

## Smoking and Tobacco Product Placement in the Movies: Introduction

Movies have always had a powerful influence on people's behavior, from how they talk to how they dress. Tobacco marketers have taken advantage of this power to popularize and normalize smoking. Tobacco companies have purposely cultivated a relationship with Hollywood since at least the 1930s. Their own internal documents show that tobacco companies:

- Suppressed negative portrayals of smoking in movies;
- Supplied free cigarettes to a long list of Hollywood celebrities to encourage publicity and brand exposure and smoking on screen; and
- Paid cash to place their brands in specific movies without audiences knowing.

With the negative health effects of smoking reported in the 1964 Surgeon General's Report, smoking in movies decreased in the 1960s, but by the 1970s smoking had re-emerged with regularity in the movies. When television ads for tobacco came under fire in the late 1960s and were barred by Congress in 1973, movies became even more important to tobacco companies to best position their brands in the U.S. and global marketplace.

Tobacco use and tobacco product placement in movies is potentially more persuasive than other forms of advertising such as print advertising. A magazine advertisement constitutes only one image, which is clearly identified as a paid advertisement. On-screen tobacco use, on the other hand, presents a series of images. It seems to be "real life" and may not be recognized as a paid advertisement.<sup>1</sup>

Portrayals of tobacco use in movies promote the same themes as other tobacco advertising: rebellion, independence, sexiness, wealth, power and celebration. Negative depictions of tobacco use are as rare as is showing brands from competing companies in the same film. Rarely do movies depict characters becoming ill from smoking, families suffering from secondhand smoke, or people complaining about the smell of smoke on their clothes when leaving a smoke-filled room. Most recently, movies have failed to accurately reflect the adoption of clean indoor air laws across the country or the normative shift to smokefree environments. Even as some in Hollywood defend depictions of smoking as reflecting reality, most on-screen tobacco appearances have been in the hands of "upscale" characters. In fact, smoking in real life is concentrated among those at the lower ends of socio-economic status. Not only does smoking in movies convey the impression that "important" people smoke, it also is likely to give the impression that smoking is much more common than it actually is. According to research conducted by Dr. Stanton Glantz at the University of California/San Francisco, the smoking rate among major movie characters (the "good guys" and "bad guys") substantially higher than it is for comparable people in reality.<sup>2</sup> Finally, despite dramatic declines in tobacco use since the 1950s and increasing public understanding of the dangers of smoking in the real world, smoking in movies is as common today as it was in movies made in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ng C, Dakake B. Tobacco At the Movies, Tobacco Use in PG-13 Films <http://www.masspirg.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Major Movie Characters Smoke Much More Than in Reality. <http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/> Retrieved 9.07.04.

<sup>3</sup> Glantz SA et al. Back to the Future: Smoking in Movies in 2002 Compared with 1950 Levels American *Journal of Public Health* 2004 Vol. 94 (2):261-263.

The 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between 46 states and the five largest U.S. tobacco companies prohibits tobacco companies from paying to place their products in movies. Despite legally binding pledges from tobacco companies to stop paying cash for brand placement, tobacco brands still appear in movies and portrayals of smoking in Hollywood movies have doubled over the last ten years.<sup>4</sup> Particularly troubling is the fact that the prevalence of smoking in movies has increased in youth rated movies even as it decreased in R-rated movies.<sup>5</sup> In the past five years, almost three-quarters of movies rated G, PG, and PG-13 included smoking.<sup>6</sup> As smoking scenes have migrated from R-rated movies to movies rated G, PG and PG-13, younger and younger audiences are being exposed.

Several studies have documented the association between smoking in the movies and increased rates of smoking by youth. A study by researchers at the Dartmouth University Medical School, Department of Pediatrics,<sup>7</sup> provides strong evidence that smoking in movies promotes initiation of smoking in adolescents. After controlling for a wide variety of factors associated with smoking, including grade in school, school performance, parent smoking and self-esteem, the study concluded that 52.2 percent of smoking initiation in 10 - 14 years old was attributable to smoking in movies. Other studies have found that teens who don't smoke and who watch "a lot" of movies are 16 times more likely to have a favorable attitude about smoking<sup>8</sup> and teens whose favorite celebrities smoke are three times more likely to smoke themselves.<sup>9</sup>

### **International Impact Of Smoking In Hollywood Movies**

Portrayals of smoking in Hollywood movies promote smoking among youth and convey an image of smoking as normative and even desirable. The same impact occurs when American movies are viewed in other countries. For every person who watches a Hollywood movie in the U.S., two people watch that movie in other parts of the world. Youth around the globe are very attracted to U.S. movies, which serve as a "window" through which others can glimpse life in the U.S. Many opinions about "American life" are formed from images in American movies. As a result, people in other countries, especially youth, develop unrealistic ideas about the prevalence of smoking in American society. They see successful Americans lighting up on screen much more frequently than Americans do in real life. Many youth around the world (especially in developing countries that the tobacco industry is targeting) aspire to be like Americans and American movies provide images and behaviors to imitate. Tobacco use may be viewed as an easy way to "be" American. American movies are one of the most powerful ways that we export tobacco use as a normative behavior to the world. Reducing the amount

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Glantz S. *Movie Survey five years Summary*.

[http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/problem/now\\_showing\\_sub.html](http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/problem/now_showing_sub.html). Retrieved January 23, 2004:

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sargent J et al Effects of seeing tobacco use in films on trying smoking among adolescents: cross sectional study. *British Medical Journal*. 323:1-6, December 15, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Sargent, J. et al. Viewing tobacco use in movies: Does it shape attitudes that mediate adolescent smoking? *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 22(3):137-45, April 2002. *Am. J. Prev. Med.*

<sup>9</sup> Tickle J et al. Favorite movie stars, their tobacco use in contemporary movies and its association with adolescent smoking, *Tobacco Control* 10:16-22, 2001, <http://tc.bmjournals.com/>

of smoking in Hollywood movies will be one of the most effective ways that we can counter and decrease the influence of the tobacco industry over youth around the world.

### **Reality Check and Smokefree Movies**

In 2002-2003, Reality Check launched the initiative, *Tobacco and Hollywood: Headed Toward a Breakup* designed to educate community members and key opinion leaders about the impact of smoking in movies and call on Hollywood to eliminate smoking in G, PG and PG-13 films. The following year, Reality Check continued addressing smoking in movies by launching phase II of the initiative, *Hollywood and Tobacco: Reality Check Strikes Again*. The objectives of phase II were to:

- Increase awareness among young people, community leaders and the entertainment industry to the real impact of tobacco promotion in G, PG and PG-13 movies.
- Decrease social acceptability of tobacco use and tobacco product placement in G, PG and PG-13 movies and
- Mobilize tobacco control programs in other states and countries to oppose tobacco promotion in G, PG and PG-13 movies.

Working closely with Stanton A. Glantz of the Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education at the University of California, San Francisco, Reality Check incorporated the four Smokefree Movies policy recommendations into the initiative objectives. The recommendations are:

- **Rate New Smoking Movies "R"**  
Any film that shows or implies tobacco use should be rated "R." The only exceptions should be when the presentation of tobacco clearly and unambiguously reflects the dangers and consequences of tobacco use or is necessary to represent smoking of a real historical figure.
- **Certify No Pay-Offs**  
The producers should post a certificate in the credits at the end of the movie declaring that nobody on the production received anything of value (cash money, free cigarettes or other gifts, free publicity, interest-free loans or anything else) from anyone in exchange for using or displaying tobacco.
- **Require Strong Anti-Smoking Ads**  
Studios and theaters should require a genuinely strong anti-smoking ad (not one produced by a tobacco company) to run before any film with any tobacco presence, regardless of its MPAA rating.
- **Stop Identifying Tobacco Brands**  
There should be no tobacco brand identification nor the presence of tobacco brand imagery (such as billboards) in the background of any movie scene.

Actions to meet the objectives of the initiatives were carried out on a local, statewide and national level. Activities to meet the objective to increase awareness among young people, community leaders and the entertainment industry included the use of paid and earned media, letters and petitions to the entertainment industry calling on them to eliminate smoking from movies rated G, PG, and PG-13 movies, community forums and interactive movies nights called "STOMPS". Activities to decrease the social acceptability of tobacco use and tobacco product placement in G, PG, and PG-13

movies included utilizing earned and paid media and community forums. To mobilize other tobacco control programs, a national partnership of tobacco control programs across the country and around the world was formed.

Thus far, Reality Check youth partners have:

- Written over 300,000 letters to key figures in Hollywood;
- Distributed more than 100,000 fliers alerting people to impact of smoking in the movies;
- Held over 300 interactive movie nights educating viewers about the impacting of smoking in movie;
- Placed warning ads in large demographic newspapers throughout New York State alerting readers to the impact of smoking in movies;
- Participated in the Smokefree Movies Day of National Action calling on studios to eliminate smoking in youth-rated movies;
- Traveled to seven states to train other youth and tobacco control advocates on implementing smokefree movies actions;
- Educated more than 100 community organizations on the subject; and
- Conducted training sessions on smokefree movies in Senegal, Helsinki and Nigeria.

### **Actions to Address the Problem**

The smokefree movie initiative is now part of the Advertising, Sponsorship and Promotion Initiative with youth partners undertaking actions focusing on community awareness and mobilization and policy change. An overview of these actions and detailed instructions can be found in the next two sections of this chapter.