Reviewer's report

Title: "Tired of watching customers walk out the door because of the smoke": A content analysis of media coverage of voluntarily smokefree restaurants and bars

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Reviewer: Rebekah Nagler

Reviewer's report:

This study analyzes media coverage of voluntarily smokefree restaurants and bars in the U.S. between 1995 and 2011. Although the study offers a useful contribution to the literature on media coverage of tobacco control, it can be strengthened in several ways. Recommended revisions and clarifications are provided below.

Major compulsory revisions:

1. As the authors point out, there are likely to be continued efforts to enact comprehensive smokefree policies in restaurants, bars, and other venues. News media coverage of such policies—including voluntary policies—may therefore be important, insofar as the media can help shape the public agenda. In other words, public opinion can play a central role in generating support for tobacco control policies, and communication theory and research describe the ways in which the media can influence public opinion. In the introduction, the authors briefly allude to this important body of work (e.g., citations on agenda setting theory, framing). I am, however, concerned that the authors may have given this foundation short shrift. Does the audience understand what agenda setting and framing are? Do they clearly understand the linkages between the media agenda, the public agenda, and, in turn, the policy agenda? Perhaps some readers will be familiar with these topics, but rather than assume such knowledge the authors should provide additional detail about these theories and their relevance to public health/tobacco control. This doesn’t have to be long-winded; a short paragraph should suffice.

2. The authors note that they “report findings from the entire population of items meeting the search criteria,” but then correctly acknowledge that they might have failed to include relevant stories in their study (p. 7). It therefore seems to me that they cannot be confident that they have, in fact, represented the universe of stories on voluntary smokefree policies in restaurants and bars. Do they not have a sample, then? Wouldn’t this suggest that inferential statistics are appropriate when comparing venues, etc.?

Minor essential revisions:

1. How did the authors define local newspapers? National newspapers? In addition to defining these, it might be helpful to give examples of the various sources in the results section (p. 7, lines 17-20)
2. Since the first section of the results ("Characteristics of news items") also describes trends in coverage over time, the title of this section should also refer to said trends in coverage.

3. In the discussion section, the authors speculate on the trends observed. This is certainly interesting; that said, I’m not sure it’s fair to say that coverage was “regular” across the entire period. It’s probably more accurate to note the substantial drop-off between 2007 and 2009.

4. On p. 9, line 9, “taken together” should be a new sentence.

5. In Table 1, do we assume that all other “story authors” were journalists?

6. In Table 2, how is the “opposition” category distinct from the “negative” classification in the prior two “overall impression” categories?

Discretionary revisions:

1. Related to my first point under compulsory revisions, I think the answer to the “so what” question could be even stronger in the conclusion—both in the abstract and the main text. In other words, why does it matter that such policies may be “increasingly normative”? What are the implications? How could the news media be harnessed to reinforce tobacco control goals here…?

2. In Table 2, it seems that instead of adding numerous references to the reference list, the authors could instead mention each news story parenthetically after each quote (e.g., author, title, publication, date).

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests: 

I declare that I have no competing interests