

20 Years of the Tobacco Industry's Internal Documents: Why these Documents are Important for Public Health

doi: <https://doi.org/10.32635/2176-9745.RBC.2023v69n2.3831>

20 Anos dos Documentos Internos da Indústria do Tabaco: Por que esses Documentos são Importantes para a Saúde Pública
20 Años de los Documentos Internos de la Industria Tabacalera: Por qué estos Documentos son Importantes para la Salud Pública

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INTRODUCTION

On January 26, 2023, at the event called It's About a Billion Lives¹, organized by the Research Center and Tobacco Control Education at the University of California in San Francisco (UCSF), the 20 years anniversary of the release of the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents (TTID)², formerly known as Legacy Tobacco Document Library, was celebrated (could not happen last year due to COVID-19 restrictions).

At this event, presenters highlighted the importance of these documents for tobacco control because they exposed the innumerable strategies used by the tobacco companies, for example, the maneuvers to deny that cigarettes cause cancer, the development of technologies to make cigarettes more attractive to children and teenagers and how projects were conducted to weaken the tobacco control policies.

DEVELOPMENT

HISTORY

Truth Tobacco Industry Documents (TTID)² was created in 2022 by the UCSF library to house and provide permanent access to tobacco internal documents produced during litigation of the US States which originated the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (MSA)³, signed on November 23, 1998, originally by the four largest US tobacco companies and Attorneys-General of 46 States.

The companies agreed, among other actions, to stop certain marketing practices, especially those targeted to children and adolescents, to disclose documents produced during the litigation, and to make annual payments to the US States of \$206 billion to be paid in 25 years to compensate medical costs of tobacco-related diseases. These resources would also fund the group Truth

Initiative⁴, responsible for campaigns such as “Truth”, which supports the storage of tobacco industry documents at UCSF.

Additionally, the US Judge Gladys Kessler, in another civil action, condemned the largest tobacco companies under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act – federal law on criminal organizations – for deceiving the population about tobacco-related health effects and creating strategies to lure the young population to smoke, among others. In addition, the companies were ordered to disclose all the documents produced during the litigation about tobacco and health until 2021⁵.

However, TTID dates back to 1994 when classified internal Brown & Williamson Tobacco documents were leaked to UCSF's Professor Stanton Glantz. These documents contained scientific studies conducted by the company on nicotine's addictive nature and other health effects of tobacco smoke which originated the book *The Cigarette Papers*⁶ and donated to UCSF library so other investigators had access to them. The company filed a lawsuit to remove the disputed material, however, the court ruled that these documents should be made available for public review⁴.

In 1998, the State of Minnesota reached a settlement with the five largest US tobacco industries to create two repositories where the companies should deposit the documents produced during the case. One of the repositories was in Guilford, United Kingdom, for documents of British and American Tobacco (BAT), and the other was in Minneapolis, USA, for documents of the companies Philip Morris, R. J. Reynolds, Lorillard, Brown & Williamson, and American Tobacco Company and tobacco industry associations, Tobacco Institute and Center for Tobacco Research. The repositories should be kept open to the public for ten years⁴.

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The Minnesota Settlement forced BAT to deposit its documents in the United Kingdom, but it was vague and did not compel the company to disclose on Internet to ensure the remote access by any investigator interested who did not have to travel to the UK to read them. Later, Celia White and Professor Glantz were able to mobilize partners known as the Guildford Archiving Project (GAP), who collected, digitalized, and indexed more than 1.6 million documents now available on the Internet under the auspices of UCSF⁴.

On February 22, 2023, the webpage offered more than 15 million tobacco industry documents with more than 92 million pages, many of which addressed advertising, manufacturing, sales and scientific research of this sector in the 20th century⁷.

Today, the UCSF documents repository, further to tobacco industry documents, also houses pharmaceuticals, food, chemical and fossil fuels industry documents.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM TOBACCO INDUSTRY DOCUMENTS

According to TTID⁸, 1,062 publications, including books, reports, documentaries and scientific papers used TTID as data sources⁸. The content comprehends research conducted by the industry to evaluate the carcinogenesis of cigarettes and strategies to mislead the public opinion about tobacco harms.

For instance, they revealed that although publicly the industry denied their products caused cancer, they were aware not only of this effect, but also conducted research about the topic. In addition, they coded (example, Zephyr) their internal communications to avoid using the term “cancer”⁶.

Regarding the strategies to deceive the public about tobacco harms, a scientific conference about smoke and its psychological benefits was proposed in 1970 to create positive statements about tobacco use that the industry’s public relation could adopt as:

Topic of The Conference:

The Gratification of Cigarette Smoking

Purposes:

Scientific: To stimulate scientists to a renewed study of the positive, rewarding aspects of cigarette smoking.

Industry: To provide scientific facts for a pro-cigarette public relation campaign.

[...]

Rationale:

Scientists have been abundantly financed for the study of the adverse effects of smoking upon physical health.

Scientists have not been supported for the study of positive effects of smoking upon psychological well-being.

Thus the public is hearing only why they should not smoke; they hear nothing in defense of smoking.

The smoker is not being told there are sound, scientific explanations for the satisfaction that he knows he gets from his cigarette.

The conference will provide authoritative statements in support of smoking. These statements can become the basis for a pro-cigarette public relations campaign⁹.

Another document reveals that the tobacco industry monitored even medical congresses and searched for information that could help the industry as described in the report about the Fifth International Symposium on the Prevention and Detection of Cancer held in São Paulo in 1982¹⁰:

“As usual” for medical congresses, pertinent scientific papers were nearly one-sidedly anti-smoking.

With one important exception, no significant new scientific data were released. However, one leading world expert on mammary cancer, Professor R. D. Bulbrook, of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, London stated that female breast cancer is “significantly” and “non-artificially” more frequent in non-smokers. Dr. Wynder, a world leader of anti-smoking establishment took pains to make, at least two detailed public declarations that he disagrees with the studies claiming that “passive-smokers” can be alleged to induce cancer in non-smokers. [...]

The most benefits of my attending the Symposium, however, came from my making several important contacts and from advance information on forthcoming scientific papers much prior to publication. In substance, my attendance at the São Paulo Symposium was very worthwhile the effort and costs.

It is important to highlight that breast cancer has a causal relationship with smoking, as well as secondhand smoke can induce cancer^{11,12}.

Another strategy exposed by the documents was how the tobacco industry created controversy about the health risks of its products. A study identified that the strategies included funding and publishing research supporting their positions, suppression and criticism of studies that do not support their position, change the standards of scientific research, and disseminate interest group data or interpretation of risks at lay press (non-scholar) and directly to policy makers¹³.

ARE THESE DOCUMENTS STILL RELEVANT?

The tobacco industry criticizes the use of these documents, alleging they would be outdated and that their current practices would hardly be applied today. However, evidences have shown that these documents are still useful, especially to contribute to understanding the technologies current utilized in tobacco products or, yet, about the origin of the strategies continuously adopted by the industry to date.

A paper illustrates this scenario, indicating that tobacco industry was developing flavour capsules utilized in cigarettes produced today since the 1960s¹⁴. In the same line, the documents indicate how researchers were chased by tobacco industry, as Professor Stanton Glantz was. Tactics included attempts to have the US Congress to cut off the funding of his researches¹⁵.

A similar strategy was recently detected in Brazil¹⁶: a cigarette company attempted to delay the decision of the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa) about electronic smoking devices (ESD). In an effort to disqualify the “*Universidade de São Paulo (USP)*” and the National Cancer Institute (INCA) they claimed that these institutions would be biased for having denounced that ESD could be health-damaging and for allegedly ignoring the scientific evidences that the industry concluded as valid. Furthermore, the news report has also affirmed that the industry attempted to undermine Anvisa’s technical staff responsible for tobacco control¹⁶.

CONCLUSION

The tobacco industry’s internal documents are an important tool for public health policies and tobacco control. More than 20 years after these documents came to light, they are still useful and help explain the industry’s strategies to date.

The large volume of yet unexplored documents and new sectors included in the UCSF virtual library are an opportunity for interested researchers not only for tobacco control but also for food, climate changes, drugs abuse, medicines and public health policies.

As a suggestion, events to empower and stimulate Brazilian researchers and students to investigate these documents should be organized because they can be a useful tool not only for scientific research, especially in oncology and related areas, but also for formulating public health policies within the Brazilian context.

CONTRIBUTION

André Luiz Oliveira da Silva participated of all the stages of the article, since its design until the final version to be published.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interests to declare.

FUNDING SOURCES

UCSF Briger Family Fellowship.

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Recebido em 2/3/2023
Aprovado em 3/3/2023