

Newspaper and wire service coverage of tobacco farmers

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Abstract

This study examined print media coverage of tobacco farmers from the perspective of agenda setting, or the extent to which information is available to the public and perceived as important. A content analysis of 743 articles published between January 1, 1995 and June 30, 1997 was completed. The number of articles increased from 1995 to 1997. Of the topics analyzed, articles on tobacco settlement (7.1% of total) and diversification (15.6% of total) were the least prevalent. Because the settlement discussions did not occur until 1997 (when it comprised 26.4% of the total in the first 6 months), diversification was consistently the least covered topic. The two most frequent topics covered were tobacco companies (36.2%) and the tobacco price support program (32.3%). Except for one 6 month interval, there were substantially more articles in local/regional publications than in national publications. Public health professionals have called for tobacco farmers to diversify to non-tobacco enterprises. Yet, there is little discussion of diversification in print media. Without more attention to diversification, the public and policy makers will be ill-informed about opportunities and obstacles in this regard.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been substantial public attention to various health, economic, legal and

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political dimensions of tobacco. This attention reached a zenith during 1996 and the first half of 1997 when FDA regulation of nicotine (Food and Drug Administration, 1995) and tobacco settlement proposals between the Attorneys General and tobacco companies (Anonymous, 1997) were initiated.

Policy makers, however, have focused relatively little attention on tobacco farmers and the communities in which they live, despite the fact that enactment of changes being discussed may dramatically affect the livelihood thousands of tobacco farmers and change the face of many rural communities. By way of background, there are approximately 124 000 tobacco farms in the US and the annual value of tobacco leaf is about \$3 billion. Over the past four decades, the number of tobacco farms in the US has decreased from 512 000 to 124 000. This decline represents both a consolidation of existing farms as well as a reduction in those farming. While tobacco is grown in 21 states, 91% of the total is grown in just six southern states (GA, KY, NC, SC, TN and VA) and nearly two-thirds of all tobacco farms are located in two states, KY and NC (Grise, 1995). Burley and flue-cured tobacco are the two major types of tobacco grown in the US, accounting for 94% of all tobacco grown.

In recent years, growing numbers of public health professionals have advocated for diversification among tobacco farms both to reduce our country's dependence on tobacco and to promote healthy rural development (Altman *et al.*, 1996, 1997). Opponents have argued the public health goal of a tobacco-free society would result in a massive wave of unemployment among farmers

and others living in tobacco growing states. A Tobacco Institute report, for example, estimated that a tobacco-free society would negatively impact the employment of 2.3 million Americans (Anonymous, 1994). In contrast, a major econometric study found that the termination of tobacco use would not wreak havoc to the US economy (Warner, 1996). This study estimated that between 1993 and 2000, 19 719 new jobs would be gained under smoke-free conditions (Warner, 1996). The number of jobs lost in the Southeast tobacco region would be 36 584, but this would be offset by the net gain of 56 303 jobs in other regions. This study sheds light on projected job loss, one of the key issues that tobacco interests employ in opposing tobacco-related regulations, including policies to promote diversification. At the same time, it also reinforces the importance of developing creative solutions to the job loss that would occur in southern states as a result of declining tobacco sales.

The current study examines the extent and content of media coverage of tobacco farmer issues in national and local/regional newspapers and wire service reports during 1995–1997, and helps document what the general public and policy makers read about farmers. In light of intense policy discussion about diversification and broad-based interest among public health professionals in policy options to promote diversification, we were particularly interested in the extent to which this issue was covered. In the context of media research, this study focuses on agenda setting, or the extent to which information about a particular issue is available to the public and policy makers, and on salience, or the extent to which an issue is perceived as important (Dearing and Rogers, 1996).

Methods

Between January 1, 1995 and June 30, 1997, we obtained copies of daily newspaper and wire service articles that contained content related to tobacco farmers. The databases searched each day included those made available by major local and national media outlets (e.g. *Washington Post*,

Chicago Tribune, *New York Times*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Reuters, *Los Angeles Times*, *Times of London*, PRNewswire, Associated Press, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Winston-Salem Journal*, *Columbia State-Record*, etc.) and through commercial data sources (e.g. Nexus). These articles were obtained through full text database searches using a two-stage search strategy. First, using the Boolean expression, ‘tobacco or smok’ or ‘cigar or nicotine’, we obtained articles on a wide range of tobacco topics. For databases in which Boolean searching of full text was not possible, headlines and/or the first one to three sentences of an article were used as the search field. Second, among the large pool of articles obtained in step one, we then selected articles that contained the stem words ‘grow’ or ‘farm’. This strategy allowed us to identify those articles with content related to tobacco farming (including the words farmer and farming) and growing (including the words grower and growing). A total of 743 articles contained one or both of these stem words. Occasionally, articles that appeared in a national publication were either excerpted or duplicated in their entirety in local or regional papers or vice versa. Because we were primarily interested in overall media coverage of tobacco farming and not the number of independent articles published, we did not exclude from the database articles, or excerpts of articles, that appeared in multiple outlets.

Table I presents data on the number of stories on farming in each publication analyzed.

These 743 articles were uploaded into a QSR NUDoIST (*non-numerical unstructured data indexing searching and theorizing*) database to allow for qualitative data analysis of the primary content of the articles. To ensure that the keywords for which we searched were valid descriptors of the content areas of interest, in each article the paragraph before and after each instance in which a keyword was identified was read for content. This allowed us to determine whether the keywords we used to operationally define the category were in fact an accurate description of the overall theme of the category. If the article did not reflect

Table I. Newspaper and wire service articles analyzed

Newspaper	No. of articles	Percentage of total
<i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i>	157	21.1
Associated Press	75	10.1
<i>Raleigh News and Observer</i>	55	7.4
COMTEX Newswire	40	5.4
<i>Charlotte Observer</i>	40	5.4
Reuters	37	5.0
<i>The State</i>	31	4.2
<i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i>	25	3.4
PRNewswire	23	3.1
<i>Fayetteville Observer-Times</i>	21	2.8
<i>Nashville Banner</i>	14	1.9
<i>Washington Post</i>	13	1.7
Dow Jones News Service	11	1.5
<i>Louisville Courier-Journal</i>	11	1.5
<i>New York Times</i>	11	1.5
<i>Winston-Salem Journal</i>	10	1.3
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	7	0.9
Business Wire	7	0.9
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	7	0.9
<i>Atlanta Journal and Constitution</i>	6	0.8
<i>Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer</i>	6	0.8
Nando News Network	5	0.7
<i>Philadelphia Inquirer</i>	5	0.7
UPI	5	0.7
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	4	0.5
<i>Myrtle Beach Sun Times</i>	3	0.4
<i>Boston Globe</i>	2	0.3
Scripps Howard News Service	2	0.3
<i>Times of London</i>	2	0.3
<i>Washington Times</i>	2	0.3
Other	106	14.3

the category, it was dropped from that particular keyword analysis. For example, if an article contained the word 'tax', but referred to estate taxes paid by farmers, it was excluded from the tax category because we were interested in discussions of tobacco excise or other tobacco-related taxes, not estate taxes. Although it is possible that the keywords we selected to operationally define the thematic category may not have captured every single article on a particular subject, based on the large number of keywords used to define each category and the multi-stage process we used to select the keywords used (i.e. in the process of developing the final list of keywords, each article

was analyzed multiple times, with different keywords, until no new articles on a particular topic were found), we believe that the keywords selected identified the large majority of articles on any particular topic. If an article contained keywords from multiple topic areas, it was coded in more than one category.

Specifically, we were interested in assessing the extent to which the thematic topics listed below were covered in each article. The specific keywords used to search the database for each topic are listed by category below.

- (1) *Diversification*. Defined as articles containing one or more of the following specific keywords: diversification, alternative, supplement, substitute, switch, new crop, replace. Articles in this category referenced some aspect of farmer's attempt to diversify to non-tobacco enterprises, either on- or off-farm.
- (2) *Tobacco price support program*. Defined as containing the specific keywords: tobacco program, price support, USDA, Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperation, Flue-Cured Stabilization Corporation, quota, allotment, Farm Bureau, production-control program. Articles in this category referenced the Tobacco Price Support and Production Control Program run through the US Department of Agriculture.
- (3) *International competition*. Defined as containing the specific keywords: Brazil, Zimbabwe, Argentina, Malawi, Africa, international, overseas, world market. Articles in this category referenced a particular country or the international market as a whole with respect to tobacco farming.
- (4) *Tobacco companies*. Defined as containing the specific keywords: RJR, Reynolds Tobacco, Philip Morris, tobacco manufacturer, Liggett, Brown and Williamson, tobacco company. Articles in this category referenced a particular company or the industry as a whole with respect to tobacco farming.
- (5) *Legislation and regulation*: Defined as containing the specific keywords: (a) *subtopic FDA*—FDA, Food and Drug Administration,

Table II. *Thematic categories of newspaper and wire service articles^a*

Time	Legislation and regulation			Diversification	Tobacco program	Tobacco companies	International market
	FDA	Taxes	Settlement				
Jan–Jun 1995 (%)	16	22	0	8	61	48	21
<i>N</i> (total = 118)	11	15	0	5	41	32	14
Jul–Dec 1995 (%)	27	13	0	23	38	20	14
<i>N</i> (total = 170)	34	16	0	29	48	25	18
Jan–Jun 1996 (%)	24	18	0	14	23	29	30
<i>N</i> (total = 303)	52	40	0	31	50	64	66
Jul–Dec 1996 (%)	31	16	0	11	29	38	24
<i>N</i> (total = 190)	39	21	0	14	37	48	31
Jan–Jun 1997 (%)	17	24	26	18	32	50	31
<i>N</i> (total = 400)	34	49	53	37	64	100	63
Total (%)	23	19	7	16	32	36	26
<i>N</i> (1181)	170	141	53	116	240	269	192

^aPercent refers to percentage of total articles containing various thematic categories. The content of each article can be coded in multiple thematic categories.

referencing the FDA's role in legislation or regulation of tobacco products or the tobacco industry; (b) *subtopic taxes*—tax, referencing articles that referred to a tax on tobacco products or the tobacco industry; (c) *subtopic tobacco settlement*—tobacco settlement, referencing the proposed settlement and related discussion between the Attorneys General and the tobacco companies pertaining to the interests and concerns of tobacco farmers.

Results

The distribution of the 743 articles on tobacco farmers by content area appears in Table II (presented in 6 month intervals). The number of articles on tobacco farmers has generally increased over time. Of the topics analyzed, articles on the tobacco settlement (7.1% of total) and diversification (15.6% of total) were the least prevalent. However, because the settlement discussions did not take place until 1997 (when it comprised 26.4% of the total in the first half of 1997), diversification was consistently the least covered topic of those we examined. The two most frequent topics covered were tobacco companies (36.2%) and the tobacco price support program (32.3%).

We also examined (Table III) whether the content of articles that appeared in national media differed from those serving local/regional markets (the latter of which are in tobacco growing states).

Except for one 6 month interval, there were substantially more articles in local/regional publications than in national publications. The data illustrate that local/regional media were more likely than national publications to cover the tobacco program and tobacco companies, while national media were generally more likely to cover international competition.

Discussion

Although US tobacco production is concentrated in just a few southern states, it poses many dilemmas for American society. On the one hand, tobacco has provided a decent livelihood for many generations of farm families and positive economic effects for communities in which tobacco is produced. Tobacco producing states, however, lag behind other states in progressive tobacco control policy. In a national study using 1989 data, Emont *et al.* (1992) concluded that tobacco-producing states, compared to non-producing states, had more smokers who consumed more cigarettes/person and

Table III. National media versus local media coverage of various thematic categories

Topic	Media ^{a,b}	Jan–Jun 1995	Jul–Dec 1995	Jan–Jun 1996	Jul–Dec 1996	Jan–Jun 1997
Diversification	local	10%	20%	14%	12%	24%
	national	10%	18%	7%	8%	13%
Tobacco program	local	63%	40%	40%	37%	45%
	national	70%	35%	11%	18%	19%
Tobacco companies	local	53%	22%	28%	47%	59%
	national	30%	12%	27%	25%	31%
International market	local	24%	8%	23%	25%	22%
	national	20%	24%	40%	30%	43%
FDA	local	16%	25%	29%	30%	23%
	national	20%	41%	19%	28%	12%
Taxes	local	29%	16%	19%	8%	24%
	national	0%	6%	15%	15%	18%
Global settlement	local	0%	0%	0%	0%	34%
	national	0%	0%	0%	0%	16%
Total articles	Local	49	83	80	60	92
	National	10	17	84	40	67

^aThis analysis was completed for media that had 10 or more articles on tobacco farmers during the period of study ($N = 16$ newspapers and wire services). These articles represent 77% of all articles in the database. Percentages reported refer to the percentage of the total articles analyzed, not the percent within local or within national media.

^bLocal newspapers used in this analysis were: *Lexington Herald-Leader*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, *Charlotte Observer*, *The State*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, *Nashville Banner*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, *Winston Salem Journal*. National newspapers and wire services used in this analysis were: Associated Press, COMTEX Newswire, Reuters, PRNewswire, *Washington Post*, Dow Jones News Service, *New York Times*.

had lower quit rates. There is often a tension between the public health goals of tobacco control and the goals of tobacco farming (Altman, 1995). Even so, we believe that there is substantial common ground between farmers and health professionals. A handful of public health professionals have begun educating themselves about the economic ramifications of a tobacco-free society, and words like ‘supplementation’, ‘diversification’, ‘transition’ and ‘alternative enterprises’ have entered their lexicon. At their core, these terms refer to maintaining the viability of family farms through reducing dependence on tobacco, developing on- and off-farm enterprises that supplement or replace tobacco, and stimulating economic and community development to support a changing rural infrastructure. Indeed, most of the legislation introduced in late 1997 concerning the tobacco settlement included proposals to help tobacco farmers transition to a new economy. Short-term costs for on-farm diversification may well be substantial, as new equipment, growing practices,

and markets must be developed. Long-term costs, however, may well outweigh these initial setbacks, especially in light of the public health costs of not reducing tobacco dependence. US tobacco growers will experience increasing pressure to supplement their tobacco income with other on- and off-farm enterprises or quit farming tobacco altogether. Along these lines, a survey of tobacco farmers in the Southeast found that 51% were ‘interested in trying other on-farm ventures to supplement tobacco income’ (Altman *et al.*, 1996).

This study documented newspaper and wire service coverage of issues related to tobacco farmers. Public health advocates and policy makers have called for tobacco farmers to diversify to non-tobacco enterprises (Carlton, 1994; Gorrie, 1994; Joint Subcommittee, 1996), and tobacco farmers report in surveys that they are interested in supplementing their tobacco operations (Altman *et al.*, 1996, 1997). Yet, we found that there is relatively little discussion of diversification in newspaper and wire service articles that serve

either national or local/regional audiences. Without more public dialogue devoted to issues around diversification, the public and policy makers will be less informed about opportunities and obstacles for rural community development of this kind (Hamilton, 1993; Kilburn, 1994). This public dialogue is important as it helps to reduce the likelihood that policy making occurs in a vacuum. Furthermore, there is evidence that federal policy makers use the media to infer what the public thinks, believes and cares about (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Indeed, in a review of the agenda-setting literature, Dearing and Everett wrote (p. 76): “the mass media are omnipresent and central in the world of policy making”. Although we cannot ascertain in this study whether the public and policy makers pay attention to media messages about tobacco farming, if media do not cover the topic, then the first step in the communications process, exposure to a message, does not occur, thereby compromising subsequent steps (e.g. attention, comprehension, attitude and behavior change) (Parrott, 1995). Beyond agenda setting is the issue of media advocacy, which is primarily about the effective framing of issues in the media for the advancement of a cause (Wallack *et al.*, 1993; Altman *et al.*, 1994; Chapman, 1994). In light of our finding that diversification was discussed rarely, let alone advocated for, this indicates that at least through the eyes of the print media, there are not active and strong voices promoting diversification and long-term sustainability. From the perspective of health education interventionists, this suggests that pro-diversification messages might well be innovative and, if combined with effective media advocacy, could help influence what the media, public and policy makers think about with respect to diversification and other issues that affect rural communities in the south.

We also found more coverage of tobacco farmers in local/regional than in national publications. Although not surprising, given that local/regional publications were concentrated in the tobacco region, it does suggest that policy makers with an influence over the future of tobacco-dependent

communities are less likely to be routinely exposed to news accounts of issues that affect farmers and the communities in which they live. This lack of exposure fuels the perception that tobacco farmers hold of most policy makers (i.e. ‘they don’t understand or care about us’). In addition, the public health implications of lack of media coverage can be understood from an ecological perspective (Pearce, 1996; Stokols, 1992, 1996; Susser and Susser, 1996a,b). This perspective would encourage the public health community to understand tobacco farming and health from multiple and interconnected levels of analysis.

There are a few limitations to interpreting the findings of this study. First, the database of articles analyzed in this study undoubtedly excluded some articles on tobacco farmers that appeared in national and local/regional newspapers and wire reports. Although we do not know the actual number of articles on farmers that appeared during the timeframe of this study, the wide range of publications that were monitored and the relatively large absolute number of articles in the database suggest that we probably included a reasonably representative sample. Second, the topics for which we conducted keyword searches do not reflect all of the topics covered in these articles, although we selected those that we thought were most germane to the topic.

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