
### Smoking in Movies

**To the Editor:**

Omidvari et al evaluated a select group of films from the 1990s confirming earlier findings that the overall prevalence of smoking in films is similar to its prevalence in the overall population and highest in R-rated films. In contrast to data collected from the 1960s through 1980s, however, they found that major characters who smoke tend to be of lower socioeconomic class and villains. They also concluded that smoking is more likely to be present in independent films than in studio films.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that, in an effort to obtain an appropriate sample to compare smoking prevalence among major characters and in 1990s society, Omidvari et al excluded any films and scenes set outside the United States, those set in earlier times, science fiction and fantasy films, and with smoking by non-US citizens. There is no evidence that viewers, particularly adolescents, make such distinctions about smoking.

To obtain their target sample size, Omidvari et al collected data on R-rated films made from 1996 to 1998, but also on PG and PG-13 (youth-rated) films from the entire decade of the 1990s. Smoking in movies has shifted “down” from R-rated films to PG-13 in recent years, which could lead this sampling strategy to underestimate the prevalence of smoking in PG-13-rated films. The fact that Omidvari et al excluded films such as Titanic, a film popular with youth featuring smoking by both its young stars, makes it all but impossible to extrapolate from statements about the nature and presence of smoking in the sample of films used to prepare this article.

Most important, the magnitude of exposure to on-screen smoking strongly predicts adolescent smoking, not its prevalence among major characters. Films from major studios, not independents, account for 90% of exposure to smoking in movies (Table 1, based on data in the study by Polansky and Glantz) and deliver the most new adolescent smokers to the tobacco industry.

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### References


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In reply to the letter of Glantz and Polansky about our article, we set out to study whether “smoking in contemporary American

### Table 1—Tobacco Incidents and Impressions: Major Studios vs Independents (1999–2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. Incidents*</th>
<th>Tobacco Impressions by Rating (millions)†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G/PG</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisan‡</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disney§</td>
<td>1,202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’Works§</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Indies¶</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lions Gate</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGM§</td>
<td>296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Corp.</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony</td>
<td>963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Warner**</td>
<td>1,283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal†</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Films††</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viacom</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†One tobacco incident × one paid theatrical admission equals one tobacco impression. Admissions were calculated by domestic gross/average ticket price for year of release.
‡Acquired by fellow independent Lions Gate in 2003.
§Includes Miramax, acquired in 1994, and Dimension, the genre film label of Miramax.
¶An independent frequently distributing through major studios.
†Miscellaneous producers/distributors releasing < 10 features over the survey period.
#Minor major” acquired by Sony 2004.
**Includes New Line and Fine Line, acquired in 1996 with other Turner properties. Disney, Sony, and News Corp. also own “specialty” labels.
††Acquired by General Electric in 2004 and paired with NBC.
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cinema” had a higher prevalence than that in the general US population, and not to study whether “movies influence smoking habits of their viewers,” as other authors have done. In order to answer our question, we had to exclude films that took place “outside the United States, in earlier times... and smoking by United States citizens” because they obviously do not portray the lives of US citizens in the United States. Equally as important, we introduced objective methodology to a difficult subject. In their zeal to demonstrate a high prevalence of smoking in the movies, the authors from the same institution have repeatedly used arbitrary definitions such as “no smoking signs,” implied or actual tobacco consumption, talking about tobacco, and tobacco paraphernalia. As such, they have demonstrated an astonishingly high prevalence of smoking in all movies, and an even higher prevalence in R-rated movies. These data must unfortunately be dismissed since they are neither scientific nor objective.

Furthermore, the letter of Glantz and Polansky has several major errors. First, we did not study “a select group of films from the 1990s.” We studied every movie that met our inclusion criteria. Science fiction and animation (not “fantasy”) movies have an even lower smoking prevalence than live action and non-science fiction movies. If included, the prevalence of smoking in all movies in our study would have been even lower and therefore, not statistically significant, exactly the same as it is now. Similarly, since none of these movies are rated R, they would not have changed the findings for R-rated movies in our study. Obviously, the net effect would still be exactly the same. These movies would not have changed either our findings or our conclusions.

Second, “To obtain our target sample size, we collected data in R-rated films (from January 1 1996–until December 31 1998)” by watching these movies in the theaters, but also continued to watch R-rated movies on video dating back to 1990, even though we had reached the necessary sample size. We collected data from virtually every PG and PG13 movie made in the 1990s that met the inclusion criteria, because there are so few of these movies released each year. Therefore, “this sampling strategy [could] underestimate smoking in PG13 films” does not make any sense since our study includes virtually all PG and PG13 movies of the 1990s, and R-rated ones from every year of that decade, especially from the later 1990s.

Finally, excluding the movie Titanic does not make our study “impossible to extrapolate from.” Our study simply states that the prevalence of smoking in contemporary American movies about American life in the 1990s is the same as that in the general US population in the 1990s. Titanic sank in 1912 when everybody smoked. It is improbable that James Cameron accepted payment from the tobacco industry while letting go of his own salary, to portray his two top characters smoke an unidentifiable cigarette.

The movie studios, run by only the single dictum of “profits,” pick up many movies in film festivals such as Cannes, Sundance, or Telluride for distribution without having any control whatsoever over their production or contents. Many of these movies were credited in the study by Polansky and Glantz as “studios,” although these studios were only the distributing companies. For example, their data lists The Quiet American (2002) and Tadpole as Disney movies. Although distributed by Buena Vista, there is no way that these movies should be considered studio products. The Quiet American was made by independent German, Australian, and US companies, and Tadpole was made by the Independent Film Channel! It is as if one called a washer a “Home Depot” washer simply because that is where it was purchased. They also failed to distinguish the English-speaking foreign movies in that study. Furthermore, in their studies, SKG is counted as “independent.” Although debatable, Steven Spielberg cannot possibly be placed in the same category as Todd Solondz. It is because of errors like these that our study is important since it deals with the subject matter scientifically and without bias.

Glantz et al. concluded that “smoking in movies has returned to levels observed in 1950.” If the prevalence of smoking has in fact been on the rise in recent years, it is simply due to the rise of the independent movies. Other authors have simply not paid attention to the fact that, as most experts agree, starting with Pulp Fiction (1994) and the parallel rise to power of Miramax Pictures, independent movies have become as important, if not more so, than the studio movies. As any researcher knows, the danger lies when one’s personal beliefs and biases influence the way that one collects and interprets data.

As pulmonologists, we are also greatly disturbed by smoking in American movies especially since so much of it is completely unnecessary. However, there is enough evidence that, if collected and interpreted correctly, obviates the need for arbitrary and forced conclusions that are cluttering the so-called scientific journals with their authors’ prejudices.

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REFERENCES

Lung Resection in the Elderly
To the Editor:

The article by Mery et al in a recent issue of CHEST (July 2005) is an important contribution indicating that minimal resection in patients with stage I and II lung cancer may be as...