

# fact

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**America's Newspapers Suppressed the Truth About Cigarettes  
and Cancer for Twenty-five Years**



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# The Great Smokescreen

By Arthur E. Rowse

An editor of the *Washington Post* tells how fear of reprisal by tobacco advertisers kept newspapers from publicizing the link between smoking and cancer for 25 years

Writing about lung cancer in *Cosmopolitan* magazine a few years ago, Gordon and Kenneth Boggs reported: "Now that the furor has died down and experts have had time to examine the supposedly damning statistics, the cigarette seems to be all but exonerated." Besides, "filters have removed much of the sting from the general condemnation."

What do Gordon and Kenneth Boggs say today? Not a word. They can't.

The article was originally submitted to *Cosmopolitan* by two writers who said nothing whatsoever about cigarettes being "all but exonerated" and about any protection afforded by filters. The editors asked the writers to insert a few sentences to that effect; they refused. The editors themselves added the sentences. Onto the article they put the by-line "By Gordon and Kenneth Boggs," who do not exist. Two pages away from the article when it appeared was an advertisement: "Viceroy gives you that *Real Tobacco Taste* you miss in every other filter brand!"

*Cosmopolitan's* performance was flagrantly dishonest; the performance of most other American magazines, newspapers, and TV stations with regard to the lung-cancer story has been only dishonest. For the most part our fearless free press remained stonily silent—until Emancipation Day, just this past January 11.

Suddenly, because of the government's official report condemning cigarette smoking as harmful to health, the massive media ended their 25 years of shilly-shallying and admitted that the subject was news. TV networks that rarely allowed their documentaries to probe into controversies closer than Angola and Afghanistan broke out with a rash of half-hour and one-hour programs; newspapers that used to relegate items about lung cancer to the space between truss ads began blossoming with eight-column banners on the front page. The news media, it seems, had been infected with lung candor. In this year alone the news machines have dispensed more truth about tobacco than they did in the 25 years that it has been known that cigarette smoking and death are bosom buddies.

Even doctors, including those who smoke Camels "more than any other cigarette," admit that the government's report offered not a bit of new evidence. The 10 panelists themselves, chosen by the Public Health Service, just reviewed old studies. Then why did the press suddenly decide the jig was up and stop filtering the bad news?

In the first place, the fact that a government-sponsored panel had affirmed all the horrible things that others had documented was news in itself—and the "jury" had the *imprimatur* of the tobacco industry itself. Second, no

study of the smoking-lung cancer link had received so much advance build-up. Third, cigarette sales had shown they could recover no matter how bad the news. And finally, in numbers there is safety. Most newspapers and TV stations with cigarette advertising would hesitate before initiating any study of the smoking problem on their own. But when it seems likely that every other newspaper and TV station will also be offending the tobacco interests, there is nothing to fear. The American Tobacco Company may not need the *Podunk Tribune* to advertise in, but it does need *all* of the nation's *Podunk Tribunes*.

A more pressing question is why the mass media saw fit to ostracize lung-cancer news in the first place. And the answer is that, while newspapers are in business to inform the public, sometimes informing the public can be bad for business. More and more it is getting to be true that he who pays the paper calls the tune. The history of how the news media covered—an apt word—news about the link between cancer and cigarettes is an object lesson in the inherent limitations of American journalism.

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Our story opens in 1938. That was when Dr. Raymond Pearl of Johns Hopkins University presented statistical “life tables” based on his studies of 6813 men. The results, he said, proved “that smoking is associated with a definite impairment of longevity.” *Time* called the report “enough to scare the life out of tobacco manufacturers and make tobacco users’ flesh creep,” but few other publications were willing to scare anyone. The shortage of publicity about Dr. Pearl’s report led George Seldes and Harold Ickes to accuse New York City papers of having suppressed the story. Of eight papers, only two, the *Times* and *World-Telegram*, ran anything in their editions of record. This was at a time when full-page cigarette ads were just beginning to bring full-bodied pleasure to publishers (contemporary slogans included, “Not a cough in the carload”; contemporary jokes included, “It’s not the cough that carries you off; it’s the coffin they carry you off in”).

Since many smokers could not then, and

cannot now, tell any difference in taste between brands, advertising became essential in the fight for sales. Tobacco became what *Business Week* called “the classic case, studied in every business school in the country, of how a mass-production industry is built on advertising.” With few exceptions, brand sales have run almost parallel with ad spending.

When the first mass of scientific studies linking smoking with mortality were made—between 1948 and 1953—many editors thought twice about publicizing them. The temporary drop of sales in 1953 and 1954 indicates that often the editors’ consciences won out. But in the great majority of cases the newspaper coverage was sporadic, brief, and variable. The greatest public impact can be attributed to Roy Norr’s article “Cancer by the Carton,” in the December, 1952, *Reader’s Digest*, a reprint from the *Christian Herald*. Probably the next most powerful blow came from *Life*’s issue of Dec. 13, 1953. Here, for the first time, smokers were shown photographs of how Dr. Evarts A. Graham of Washington University, using cigarette tars, induced skin cancer in mice. These articles, along with accumulated ash from other stories, were enough to depress sales. Up to this point, radio and TV coverage was next to nothing.

Alarmed by what they called “loose talk,” the leading tobacco companies accepted a proposal of Hill & Knowlton, their public-relations voice, to strike back. In January, 1954, they formed the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to conduct “independent” research and to “communicate authoritative factual information.” Henceforward, nearly every news item containing harsh ingredients was made milder by simultaneous T.I.R.C. statements dismissing the new evidence as inconclusive—often before there was even time to review the facts. Tobacco spokesmen capitalized on the misconception—common even among newspapermen—that objectivity means giving every side of a controversy equal publicity, regardless of relative newsworthiness. Naturally, tobacco interests deserved space for comment, but their repetitious rebuttals soon lost all possible newsworthiness



and took up space that could have gone toward fuller descriptions of new findings.

\* \* \*

Of the hundreds of studies examined in the recent government report, only two received anything like front-page treatment when they first became news. Both studies were made by the American Cancer Society. The preliminary findings, released in June, 1954, showed that, of 187,000 men age 50 to 70, cigarette smokers had a death rate from heart attacks and coronary diseases 50% higher than nonsmokers. Deaths from lung cancer were 5 to 16 times greater. This was by far the most conclusive evidence to date, dwarfing previous studies in size and in the contrast between the health of smokers and nonsmokers. Surely it was of the greatest concern to people in general and to the 65 million smokers in particular. It was released almost 10 years before the Surgeon General's report. Why didn't it have a similar impact? The *Times* gave the story a two-column picture and headline on page one. *But of 19 major newspapers across the country, fully 13 decided that the story just was not front-page news.*

By this time, however, enough information had seeped through printed media to give most people a whiff of the health issue. A Gallup poll found that 90% of its national sample had heard something about cigarettes and lung cancer. But what their knowledge amounted to was a big question. How many thought they were being protected by "exclusive micronite" and "selectrate" filters? How many realized the weight of the evidence already in?

Questions like these were soon buried under an avalanche of competing claims of low tar and nicotine content. The "tar derby" was set off, ironically, by tobacco's most consistent critics, *Consumer Reports* and *Reader's Digest*, with their detailed laboratory analyses of cigarette brands. (Why the *Digest* should add cigarettes to its hate-list of taxes, Democrats, foreigners, sex, atheists, Indians, negligence lawyers, and intelligence is an interesting question. The best explanation is that publisher DeWitt Wallace is a pleasure-hating Puritan, which is why the *Digest* was against smoking

back in the '20s, before a really sound case had been made by the prosecution. True to form, the *Digest* recently ran an article extolling the "safety" of American automobiles in the same issue with 20 full-page, color ads for various cars, at \$55,675 a page.) As a result of the tar derby, filter cigarettes jumped from 10% of total sales in 1954 to 40% in three years, and mentholated brands rose from less than 1% to more than 7%. And this meant more profits, too, because the tobacco companies could use inferior tobacco in filter cigarettes without anyone's tasting the difference.

Then, in June, 1957, came the final report of the Cancer Society, showing an even greater incidence of illness among smokers than the first report did. It got the best coverage any such story received before 1964. Ten of the same 19 major papers placed the story on page one.

The next month was the newsiest of all until last January. Rep. John A. Blatnik (D., Minn.), having heard that filters don't filter, began hearings to find out why. He invited top authorities, including representatives of tobacco companies, to testify. The tobacco men refused, but saw to it that their views were expressed by Clarence Cook Little, chairman of the T.I.R.C., plus a few other pro-tobacco spokesmen. Their consistent demurrer: more research is needed before drawing conclusions. As one ad man said after hearing how smoke causes lung cancer in mice, "It proves that mice shouldn't smoke."

Coincidentally, on July 15, three days before the first of Blatnik's hearings, U.S. Surgeon General Leroy E. Burney announced that government scientists had confirmed the presence of benzpyrene in cigarettes—benzpyrene is a suspected carcinogen. A check of 26 large papers with 42% of all morning circulation showed that *only nine printed anything about Dr. Burney's announcement.*

The same shabby press coverage characterized the Blatnik hearings. Both sides took turns at the microphone opening day, allowing editors to print both viewpoints and thus have less timidity about printing anything anti-tobacco at

all. To lighten their worries even more, wire dispatches, for no good reason, led off with Little's pro-tobacco views. Of the eight news breaks of major importance on the cigarette-cancer controversy in this two-week period, the first day's hearing got the most play. Two of the 26 papers used it on page one, and only three ignored it altogether.

Far more significant testimony came at the second hearing—from Dr. Ernest L. Wynder of the Sloan-Kettering Institute for Cancer Research. Dr. Wynder reported on clinical tests he had made which showed that filter-tip cigarettes often carried residues more harmful than those of nonfilter cigarettes. Although this was little-known except to readers of the *Digest* and *Consumer Reports*, only 12 of the 26 papers printed anything about it. None used it on page one.

Dr. John R. Heller, director of the government's National Cancer Institute, went even further at the next session: "We don't believe any filter can selectively filter out the component or components in the tars that are responsible for lung cancer." Here was news even to *Digest* readers, yet 16 of the 26 papers ignored it completely.

The next day, newspapers got a chance to give their readers detailed analyses of the tar and nicotine content of individual brands. But half the papers omitted all wire dispatches, and only three revealed any of the brand differences that would have been of tremendous interest to smokers.

During the eight days of key developments, including two final hearings and an interview in which Heller said that lung cancer killed more people annually than automobiles, not one newspaper reported all events.

The *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Daily Record* printed only one of the stories.

The *Des Moines Register* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* used only two stories.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Charlotte Observer* used only three stories.

Papers with the best performance—six stories—were the *New York Herald-Tribune*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*,

*Denver Post*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, *Miami Herald*, *Houston Post*, and *New York Times*.

Of the 208 possible newspaper stories (26 papers for 8 days), only 57% saw print, and only 4% made the front page. This is not to imply that all the stories deserved page one. Newsworthiness is a relative thing, complicated by local factors, competing events, and available space. But as the commercials tell us, "It's what's up front that counts."

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If newspapers were shamefully remiss about publishing news the public needed to know, TV was worse. By 1957, more than half the \$150 million advertising budget of tobacco companies was being spent on TV commercials. People like Arthur Godfrey gave folksy assurances that smoking was one of the greatest pleasures and health elixirs known to man. "You hear stuff all the time," purred Arthur, "about 'cigarettes are harmful to you,' this and that and the other thing." Then, holding up a picture, he went on: "Here's an ad. You've seen it. If you smoke, it will make you feel better, really. 'Nose, throat and accessory organs not adversely affected by smoking Chesterfields.'" He proceeded to cite a study by what he called a "competent medical specialist" substantiating these claims. Now that amiable Arthur has returned to the air after a lung-cancer operation, he sells small cigars. In replying to a listener recently on why he himself had changed from cigarettes to cigars, he said, "You don't have to inhale them."

At least one other Chesterfield smoker was not so stoical. Otto E. Pritchard, a Pittsburgh cabinet maker, sued Liggett & Myers in 1954 for \$1,250,000, claiming that Chesterfields had given him lung cancer. Similar suits had been filed before, but none had gone higher than a district court. So it was a major news event on Columbus Day, 1961, when a U.S. Court of Appeals in Philadelphia ruled in favor of Pritchard and ordered a district judge who had thrown out the case to try it with a jury. Said the appeals court:

**The evidence compellingly points to an express warranty [by Liggett & Myers], by means of various advertising media, not only repeatedly assuring plaintiff that smok-**



ing Chesterfields was absolutely harmless, but in addition the jury could very well have concluded there were express assurances of no harmful effect on the lungs.

Further, said the court, Pennsylvania law requires that any maker of a product who knows, or should know, that its use is dangerous to human life must warn the user and advise proper precautions. The case clearly could have been revolutionary, especially if it opened up legal recourse for all lung-cancer victims to collect damages from the manufacturers of the cigarettes they smoked. On the day of the decision, both AP and UPI sent out bulletins so brief they included none of the court's reasoning or any hint of the case's significance. The AP did not even identify Chesterfields, just mentioning "a certain brand of cigarette," and the UPI thoughtfully put the word "Chesterfield" in parentheses, apparently to jog editors who might want to delete it. As it turned out, the news did not get far beyond the wire machine. Of the 26 major papers, 17 ignored the short wire dispatches, and the others settled for a sentence in the daily stock-market summary saying that some cigarette stocks had tumbled because of a court decision. Two papers—the *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*—printed more than the wire material, but for them it was a local story. Two other local papers printed nothing in their editions of record—the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Pittsburgh Press*.

Since then, a jury has ruled that Chesterfields did indeed cause Pritchard's lung cancer, but declined to set damages. Pritchard died in 1963, and his estate lost a plea for a new trial just this year, leaving the question of damages still undecided by a higher court. A similar case, however, is going forward in Miami, where an appeals court is considering a case brought by the widow of Edwin Green Sr., who died in 1958 from lung cancer. In an advisory opinion, the Florida Supreme Court said that the American Tobacco Company, manufacturer of Lucky Strike cigarettes, could be held responsible for Green's death. Still another case has been begun in Miami, where Leo A. McGraw, 52, has accused the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company—makers of Camel, Winston, and Salem, which

McGraw had smoked for 30 years—of being responsible for his lung cancer.

Cases like these, if they are ever successful, could cripple the tobacco industry in America almost overnight. In 1964, according to the American Cancer Society, 43,100 people will die of lung cancer. Green's widow is seeking \$250,000 in damages; McGraw wants \$2,536,000. Has the reader ever heard of these cases? What paper do you read?

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It would be unfair to blame advertising pressure alone for the scarcity of news about the cancer-cigarette link-up. The mass media generally tend to undervalue the public interest in consumer news, and to be unaware of the need to catch up with important items later if they are missed first time round. But advertising pressure deserves *most* of the blame. The news blackout on the cigarette-cancer story was not the result of an ugly, open conspiracy—it was more subtle than that. Here are two scenes, the first real, the second imaginary:

- At a story conference of one of the nation's leading magazines, a new staff member suggests an article on "How to Stop Smoking." The managing editor replies testily, "Yeah, we'll run it next to the L&M ad." The other staff members exchange superior smiles; the new staff member smiles apologetically. Next suggestion.

- A city editor examines a wire-service dispatch dealing with the danger of cigarettes. If the dispatch were printed, he knows, his publisher might be quietly annoyed, his advertising director might be quietly furious, and he himself might quietly never become managing editor. Ads bring in three times more money than subscribers' pennies. Perhaps barely conscious of his reasoning, the city editor throws aside the wire-service dispatch and uses something innocuous to fill the hole on page two. And not a word has been exchanged between advertiser, publisher, advertising director, and city editor.

A comparison of the various news media through 1963 shows a clear correlation between ads and lack of news. The two magazines that have penetrated the deepest, the *Digest* and



*Consumer Reports*, get no tobacco revenue—whereas the *Digest* refuses such ads, *C.R.* accepts no ads at all. The small-circulation, intellectual magazines, like *New Republic*, the *Nation*, and *Harper's*, also have no worries about withdrawal of cigarette advertising. Among the big weeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek* have done a conscientious job. Last December 18 *Newsweek* even had a cover story on "Smoking and Health" against a back-cover ad for Kent's "satisfying taste." *Life*, with all its cigarette ads, has occasionally treated the subject with complete frankness. So has the *New Yorker*, for which cigarette advertising is only a small part of its revenue. Of the other big slicks, however, few have done anything. The "crusading" *Saturday Evening Post* has never yet dared offend its big tobacco customers. *Look* has covered its journalistic eyes. And so, for the most part, have the big women's journals, despite little or no cigarette advertising. *Redbook* is one of the few big sellers to take tobacco revenue and face the facts—if one article deserves such distinction. In June, 1960, the magazine not only presented a hard-hitting story, but pointed out how courageous the magazine was.

Radio and TV, partly because of the nature of the beast, did not have room between commercials for more than a glance at the lung-cancer story. There is little time in a 3½-minute news capsule for much news about anything, much less about lung cancer, and especially if the show is sponsored by Camels. The best means of telling such a story on TV is, of course, documentaries. Replying to a query late in 1962, ABC reported it had done no documentaries on the subject and did not contemplate any. NBC, which calls itself "the largest single source of news, entertainment and information in the free world," also had done none and planned none. Until this year, the only network to give the lung-cancer story more than a shrug was CBS, but even its efforts were paltry.

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Radio and TV, since they seldom present editorials, can be excused for not warning people directly about the dangers of cigarette smoking. Not so newspapers and magazines. And

not only were there scarcely any editorials anywhere until this year, but the few there were harped on the refrain that more evidence was needed—which was just what the tobacco industry wanted. CIGGIES ASSAILED AGAIN—HO HUM. That was the headline over an editorial in the New York *Daily News* during the filter hearings. "Sure," snarled the subway slangster, "the *News* takes cigarette advertising and likes it, and so what?" Ya wanna fight? Two years later, America's best-selling paper again demonstrated its sense of responsibility by adding that "until the scientists make up their minds one way or another, we don't see why Americans shouldn't go on calmly smoking as many cigarettes as they damn please." This courageous stand did not earn a Pulitzer Prize for the paper that *Time* lists as one of the nation's best, but it did bring an accolade from a prominent tobacco publicist for "a fine editorial stand" and "an excellent service to readers." Other newspapers that have been praised by industry spokesmen for editorial excellence along these lines have been the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.

Of the newspapers that did take a public-minded editorial stand, none was more outspoken than the *Washington Post*, which has argued that warnings should be printed on cigarette packages. The *Times* has also spoken strongly, though less frequently. One of the frankest statements from a newspaper in a tobacco area came from the *Charlotte Observer*: "The problem can be licked if all the people who have a stake in it would quit beating around the bush and admit the cancer problem exists."

As for the syndicated columnists, most of them virtually ignored what amounted to one of the biggest stories in a decade. David Lawrence of *U.S. News & World Report*, one of the few who has commented seriously on the subject, has consistently belittled the evidence. Drew Pearson recently pointed out that it had taken 10 years for the government to take action after he "first reported the danger of lung cancer from cigarette smoking" in 1954.

The threat that cigarette companies would withdraw advertising if a news medium played

too rough was a very real threat. An advertiser is free to advertise where he wants to, and why should he help a newspaper or magazine that knocks his product? True, there are no known cases where a tobacco firm withdrew advertising because of pique over editorial policies. Perhaps the unspoken threat proved effective enough, and perhaps the tobacco men were afraid of starting a public controversy. Then too, as a general rule, the small-circulation, financially insecure newspapers and magazines cannot afford to offend advertisers, while the big-circulation, prosperous ones can—because they will survive any such withdrawal of advertising and because the advertisers may need them as much as they need the advertisers. Yet though circulation is a good clue to financial health, it is not infallible. Some media with large readerships can be financially and morally insecure too—like *Cosmopolitan*.

The tobacco firms have occasionally shown how concerned they are about who prints what. In 1957, the American Tobacco Company asked its ad agency, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, to stop handling the *Reader's Digest* account. The *Digest* was spending \$1.3 million a year; American Tobacco was spending \$22 million. The request was granted. Two years later, Bantob Products of Long Island, makers of a tobaccoless (and probably tasteless) cigarette, began a \$15 million antitrust suit against the Big Five cigarette companies. Bantob claimed that the companies had blackjacked papers, radio, and TV into refusing Bantob ads, and quoted *Tobacco Leaf*, a trade publication, as saying, "The most effective weapon against invaders [of this kind] is economic pressure, and we believe that it should be used in whatever legal manner the industry deems necessary for its own preservation." Also in 1959, the makers of Aquafilter, a cigarette holder and filter, voiced the same complaint. These suits apparently worked, at least to the easing of this kind of pressure. But the important point is that newspaper and magazine editors and publishers knew beyond doubt that the tobacco companies were sensitive about what was being printed and were not averse to using their big stick.

The problem presented by the way the mass media ignored the cigarette-lung cancer story is an old one: Advertising often influences editorial columns, and sometimes it can even undermine the basic function of the press, which is to keep the public informed. Short of getting rid of advertising altogether, by having the government, private foundations, or universities subsidize all or some mass media, the only solution is that eternal cliché, eternal vigilance. For there are other areas, right now, where the public is not being kept sufficiently informed. Alcoholism, for instance. Currently it is America's No. 3 health problem, coming right after heart disease and cancer, and the ranks of alcoholics are steadily being joined by women and even by teen-agers. Yet do newspapers that take liquor ads print enough news about alcoholism? What about the mass magazines—has their choice of articles reflected the importance of alcoholism in America? Will *McCall's*, which has run a Schenley ad urging homemakers to serve liqueur "*always, with any meal*," ever print an article about America's 750,000 women alcoholics? Will it take another U.S. Public Health Service report to make Americans sufficiently aware of the dangers they risk by drinking?

Still another area where the mass media can be counted on to suppress information is excessive coffee-drinking. Dr. Oglesby Paul and his colleagues at the University of Illinois recently made a long-term study of 2000 male employees at the Western Electric company in Chicago. They found that men who drank more than five cups of coffee a day ran a greater risk of having heart disease. Another study made by Dr. D.R. Huene, a Naval Reserve flight surgeon, showed that excessive coffee-drinking causes irregular heartbeats.

Commenting on these studies, a spokesman for the Coffee Brewing Industry has said, "More evidence is needed to prove any association between coffee drinking and heart disease, if any association does, in fact, exist."

To quote George Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."



