

# Rate Movies with Smoking “R”

## EDITORIAL

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The major goal of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Hollywood’s political arm, is to protect the movie studios and the multinational corporations that own them from anything that would restrict their activities or profits. In response to efforts by the government to censor the content of films, the MPAA instituted a voluntary system of rating films in 1968.<sup>1</sup> According to the MPAA, “The basic mission of the rating system is a simple one: to offer parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see.”<sup>1</sup> Movies are rated on the basis of language, violence, sexual content, and drugs. Movies with explicit sexual material, explicative language, or drug use receive an R rating (restricted—no one under 17 admitted without a parent). The MPAA does not consider smoking—the most widely used addictive drug that kills the most people—in assigning ratings.

The fact that the MPAA does not consider smoking when rating a movie is very important to the tobacco industry because it recruits and retains new smokers—the children that the MPAA rating system is supposedly designed to protect—by associating its products with excitement, sex, wealth, rebellion, and independence. Movies are a powerful way to make this connection. The tobacco industry has built its alliance with Hollywood for decades by working at every level, from payments to studios to distributing free cigarettes to the people who make movies.<sup>2,3</sup> And it has been a two-way street. For example, in 1972 the president of a production company wrote RJ Reynolds Tobacco reporting that all the characters in a suspense thriller they were producing smoked, then added, “Film is better than any commercial that has been run on television or any magazine, *because the audience is totally unaware of any sponsor involvement.*”<sup>4</sup>

The paper by Dalton and colleagues<sup>5</sup> in this issue of **ecp** encourages taking smoking into account when rating a movie to provide a tool to help parents prevent their children from beginning to smoke. While the MPAA does not consider smoking in rating a film, there is generally more smoking in R-rated movies than in those rated G (general audience), PG (parental guidance suggested), or PG-13 (parents strongly cautioned; some material may be unsuitable for children under 13). Using a large sample of children in grades 5 through 8, they found that the more the children viewed R-rated films, the more likely they were to smoke and drink. Conversely, children whose parents restricted watching of R-rated films were less likely to smoke and drink. This effect persisted even after controlling for demographics and other aspects of parental restrictions. Compared with children who had no restrictions on viewing R-rated movies, children with restrictions had adjusted odds for having tried smoking reduced by half, and odds for children who were completely restricted were reduced by a factor of 5. Parents can help prevent their children from beginning to smoke by not allowing them to watch R-rated films whether in theaters, video, or television.

Dalton and colleagues’ study adds to the already strong case that smoking in movies has a powerful impact on teen smoking. After a decline in the 1970s and 1980s, the amount of smoking in American movies began to increase dramatically in 1991 and now exceeds the amount present in 1960.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to reality, smoking in the movies is usually associated with high-profile, successful figures.<sup>7</sup> A teen going to the movies today will leave with the misimpression that smoking is widely accept-

*This paper is available at [ecp.acponline.org](http://ecp.acponline.org).*

# If smoking in a movie is about “free expression,” why do all the characters smoke the same brand?

**B**ig Tobacco has a long history of using cash and favors to promote smoking in movies. Big-screen appearances may be protected by the First Amendment. But so is the audience’s right to know what’s really behind them.

Despite Big Tobacco’s 1989 pledge to stop paying for product placement in films, smoking in movies has soared.

Those in Hollywood who say that smoking on screen is “artistic choice” or “creative expression” ignore the sordid history of trading cash, goods and publicity for screen time.

Meanwhile, filmmakers act as if product placement never stopped.

Example? The most advertised brand, Marlboro, dominates the big screen.

And when several leading characters smoke in a movie, they never smoke brands from competing companies — exactly the sort of “exclusive” demanded by any product placement deal.

The claim that writers and directors “reflect reality” doesn’t hold up either:

- ▶ Smoking on screen is heavier now than in movies from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when more Americans smoked.

- ▶ Smoking among leading movie characters is more common than it is among comparable people in the U.S. population.

- ▶ The characters shown smoking are mostly up-scale; real-life smokers tend to be low-income and less educated.

- ▶ Tobacco kills four million people a year worldwide, but movies almost never portray smoking and second-hand smoke as unhealthy, let alone lethal.

Does the First Amendment protect



Barry M. Meyer, Warner Bros.



Sherry Lansing, Paramount



Tom Rothman, 20th Century Fox



Dick Cook, Disney

*Defenders of artistic freedom? These studio bosses let Big Tobacco promote smoking to global audiences in theaters, over satellite and cable, on tapes and DVDs, and so cleverly that you can’t tell it apart from paid product placement.*

Big Tobacco’s commercial speech whenever it appears? It certainly protects the movies.

Whether actors, directors, editors, set dressers or producers are addicted to nicotine themselves, corrupt enough to accept favors from Big Tobacco, or stupid enough to do the tobacco industry’s dirty work for free, censorship is not the answer.

Free speech is essential to a healthy society.

Indeed, the First Amendment is the reason we can make so many secret documents tracing Big Tobacco’s involvement in Hollywood available to the public.

Big Tobacco argues that its free speech rights prevent states from restricting tobacco advertising to kids.

Yet it has never hesitated to violate the public’s right to know — retaliating

against publications critical of tobacco, trying to block damaging research, spreading disinformation. The tobacco industry even lied to Congress about its activities in Hollywood.

But as researchers and public health advocates, we value free speech as an absolute guarantee that information will flow freely and powerful interests cannot suppress the facts.

The facts are these: Sex and violence sell movie tickets. Smoking only sells cigarettes. When Hollywood solemnly defends smoking on screen, Big Tobacco gets away with addiction and death worldwide.

Government should not, and need not, interfere in film content.

Instead, we ask studios and the giant media companies that own them to take the following reasonable but life-saving steps.

E-mail the studio chiefs yourself and ask them why they don’t...

**1] ROLL AN ON-SCREEN CREDIT** certifying that nobody on the production has accepted *anything* of value from any tobacco company, its agents or fronts.

**2] RUN STRONG ANTI-TOBACCO ADS IN FRONT OF SMOKING MOVIES.** Put them on tapes and DVDs, too. Strong spots are proven to immunize audiences.

**3] QUIT IDENTIFYING TOBACCO BRANDS** — in the background *or* in action. Brand names are unnecessary.

**4] RATE ANY SMOKING MOVIE “R.”** While this may identify smoking with maturity, it should give producers pause.



**SMOKE FREE MOVIES**

www.PublicMediaCenter.org

## E-mail the studios at [SmokeFreeMovies.ucsf.edu](mailto:SmokeFreeMovies.ucsf.edu)

Smoke Free Movies aims to sharply reduce the film industry’s usefulness to Big Tobacco’s domestic and global marketing — a leading cause of disability and premature death. This initiative by Stanton Glantz, PhD (coauthor of *The Cigarette Papers* and *Tobacco War*), of the UCSF School of Medicine is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. To learn how you can help, visit our website or write to us: Smoke Free Movies, UCSF School of Medicine, Box 0130, San Francisco, CA 94143-0130.

**FIGURE 1.** An advertisement that first ran as part of a campaign to encourage Hollywood to confront its role promoting tobacco worldwide. This advertisement first ran in the entertainment industry trade publication *Variety* on October 31, 2001. The full campaign, together with supporting information, can be viewed at [www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu).

ed— that is, the “winners” smoke, and no health or social consequences are associated with smoking. Appearance of specific brands, with Philip Morris’ Marlboro dominating during the 1990s, is high, and use

of specific brands by actors on screen has increased dramatically.<sup>8</sup> Smoking by high-profile actors is associated with favorable attitudes toward smoking and actual smoking among teens.<sup>9,10</sup> The more smoking that teens

see on screen, the more likely they are to smoke. Compared with teens who had watched films with a total of 50 or fewer tobacco uses, watching movies with high tobacco use (more than 150 incidents) tripled the odds that the teens would try tobacco.<sup>11</sup>

Given the evidence that smoking in movies strongly impacts childhood and early smoking and claims by the MPAA that it created the ratings system to help parents protect their children, why has the MPAA consistently refused to include smoking when rating a movie? The MPAA has a long history of friendly relations with the tobacco industry; it has hosted meetings<sup>12</sup> of the tobacco industry's super-secret Committee of Counsel.<sup>13</sup> Similar to the tobacco industry, Hollywood has dealt with expressions of concern about smoking with rhetoric about "free expression" and denials that smoking in the movies actually contributes to smoking.

The MPAA's policy of protecting tobacco promotions in films by refusing to rate such films R under the guise of free expression is hypocritical in light of the fact that it rated the 1999 film *The Insider* R because of "language." *The Insider*, which described the struggle of former Brown and Williamson chief scientist Jeffrey Wigand and CBS *60 Minutes* producer Lowell Bergman's efforts to tell the public the truth about big tobacco, is probably the most powerful educational film made about tobacco. It clearly demonstrates the industry's unscrupulous behavior and demonstrates how it has used its power to keep the truth away from the public. This message of truth versus lies is probably the most effective message that can be used to prevent teen smoking.<sup>14,15</sup> The MPAA's R rating substantially reduced the number of teens that would see this film and virtually ensured that it would not be shown in schools. Quite a favor for the tobacco industry.

Of course, rating movies that contain smoking R has economic consequences for the studios because an R rating generally means less box office revenues and profits. In those cases where the producers, directors, actors, and writers think that smoking is crucial for dramatic effect, they would be free to include it, just as they can include graphic violence or sex. An R rating for smoking would, however, raise the cost of doing the tobacco industry's dirty work and would substantially reduce the number of films that promote smoking.

To achieve the maximum benefit of this policy, Hollywood would have to end the practice of promoting R-rated films to children and teens.<sup>16</sup> Theaters and video stores would have to take the R rating seriously and preclude children's access to these films unless they have expressed parental permission.

Rating films with smoking (or other pro-tobacco imagery) R is, of course, only one element of a program

to prevent American films from being the tobacco industry's most powerful promotional device worldwide. To promote a discussion of these issues in Hollywood, I have been running an educational campaign based on full-page newspaper advertisements in the entertainment trade press (**Figure 1**). In addition to rating films with smoking R, this campaign advocates three other steps:

- **Certify in the closing credits that no one involved in the film's production received anything of value—cash, loans, tobacco products, publicity, or anything else—in exchange for using or displaying tobacco.**
- **Require strong antitobacco advertisements before any film that contains smoking (including those on television, videotape, and DVD) to immunize audiences from the pro-tobacco influences in the film.<sup>17</sup>**
- **Stop identifying brands.**

None of these measures will choke creativity or restrict content. They will, however, make movies less effective as promotional devices for the tobacco industry.

Jack Valenti, President of the MPAA, parroting tobacco industry logic, says that smoking is not considered in the ratings system because "Cigarettes are legal, so how could you have it affect the rating of a picture?" (Mr. Valenti seems to forget that the "f" word is legal, too.) He has also said that smoking is not considered in the ratings system because parents have not asked for it.

It is time to ask.

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