOS, for example, they say that they will stop selling cigarettes. And this has not been the case for Colombia, and I think has not been the case for any other country in the world.

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Daniel

Second, that they are not target youth audiences and well, the festival illustrates a contradiction. Up to date has not been demonstrated that they are doing anything to reduce the deaths that their products are causing.

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Louis

So Gan Quan, when heard there from Daniel about this use of music festivals, kind of cultural events as ways of targeting markets. I mean, this is in some ways a familiar strategy of the tobacco industry, they have always been interested in this kind of marketing through cultural sponsorship, that kind of thing. But this is about newer products.

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Louis

You know, what's your response to this strategy?

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Gan Quan

This strategy, what this strategy tells us is, the tobacco industry is very much eyeing the new generation as their potential customers in the future. We know these cultural events such as music festivals are usually attended by the youth, by the young generation. And that's where the tobacco industry is pouring their marketing and advertising dollars into promoting their products.

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Gan Quan

And besides the examples shared by Daniel, we know recently, in the Philippines, that Steve Aoki was collaborating with Philip Morris International to promote their products, I guess, in one of his concerts which was to be held in the Philippines. And just another perfect example of how the tobacco industry works with celebrities in trying to market their products, targeting the youth.

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Gan Quan

And thanks to the tireless and successful advocacy efforts from the tobacco control community, this particular concert in the Philippines was cancelled. So, yeah, just, you know, the tobacco industry is very much aware that smokers do die from smoking related diseases, and many of them die younger, so they do need younger generations to continue to profit from this smoking epidemic.

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Louis

I mean, it's an incredible night of pressure that, I mean, that all countries are under, but particularly as you mentioned, low- and middle-income countries or countries of weaker regulatory tobacco

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control laws in place. They're really vulnerable to, to some of these strategies, aren't they? They've got these narratives about newer product use in high income countries. They also got sponsorship pressure on the young people of these countries to take up these newer products.

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Louis

I mean, what can countries do when they're in this kind of bind? And how do you guys support some of these countries in challenging this immense amount of pressure they're under?

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Gan Quan

I think when it comes to these new products, what we tell the countries is they should be very clear that the introduction of these products into the market will result in net public health benefit or not, they need to carefully assess the situation and start up to a cost benefit analysis of this and what we realized, you know, in these countries in our working with governments in these countries, is that the introduction of these products will not switch smokers from away from smoking as the industry claim, but rather it will just perpetuate the smoking epidemic amongst smokers and

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Gan Quan

also probably much more concerning is the younger generation, that the younger generation will be hooked with nicotine addiction and eventually become customers of the tobacco industry. So it's really up to the government to decide what kind of policies they want to adopt. And there's a lot of factors they need to take into consideration in whether they should ban or regulate these products.

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Gan Quan

But we do know that many countries, for instance, when it comes to e-cigarettes, about 42 countries around the world have banned the sale of e-cigarettes. And we know many of the countries we work in in the Southeast Asian region, including Latin American region, have also banned the sale of some of these products, mainly from the consideration that introduction of these products into the market will not bring net public health benefits to the country.

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Gan Quan

And we know countries that have banned the use of e-cigarettes, for instance, they have lower prevalence of use among youth than countries who regulate the e-cigarettes. So that's just another

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perspective that, you know, when you ban these products, you are really doing a better job than regulating these products to protect the health of your population.

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Louis

And finally, just zooming out to the kind of global perspective again, what do you think could be done as a kind of global public health community to challenge these industry narratives and the way that the industry is adapting to tobacco control?

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Gan Quan

Yeah. If we look back, let's say, 20 years when the FCTC first came into force, then the tobacco industry and then the tobacco control community, had a very strong consensus when it comes to their position against the tobacco industry. There was no question, you know, everybody was on the same page about the tobacco industry is a bad player and they shouldn't be engaged in tobacco control policy discussion and so on, so forth.

00:38:58:06 - 00:39:45:23

Gan Quan

There was no question about that. But because of the emergence of these products and because of the industry's effort to sell the harm reduction and industry transformation narratives, we began to see a division within the tobacco control, even among the tobacco control community starting, I would say, about ten years ago. In terms of the utility of the newer products, such as especially the e-cigarettes and even their position toward the tobacco industry, whether they should be a player or whether they should be a stakeholder in tobacco control or not.

00:39:46:00 - 00:40:24:13

Gan Quan

This is quite unfortunate to see that tobacco control community is no longer as united as in the past. So I think part of that is due to the fact that the evidence on these products has not been conclusive because they are new to the market and the research studies on these products, many of them are still ongoing.

00:40:24:13 - 00:41:11:04

Gan Quan

So I really hope with more and more evidence being generated by the scientific community, then the tobacco control advocates can really have a clear understanding of these products and can be united

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again against the tobacco industry. So because only if we can be a united force against the tobacco industry can we generate the power that we need to fight against the tobacco industry and to protect the tobacco control policies from the interference from the industry.

00:41:11:06 - 00:41:18:13

Louis

I think that's an excellent point to end our conversation on. So all that's left to say is, thank you very much, Dr Gan Quan, for joining me today in the studio.

00:41:18:15 - 00:41:19:18

Gan Quan

Thank you.

00:41:19:20 - 00:41:45:12

Louis

Also, thanks to Lisa Lennartsdotter Ermann, Ulysses Dorotheo and Daniel Dorado Torres for also contributing their specialist knowledge to this episode. As always, the sources for today's discussion can be found in the episode show notes. This was the final episode of the second season of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco. We hope to be back with more episodes in the future where we'll continue to challenge deadly industries.

00:41:45:14 - 00:41:50:05

Louis

But for now, thank you for listening.

00:41:50:07 - 00:42:11:22

From the Tobacco Control Research Group, you've been listening to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, hosted by Louis Laurence, produced by Kate White and edited by Sacha Goodwin.

00:35:11:11 - 00:35:23:04

Louis

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