

LOST AMID MISINFORMATION: REAL PEOPLE, REAL SCIENCE, REAL PROGRESS



By Dr. Moira Gilchrist, Vice President, Strategic & Scientific Communications, Philip Morris International

We often think that misinformation and disinformation are online phenomena, with fake news and conspiracy theories only occasionally spilling over into real life. The reality is that these threats to progress are not confined to online peddlers of the unreal; they have real-world consequences that hurt real people.

As a scientist working for Philip Morris International (PMI), I see the spread of misinformation nearly every day—from poorly executed scientific studies and results skewed by bias to misleading headlines. I personally have been subjected to intimidation tactics grounded in misinformation that, unfortunately, have achieved their intended effect of shutting down debate and stifling free and open discussion. Too often and too easily, reason and fact are drowned out by skewed and hyperbolic voices.

The confluence of misinformation and the stifling of speech can have a devastating impact. This is certainly the case in tobacco harm reduction. Around the world in 2021, hundreds of millions of adults continue to smoke and many now find themselves confused hesitant to switch to a better choice because of misinformation.

It need not be that way. We know that the best thing anyone can do for their health in terms of tobacco and nicotine consumption is to quit smoking—or, better yet, never start. That's clear. But most adults who smoke do not quit. It is for these men and women that scientifically substantiated smoke-free alternatives are intended. Though not risk-free, these products have been shown to be a far better choice than continued smoking. And the public wants smokers to have access to them. Indeed, 73 percent of adults surveyed globally agree that governments should consider the role that smoke-free products can play in reducing cigarette use.

What's the holdup? While adults who currently smoke want new approaches and better choices, too many are unaware such innovations exist, can't access them, or are confused by disinformation campaigns that muddy the truth.

This is not an accident. So-called philanthropic organizations and individuals are so focused on ridding the world of cigarettes that they have completely dismissed the potential of these smoke-free products—those that remove combustion. (At PMI, we too want to move adults away from cigarettes but recognize that for those who do not want to quit, we can help by enabling switching to better alternatives.) Unfortunately, those who see only one path forward often bombard the public with a mix of fact and fiction—a dangerous combination that lumps together all tobacco and nicotine products and leaves smokers confused—and ostracize anyone who does not resolutely and absolutely adopt their single-minded agenda.

What's at stake is a public health breakthrough of enormous import. PMI is on a path to completely replace cigarettes with scientifically substantiated alternatives for those adults who would otherwise continue to smoke. With the right regulatory and public support, we are convinced we can achieve this in many countries in which we operate in as soon as 10 to 15 years.

To achieve this, we need to ensure that science and facts outweigh personal opinions in decision-making. And as in so many other areas of our society, we need to engage and hear from all perspectives, including industry and adults who smoke. Bottom line: Inclusivity, transparency, and a respect for scientific evidence should be the norm in discussions of tobacco harm reduction rather than the exception.

I recognize that not everyone will agree on how best to reduce the harm caused by cigarettes. That should not prevent us from coming together to talk about solutions. As a scientist, I have a strong belief that facts and evidence ultimately become too difficult to ignore. But we can achieve so much more—so much faster—if we make a conscious effort to eliminate misinformation and overcome stigma. Scientific evidence and transparency remain our strongest tools in enabling the men and women who smoke to make informed decisions. They deserve nothing less.

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