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COUNTERFACTUALS:

What the Motion Picture Association of America claims about movie smoking

Summary

Since May 2007, the MPAA has consistently stated that smoking is a factor in its film ratings and that about 75 percent of movies with smoking are already rated “R.” Both of these assertions are at variance with independent observations and research results.

ASSERTION: *“Now, all smoking will be a consideration in the rating process”*

Time period: 2007 to present

In reality: Since its May 2007 press announcement on tobacco and ratings, the MPAA has identified no film whose rating was R-rated because of its tobacco content. The MPAA-NATO *Rating Rules*, last revised January 1, 2010, makes no reference to tobacco products or use as a factor in US film ratings.

Between 2007 and 2010, the MPAA added fine-print “smoking” descriptors to the ratings of just 15 percent of all wide-release, youth-rated movies with smoking. Some 85 percent of tobacco impressions delivered to theater audiences by youth-rated films came from un-labeled films. There is no evidence that descriptors, as a method, can reduce adolescent exposure to on-screen smoking.

Observation: The MPAA’s assertions create the impression that the MPAA has responded to concerns from public health authorities, state attorneys general and leading national medical and health groups by bringing tobacco into its rating regime. In fact, the MPAA has not done so. Meanwhile, labeling a mere fraction of films with smoking is much more likely to mislead than to inform parents about films’ tobacco content.

ASSERTION: *“Nearly 75% of pictures with smoking are already rated R”*

Time period: 2007 to present

In reality: From 2004 to 2006, 44 percent of movies with smoking were R-rated for other reasons; from 2007 to 2010, 47 percent. 2010 was the first year that more than half of movies with smoking (54%) were R-rated.

The MPAA's "75%" assertion is unsubstantiated. If the MPAA has based this result on the sample of all films it rates for a fee — as opposed to the films actually seen by US theater audiences — it is unrepresentative of the ratings mix and tobacco content of films exposing adolescents and also grossly downplays the nature of MPAA-member companies' contribution to this exposure.

Observation: The misleading "75%" appears to suggest that the MPAA's current R-rating practices have already solved the smoking problem in youth-rated movies. At the same time, the MPAA has also characterized the proposal to R-rate smoking as "extreme."

MPAA Quotes

Direct or indirect quotation of MPAA's language, with sources, 2007–2011:

"Now, all smoking will be a consideration in the rating process. Three questions will have particular weight for our rating board when considering smoking in a film: Is the smoking pervasive? Does the film glamorize smoking? And, is there an historic or other mitigating context? Additionally, when a film's rating is affected by the depiction of smoking, that rating will now include phrases such as 'glamorized smoking' or 'pervasive smoking.' This ensures specific information is front and center for parents as they make decisions for their kids. ...

"Some have called for a 'mandatory R' rating on all films that contain any smoking. We do not believe such a step would further the specific goal of providing information to parents on this issue. Unfortunately, the debate on this extreme proposal has become heavily politicized, and many inaccurate statements have been made...

"The rating board has comprehensively reviewed depictions of smoking in every rated film over the past several years. From July 2004 to July 2006, the percentage of films that included even a fleeting glimpse of smoking dropped from 60 percent to 52 percent. Of those films, 75 percent received an 'R' rating for other factors. So, three out of every four films that contained any smoking at all over the past few years are already rated 'R.'

MPAA Chairman and CEO Dan Glickman, MPAA press release, 5/10/2007
(<http://www.mpa.org/resources/9d558a6b-9e9a-41d2-9ac8-d7b2361ef965.pdf>)¹

¹ Alternate access: <http://www.mpa.org/news/pr> > 2007 > page 8 > "Film rating board to consider smoking as a factor"

Now, “all smoking will be considered and depictions that glamorize smoking or ... feature pervasive smoking outside of an historic or other mitigating context” could warrant a more prohibitive rating, the [MPAA] said.

According to an MPAA study of all movies rated over the past four years — roughly 3,400 movies — 57% contained scenes of smoking. Of that 57%, roughly 75% were rated R, the MPAA says.

USA Today, 5/10/2007

(http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2007-05-10-MPAA-smoking_N.htm)

The MPAA [said] that tobacco use in movies is one of many factors considered in the rating system. Since May 2007, when the MPAA started using smoking in its ratings criteria, about 73% of movies with "even the slightest bit of smoking" are rated R; 21% are PG-13; and 6% are PG, said Howard Gantman, the MPAA's vice president of corporate communications. Some studios have their own policies restricting or eliminating tobacco use in movies marketed to youth.

"Our research shows that parents are very clear to us that they — not the industry and certainly not the government — should determine what is appropriate viewing for their kids," Gantman said. "What they want is information, and that is what our ratings system provides."

American Medical News, American Medical Association, 9/13/2010

(<http://www.ama-assn.org/amednews/2010/09/06/prsc0906.htm>)

According to MPAA spokesperson Elizabeth Kaltman, underage smoking has always factored into movie ratings, but as of May 2007, all smoking is included as a ratings factor, along with language, nudity and other adult content. Kaltman adds that movies depicting smoking in a fantastical rather than realistic manner are more likely to receive slack on the ratings front.

The Wrap. Paramount's 'Rango' has lit up a smoking controversy. 2011.

(<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/column-post/rango-smoking-controversy-puffed-or-purposeful-25025?page=0,0>)

Of more than 2,500 movies rated from May 2007 to May 2010, nearly three-fourths of those that depicted smoking were rated R, and instances of smoking in films not rated R have declined, MPAA spokeswoman Elizabeth Kaltman said. Still, she said,

"the (ratings) system should not be held up as a vehicle dedicated to cause less smoking in films."

USA Today, 3/8/2011. PG-rated 'Rango' has anti-smoking advocates fuming. (http://yourlife.usatoday.com/health/story/2011/03/PG-rated-Rango-has-anti-smoking-advocates-fuming-/44618190/1?csp=24&sms_ss=email&at_xt=4d7add420d917c4f%2C0)

[MPAA spokesperson Elizabeth] Kaltman says nearly 75% of all pictures with depictions of smoking are already rated R."

USA Today, 7/15/2011
(<http://yourlife.usatoday.com/health/story/2011/07/CDC-Smoking-in-youth-movies-sharply-declines/49390348/1>)

The MPAA, which assigns ratings to movies, has rejected calls for an automatic-R system. Such a policy is unnecessary because nearly three-fourths of films with smoking are already rated R, says a spokeswoman for the group. Moreover, the MPAA since 2007 has factored onscreen smoking into its ratings decisions.

Christian Science Monitor, 7/14/2011
(<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2011/0714/Movie-industry-hasn-t-stopped-smoking-but-it-has-cut-back-a-lot>)

Independent Appraisals

1 | MPAA's rating of movies with smoking

Since May 2007, the MPAA has consistently maintained that smoking is a rating factor and that its ratings "inform" parents about tobacco content.

Independent observations:

- The MPAA's press release dated May 10, 2007 is the only documented indication that tobacco imagery *might* affect a film's rating. Nothing in its text obligates the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA) — jointly governed by the MPAA and National Association of Theatre Owners — to take any action.
- Since May 2007, the MPAA has never publicly named any motion picture whose rating was affected by its tobacco content.

- CARA's *Rating Rules (effective as revised January 1, 2010)*¹ includes no reference to tobacco products or consumption. The *Rules* list of rating factors includes: "language, depictions of violence, nudity, sensuality, depictions of sexual activity, adult activities...and drug use." The *Rules* do not define what are "adult activities" except in terms of legality.
- From May 2007 to May 2010, the MPAA assigned a fine-print "smoking" descriptor to the rating label of only 15 percent (17/115) of nationally-released, youth-rated movies with smoking.²
- Wide-release, youth-rated movies with smoking from *non*-MPAA member companies were 2.5 times more likely to be assigned a smoking descriptor than the same type of film from MPAA members (28% vs. 11%). MPAA members released more youth-rated movies with >50 tobacco incidents, however, and accounted for six times as many youth-rated tobacco impressions (18 billion vs. 3 billion) delivered to theater audiences.
- Assignment of smoking descriptors to a small fraction of nationally-released, youth-rated movies with smoking — coupled with the MPAA's assertions that it "considers all smoking" in ratings that "inform" parents — might lead parents to expect movies without descriptors to be smokefree. To the contrary: 85 percent of youth-rated tobacco impressions 2007-2010 were delivered by movies carrying no tobacco descriptor.³
- There is no evidence that rating descriptors, as a method, can lower adolescent exposure to on-screen smoking.

2 | Prevalence of smoking in youth-rated movies

Since May 2007, the MPAA has failed to provide substantiation⁴ for its repeated assertion that about 75 percent of movies with smoking are already rated "R". This substantiation was first requested, on June 5, 2007, by Vermont Attorney General William H. Sorrell, a

¹ CARA. Rating Rules. (Accessed at http://www.filmratings.com/filmRatings_Cara/#/ratings/rules/ on 22 July 2011.)

² Polansky JR, Mitchell S, Glantz SA (2010) Film-Flam: How MPAA/NATO movie labels hide the biggest media risk to kids. UCSF Center for Tobacco Control Research & Education. (<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/8hn866tt>)

³ In-theater tobacco impressions are an index of overall exposure. Tobacco impressions = tobacco incidents per film X paid admissions per film.

⁴ Vermont Attorney General William H. Sorrell, a leader of dozens of state attorneys general who had been engaged with the US film industry on the smoking issue since 2003, first requested this substantiation, on June 5, 2007. See Gen. Sorrell's letter at <http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/AG4-Glickman%206.5.2007.pdf>.

leader of the dozens of state attorneys general engaged with the US film industry on the smoking issue. For notes on the film samples, see Appendix A.

The MPAA's assertions differ from observations from independent researchers¹ who, since 2002, have continuously and systematically monitored tobacco content of top-grossing² films released theatrically in the United States:

MPAA assertion #1 (2007): "From July 2004 to July 2006, the percentage of films that included even a fleeting glimpse of smoking dropped from 60 percent to 52 percent. Of those films, 75 percent received an 'R' rating for other factors."

Independent results: January 2004 - December 2006, the percentage of top-grossing films with any tobacco imagery declined from 67 percent (96/144) to 61 percent (98/161). Note that there was no real change in the number of movies with smoking between 2004 and 2006.

From 2004 to 2006, 39 percent (114/291) of top-grossing films with smoking were R-rated for other reasons. Of films with smoking released in 2004, 34% (33/96) were rated "R;" in 2005, 39% (38/97); in 2006, 44% (43/98).

MPAA assertion #2 (2007): "According to an MPAA study of all movies rated over the past four years — roughly 3,400 movies — 57% contained scenes of smoking. Of that 57%, roughly 75% were rated R, the MPAA says."

Independent results: January 2004 – December 2007, 64 percent (388/606) of top-grossing films featured tobacco imagery. Of the movies with smoking, 43 percent (166/388) were R-rated for other reasons.

MPAA assertion #3 (published 2010): "Since May 2007, when the MPAA started using smoking in its ratings criteria, about 73% of movies with 'even the slightest bit of smoking' are rated R; 21% are PG-13; and 6% are PG..."

Independent results: January 2007 – December 2010, 47 percent (153/324) of top-grossing films with any tobacco imagery were R-rated; 44

¹ Thumbs Up! Thumbs Down!, a project of Breathe California of Sacramento-Emigrant Trails (California) and the University of California, San Francisco, Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education. This dataset was employed, most recently, in Glantz SA, Mitchell S, Titus K, Polansky JR, Kaufmann R, Bauer U (2011) Smoking in top-grossing movies - United States, 2010. US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *MMWR* 60: 909-913.

² "Top-grossing" films are defined as those films that rank among the top 10 in weekly box office gross for at least one week of their first theatrical run.

percent (141/324) were PG-13 — double the MPAA’s assertion — and 9 percent were rated PG.

MPAA assertion #4 (published 2011): “...instances of smoking in films not rated R have declined...”

Independent results: From 2007 through 2010, tobacco incidents per youth-rated, top-grossing movies declined 43 percent (11.9/6.8) overall. The peak was 2005, two years before the MPAA’s rating announcement.

Progress is non-uniform across the industry. As reported by the US CDC (*MMWR*, 7/15/2011), three MPAA-member companies — Disney, Universal and Warner Bros. — reduced tobacco incidents in their youth-rated movies by 96 percent on average since 2005, while Fox, Sony, Paramount and (non-MPAA) indies reduced theirs by less than half as much (42 percent).

MPAA assertion #5 (published 2011): “Kaltman adds that movies depicting smoking in a fantastical rather than realistic manner are more likely to receive slack on the ratings front.”

Observation: This is directly counter to the R-rating proposal from the US CDC and other public health authorities, which would exempt portrayals of tobacco use by actual historical persons who actually used tobacco (e.g., George VI or Edward R. Murrow) or depictions of the dire health effects of tobacco use.

MPAA assertion #6 (2011): “Still, [the MPAA spokesperson] said, “the (ratings) system should not be held up as a vehicle dedicated to cause less smoking in films.”

Observation: The Harvard School of Public Health, commissioned by the MPAA in 2006 to recommend a solution, advised the studios to eliminate smoking from movies accessible to children.¹ State attorneys general have told the studios, “[I]t is clear that every time the industry releases another movie that depicts smoking, it does so with full knowledge of the deadly harm it will bring to the children who watch it.”² The US CDC recommends the R-rating precisely because it would create a voluntary incentive for producers and studios to omit smoking from movies accessible without

¹ Harvard School of Public Health. Presentation to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) on smoking in the movies. February 23, 2007 (<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/mpaa/>)

² See Gen. Sorrel to studios’ parent companies, June 2, 2009. (<http://www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu/pdf/AG%20Sorrell%20060209.pdf>)

restriction to children and adolescents 17 and younger.¹ The practical effect will be to reserve smoking for R-rated films, just as studios now routinely calibrate language, violence and sexual imagery according to MPAA rating criteria.

MPAA assertion #7 (published 2011): “[N]early 75% of all pictures with depictions of smoking are already rated R.”

Independent results: Fewer than half (47 percent) of top-grossing movies with smoking were R-rated in the years 2007-2010. Of PG-13 films in this same period, 58 percent featured tobacco imagery.

¹ Glantz, Mitchell et al. (2011).

Appendix

Observation about film samples: The MPAA has provided no substantiation for its assertions about movies with smoking; we don't know what sample (if any) it used as a basis. The phrase "roughly 3,400 movies" for 2004-2006 (and for 2007-2010, "more than 2,500 movies") is the only information that the MPAA has made public about how it may have generated its assertions.

These numbers suggest two things:

- 1) that the MPAA has been tracking the tobacco content in all films that it rates (for a fee) since 2004; and
- 2) that the MPAA's film sample does not correspond to, nor is it representative of, films actually seen by US theater audiences.

If (1) is true, then nothing logistical stood in the way of the MPAA's fulfilling a 2007 request from the attorneys general that the MPAA show how its May 2007 "ratings" announcement would have affected ratings of movies with smoking in prior years.¹ The MPAA declined to make this demonstration.

Also, if the MPAA has been systematically tracking films' tobacco content since 2004, then the MPAA also might have begun R-rating movies with smoking in 2004, averting about 55 percent of all in-theater tobacco impressions delivered through 2010 — and the consequent dose-related harm to adolescents' health.

As for (2): In an annual compendium of theatrical market statistics, the MPAA reports that it rated 3,500 films from 2004 through 2006² — congruent with the 3,400 movies that the MPAA counts from mid-2004 to mid-2006.

Over the same calendar years, the MPAA reported that 2,200 "new" feature films were released in the US and MPAA-member studios distributed 764 of these "new" films. It appears, then, that only 20-25% of the movies rated by the MPAA from 2004 to 2006 were major studio films actually released for public viewing in any form.

Over the same period, a total of 606 films qualified as top-grossing, according to independent researchers' criteria. Those films amounted to 17% of all films rated by the MPAA and 28% of all films that the MPAA reported released in any form. Yet top-grossing films account for more than 80 percent of all films earning at least \$500,000 at the box

¹ See Gen. Sorrel (2007).

² MPAA. Theatrical market statistics 2008. (Accessed at <http://www.stop-runaway-production.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/2008-MPAA-Theatrical-Stats.pdf> on July 22, 2011. The 2010 report currently available on the MPAA web site (<http://www.mpa.org/policy/industry>) does not include 2004 data.)

office (i.e., all wide-release films) and more than 95% of all US ticket sales.¹ Of the *top-grossing* films, 2004-2006, 87 percent (529/606) were released by the major studios that govern the MPAA and its rating system. This nearly 90% dominance of actual box office by MPAA-member films strongly contrasts with the much smaller 20-25% MPAA-member share of all the films rated by the MPAA.

This comparison of two film samples — *all the films the MPAA rated for a fee vs. the top-grossing films that generate almost all box office sales* — suggests that the MPAA's film sample (if there is one) includes many more small-budget, straight-to-video or unreleased films than it does movies actually distributed to theaters and viewed by US audiences.

If so, then the MPAA's purported sample does not represent the movies actually delivering tobacco exposure to movie audiences. Use of such a sample would also have the effect of diluting MPAA's own studio members' contribution to on-screen smoking exposure.

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For more information about this topic,
please visit www.smokefreemovies.ucsf.edu

¹ Titus K, Polansky J, Glantz SA (2009) Smoking presentation trends in US movies 1991-2008. UCSF Center for Tobacco Control Research and Education. (Accessed at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/30q9j424> on July 22, 2011.)