

Research Methods for “‘A phony way to show sincerity, as we all know’: tobacco industry lobbying against tobacco control in Hong Kong”

Following is a discussion of a number of methodological issues pertaining to the qualitative case study of tobacco industry lobbying against tobacco control in Hong Kong (HK).

Data sources

Data for this paper were primarily drawn from internal tobacco industry documents made available online through the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA). In addition, a selection of documents from British American Tobacco (BAT) were also used. Preliminary document searches were conducted from April 2001 to October 2002 using the primary MSA websites. These included the four manufacturers' sites:

Philip Morris	http://www.pmdocs.com
R.J. Reynolds	http://www.rjtdocs.com
Lorillard Tobacco Company	http://www.lorillarddocs.com/
Brown and Williamson	http://www.bwdocs.com/public.asp

as well as the sites from the two major US-based industry organizations:

Tobacco Institute	http://www.tobaccoinstitute.com
Council for Tobacco Research	http://www.ctr-usa.org

As the research progressed initial MSA searches were supplemented with subsequent searches on three secondary online document collections:

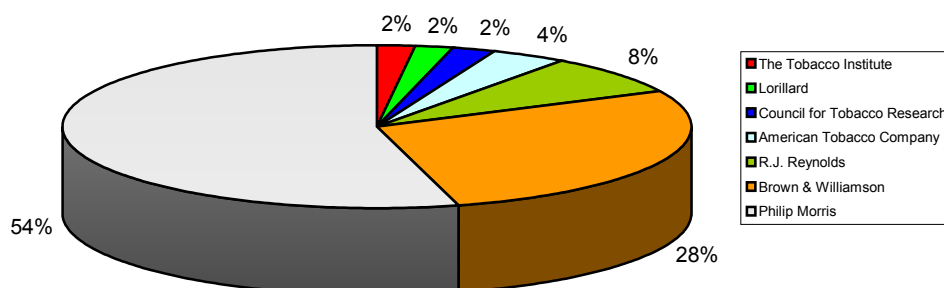
Tobacco Documents Online (TDO)	http://tobaccodocuments.org
Legacy Tobacco Documents Library (LTDL)	http://legacy.library.ucsf.edu
Tobacco Documents System (TDS)	http://tobacco.health.usyd.edu.au/site/gateway/docs/index.htm

The litigation giving rise to the release of industry documents occurred in the late 1990s. As a result, most of the available documents end about this time. Quite coincidentally, this time frame was most appropriate for the HK study. In mid-1997 HK returned to Chinese rule. The British appointed position of Governor ceased to exist and the legislative process underwent substantial change.

Data collection

The initial search words used to gather as broad a sweep of HK documents as possible were: Hong Kong, Macau, Kowloon, BAT Hong. The preliminary search produced an initial set of 9,626 documents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 MSA documents collected
n=9,626



From this sample, a number of documents were excluded. These included documents which were illegible, in languages other than English, shipping documents; duplicates, pertained to a project called “Hong Kong” and other documents considered to be of little relevance to the issue of tobacco control in HK.

Material retained for analysis included corporate mission statements, public relations material and press releases, policies on marketing strategies, research reports, formal memos between different groups and departments, and informal and private correspondence (some of which was labelled “confidential” or “top secret”) between staff and correspondence between respondents and researchers. As Forster has noted, it is important to be aware of these different kinds of documentation and of the variety of functions different kinds of documents can play in organizational life.³

Documents and related metadata collected from the preliminary searches were incorporated into a database for quick retrieval. The resultant documents were then sorted into chronological order.

Data analysis

Documents retrieved by these initial searches were sorted into broad topic areas for further analysis. Each document was reviewed and those deemed important were summarised and ranked according to degree of importance (1= little importance; 2 = of moderate importance; 3=primary importance). An Excel workbook divided into 25 thematic worksheets was maintained to record interpretive information.

The sorting of documents under broad themes provided insights into the tobacco industry’s views and plans and helped to identify the availability of documents on an issue. The preliminary analysis also assisted in identifying terms for further research. At this stage, the metadata for documents considered to be of high value were screened for further clues to conduct subsequent searches.

Once the HK data were gathered and summarized, data specifically relating to the development of tobacco control policy and the industry’s strategies to interfere with

this process were identified. Initially, documents summarized in three of the Excel worksheets were utilized: politics; public policy; and Tobacco Institute of Hong Kong. Documents from these worksheets formed the basis of this paper’s study. Using these documents as a base, we searched for themes within each document and then within clusters of documents.

Refining the initial search

A number of specific searches were conducted utilizing specific keywords relating to individuals, organizations or legislation (see Table 1 for examples). From there “snowballing”¹ and opportunistic searches completed the data collection stage of the study.

Lists of search terms were created and maintained throughout the search process. Initial inquiries were followed up by entering new, more specific terms we came across as we worked through the documents initially located.

Opportunistic searches were conducted on both the primary MSA websites and secondary document collections. As recommended by Malone and Balbach,² search words incorporated synonymous terms, acronyms, abbreviations, and variations of spelling (eg. searches on the name of Hong Kong based physician/activist Judith Mackay included “Mackay”, “MacKay, “Mckay” and “McKay”).

Table 1 Select examples of keywords/search terms used in data collection for “A phony way of showing sincerity”

<p>Individuals Mackay, J Wong, E Paul, H Oliphant, R Falconer, M Pethebridge, R Paul, H Chow, B Jacobs, P Turner, C Patten, C Bolsover, M Barnes, G</p>	<p>Organisations Council on Smoking and Health (COSH) Health and Welfare Branch Broadcasting Review Board (BRB) Tobacco Institute of Hong Kong (TIHK) Ad hoc Committee Executive Council (ExCo) Legislative Council (LegCo) Asian Tobacco Council Baker & McKenzie Asian Tobacco Council Television Authority of Hong Kong (TAHK) Ad hoc Committee on Smoking and Health</p> <p>Legislation Public Health Bill Smoking (Public Health) (Amendment) (No 2) Bill</p>
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During this stage of searching a near complete collection of Tobacco Institute of Hong Kong minutes for the period 1987–1991 was assembled. This collection provided a particularly useful insight into the mindset and maneuverings of the country's tobacco industry agency.

In using industry documents, it is essential that they be put into their historical and situational context. Secondary sources were therefore used to supplement the industry documents. Hong Kong based personnel were particularly helpful in providing material unable to be accessed in Australia. The HK Legislative Council library provided the Public Health Library, University of Sydney with a hard copy of the "Report of the Broadcasting Review Board" and COSH staff made available back copies of research reports, annual reports, and newsletters. In addition, the online availability of transcripts from the HK Legislative Council was most helpful.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations inherent in document research which impact upon this paper. Some of these limitations are general and are intrinsic to company documents from any industry. The available documents may, for example, be fragmentary in content and time covered providing only a partial picture of the organisation's activities and plans.³ As Forster notes:

Company documentation may be fragmentary and subjective. It may not be an authentic or accurate record of actual events and processes. . . They may not be truly representative of life in a particular organization. They are invariably political and subjective. They may be used by information gate-keepers in organizations with ulterior motives. Such documents need to be carefully checked, interpreted and triangulated with other data sources . . . they must be regarded as information which is context-specific and as data which must be contextualized with other forms of research.³

Other concerns are specific to the use of documents from the tobacco industry. These include:

1. public accessibility: available documents are those released through the process of discovery (ie. specific documents related to litigation that were requested by the parties involved in the legal action) not the entire collection of all documents of those companies covered by the MSA⁴;
2. limited access to BAT documents: BAT was not party to the MSA and as a result, access to their documents is not through primary industry sites as is the case for all other leading tobacco companies. At the time of preparing this paper only a small subset of BAT documents were available from a range of sources including TDO, TDS as well as the Legacy library. This limited availability and its ramifications has been discussed by, for example, Bero¹ and MacKenzie et al⁴. Since submitting this paper for publication, UCSF has launched the British American Tobacco Document Archive (BATDA) (<http://bat.library.ucsf.edu>). This site plans to make available all BAT documents currently housed in the Guildford Depository. The documents will be released in phases, with the first one million documents released in September/October 2004;

3. document destruction: the 2002 McCabe-BAT case in Australia demonstrated that the industry can and does destroy its documents.⁵ The full extent of such destruction is, however, impossible to ascertain. Available documents therefore represent an unknown cross section of all documents written and circulated;
4. use of industry websites: documents are continually being added to the industry internet sites. While our search strategy was comprehensive at the time it is possible further relevant documents have since been posted. In addition, specific challenges to efficient researching of documents inherent in the websites have been identified.¹⁻²

An appreciation of these shortcomings and challenges must be taken into consideration when studying this paper.

REFERENCES

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