

## **PMI : outstanding innovation award in the construction of lies.**

In January 2020, Philip Morris International PMI released a white paper titled “Unsmoke your mind: pragmatic answers to tough questions for a smoke-free future” during a conference held in, of all places, Davos, Switzerland: the World Economic Forum. The central preoccupation in Davos this year was the future of our planet and our environment. But we doubt that PMI paid any attention to Greta Thunberg.

Big tobacco companies profit from the financial advantages of location in Switzerland, where they optimize their revenues and organize and deploy their worldwide strategies unchecked. It is here as well that PMI piggybacked on WEF to bolster its efforts to hold onto smokers at the same time that it is moving users to other forms of nicotine addiction.

## **Media bending and greenwashing**

The PMI white paper, which merits critical reading, and the Davos conference are just different aspects of a complex strategy to rebrand PMI as an innovative, climate conscious, socially responsible company interested in health.

PMI also promotes this image in its media webpage, which lists “awards” PMI has earned for industrial innovation, environmental sensitivity, and business practice. Despite the awards and anodyne marketing language that associates e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn devices with electronic products like iPhones, e-scooters, and e-whatever sold in clever, well-designed packaging, these new devices are simply miniaturized delivery systems for liquid nicotine mixes. Do they really merit pompous awards for technological innovation? We should understand the associations with electronic coolness and environmental responsibility for what they really are: clear efforts to greenwash the image of an industry profiting from an old addiction in new ways.

## **A history of manipulation**

It is impossible to overstate the tobacco industry’s long history of lying about the risks and dangers of their products, about which the white paper says nothing. In the 1950s, filters were introduced to make smokers think cigarettes were made safer by absorbing some of the so-called tar, which would protect smokers from lung cancer. For a long time we have known this is a myth, that it is in fact a criminal scam. Since their introduction, filters have evolved to become a high-tech component of the cigarette with large teams of engineers dedicated only to “improving” filters. Yet even in the scientific community few realize that filters are chemically treated to change color during smoking to make smokers believe in their efficacy, and since their introduction deaths from tobacco-related cancers have only risen. Tobacco companies actually do merit recognition for the industrial innovation of filters, which are one of history’s most successful technological frauds. We should simply forbid the use of filters, which research has shown do identically nothing to reduce the lethality of cigarettes, for the same reason tobacco companies oppose doing so: it would have a negative impact on cigarette consumption (and thus industry revenues). We also should recognize one further outcome of filter innovation that compels banning them: cigarette butts are the number one source of toxic plastic waste in the environment worldwide.

In 1965, tobacco companies started to add ammonia in their products. Marlboro was the first brand to introduce ammonia to increase the nicotine “kick,” and they increased the use of ammonia for the next ten years to become the world’s dominant brand of cigarettes as other brands like Camel scrambled to catch up to this technological advancement. Since then, the number of chemical additives in cigarettes have steadily increased. The tobacco smoked today is far from a natural tobacco leaf, with manipulated nicotine levels, additives, and thousands of toxic substances in the smoke including pesticides and fungicides. We also cannot forget that the production cycle of this deadly product is an ecological catastrophe.

In the 1960s, the industry also increased marketing aimed at women with so-called “slim” and “light” cigarettes. Marketing for slim cigarettes played on the female body to sell appealing products to women. Often, consumers believe that “light” means “safer”. In fact, “light” smokers often engage in compensatory smoking, inhaling more deeply and more frequently to sustain the amount of nicotine absorbed.

We also must emphasize how the tobacco industry has long manipulated science—even though we likely will never know the full story. Between 1954 and 1997, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) spent nearly \$300 million funding scientific projects on “tobacco and health,” the intention of which was to call into question any and every finding that supported a relationship between smoking and cancer (Sarah Milov, “The Cigarette: A Political History”, 2019). There is no reason to believe that the “science” the industry supports today, whether promulgated as a “white paper” in any other seemingly disinterested forum, is not equally disingenuous.

### **White papers and whitewashing**

In its white paper, PMI reaches a new low in argumentation. Here are some examples. The title, “Unsmoke your mind,” is itself a rhetorical gem that at the outset tells any properly skeptical reader that they are in a cloud of smoke that the white paper will clear. (The irony—like tobacco smoke, literally—is breathtaking.) This implicit accusation is immediately countered by the promise of the subtitle, “pragmatic answers to tough questions for a smoke-free future”, to take the reader to the truth about a benign, smoke-free world (in which PMI innovatively sustains nicotine addiction). And what are those “tough” questions?

The “independent” survey commissioned and paid for by PMI posed hard-hitting questions such as “*How important do you believe it is for the government to dedicate time and resources to efforts to reduce smoking rates?*” Among persons who were asked this across 14 countries in which the study was conducted, a big majority of 79 percent rated such efforts as important. Respondents were also asked whether “*Smokers who would otherwise continue smoking cigarettes should have access to, and accurate information about, smoke-free alternatives?*” Overall, 73 percent agreed with this, while only 16 percent disagreed. These questions compel this (rhetorical) question: Would reasonable people ever answer these sensible questions otherwise?

Of course they wouldn’t. The point, therefore, of that first question is that it displaces a question actually worth asking: “*How important do you believe it is for the government to dedicate time and resources to efforts to prevent, reduce, and eradicate tobacco and nicotine consumption?*” The second question also

could have been less disingenuously posed had it asked, with minor rephrasing, whether *“Smokers who would otherwise continue smoking cigarettes (and using other nicotine products) should have access to scientifically based and medically supported smoking cessation?”* No questions like these originate in disinterested points of view. Every question can be said to be biased. But must we accept the bias of the tobacco industry itself and let it set the very questions we need to ask as we try to move from addiction to health?

The bias in this white paper is as pervasive as it is hidden bias. In a chapter called “Science Illuminates, Science Blinds”, the key point is a twisted attempt to orient readers toward what big tobacco wants them to believe is good science. To demonstrate how much the tobacco industry cares for scientific truth, the white paper selected a well known example of bad science: the 1998 article in *The Lancet*, subsequently retracted, that linked vaccination to autism. This article was indeed a scientific catastrophe with serious consequences for trust in vaccines that persist today. The white paper’s key but implicit intention is to undermine scientific scrutiny of new technologies of addiction. If one of the world’s top medical journals cannot be trusted to get the relationship between vaccination and autism right—first there was a connection, but now there is not—neither can biased scientists be trusted to properly understand the virtues of e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn devices.

The rhetoric of the white paper hews closely to sensible statements that are not difficult to agree with, which position the industry as well intentioned. The statement of what seems a simple truth, that *“Trust in combustible cigarettes was breached decades ago, when the medical evidence established that the use of these products carries inherent and serious health risks. Everyone now knows that cigarettes are harmful and addictive,”* elides the fact that the tobacco industry itself knew of the “inherent and serious health risks” of smoking, which were established in the 1950s. The industry’s own, internal research verified the risk of smoking “long ago,” yet the industry fought the association of smoking with serious health risks with all its strength for decades. Neither does the report mention that e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn devices are harmful and of course addictive—maybe even more addictive than traditional cigarettes.

To “unsmoke the world,” PMI states its new mantra: “If you don’t smoke, don’t start; If you smoke, quit; If you don’t quit, change.” If PMI really cared for the health, it would add “If you don’t vape, don’t start; If you vape, quit; If you don’t quit, you should.” Smoking cessation therapies are available to break nicotine addiction. Yet the white paper devotes not a single line to explaining what PMI intends to do to discourage its primary target market, teen-agers, from starting to either vape or smoke. The point, of course, of course, is to transition smokers from one form of addiction that PMI can profit from to another. In the end it does not matter to PMI how people satisfy their addictions. It matter only that they become addicted, and PMI will meet their needs thereafter.

In the Swiss Canton of Graubünden, where Davos is situated, the legal age to buy cigarettes is still 16 years and there is no current limitation for the sale of e-cigarettes and heat-not-burn devices. In Switzerland, the industry today pretends to be in favor of a general limit of 18 years for the sale of any tobacco or nicotine product. If this was really the case, they could have decided years ago to auto-regulate their sales without waiting for any national legislation, which they have continuously fought. Thus did the general manager of PMI not utter a single word to encourage teenagers to not start smoking or vaping. Some silences really speak more loudly than words.

To understand the actual intention of the PMI white paper, we should consult the most recently available PMI annual report, for 2018. PMI clearly states that until the vision of a smoke free world is achieved, “*we remain committed to maintaining a leading share in the international cigarette category,*” and the report trumpets PMI success in constantly increasing their market share. In many countries, particularly in Africa, nothing is done to provide so called “less harmful” products. Instead, everything currently done by the tobacco industry is done to increase tobacco consumption and create new generations of people addicted to nicotine who can be transitioned to newer addictive technologies of tobacco that currently are being developed in Europe and North America. To understand the industry strategies in Africa, read the outstanding article by Marie Maurisse, “The blazing success of Swiss cigarettes in Africa,” published in January 2019.

### **Unsmoked or smoke screened minds?**

The PMI white paper is a renewed example of big tobacco undermining science and evidence, which are bent toward tobacco industry purposes. It is a dishonest attempt to undermine the credibility of the people and organizations opposing deadly nicotine addiction. We should continue to focus on how the industry deploys clever rhetoric to manipulate public perceptions of the risks and dangers of their products. This manipulation began in the 1950s, has never stopped, and it grows more sophisticated and complex today with armies of well-paid lobbyists, lawyers, marketing, communications, and public affairs specialists. It is not the minds of those fighting against tobacco and nicotine addictions that should be “unsmoked.” It is the industry’s multiple smoke screens that must be dissipated.

Luciano Ruggia, Director, AT Swiss Association for Smoking Prevention, January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020