“Anti-Smoking Data Are Exaggerated” Versus “The Data Are Clear and Indisputable”: Examining Letters to the Editor About Tobacco

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Media advocacy plays a unique role in tobacco control policy development. Letters to the editor in particular are an interesting form of media advocacy because they reflect community sentiment regarding the policy agenda and provide insight into the public debate. The authors used ethnographic context analysis to examine the techniques used by writers of 262 tobacco-related letters to the editor published in 61 newspapers across Missouri over a 2-year period when tobacco tax and smoke-free indoor air initiatives were occurring across the state. The authors found that pro–tobacco control letter writers often used didactic strategies, citing numbers and reports, to convey information and presented their training or experience as a health professional (e.g., M.D., Ph.D.) to add legitimacy to their arguments. Anti–tobacco control letter writers, in contrast, used narrative strategies to support their stance, claimed authority as a smoker or small business owner to legitimate their claims by relating to the audience, and used collectivity to capture the attention of policymakers. These results present the importance of strategic media advocacy in tobacco control. Tobacco control advocates should increase their use of narrative strategies and collectivity in order to better connect with the public and policymakers.

Intervening at the policy level is one of the most effective methods to influence norms related to tobacco use. Policies raising tobacco taxes and codifying smoke-free indoor air have reduced rates of tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure in communities, states, and countries (Brownson, Haire-Joshu, & Luke, 2006; Giovino, Biener, et al., 2009; Giovino, Chaloupka, et al., 2009; Pickett, Schober, Brody, Curtin, & Giovino, 2006; Wisotzky, Albuquerque, Pechacek, & Park, 2006).

Media advocacy is a form of health communication that plays a unique role in tobacco control policy development. Media advocacy is the process of disseminating policy-related information through the communications media, where the aim is to effect action, or to alter the public’s view of an issue (Dorfman, 2003). Over the past...
two decades, media advocacy has proven an effective communication tool for pro– and anti–tobacco control advocates in the advancement or dismantling of tobacco control policy. For example, in 2006 and 2007, the tobacco industry directed millions of dollars to media campaigns to successfully combat attempts to raise cigarette taxes in California, Missouri, and Oregon (California HealthCare Foundation, 2007; Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, 2007; Missouri Ethics Commission, 2006). Similarly, public health proponents used the truth® media campaign to shed light on deceptive tobacco industry marketing tactics and promote policy change to reduce youth smoking (Farrelly, Nonnemaker, Davis, & Hussin, 2009; Niederdeppe, Farrelly, & Haviland, 2004; Niederdeppe, Farrelly, & Wenter, 2007; Zaza, Briss, & Harris, 2005).

Media advocacy is one of few ways for the public to get involved in shaping policy. Public health advocates, tobacco enthusiasts, stakeholders, and others lend their voices to policy debates by writing letters to the editor (LTEs), inserting their own writing styles and techniques to frame the issue and demonstrate opinion.

The writing styles and techniques used in LTEs are reflective of health communication strategies. In the past, health communication campaigns have focused on statistical evidence (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007), or the use of didactic writing styles to educate the public. For instance, in an attempt to influence public opinion, some writers didactically cite scholarly articles warning about the health effects of tobacco use (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Emerging science suggests that use of narratives or testimonials as a health communication strategy may be more effective because it turns abstract information into something more personalized and memorable and can help to get a message across when there are unsupportive social norms or there is low perceived vulnerability around the topic (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Slater, Buller, Waters, Archibeque, & Leblanc, 2003; Wakefield, Smith, & Chapman, 2005). In addition to writing style, health communication research has shown that the person delivering the message should have credibility or authority and should match the audience (Rimer & Kreuter, 2006; Slater et al., 2003). For example, when communicating with the general public about health, doctors are seen as authority figures. Listing their credentials often adds to the integrity of the message.

Previous research has shown that LTEs provide important insight into community sentiment (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005) and may have implications for policy development (Holder & Treno, 1997; Smith et al., 2005). Therefore, diverse stakeholders, from grassroots organizations to major national corporations, urge advocacy through LTEs to advance their position. However, little is known how best to use this venue for advocacy. How can writing styles and techniques present arguments that would effectively influence the general public? How might tobacco control advocates use LTEs to advance policy efforts? To answer these questions, it is important to examine LTEs and the role they play in engaging the community and influencing tobacco control policy.

This study analyzes LTEs about tobacco issues published in Missouri newspapers over the course of 2 years (November 2005 through November 2007). In the past, Missouri has had a difficult climate for tobacco control, with few local smoke-free policies and the lowest tobacco tax in the country (Harris, Shelton, Moreland-Russell, & Luke, 2010). In November 2006, Missouri voters defeated an 80-cent increase in the state tobacco tax. In an earlier study of tobacco in Missouri’s
print media, the research team identified a surge in anti–tobacco control LTEs in the month just preceding the election (Harris et al., 2010). In addition to the tobacco tax ballot measure, local efforts to adopt smoke-free policies were occurring in communities throughout the state during this time. To examine how LTEs may contribute to (or reflect) the tobacco control environment in Missouri, this study examines the overall tobacco control position (i.e., pro–, anti–, mixed about, or neutral to tobacco control), the writer’s objective, and claim to authority. This study also examines writing style including use of rhetoric and use of narrative versus didactic strategies to convince the reader. In particular, this article seeks to study the following research questions:

1. How do LTE authors representing the pro– and anti–tobacco control perspectives differ in terms of how they portray their own identities and authority relative to their respective positions?
2. How do the two issue sides differ in terms of the reasons or “triggers” that prompted LTE authors to enter the debate?
3. What are the dominant narrative or didactic strategies used by LTE authors representing the pro– and anti–tobacco control perspectives to persuade their readers?

Methods

We used an ethnographic context analysis approach to examine the tobacco-related content of LTEs. This approach allowed us to identify key arguments and patterns, underlying meanings, rhetorical devices, and processes used by the letter writers. Ethnographic context analysis is a form of qualitative documentary analysis that focuses on the meaning of the text and the emergence of ideas, rather than the frequency or quantity with which particular items occur (Altheide, 1987, 1996). In addition to ethnographic context analysis, we used Scott’s pi to examine the reliability of our coding scheme and standard descriptive statistics to describe the data.

Data Collection

The Center for Tobacco Policy Research worked with Metropolitan Newsclips Service, Inc., to monitor the coverage of tobacco issues in daily and weekly Missouri newspapers across the state. These newspapers included major city dailies with a circulation of more than 100,000 (e.g., the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and the Kansas City Star) and smaller suburban and rural newspapers (e.g., the Boone County Journal; Table 1).

The sample used for this study consisted of 282 articles identified as LTEs from 61 newspapers in 36 counties over the course of 2 years (November 2005 through November 2007). This time span encompassed the failed tobacco tax initiative in the 2006 election.

Measures and Analyses

With a codebook informed by Smith and colleagues (2005), each letter was coded for the following: general information about the newspaper and story (e.g., county of publication, date of publication), the overall position of the article (i.e., anti–,
neutral to, mixed about, or pro–tobacco control), the trigger of the letter (i.e., event that provoked the writer to compose the letter), the objective of the letter (i.e., the writer’s goal), authority claimed by the writer (e.g., smoker, physician), and use of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Post-Dispatch/Illinois</td>
<td>265,634</td>
<td>Park Hills Daily Journal</td>
<td>8,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Post-Dispatch/Metro</td>
<td>265,634</td>
<td>Hannibal Courier-Post</td>
<td>7,332</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edition</td>
<td></td>
<td>The Missouri Municipal Review</td>
<td>6,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City Star</td>
<td>210,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kansas City Star/Independence &amp; Raytown</td>
<td>210,000</td>
<td>Columbia Missourian</td>
<td>6,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webster-Kirkwood Times</td>
<td>76,700</td>
<td>Columbia Business</td>
<td>6,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Springfield News-Leader</td>
<td>71,334</td>
<td>Lebanon Daily Record</td>
<td>5,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis American</td>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>Mexico Ledger</td>
<td>5,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Joseph News-Press</td>
<td>29,295</td>
<td>Warrenton Journal</td>
<td>3,966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Argus</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>Clinton Daily Democrat</td>
<td>3,875</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Side Journal</td>
<td>27,260</td>
<td>California Democrat</td>
<td>3,618</td>
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<tr>
<td>North Side Journal</td>
<td>26,325</td>
<td>Brookfield Linn County</td>
<td>3,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joplin Globe</td>
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<td>Star-Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>O‘Fallon Journal</td>
<td>24,100</td>
<td>Chillicothe</td>
<td>3,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Charles Journal</td>
<td>23,915</td>
<td>Constitution-Tribune</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Democrat Journal</td>
<td>23,752</td>
<td>Trenton Republican</td>
<td>2,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest City Journal</td>
<td>22,915</td>
<td>Times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wednesday Sun</td>
<td>22,675</td>
<td>Maryville Daily Forum</td>
<td>2,600</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oakville-Mehlville Journal</td>
<td>20,105</td>
<td>Palmyra Spectator</td>
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<td>18,300</td>
<td>Nevada Daily Mail</td>
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<td>17,840</td>
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<td>Macon Chronicle-Herald</td>
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<td>Richmond Daily News</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boonville Daily News</td>
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<td>Edina Sentinel</td>
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<tr>
<td>South City Journal</td>
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<td>Waynesville Daily Guide</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independence Examiner</td>
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<td>Norborne</td>
<td>875</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic</td>
<td>13,501</td>
<td>Democrat-Leader</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas City Business Journal</td>
<td>12,752</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sedalia Democrat</td>
<td>11,494</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sikeston Standard-Democrat</td>
<td>8,562</td>
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Circulation 70,000 or greater—pro 0.50, anti 0.39. Circulation less than 70,000—pro 0.50, anti 0.61.
rhetoric (i.e., type of writing used to persuade the reader). Specifically, coders were asked to respond to the following questions after reading each letter:

1. Position: Is the letter writer providing support for or opposition to tobacco control objectives?
2. Trigger: What seems to be the “trigger” for the letter? What provoked the letter writer to write the letter?
3. Objective: What specifically does the letter writer seem to be trying to do by writing a letter? What does he or she want? What is he or she trying to achieve?
4. Authority: Is the letter writer making any particular claim to authority or legitimacy?
5. Rhetoric: Is the letter writer employing tactics/strategies or calling on any particular rhetoric in the letter?

Analyses were completed in multiple steps. A sample of 32 LTEs (11.3% of the articles) was drawn at random and used to establish that the coding system was reliable before three trained coders coded all 282 articles. Scott’s pi was completed for measuring interrater reliability of coding for article position and showed consistency (\( \pi > 0.80 \)) between coders. Because all other items (trigger, objective, authority, and rhetoric) were open-ended and did not have a set of required responses, the first author compared coders’ responses and confirmed that coders were consistent in their coding and understanding of each element. Once consistency in coding was established, pairs of coders were randomly assigned to code 194 LTEs. After coding independently, each pair met and came to consensus on each measure. Last, thematic analyses across all LTEs were completed by the authors to identify recurring themes and patterns.

Results

Of the 262 LTEs, 160 were pro–, 82 anti–, 17 neutral to, and 23 mixed about tobacco control. Of the 61 papers, 7 were high circulation (75,000–265,000) and 54 were smaller circulation papers (fewer than 45,000). The high circulation (urban) newspapers published 50% of the pro–tobacco control LTEs and 39% of the anti–tobacco control LTEs. The low circulation and mainly rural/community-based papers published 50% pro–tobacco control LTEs and 61% anti–tobacco control LTEs. A possible reason for the publication of more anti–tobacco control LTEs in low circulation papers may be that smaller papers, often owned locally, are constrained by the opinions of their owners, who need to live and work every day with other local elites and support the status quo—in this instance, anti–tobacco control (Demers, 1998). Larger papers, in contrast, often owned by chains, are more free to espouse more progressive, innovative positions as long as they make profits for their owners (Demers, 1998).

Clear patterns relating the position of the article (pro– or anti–tobacco control) to the writer’s use of the other elements emerged. In particular, LTE position related consistently with the event that triggered the letter, the writer’s objective, use of rhetoric, and use of authority in the letter.

Triggers

Triggers for writing a LTE included response to a previous article, reactions to actions by local political leaders, proposed tax initiatives and smoke-free policies,
and personal experiences. In pro– and anti–tobacco control LTEs, response to a previous LTE, editorial, or news story was the most common reason for letter writers to write to a given newspaper. For example, one anti–tobacco control LTE about the proposed smoke-free law in Kansas City exclaimed, “Your recent editorial ignores reality” (O’Connor, 2007). An LTE about the tobacco tax initiative stated, “The editorial, ‘Try, try again’ about the failed initiative to raise Missouri’s tobacco tax sounded familiar” (Gosney, 2006).

Another common reason that pro–tobacco control LTEs were written was in response to recent actions by local officials regarding tobacco control policies. Many of these letters took a pro–tobacco control position, expressing disgust with council members who voted against a smoke-free policy or who did not take action in adopting a tobacco control policy.

What are the St. Louis County Council members who voted against Councilman Kurt Odenwald’s proposal to ban smoking in public places afraid of? (Buchmueller, 2006)

Four council members of the St. Louis County Council chose not to “let the people choose” on banning smoking in public places in the county. One is my representative, Michael O’Mara. I’m glad he thinks that a sign in a restaurant window will protect my health. (Lokemoen, 2006)

Personal experiences, such as dining in a smoky environment or visiting smoke-free states, were also common triggers for writers taking a pro–tobacco control stance.

Within the past month, my family, guests, and I dined at two restaurants in Overland Park . . . while eating we could smell smoke from the bar area. (Thomas, 2005)

Recently, we took a trip to Niagara Falls. After the first couple of days it was obvious there was no smoking in the city. (Jowett, 2006)

Other triggers prompting writers to write a pro–tobacco control LTE included the proposed tobacco tax, smoke-free policies, calendar events such as the Great American Smokeout, and published reports, specifically the Surgeon General’s Reports.

Writers taking an anti–tobacco control stance responded to a different set of triggers. In addition to responding to previously published articles, writers taking an anti–tobacco control stance were mainly prompted by the proposed tobacco tax.

The movement to increase taxes on cigarette and other tobacco products is not fair. (Willey, 2005)

I am writing this in regard to the Amendment 3, which will be on the Nov. 7 ballot. I believe this is the most ridiculous item ever put on a ballot. This in singling out a class of people and is the largest tax increase in Missouri history. (Sherman, 2006)

Other events that prompted an anti–tobacco control writer to compose an LTE included proposed smoke-free laws and recently published reports.
Writers’ main objectives were to persuade readers about the harmful health effects of tobacco, government irresponsibility, unfair treatment, and obstruction of rights. Pro– and anti–tobacco control letter writers used different objectives.

Letters written in support of tobacco control were primarily written to either educate readers of the harms of smoking or to encourage voters to support tobacco control efforts in advancing tobacco control policies. Supportive letters used didactic strategies and presented propositions in the form of evidence to discuss and educate about the health effects of secondhand smoke. To accomplish this, writers often used data and science to support their claim.

The following facts might encourage your support of the tobacco tax.
In Missouri currently: 24.8 percent of high school students smoke, 24.1 percent of adults smoke . . . (Permut, 2006)

The U.S. Surgeon General this past summer presented a report on secondhand smoke. He concluded that there are no safe levels of secondhand smoke—none. (Ruckman, 2006)

The data are clear and indisputable. Smoke-free ordinances improve community health. (Braby, 2006)

Letters that oppose tobacco control had three prominent objectives: (a) to convince the audience that tobacco control policies are unfair and impede on civil liberties, (b) to expose the government’s irresponsibility in using tobacco tax revenue, and (c) to solicit empathy for smokers. Unlike letters supporting tobacco control, those that opposed tobacco control used narrative instead of didactic strategies to accomplish their objective. The type of narrative strategies used included personal stories, anecdotes, and testimonials.

The objective of revealing how tobacco control policies impede on civil liberties and create inequities was voiced in different ways:

Too often liberty is overlooked in the face of popular sentiment . . . . it remains the exclusive choice of owners to allow or deny smoking, and it remains the exclusive choice of individuals to patronize such establishments. A smoking ban would only serve to take this choice away from us and reduce our liberty. (Stowell, 2007)

This is singling out a class of people. (Sherman, 2006)

Examples of letters with the objective of persuading citizens about the government’s irresponsible use of tax revenue included the following:

Amendment 3 is about the government wasting even more of our tax dollars. (Leone, 2006a)

The fact that our elected leaders never consider actually banning tobacco, but rather they just keep piling tax after tax on it, tells me that their concern is not the really people’s health or welfare. (Turner, 2006)
This money [from the new tax on cigarettes] will never go to Medicare as they say. It will go into the coffers of the House of Representatives and Senators to have a raise. (“New tax proposed on cigarettes is preposterous,” 2005)

This objective may be related to a pro–tobacco control educational campaign conducted by the American Lung Association leading up to the 2006 election. One of the messages in the association’s campaign was “Missouri has spent $0 in state funds for a comprehensive tobacco use prevention and cessation program, ranking us last in the country, although it has received over $1 billion in Master Settlement payments” (Center for Tobacco Policy Research, 2007). Although developed for a pro–tobacco control campaign, this message was ultimately used more often in opposition to tobacco control.

Oppositional letters were also written to solicit empathy from their readers by showing that smokers are being singled out unfairly. One letter writer stated, “Smokers are taxed excessively” (Grunzinger, 2007). Another complained about the poor treatment of smokers, exclaiming, “I already feel as if I am treated as a dog” (Clausen, 2007). “The smoker has already been maligned as being an evil pariah who must hide behind bushes in the snow and rain in order to smoke a cigarette,” objected another Missourian (Buschman, 2006).

Oppositional writers generally used emotion to achieve their objective, dismissing data and science:

You selectively quote data from other states with high cigarette tax rates and mistakenly conclude a higher tax in Missouri will have the same effect. (Kuneman, 2006)

I believe Surgeon General Richard Carmona’s new report to be just another chapter in the junk science hoax to make America smoke-free by choice. (Hannegan, 2006)

Anti-smoking data is exaggerated. (Grunzinger, 2007)

Studies on secondhand smoke are dishonest and fraudulent. (Martin, 2006)

Authority

Authority is the use of status or position in society when making a claim and is sometimes used to add legitimacy to an argument (Jernigan & Wright, 1996). LTEs written in support of tobacco control policy were more likely to include a claim to authority than anti–tobacco control LTEs.

In pro–tobacco control LTEs, claims to authority often referred to the writer’s training as a physician or public health official: “I say this based on years as a dedicated physician” (Braby, 2006) and “As a pediatrician, I work to prevent kids from smoking and help those who do smoke stop before they face the horrible consequences” (Plax, 2006). Some letter writers simply used their credentials (e.g., M.D., Ph.D., R.N., J.D.) in their signatures to demonstrate expertise.
Writers of LTEs in opposition to tobacco control policy generally claimed authority based on their experience as a smoker or business owner, adding authenticity to their position.

As a small business owner... passage of the proposed smoking ban will most certainly have a negative effect on my business. (Davis, 2006)

As a long time smoker, I am following the ads regarding the proposed dramatic cigarette tax increase. (Wagers, 2006)

I am 69 years old and have been smoking since I was 17. Our hospitals proclaim 'we are smoke-free' and spend millions of dollars to expand their facilities. What about me? What about the smokers? (Warner, 2006)

The use of smoking status or role in the community can be extremely powerful because it characterizes the problem in terms of an individual's experience, allowing the reader to relate to the writer (Best, 1990). When it comes to soliciting compassion or agreement, people (or readers) identify more to personal stories (narratives) or connections to their communities (Small, Loewenstein, & Slovic, 2007). Therefore, writers who use their role in the community to document their narrative may be more effective at persuading others.

**Rhetoric**

Writers used several types of rhetoric: collectivity, comparison, concern for children, and faulty reasoning (e.g., slippery slope, hasty generalization). Collectivity, comparison, and concern for children were used most often in pro–tobacco control letters, while collectivity and faulty reasoning were used most often in anti–tobacco control letters (Table 2).

Both supportive and oppositional letters used collectivity as a rhetorical device.

Wake up, Metropolitan Kansas City, and smell the smoke. We all—restaurant and bar employees included—deserve a healthy environment. (Thomas, 2005)

It is time we the smokers start paying our fair share... (Wagers, 2006)

In addition to the term *we*, two other forms of collectivity—*us* and *them*—were used by writers to display the battle between smokers and nonsmokers or between proponents and opponents of the various tobacco control initiatives.

Letters that took a pro–tobacco position also used comparison as a rhetorical tool. Some writers compared their local laws to that of other communities while other writers used comparison to convince their readers that Missouri should be like other states and pass smoke-free laws or higher taxes:

Now that [Illinois] has signed the Smokefree Air Act into law, Missouri looks like a pitiful slacker. (Lindsey, 2007)

If [Kentucky] can make the leap, why can’t we? (Delehunt, 2007)
Table 2. Rhetoric used in pro– and anti–tobacco control letters to the editor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of rhetoric</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Example in letter to the editor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collectivity</td>
<td>Strategy used to convince or persuade the reader that he or she, as a part of the aggregate, should agree and support the writer’s stance</td>
<td>Pro and anti</td>
<td>“We, as concerned citizens, need to reach out to them by punishing them and profiting from their foolishness.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>The process of examining two or more things to show similarities and difference between them</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>“If Illinois can enact a smoke-free law, it’s time for Missouri to get with the program.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing concern for children</td>
<td>Tool used to highlight children as victims</td>
<td>Pro</td>
<td>“It is the duty of all responsible citizens to protect against the possibility of injuring the child.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty reasoning</td>
<td>The act of drawing a conclusion that is not supported by the data</td>
<td>Anti</td>
<td>“Our futures find us encased in bubble suits, driving battery-powered cars and drinking government approved packets of vitamin-only gloop if the trend [to let government intervene on rights] continues.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We need a solution to the pollution. Twenty states have it. Let’s not be No. 50. (Ahner, 2007)

These writers use the success of other states in passing smoke-free ordinances and higher taxes, and they display their disappointment in Missouri in an attempt to persuade readers.

Using concern for children was another device used by letter writers to persuade readers to support the adoption of tobacco control policy.

It’s time for them [tobacco companies] to stop making money off our children. (Young, 2006)

The lives of our children…are at stake. (Reynolds, 2006)

It is the duty of all responsible citizens to protect against the possibility of injuring the child. (Galloway, 2006)
In these examples, children are hailed as the victims of tobacco. The writer highlights their victimization to invoke a sense of responsibility from the reader to protect children by supporting tobacco control efforts.

Writers who did not support tobacco control used other forms of rhetoric to persuade readers. In addition to collectivity, oppositional LTE writers used faulty reasoning to persuade the reader to adopt their position. One common use of faulty reasoning in anti–tobacco control LTEs was the use of slippery slope arguments, which state that a relatively small first step inevitably leads to a chain of related events culminating in some significant effect even though there is no evidence to support the argument. This type of rhetoric was most commonly used by anti–tobacco control writers to persuade readers that if they allow the government to ban smoking in public places, the government will take away all civil liberties.

The government wants everyone to act a certain way, to think a certain way, and to look a certain way...this country will be a dictating country before too much longer, just like Russia was. (“New tax proposed on cigarettes is preposterous” 2005)

Smoking bans will continue until public smoking is eliminated, free will and freedom of choice be damned. (Ingenthron, 2007)

Our futures find us encased in bubble suits, driving battery-powered cars and drinking government approved packets of vitamin-only gloop if the trend [to let government intervene on rights] continues. (Regions, 2006)

Hasty generalization was another form of faulty reasoning rhetoric used by anti–tobacco control LTE writers to persuade their readers. Hasty generalization is overgeneralization based on insufficient evidence. This form of rhetoric was used to convince readers that all businesses would shut down if a smoke-free ordinance was passed.

Many of the smaller, independent, family-owned and operated restaurants and bars are going to take a huge hit—and some will inevitably go out of business! (Benedict, 2006)

By using the words many or all the writer generalizes the fate of businesses if tobacco control policy is enacted, even though there is extensive literature refuting such statements (Glantz & Smith, 1994; Hyland, Cummings, & Nauenberg, 1999; Scollo, Lal, Hyland, & Glantz, 2003). However, the public is not always aware of all the information surrounding an issue, and thereby might be persuaded by this writer (American Cancer Society, 2003). This argument is also commonly used by opponents of smoke-free policies in an attempt to elicit concern from the reader about their community economic well-being (Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights, 2006).

Writers also used hasty generalization when writing about the proposed tobacco tax:

It [proposed tax increase] will put all MO retailers at a competitive disadvantage. (Leone, 2006b)

This huge tax, if approved, will cause a very large cascading effect in sales of other products throughout the state, which will cause harm to existing businesses. (Kolarik, 2006)
These writers predict that the proposed tobacco tax increase will have a harmful effect on all businesses and ultimately on all goods and services.

Another tactic used by anti-tobacco control writers is displacement of the issue. Instead of writing specifically about the tobacco tax, or smoke-free policies, authors used other issues (somewhat similar but not at all analogous) to defend their position. Displaced topics included alcohol use, obesity, coffee drinking, and using a cell phone while driving.

We need to be just as benevolent to alcoholics, drunk drivers, drug addicts, overeaters (including all processed food consumers), sun worshippers, tanning booth junkies, people who engage in unprotected sex, etc. It’s time for Americans who engage in risky behavior—including the self righteous—stop or be over-taxed too. (Hasestab, 2005)

Once again the politicians and the do-gooders are out to get the people who smoke cigarettes. Often times I have wondered why these same people do not spend all their energy on the people who drink beer and hard liquor. Could it be because this might affect them too? (Goodall, 2005)

If everyone quit smoking who would they go after next? I would love to hear the outcry if coffee was $5 a cup. The point is raising money right? (Feltz, 2005)

Let’s start with banning cell phone use while driving in public highways and roads before banning smokers (Walker, 2005)

**Other Findings**

Further analyses revealed techniques used by writers to add power to their statement. Regardless of position, writers used words such as *voter, taxpayer,* and *paying consumer* to assert power by calling out their local officials and threatening their vote if they made the wrong move.

The failure of our City Council to do the right thing by banning smoking in all public places is a disgrace. I implore all properly registered and appropriately identified legal voters in the region to keep this failure in mind each time they vote in the foreseeable future. (Walsma, 2006)

Russ Carnahan, Christopher Bond, and Claire McCaskill, we are watching you and how you vote on this bill. Don’t think for a moment we are blind or stupid. (Cashion, 2007)

Other LTE writers identified with groups of people to show that they were not alone in the way they cast their vote. This also added power behind their statements as the writer represented masses of voters:

I am one of those “tax-hating, personal freedom-loving Republicans” and I am 100 percent uncompromisingly anti-tax. I don’t like higher taxes and I won’t vote for any. (Thompson, 2005)
I represent the more than 750 American Cancer Society volunteers from Metro East communities. The senator should support SB 500 to protect the people from the dangers of secondhand smoke. (Lubkuecher, 2007)

**Discussion**

Our findings point to distinct differences in strategies used by pro–tobacco control and anti–tobacco control letter writers. First, LTE writers use different techniques to persuade readers to adopt their position regarding tobacco control. Writers who support tobacco control tend to try to convince readers of the harmful health effects of smoking, using data to support their stance and using professional credentials and experience as a health official or physician to add legitimacy to their arguments. Pro–tobacco control writers also use collectivity, comparison, and concern for children as writing techniques to persuade their reader.

Opponents of tobacco control write LTEs to convince the audience that tobacco control policies are unfair and take away civil rights, to expose the government's irresponsibility in using tobacco tax revenue, and to solicit empathy. Anti–tobacco control writers do not tend to cite scholarly articles or data to support their arguments; instead, they use personal anecdotes, faulty reasoning, and displacement to persuade their audience. Oppositional letter writers also use their personal community status to claim authority on the issue.

Second, most LTEs were written in response to another LTE, an editorial, or news story. This finding confirms the use of LTEs as a forum for debate of a specific issue within a community. This finding is also consistent with findings from analyses of LTEs by Carpenter (2009) and Smith and colleagues (2005).

Last, writers of LTEs, regardless of position, add power to their stance by using words such as **voter**, **taxpayer**, or **consumer** in the letters. These words invoke a sense of control/power in regard to an elected official retaining their position. This finding is important as campaign organizers often reinforce the use of power (e.g., showing large constituent support, threatening reelection) especially toward policymakers, as a key element in conducting a successful campaign (Chapman, 2004).

Several findings in this study are consistent with those found in similar research. Smith and colleagues (2005) in their analyses of Australian LTEs on tobacco also found that opponents and proponents of tobacco control used collectivity in writing LTEs. Smith and colleagues (2005) also found that LTE writers critiqued government reliance on tobacco tax income to persuade their readers to oppose the tax campaign. Previous studies also found that writers used their science, credentials, or personal roles as members of the community to assert authority and add legitimacy (Carpenter, 2009; Smith et al., 2005). However, these findings were not related specifically to position.

There were two main limitations of this study. First, our sample only includes those LTEs selected for printing. The editorial staff determines which letters are printed. Some newspapers may have an agenda (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006) and therefore may be more likely to print those LTEs that support their position. The media also is known to seek out controversy (Smith, et al., 2005) and letters printed possibly represent extreme points of view. However, according to the American Public Health Association's Media Advocacy Manual (2000), many local papers, especially newspapers with smaller circulation, publish up to 80% of the letters they
receive. Second, clipping services like the one used tend to only collect about 80% of articles published on a given topic (Harris et al., 2010). Therefore, our analyses may not include all LTEs about tobacco published in Missouri during this time.

Conclusion/Recommendation

Media advocacy affects public health outcomes, (Holder & Treno, 1997; Jernigan & Wright, 1996; Niederdeppe et al., 2004; Niederdeppe et al., 2007) and influences how the public and policymakers rank the importance of different issues (Jernigan & Wright, 1996). LTEs are “the simplest way to communicate an opinion to the general public” (American Public Health Association, 2000). One letter can reach thousands of people, including legislators and their staff; thus, writing LTEs is seen as an important component of advocacy efforts (Smith et al., 2005). Research has shown that news that favors one side of an issue is associated with increases in popular support for that point of view (Jernigan & Wright, 1996).

In light of the importance of media advocacy in general and LTEs in particular, we have two primary recommendations for advancing tobacco policy. First, tobacco control advocates must begin to use narrative rather than relying so heavily on didactic approaches. Recently, narrative approaches (e.g., stories, testimonials) have been cited as important alternatives to the conventional, didactic approaches when trying to reach audiences (Rosenthal, 2003; Slater, 2002; Slater et al., 2003). For example, instead of presenting numbers related to secondhand smoke in an LTE, a writer could write about being a mother, concerned to take her child into a smoky restaurant, or about a friend struggling with tobacco-related disease. Second, tobacco control advocates should capture the attention of their local policymakers through the use of words that convey a sense of power, such as voter, constituent, or majority, because they imply that the writer has ultimate control, come election time. Overall, it is important for tobacco control advocates to recognize the power of strategic media advocacy. LTEs can be important pieces of this strategy if effective writing and persuasion techniques are used. Understanding of these effective techniques can help advance the promotion of future tobacco control policies, particularly during tobacco control policy campaigns.

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Examing Letters to the Editor About Tobacco


