

The Hidden Links Between the Tobacco Industry and Pro-Vaping Advocates in Mexico

By Nantzin Saldaña and Sergio Rincón



On February 18, 2020, representatives of the federal Ministry of Health and civil organizations cancelled their attendance to the forum "Nicotine Consumption and Regulation", which was to be held the following day at the Mexican Congress. Their reason: the attendance of representatives "promoting the interests of the tobacco industry," Arturo Sabines, head of the national office for tobacco control of the National Commission against Addictions (Conadic), said at a conference.

All eyes were on two civil organizations in favor of vaping (use of electronic cigarettes and vaporizers) in Mexico, both of which are closely related to the tobacco industry. Doctors, scientists and experts in addiction control were

warned by telephone from the Ministry of Health not to attend the forum because doing so could be in violation of Article 5.3 of the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which establishes limiting or avoiding interaction with representatives of the tobacco industry.

The researcher from the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) Inti Barrientos and Arturo Sabines, from Conadic, who were invited to the forum, said in an interview that the organizations that were being singled out were México y el Mundo Vapeando and Pro-Vapeo México.

"From the Ministry of Health, we noticed a conflict of interest concerning the participants who will attend this forum. There are

representatives of the vaping industry who collaborate or associate with other organizations that are clearly financed by the industry," added Sabines, from Conadic.

In Mexico, these two organizations are the main advocates on the issue of vaping. Its members have attended forums, the media, the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation and Congress to promote the discourse that vaping is less harmful than smoking tobacco and that it is an alternative to stop smoking cigarettes; they have also stated that they have no conflicts of interest and that they have never been financed by the nicotine industry.

However, México y el Mundo Vapeando has received funding through donations from the national vaping industry or small nicotine

retailers; and Pro-Vapeo Mexico is a member of the International Network of Nicotine Consumer Organizations (INNCO), based out of Switzerland, which has been documented to be indirectly funded by the tobacco corporation Philip Morris International (PMI). In addition, they are involved in an infrastructure of organizations, as well as groups of scientists, lawyers and physicians who have generated a discourse in favor of vaping, using information that has not been endorsed by the scientific community, or even with studies prepared by scientists with a possible conflict of interest, as they have worked for the tobacco industry.

México y el Mundo Vapeando and Pro-Vapeo México are listed by their own directors as opponents of the laws that currently ban the importation, commercialization and distribution of vaporizers. On the one hand, the organization México y el Mundo Vapeando offers a free amparo lawsuit form against the prohibition of these devices or even calls for peaceful resistance; while Roberto Sussman, President of Pro-Vapeo Mexico, launched a strategy on social media to "attack" and "criticize" any official opposed to vaping.

Inti Barrientos has closely followed both organizations and claims that the pro-vape discourse favors tobacco companies because the control of the nicotine market is held by large companies and because, although there are small companies dedicated to the manufacture and marketing of vaporizers and derivatives, the tobacco industry also has similar products and the ability to monopolize the market.

Expansión magazine published in 2018 that the black market for electronic cigarettes in Mexico could reach two billion dollars, although for the time being their sale is prohibited. Globally, that year British American Tobacco earned nearly \$16 billion from its vaping products, according to its 2019 annual report. That same year, Philip Morris International

earned profits of more than 5.5 billion dollars from the sale of so-called "reduced risk products".

"These organizations (México y el Mundo Vapeando and Pro-Vapeo México) claim to be against tobacco companies, and that is part of the pro-vape discourse: to say they are against tobacco. But this is not the case. Pro-Vapeo México has participated in events sponsored by Philip Morris International. An example of this is that Roberto Sussman and Tomás O'Gorman (secretary of the organization) participated in a series of (commercial) reports financed by the tobacco company," says Barrientos.

In 2018, both Sussman and O'Gorman participated in publicity stunts, which were part of PMI's "Smoke-Free Future" campaign. Last June, Ethos Public Policy Lab reported that the slogan "Smoke-free future" was used by dozens of influencers to advertise iQOS.

The phrases "smoke-free future" and "evolve to vapor" are part of a tobacco industry marketing strategy. PMI announced last October that it will stop selling cigarettes in 2030 and replace them with its iQOS device, which heats tobacco to obtain aerosolized nicotine, a process for which the WHO has warned that there is no evidence that it is less harmful. British American Tobacco also pursues a strategy to replace its traditional cigarettes with its Vype vaporizer, which is available in Mexico for 99 pesos.

THE INTERESTS OF ACTIVISTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

As of this January, the websites of México y el Mundo Vapeando (MMV) and Pro-Vapeo México (PVM) do not show their Federal Taxpayers Registry (RFC), nor do they have a privacy notice or a space for donations, as do other civil associations, which even issue tax-deductible receipts to donors. This is not the case here. Neither do they

make public their donations - although it is not mandatory for them-, nor the relationship of their directors with nicotine companies.

According to its director, México y el Mundo Vapeando was incorporated as a civil association in September 2016 in Mexico City's Notary Office Number 50. Days later it was registered before the Public Registry of Property and Commerce and before the Ministry of Finance, with an RFC that is still active before the Tax Administration Service (SAT).

To operate, México y el Mundo Vapeando relied on financing from companies that sell nicotine and/or vaporizers, as evidenced by the receipts of transfers and deposits, of which users uploaded photos to a private Facebook group that was deleted in December 2020.

The director of México y el Mundo Vapeando, Juan José Cirión Lee, informed in two videos that the companies dedicated to the sale of vaporizers and derivatives that wanted to be part of the civil organization were required to pay an annual fee of 1,000 pesos, and would be registered before a notary as "commercial associates". Likewise, an annual cost of 1,000 pesos was determined for "consumer associates". This is in addition to voluntary donations.

Ethos Public Policy Lab has documented through receipts and vouchers that businesses dedicated to the production and sale of vaporizers and derivatives donated money to the organization México y el Mundo Vapeando.

Despite this relationship with nicotine businesses, Cirión Lee, the director of México y el Mundo Vapeando, declared last February, during the forum on vaping in the Chamber of Deputies: "I have no conflict of interest, because a conflict of interest has to do with, basically, a stance; if anything, the conflict of

interest I may have is that in my work as a litigator I have won all the cases I have litigated against Cofepris (Federal Commission for Protection against Sanitary Risks)”

The other civil organization, Pro-Vapeo Mexico, was founded in 2018 and at the time of publishing was not found in the SAT's public records. Nor does it appear in the Commercial Registry of the Ministry of Economy or in the National Institute of Social Development, institutions with which organizations are registered by Mexican law to receive donations and issue tax receipts to their donors.

Roberto Sussman is the current director of this association, Tomás O'Gorman, the secretary, and Atakan Erik Befrits is another founder. The latter two are also members of INNCO, a network indirectly financed by the tobacco company PMI.

Between 2018 and 2019, INNCO received \$209,000 through a grant from the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW), whose sole donor is Philip Morris International, according to U.S. tax documents.

In other words, part of the money that the company - owner of IQOS and Marlboro - donates to FSFW, is reaching INNCO, which claims to be against cigarette smoking.

To achieve this international operation, the cigarette company uses a subsidiary created in 2002 in Delaware, United States, called PMI Global Services INC, which has donated around \$160 million between 2018 and 2019 to the FSFW in New York, and which has finally financed INNCO, whose headquarters are in Switzerland.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg: in May 2019, Philip Morris International pledged to donate 80 million annually to FSFW for a decade. That amounts to more than \$800 million for the foundation and "smoke-free" projects, such as INCCO.

Although there is documentary evidence of INCCO's financing, there is no record of what it does with the money, since this network does not

disclose its operating expenses, whether it pays the members of its board of directors, such as O'Gorman -who has denied any monetary ties- and Atakan, and if so, how much; the only thing it has disclosed is that it does not finance its 31 affiliated members, among them Pro-Vapeo México.

Sussman participates in almost all national and international pro-vape forums, although some of these are also industry-funded. In Mexico and Latin America, his is the loudest and most powerful voice. A Mexican scientist who is best known for advocating for nicotine products, although his expertise is not in medicine, but in physics. He is a researcher in General Relativity, Gravitation and Cosmology at the Institute of Nuclear Sciences of UNAM. He is currently inactive as a professor in the Department of High Energy Physics. He is co-author of a technical guidance booklet on COVID-19 and vaping, distributed over the last few months on the CliveBates.com site of the founder of Counterfactual, a consultancy and promotional firm, and a recognized attendee of the industry-funded Global Tobacco and Nicotine Forum (GTNF) since 2014.

In 2019 and 2020 Sussman participated in two forums of the Knowledge Action Change partnership, which is also funded by PMI through FSFW.

Sussman is also a member of the MOVE (Medical Organizations Supporting Vaping and Electronic Cigarettes) platform, which provides scientific support to INNCO, according to documents from this organization.

MOVE has not disclosed where it obtains resources for its operation. It includes 20 Mexicans among its members, including Sussman himself and vaporizer entrepreneur and doctor Roberto Amury, a member of México y el Mundo Vapeando AC.

FSFW launched to the world in 2017 as an independent, non-profit funder to support scientific research and end smoking and its effects on people's health. It is in fact the entity around which a global infrastructure is built to boost vaping, as it has been funded by PMI for the past two years, according to its tax reports filed with the US tax authority.

These also reveal that their support has not been focused on science, but mostly on promotion and public relations (one in six), according to an analysis by the Tobacco Tactics platform of the STOP initiative. Now FSFW has presented an index that reports on the actions taken by each tobacco company to move away from combustible cigarettes to vapes and e-cigarettes.

The foundation created and funds research centers, known as "centers of excellence", which produce articles on electronic cigarettes and vaping - and describe them as less harmful - which they disseminate to vaping organizations by region and to INNCO. These in turn are responsible for disseminating them in international forums, media, stores and manufacturers, as well as delivering them to officials, legislators and the public opinion so that they enjoy popular recognition, with the aim of being referenced by decision-makers.

The provider of information and research for the Ibero-American research groups is the Center of Excellence for the Acceleration of Harm Reduction (CoEHAR) at the University of Catania in Italy, created by Italian academic Riccardo Polosa, a consultant for British American Tobacco and funded by PMI.

In turn, CoEHAR reports to the Global Forum on Nicotine (GFN), which is held once a year, and also reports to industry-funded specialty magazines and news sites such as Filter Magazine, VIDA News and Vaping Today. The latter is the first

whose content is in Spanish, which was launched in the second half of 2020 and of which there are still no reports of its financing, but it promotes itself as a digital newspaper for Ibero-America, and in its coverage it translates much of what the other two English-language media publish. The Association for Harm Reduction in Ibero-America (ARDT by its Spanish acronym) was created by the INNCO network and brings together all the vaping organizations in the region. It also connects them with foreign scientists who are often involved as their advisors in order to strengthen their international presence. As an example, this is what Pro-Vapeo México did with the Greek Konstantinos Farsalinos and the Italian Riccardo Polosa, academics with studies on e-cigarettes, who preside over a network of experts in Europe and Latin America, with whom they publish studies and research.

Pro-Vapeo also includes as scientific consultants David B. Abrams, of New York University's School of Global Public Health; Joel L. Nitzkin, of R Street Institute Washington; Carl V. Philips, an independent consultant in Epidemiology and Economics and former scientific director of the Consumer Advocates for Smoke-Free Alternatives Association (CASAA); and David Nutt, professor of neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College Burlington.

In addition, vaping activists are training their own spokespersons, who give them credibility and consolidate their discourses through statements to specialized media, podcasts, YouTube shows and blogs, while at the same time inserting them in traditional media through interviews and backed up by supporting research.

ATTACKS ON AUTHORITIES

"Commissioner (Gady) Zabicky talks about nicotine smoked from tobacco cigarettes. Nicotine dependence is much lower if consumed by other means (patches, gum, e-cigarettes, oral snus)," tweeted Roberto Sussman, president of Pro-Vapeo México, on June 2, criticizing the head of Conadic, who in a television interview spoke of the complications that smoking and vaping create regarding COVID-19.

Months later the controversy involved Hugo Lopez-Gatell, Undersecretary of Health, who in the forum "Future of Tobacco Control in Mexico" in the Chamber of Deputies on November 17, stated that through the manufacture of pseudo-science and marketing, the aim is to position vapers and e-cigarettes as an alternative to smoking.

The head of the federal strategy against COVID-19 said about vapers: "Today, new stakeholders in tobacco life have appeared who, without a scientific basis, would like to position themselves as alternatives in the practice of risk reduction and cessation. Without having properly documented their possible virtues, they have begun to position themselves with an enormous investment in terms of marketing and persuasion, and the construction of pseudo-science".

Pro-Vapeo, an organization led by Sussman, published a response letter in which it called the official's remarks "misinformation" and accused him of promoting "a disastrous policy".

It is common for Sussman, when faced with questions about e-cigarettes or vaporizers, to object with references to scientific articles that endorse these products, although most of them are not backed by a peer review process and "cannot be used to inform clinical practice", and even publications such as the European Respiratory Journal advise against this, when a study has not

been verified.

He also uses social media as a battleground. In response to hashtags such as #NoFumoNiVapeo (neither smoking, nor vaping), used by federal agencies such as Cofepris, the activist and his followers respond with #VapeoPorqueNoFumo (I vape because I don't smoke). And it is usual for him to tag those to whom he directs his messages or those who are close to him and support the regulation of e-cigarettes, such as federal representatives Éctor Jaime Ramírez Barba (PAN), Frinné Azuara Yarzabal (PRI), Lorenia Valles and José Ricardo Delsol Estrada (Morena).

Sussman refutes in social media scientists and officials who speak in favor of the vaping ban, and labels as "shameful" the award given to Mexico by the World Health Organization for taxing cigarettes and banning vapers. Also, those who have claimed that the secretion of droplets when vaping increases the risk of COVID-19 spread. He has even accused the campaigns against e-cigarettes of "promoting death", and spokespersons of international organizations of being "ignorant".

These accusations are part of a mechanism that the tobacco industry supports with direct or indirect financing in favor of its interests. An ecosystem of institutions, organizations, forums, specialized media and communities in social media that are intertwined and lead to consolidate research with "a la carte" results, permeating society with the idea that these are alternatives to quit smoking, less harmful than a cigarette, although these claims are not supported by solid scientific evidence.

Some of these interest groups emphasize that in countries such as the United Kingdom, their institutions have endorsed them as an alternative to reduce cigarette consumption, even against the WHO's recommendation, and suggest emulating that regulation. But these claims are out of context,

given that that country's smoking epidemic and regulatory capacity are not comparable to or in the same state as those of Mexico and other low- and middle-income countries. The same is true for New Zealand and France.

Dr. Juan Zinser, president of the Mexican Council Against Smoking and oncologist at the National Cancer Institute (InCan), affirms that electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS), popularly known as e-cigars and e-cigarettes, do not help to quit smoking and represent a gateway to the world of nicotine and traditional cigarettes for almost 20% of teenagers who tried them for the first time between 12 and 13 years of age compared to those who did not know about them, as documented in an international study in which the INSP participated.

Even the coronavirus pandemic crisis has been used by the pro-vape network. The article "Characteristics and Risk Factors for COVID-19 Diagnosis and Adverse Outcomes in Mexico: An Analysis of 89,756 Laboratory-Confirmed Cases of COVID-19" was published in the European Respiratory Journal in early July, and is signed by physicians and individuals presented as experts linked to this pro-vape network, such as Farsalinos and Sussman. The text argues that nicotine is not a risk factor for COVID-19, and that it even helps to reduce the susceptibility to infection.

This article is a preliminary version of new medical research that has not followed a peer review methodology, which is characteristic of texts with scientific content. That is to say, it has no authority to inform clinical practice. In their results, they report that in the review of COVID-19 cases in Mexico, with data from the Ministry of Health, smokers were less likely to be diagnosed positive, compared to non-smokers. But this was only a first working paper, and six months after its publication, the revised version is still not available.

The document has been used by these groups as one of the arguments

they attempt to place in society.

José Manuel Mier Odriozola, one of the participants in this study, is the second most important spokesperson for this network in Mexico. The surgeon runs his own private institute at the Hospital Angeles Lomas and offers, among other specialties, therapies involving nicotine products for smoking cessation. He is currently conducting a comparative prospective research program with a "reduced risk" product, as he mentioned in a forum at the Chamber of Deputies.

Dr. Mier offers interviews in mass media, YouTube and social media. Last August, he participated in a panel discussion on why banning e-cigarettes is not good for health, along with Tomas O'Gorman of Pro-Vapeo México, for VIDA News Live, a broadcast of the FSFW-funded VIDA News site.

TRAVEL AND INVITATIONS

"Lately there are more scientific and clinical researchers doing work on behalf of the tobacco industry, especially locally. Years ago it was not a modus operandi in Mexico," says Dr. Luz Myriam Reynales, head of the Department of Tobacco Research at the National Institute of Public Health (INSP). In the past, studies were done abroad.

"However," she adds, "these experts do not disclose their conflict of interest on receiving funding from the industry and being part of the national system of researchers or belonging to public research centers. Others disguise it in order to position their work as independent, since the scientific community is still skeptical of their contributions. In addition, scientific journals rely on the self-disclosure of the authors and there is nothing to validate this". Inti Barrientos of INSP adds that "creating a scientific and academic article and publication verification center would help".

Doctor Zinser Sierra states that although verified studies supporting these products have been published in some prestigious scientific journals, this is not the norm. "What we are currently witnessing is not new, but they have been evolving it and they are doing it more and more efficiently," he adds about the publications that apparently have a strong influence from the tobacco industry and vapers, which could have a conflict of interest involved.

In an analysis on production, collaborations, conflict of interest and results of 600 scientific articles on electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco products, published between 2017 and 2019 in the world, and elaborated by 1,880 authors, it was found that someone with conflict triples the possibility of declaring less harm from consumption of these products and is 65% less likely to warn of a negative effect or a neutral valuation, according to the work that will be published at the end of February as part of The ENDS Repository project of the INSP's Evaluation and Survey Research Center, during the annual meeting of the Society for Research on Nicotine and Tobacco (SRNT) 2021. Researcher Inti Barrientos advanced some of these results in the webinar "Electronic cigarettes and heated tobacco products. Part 2", organized by Tobacco-Free Kids and The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease in September 2020.

At least 10 supporters of PMI's #FuturoSinHumo (smoke-free future) campaign who shared photos on Instagram attended the tobacco company's balcony at Formula 1 in 2018; some of them have also been invited by this company to visit its laboratories in Switzerland, according to sources who have requested anonymity, although there is also graphic evidence that was published on social media by the guests themselves.

It is precisely in these spaces where vaping activists, scientists, doctors and also celebrities, influencers and journalists converge.

Antonio (his name is an alias to protect his identity) is a young political activist with 50,000 followers on Twitter who was invited by PMI in 2015 to visit a research center where the iQOS e-cigarette was being developed. He was paid for airfare, lodging, and meals.

According to his interview, he was never asked to speak favorably of the product. But he says he was invited to events such as Formula 1 in Mexico City, where he was told by a public relations agency - the same that gave him the flight tickets - that iQOS was less harmful than traditional tobacco.

Antonio recalls that the invitations for the trips and events were handled by a public relations agency, which took care of every detail.

Surgeon Jose Manuel Mier - who promotes vaping and "reduced risk" products - has posted photos of his visits to PMI on his Instagram account. "I am at the Phillip Morris International Research and Development Center, learning how new alternatives to cigarettes have been scientifically developed," Mier posted on Jan. 18, 2018. |

THE HIDDEN LINKS BETWEEN THE TOBACCO INDUSTRY AND PRO-VAPING ADVOCATES IN MEXICO

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