

Public Health News Frames in North Carolina Newspaper Coverage of the 100% Tobacco-Free Schools Campaign? Sometimes

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Abstract

Objective: News organizations are an important and influential part of the social environment. They identify certain issues by the extent and nature of their coverage. To help explain what public health policy messages may have influenced school policy decisions, this content analysis provides an examination of newspaper coverage of North Carolina's 100% tobacco-free schools campaign.

Data Collection Methods: Researchers searched LexisNexis for articles published in North Carolina newspapers between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2004 that included variations of "North Carolina tobacco-free schools." Researchers then conducted a descriptive analysis of 138 stories from nine North Carolina newspapers (approximately 4% of all the state's newspapers) and used page placement and story type to examine the level of importance placed on the issue. Finally, frames for and against tobacco-free school policies were tracked, along with the presence of key messages presented by 100% TFS advocates.

Principal Findings: The volume of news coverage changed throughout the study period, with peaks and valleys closely associated with external "trigger" events. In addition, a majority of the newspaper articles did not include key public health messages.

Conclusions: The results suggest an opportunity for public health experts and officials to work more effectively with local journalists to increase the use (and impact) of public health messages in news coverage of tobacco policies affecting youth.

Introduction

Tobacco use is a tremendous public health burden in North Carolina, particularly among youth. The results of tobacco prevention research in schools show that school districts with a 100% Tobacco-Free School (TFS) policy in place (one that bans all tobacco use, everywhere on campus, by everyone, at all times) have a lower rate of tobacco use among youth.^{1,2}

North Carolina state law prohibits tobacco use inside school buildings, but permits local school boards to establish policies for outdoor tobacco use by students, school staff, and school visitors.³ In 2000, 90% of North Carolina's 115 school districts had policies that permitted school staff, visitors, and/or students to use tobacco on campus and at school-related events.⁴ In response, the North Carolina Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch (TPCB) of the North Carolina Department of Public

Health initiated a statewide campaign to encourage all school districts to adopt a 100% TFS policy.⁵ This initiative has relied on advocacy strategies to draw attention to the issue and promote public health frames intended to influence how the public and policymakers respond to the proposed policy changes. As of January 2006, 65 districts were 100% tobacco-free.^{6,7}

As public health leaders and advocates focus their efforts on 100% TFS policy adoption in the remaining North Carolina school districts, it is important to understand what information on this issue is available to policymakers and to consider the kinds of messages or data needed to inform these debates. The primary aim of this study is to describe whether key public health messages, sources, and data related to 100% TFS policies are being presented in print news media. Following this analysis, recommendations are offered for how existing media advocacy strategies promoting public health messages can be improved

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or expanded so 100% TFS policy debates are informed by public health goals and evidence.

An Overview of North Carolina's 100% Tobacco-Free Schools Campaign

North Carolina's 100% TFS campaign was spurred by former Governor Jim Hunt's Teen Tobacco Use Prevention Summit in January 2000. The Summit was organized by state leaders in response to the high tobacco usage rates among North Carolina's youth reported in the 1999 Youth Tobacco Survey.⁸ The initiative gained momentum in 2002 with the creation of the 100% TFS Program within the TPCB. In June of the same year, the State Board of Education passed a resolution encouraging, but not requiring, all North Carolina school districts to adopt this policy. Finally, in July 2003, the North Carolina General Assembly passed Senate Bill 583 (SB 583) entitled "Tobacco Use in Schools."⁹ This new law joined federal legislation in banning tobacco use in school buildings and gave school districts the authority to adopt 100% TFS policies that are more restrictive than the state law. By December 2005, 57% (65) of North Carolina school districts had adopted this policy. This paper focuses on how some of the key public health messages, sources, and data were reported in newspapers by North Carolina journalists from 2000 through 2004.

The Significance of News Frames in Public Policy Debates

News reports, analyses, and commentaries comprise the principal arenas within which scientific, medical, and public health controversies are defined as public problems and are brought to the attention of decision makers, interest groups, and the general public.¹⁰ News coverage (in print and other media) affects the shape and outcome of health policy debates in two key ways: agenda setting and story framing.

First, agenda setting theory shows that the capacity of the public's or policymakers' agendas is limited.¹¹ At any time, only a few major issues—out of the hundreds that can be reported each day—are of concern to the general public or policymakers. Journalists' and editors' story selections focus a spotlight on issues that are reported. The spotlight can be enhanced by the relative prominence of placement of news reports.¹²⁻¹⁴ By emphasizing some issues with repeated and prominent coverage, the news legitimizes and increases the salience of highlighted problems, leading people to seek solutions for highly visible issues, often to the exclusion of unpublicized ones.^{11,15-20} In sum, journalists may influence health policy by highlighting issues and policies that then become more likely than other issues to find a place on the public agenda.

Second, journalists use frames, a central organizing idea or story line, to tie information together or provide emphasis and to quickly convey the essence of an issue.²¹ By emphasizing a specific component of an issue or policy solution over another, news frames can influence which considerations are deemed most accessible or most important when the public is making

policy choices.^{22,23} Frames within news articles provide direction for audiences by assigning relative importance to particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, or preferred courses of action.^{24,25}

Thus, by presenting particular interpretations of problems and policies, issue frames presented in the news can become a key basis for public policy decisions.^{26,27} And, once an issue is framed by news coverage, it can be very difficult for policymakers and other interests to shift the image of the issue to another perspective.¹⁰

Key Research Questions

This analysis evaluates news coverage about 100% TFS policies in North Carolina with regard to agenda setting and framing. The time period, 2001-2004, represents the first key phase of the 100% TFS campaign. This analysis examines the volume and prominence of the North Carolina newspaper coverage of 100% TFS schools as well as the tobacco control frames and messages that were reported.

Methods

This study analyzes newspaper coverage of the 100% TFS issue in North Carolina from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2004 in major daily newspapers in the state. Reports on this topic were identified by performing a key word search using phrases related to "North Carolina tobacco free schools." We collected all of the reports with the key terms anywhere in the full text of the article from the sources listed for North Carolina in the LexisNexis news archive between November 2004 and February 2005. The resulting nine English language newspapers were from the North Carolina news outlets in the LexisNexis archive and represent 4% of the state's newspapers. Initially, we retrieved and reviewed 192 articles against our inclusion criteria, leaving 138 in our final sample.

Outcomes Measures: General

Each article was coded for the newspaper that published it, the date of publication, and whether 100% TFS was the focus of the report or part of a broader discussion. The inverted pyramid style of journalism calls for the most important information of the article to be placed at the beginning or lead.²⁸ Consequently, 100% TFS was considered to be the focus when it was mentioned in the headline or lead sentence or discussed in at least one-third of the article. In addition, each story was coded for whether it was a regular news report, a news brief, an editorial or letter to the editor, or commentary. Hard news stories (the regular reports and news briefs) are expected to report the who, what, when, where, and how of a news event with no explicit opinion.²⁸ A newspaper's editorial page, letters to the editor, or commentary pieces are intended to convey the views or opinions of the editorial board of a newspaper or the author. This variable allows for a better understanding of the sources of the public health frames.

Outcome Measures: Agenda setting

The extent of the 100% TFS coverage was measured by counting the volume of news coverage over the study period. In addition to reporting significant issues more often than other issues, editors and reporters give information they consider important more prominent placement.²⁹ Because prominent stories are more likely to have an impact on audiences, each article was coded for whether it was published on the front page of the first section of the newspaper, on the front page of the local news section, or in other sections.

Outcome Measures: Framing

A preliminary review of the North Carolina news articles confirmed reliance on two, prominent policy frames on each side of the tobacco policy debates. The primary frame supporting 100% TFS, that tobacco in schools is a children's health problem, uses a public health frame implying that 100% TFS is necessary to provide a healthy school environment. The primary opposing frame, that adults have a right to use tobacco as they see fit, consolidates the argument around infringement on the personal rights of adults who work in schools or attend school functions. Each article was coded for whether it mentioned either of these issue frames.^{27,30}

Regardless of the frame through which the story was told, each report was also coded as to whether it contained two messages about tobacco use that are offered as an underlying rationale for 100% TFS policy and are based on public health research. We measured whether the articles included (1) information that secondhand smoke is dangerous to youth and (2) that role modeling of tobacco use by peers and adults is associated with an increase in youth tobacco use. Each article was also coded as to whether specific data, such as youth tobacco use rates, were mentioned.

Coding

Each outcome measure was based on published analyses of news coverage of health or health policy topics and a review of prior debates of tobacco free schools.^{27,36-37} A codebook was developed and the coding for each variable was pre-tested. Coding reliability was

tested on a 25% probability sample of the population of articles. Coder agreement, calculated as the percentage of agreement between the two coders, was 94% across 54 variables. Data were analyzed using a combination of Microsoft Excel and SPSS software.

Results

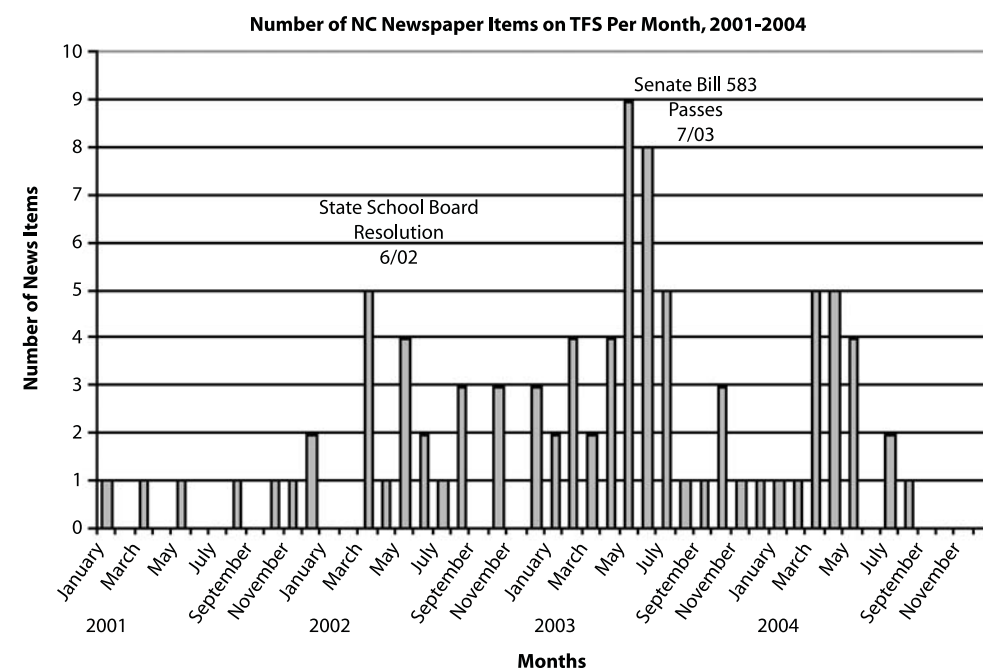
General

A majority of the 138 articles identified in our search came from North Carolina's largest daily newspapers, with the greatest percentage of articles (23%) came from the *Raleigh News & Observer*, which serves the state capital and covers state government issues closely. Eighty-eight of these news items (64%) were focused on 100% TFS in either the headline, lead or at least one-third of the article. Regular news reports accounted for more than half (55%) of the articles analyzed. Thirty-five percent were news briefs and 10% were opinion pieces (i.e., commentary or editorials/letters to the editor).

Agenda Setting

Figure 1 shows that there were several peaks and valleys in the volume of 100% TFS newspaper coverage in the time period. Events such as the State School Board Resolution and the debate and passage of SB 583 are associated with an increase in news coverage. Following these events, the coverage level dropped to previous levels. As another indication of the prominence of these reports, one quarter of the articles appeared on a front page of a newspaper section; 7% appeared on the front page of the entire

Figure 1.
Monthly Distribution of 100% TFS News Items in North Carolina Newspapers, 2001-2004, n = 90



newspaper, and 18% appeared on the front page of the second section of the newspaper, which is usually devoted to local news.

Framing

Slightly less than half (47%) of the news items included at least one of the two dominant policy frames. The children's health frame was used in 33% of the news items, while 19% of the stories framed the issue around individual rights (see Table 1). The messages about dangers of secondhand smoke and the importance of role modeling for school staff were apparent in the coverage. Thirty percent of the reports included the secondhand smoke message, and 28% included the role-modeling message. Fifty-seven percent included neither of these messages.

explanation suggests that advocates wanting to raise the salience of 100% TFS in school districts should spend some advocacy efforts on finding ways to connect 100% TFS to values, consequences, and conflicts that are newsworthy or connect with the communities' top priorities. Getting more front page coverage about 100% TFS could help move this policy onto or up school boards' agendas. Third, reporting on the issue may be especially challenging for North Carolina newspapers. Editors may hesitate to take on a topic that has the potential to alienate some of their readers, for example, those who use or make their living from tobacco. Fourth, there is also a tendency for news items to naturally run out of steam, especially if not refreshed by new information or story lines. Finally, editors may have chosen to feature other tobacco-related stories during the study

period, including the proposed tobacco tax and the tobacco buyout.

A third key finding is that although these newspapers' reporters used the children's health issue frame in nearly twice as many articles as the rights frames, a large majority of the articles did not contain this public health frame. These results suggest that public health frames in connection with 100% TFS may not be getting through to news audiences.

This study has several limitations. One drawback of this type of evaluation is the lack of consensus in the

broader public health and journalism communities about what constitutes high quality coverage for 100% TFS and related policies. For assessments of news coverage to be most effective, they should be guided by a normative standard incorporating the goals and constraints of news reporting and the information needs of the general public. Further discussion and analysis is needed to determine and apply a policy news reporting standard to tobacco free schools policy coverage.

Another limitation is that the newspapers included are only a small proportion of the newspapers in North Carolina. Because LexisNexis is a key news archive and is often used as the basis for this type of analysis, we believe our findings highlight important insights that warrant further investigation with a more representative sample of North Carolina news. This study points to the need for research that identifies the full scope of reporting on the issue and examines in detail why local journalists report on tobacco-free school policy issues as they do (or do not) and the impact those choices have on local and state level debates.

Finally, though this study reported on the use of data and sources in articles related to tobacco free schools, it did not assess the accuracy or balance of the information presented. News stories that contain inaccurate information or portray circumstances with an obvious bias can result in opinions or views about policies that are misinformed and not truly reflective of public preferences.

Table 1.
Distribution of Public Health Policy Frames and Messages in 100% TFS Coverage in North Carolina Newspapers, 2000-2004

Frames	% of News Items n = 138
Children's Health	33%
Individual Rights	19
Neither of these	53
Messages	
Danger of second hand smoke and smoking for youth	30
Impact of role modeling on youth	28
Neither of these	57

Discussion

The results of this analysis provide the first systematic description of the extent and content of newspaper coverage of North Carolina's 100% TFS movement from 2001-2004. First, the volume of reports from these newspapers appears to reflect coverage of "trigger" events, such as adoption of the statewide school board resolution on 100% TFS, rather than continued interest in the local processes considering 100% TFS across the state. While this trend is not surprising given journalists' reliance on events as a catalyst for news reports, it also highlights the fact that proponents of 100% TFS will likely have to continue their advocacy campaigns to provide incentives for continued coverage.

Second, the prominence of these stories provides another view of what priority newspapers placed on reporting the 100% TFS policy. Very few (7%) of the 100% TFS articles in this study made it onto the front page of the newspaper. While newspaper coverage is not the only indicator of the public policy agenda, it is an important indicator of how the public perceives an issue.

Several factors may have influenced the extent and prominence of this newspaper coverage of the debate. First, newspaper editors may consider 100% TFS debates a community news story, one more likely to be covered by a local newspaper. Second, debates about 100% TFS in a newspaper's market may not have been controversial and reporters and editors may not have believed they merited attention or prominence in the news coverage. This

Conclusions

Based on these results, additional public relations events and promotions from state leaders may help raise 100% TFS on journalists' agendas. At the same time, providing opportunities for journalists to report proactively, rather than focus on event-driven coverage, may help to increase the number of 100% TFS articles. For example, public health advocates may arrange to meet with reporters and editors to discuss the benefits of the policy to students and school districts. They may provide other reporting angles, such as education, business, or economics, that might broaden its appeal to news audiences and convince reporters that the issue is important because of its statewide scope. Reporting frames that link 100% TFS with other tobacco-related stories, such as those on hospitals, worksites and uni-

versities considering a tobacco-free policy, may also help raise the salience of 100% TFS. Finally, for public health framing to gain traction in news coverage, public health advocates should consistently promote several public health angles, including the one that moved public policy in early tobacco control debates, specifically the notion that tobacco kills.

In sum, news organizations have an important role to play in public health policy development in all types of settings, including schools. While news professionals make the decisions about how to write a story, advocates and public health leaders who work with journalists can help inform and shape the views of the public and policymakers. For the 100% TFS policy, improved news coverage could help the issue garner more attention from North Carolina residents and policymakers. **NCMedJ**

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