

Risky Half-truths of the Tobacco Industry

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A century ago, the progressive era brought to the United States more than just a series of social movements that gave women the right to vote or brought about educational reforms, it also left America with an entrenched tradition that has remained unchanged: the traditional breakfast of eggs, pancakes, juice and, above all, bacon, whose daily consumption is associated with an increased risk of [colorectal cancer](#).

The story of how this type of breakfast took hold is [well known](#). Seeing its revenues fall, Beech-Nut Packing hired the father of public relations, Edward Bernays, to boost its sales. The also-nephew of Sigmund Freud conducted a pro-bacon campaign that included a consultation with 5,000 physicians asking them only whether a hearty breakfast is better than a light one. 4,500 medical doctors agreed that hearty was better, and Bernays submitted his "study" to newspapers across the country, which replicated the false idea that hypercaloric breakfasts containing bacon were better for the health of Americans.

Establishing a half-truth by manipulating "scientific" data is nothing new: controlling public opinion can ensure that something that is far from the truth is assumed to be true. Large industries have historically displayed this *modus operandi*, and the tobacco industry has been no exception.

Through [several journalistic investigations](#), Ethos Public Policy Lab has highlighted the strategies used by the tobacco industry in Mexico to weaken tobacco control policies. This goes from [interference in political and legislative processes](#), to advertising their misnamed "reduced harm products" [through influencers](#) to directly impact the younger population. Ethos [recently documented](#) that the industry leverages civil society groups and academia with conflicts of interest, who strongly discredit official scientific information and promote their own data in favor of the use of e-cigarettes (commonly known as "vapers") and heated tobacco devices.

Consumer health and wellness are sidelined when it comes to global sales of these new devices amounting to millions of dollars: [nearly 16,000](#) for British American Tobacco in 2018 and [more than 5,500](#) for Philip Morris International in 2019.

Nationally, the organizations México y el Mundo Vapeando and Pro-Vapeo México support a pro-vape discourse that favors the tobacco industry, because although there are small companies dedicated to the manufacture and marketing of vape devices, both Philip Morris and British American Tobacco -the two largest tobacco companies in Mexico- have entered the market with their own devices and have the means and intention to monopolize it.

In addition, the financing of both organizations is closely linked to commercial discourse. México y el Mundo Vapeando receives resources from the national vaping industry or small nicotine retailers; and Pro-Vapeo México has a direct connection with the International

Network of Nicotine Consumer Organizations (INNCO), based out of Switzerland, which is indirectly funded by Philip Morris International.

But, how does the money make its way down from Philip Morris to this network? The scheme is intricate and secretive. [Detailed investigating](#) by journalists Nantzin Saldaña and Sergio Rincón shows that, through its subsidiary PMI Global Services, Philip Morris has donated \$160 million to the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW) between 2018 and 2019 alone, with a 10-year pledge of more than \$800 million. FSFW, in turn, has allocated \$160 thousand to INNCO, an institution that, by the way, does not disclose its financial statements. Some active members of INNCO in Mexico are Tomás O'Gorman and Atakan Erik Befrits, the secretary and one of the founders of Pro-Vapeo México, respectively. Also, Roberto Sussman, its director, who is an active participant in almost all pro-vaping forums, some of which are funded by the industry.

This multinational scheme is an example of the vested interests in a number of organizations, forums, social media communities and even specialized media that promote the erroneous idea that [vaping is 95% less harmful than smoking](#). Coincidentally, this same argument is used by tobacco companies and [has already been refuted](#) by the World Health Organization and Mexican health authorities, who contend that this data comes from studies involving a conflict of interest.

Vaping in Mexico has emerged as the spearhead for the tobacco industry to reinvent itself and stay relevant, especially among young people and in the context of the pandemic. The loose regulations on tobacco control and the interactions between tobacco companies and decision-makers have created the conditions for the emergence of a confusing discourse that diverts attention from public health.

Cigarettes account for [8.4% of all deaths](#) caused by health conditions every year, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups of the population.

It is not a matter of replacing it with a "less harmful" product, especially with the alarming rise in popularity of the new devices. As long as there is no conclusive evidence, free of vested interests, of the effects that these could be causing, the risk remains present. Only through transparent regulation in line with a precautionary principle will it be possible to protect present and future generations from the harms associated with tobacco and nicotine.