



# Medicine in Television Series

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# Mad Men and Tobacco Addiction

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*Don Draper is, in all likelihood, one of the most representative icons of the golden age that TV series are currently enjoying. Set in a New York ad agency in the 1960s, the show is a true and elegant reflection of a period characterized by social discrimination, and has reaped the most prestigious accolades since it premiered on the cable channel AMC in 2008. It scored four consecutive wins as Best Drama in the Emmys, and three Golden Globes, totaling 20 awards over its seven seasons on air. Even before its finale, it was considered one of the best series in television history.*

Big tobacco companies have used different strategies to promote tobacco use for decades. Naturally, direct advertising is the most significant, and one of the most effective; billboards on the street, seen by the general public in their daily lives, is one of its favorite supports, as well as adverts in the printed press and spots on radio and TV. In such adverts, it is common to show popular figures smoking, and the stars of film and TV were doing it from the 1920s onward. So Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall starred in tobacco adverts in the 1940s, but so did many more US artists, until the practice was declared illegal in 1964. As governments in many advanced societies adopted policies to reduce the damage that tobacco was causing, for example prohibiting the advertising and promotion of tobacco, the industry sought ever more subtle ways of promoting itself. One of these was through its presence in films or on TV. In recent years, it has come to light that both studios and artists signed contracts with tobacco companies that led to attractive film stars visibly smoking, or even making favorable comments on tobacco brands. These tactics intensified in the 1980s, and it has been documented that during the following decade the presence of smoking on-screen in Hollywood films increased, especially in films rated for gen-

eral exhibition. Internal tobacco industry documents revealed in North American court cases document this, and the work of Stan Glantz and his collaborators at the University of California provides ample evidence.

Mad Men is a successful TV series, which many consider a work of art. In recent years, part of the creative talent that time back was employed in films has migrated toward TV series on channels like AMC and HBO. Mad Men is part of this process. Since the series is set in the 1960s, when smoking was common in the US, tobacco plays a significant role, leading to the formulation of this analysis from a double perspective: the viewpoint both of a fan of the series, and of a public health professional involved for years in the prevention of smoking.

## **The historical context of Mad Men**

The series Mad Men premiered in 2007 in the US, on the cable TV channel AMC, and ended in 2015, after seven seasons. Set in New York throughout the 1960s, it focuses on an ad agency located on Madison Avenue (hence the reference to “Mad men”, the men of Madison Avenue in ad agency slang, since there were numerous agencies located in the area at that time). The drama follows

the career of the creative Don Draper and the people in his personal and professional sphere, centering on ad agency business and the life of its stars during several years of frenetic changes in the US, up until the 1970s. This period allowed the series, using images and dialog, to place several themes center-stage: cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, persistent sexism, budding feminism, frequent adultery and infidelities, hidden homosexuality and homophobia, anti-Semitism, and signs of flagrant racism. Throughout the series, events occur which pervade the action: Kennedy wins the elections, the contraceptive pill comes onto the market, the Vietnam War breaks out, the damage that tobacco causes is documented, and so on. Yet perhaps its major pillar, one of its main underlying themes, is the deception people weave and their projection of identity. We see characters living a lie, hiding key elements of their identities, lives and past, who are, moreover, constantly deceiving the people closest to them. A certain parallel exists between such aspects and the ad agency's core activity, which builds an unreal image of the brands and products it promotes to consumers.

In the early 1960s, tobacco use in the US had reached its critical point. For decades most adult men had smoked, and since the mid-1940s it had been widely taken up by women too. Its social acceptance was widespread. One smoked at work, on trains, in bars and in restaurants. Advertising frequently laid claim to the presumptive benefits of one brand over another, and its less irritant properties. It was not infrequent to show health professionals on cigarette adverts. In 1965, the prevalence of smoking was 42.4% (51.9% of men and 33.9% of women).

Early studies incontrovertibly showing the damage caused by tobacco were published in the 1950s. Foremost among them was Richard Doll's pilot study in the UK and a study of cases and controls by Ernest Wynder in the US. This knowledge began circulating in professional circles and had a certain impact in the press, but it was not until the early 1960s that the relationship between tobacco, lung cancer and other diseases became generally accepted and reached the wider gener-

al public through the media. The detonators were the 1962 report by the Royal College of Physicians in London, Great Britain, and publication of the US Surgeon General's Advisory Committee report in 1964. Statistics on tobacco use showed the impact of the Surgeon General's report, which marked a clear turning point, since its publication prompted many desertions from tobacco's cause. So 1963 was the year of greatest tobacco consumption per capita in the US (this has been estimated at 4345 cigarettes per inhabitant over 18). After the Surgeon General's report in 1964, many states and cities began to pass regulations aimed at reducing tobacco addiction. This process led to the current situation, where 20% of adult Americans smoke, a ratio that in New York City drops to 14% of the population. In this city, one cannot smoke in the workplace, on public transport, in bars or restaurants, or on beaches or in parks. (The fine for smoking in a public park is \$US50.) The cost of cigarettes is high due to specific taxes (in New York, the average price for a packet is \$US12). Tobacco cannot be sold to persons under 21 in the city. Lastly, messages warning against smoking, offering reasons to stop smoking are everywhere.

### **The key tobacco moments in the series**

Throughout the series, tobacco is constantly present. The main character, his wife and many of the adult characters are smokers. The absence of tobacco regulation in the period means that they smoke in the office, in meetings, in bars and in restaurants. The characters constantly smoke. In addition to tobacco's omnipresence, there are three key moments when tobacco is not merely part of the atmosphere but plays a leading role in the show: in episode one of the first season (focused on tobacco advertising); in the twelfth of the fourth season (when they talk about the damage tobacco causes); and in the final episode of the seventh and last season (where lung cancer affects one of the main characters). We should review these moments.

In the first episode (named, like *The Platters* song, "Smoke gets in your eyes"), the agency is trying to win an important contract with the com-



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pany that manufactures the cigarette brand Lucky Strike. They must combat a growing social perception that tobacco is bad for one's health (an opinion the *Reader's Digest* has just published), as well as a prohibition by the Federal Trade Commission from evoking health benefits in advertising as was previously common (the tobacco company executives rant about these marketing obstacles, with references to Russia and communism). To prepare for the meeting, Don Draper holds apparently trivial conversations with the smokers around him, delving into their reasons for smoking and for choosing a brand. He also has a meeting with a medical consultant, a psychoanalyst, who indicates that an underlying element for smokers is a death wish. In his meeting with the tobacco company executives, which develops in rather an insane manner, where naturally any concern about the damage tobacco may cause is rejected or ignored (though as committed smokers, they are visibly coughing), Don Draper, who was creatively blocked, is struck by sudden inspiration and proposes an ad campaign that differs from those that have been typical up to that point. He suggests ignoring any concern about tobacco and health, and seeking connections with their customers' aspiration to happiness: based on the smokers' stories and identity. He advocates building the brand image based on colors, logos and slogans. Pure advertising: "Lucky Strike. It's toasted." While Lucky Strike was already a brand that used a play on words, "It's toasted" refers to the fact that during manufacturing, this tobacco is toasted instead of just dried (other brands also do this, but they decided to make a feature of it). Simultaneously, they sought a connection with the customer by evoking the morning toast and relaxed daily life. A surefire success. (In fact, this story is pure fiction, since the slogan "It's toasted" was coined decades earlier.)

At the end of the fourth season, Lucky Strike abandons the ad agency after 25 years of contracts and signs with another agency. In episode 12, "Blowing smoke", the agency's survival seems threatened by the consequences of this change, which affects its image. An attempt to capture Philip Morris as a substitute client fails. Don Draper reacts and writes a letter to the *New*

*York Times* entitled "Why I'm Quitting Tobacco", in which he proclaims he is happy to stop publicizing a product that kills its users, and that henceforth he will not accept tobacco companies as clients. Furthermore, he publishes the letter as a full-page advert. Naturally, everybody keeps smoking in the office, while the agency has serious financial difficulties and must lay off staff. Yet in the next episode, it wins new accounts and begins talks with the American Cancer Society, which is possibly interested as a client, from the result of Don Draper's advert against tobacco companies.

In the seventh season, at the end of the series, the attractive Betty (Don Draper's ex-wife), an ex-model and heavy smoker, undergoes tests after suffering health problems and receives the diagnosis of lung cancer. They tell her the prognostic is grim: she has a few months left, though she may survive for a year if they undertake aggressive treatment, which she refuses. So she prepares for her death, notifying the people around her, while she organizes her children's future... and keeps on smoking. Furthermore, in the last episode, Roger Sterling also appears. He is the character who indulges in every excess, with heart attacks in his past since the first season. And he continues smoking, drinking and ordering lobster and more champagne, along with his young partner.

### **Tobacco use in the series and during the period**

As mentioned above, tobacco use in the series reflects reality throughout the 1960s. At the start of the series, set in 1960, smoking is common among adult men and women, except for old people. Smokers smoke everywhere: naturally at home, but also on the train on the commute, at the office, in bars and restaurants. Naturally, this means that smokers smoke heavily. Early data tell us that in 1965, many smokers smoked more than a packet a day. So the levels of tobacco consumption shown in the series are in line with contemporary reality.

Another element to note is that Don and Betty's adolescent daughter begins smoking in

secret, a detail that also seems to reflect with certain realism the process by which some people began smoking back then. Equally shocking is how her mother, wanting to improve their relationship, offers her a cigarette in one scene, an act in which she seeks to create complicity. For people of my generation, this was not an unusual event in the family circle, or with certain teachers. Nowadays it would clearly clash with our current sensibilities.

The series is set in an ad agency, so this occupies a relevant space. There were no limits on tobacco advertising in those days. The federal prohibition against tobacco advertising on electronic media (radio and TV) came about in the 1970s. The reality was that advertising expenses for the tobacco industry were then far lower than in the early twenty-first century. What the series shows is fairly true to life, tobacco being one of the important accounts for an ad agency. Until the early 1960s, ad campaigns did not hesitate to evoke the presumed benefits of smoking, using doctors and other health professionals in ads. Facing concern about the damage caused by tobacco, advertising was reoriented to transmit feelings of happiness, relaxation and daily life linked to their customers' identity and aspirations. Initially, no mention was made of luring adolescents towards smoking, or of market segmentation by gender or race (though in later episodes set in the late 1970s, a Philip Morris campaign did appear aimed specifically at the female market). In my understanding, it is probable that advertising's omnipresence, along with consumer reality in 1960, made any segmentation unnecessary. In the fourth season, in the episode described above, set in 1965, when Don Draper makes public that the agency will not accept any more tobacco advertising because it is a product that harms its customers, he is trying to turn the loss of his largest account to his advantage, to position himself favorably in the light of publication of the Surgeon General's 1964 report. In later episodes, the American Cancer Society organizes an event in his honor and it seems like a good opportunity to win new clients, but we are informed that the executives of the large companies attending the dinner consider Don Draper

rather unreliable due to the publication of his letter on tobacco.

### **Tobacco's consequences: reality and image**

Tobacco's negative consequences appear in the series. Betty's lung cancer, diagnosed at a surprising age due to her youth, is probably the most striking (though it appears only in the final two episodes of the last season, among a number of episodes). Roger Sterling's heart attacks are there from day one, and tobacco shares its causal role along with other risk factors. But this does not stop Roger smoking and he generally gives an impression of doing everything he can to endanger his health while continuing to have a good time. In the later seasons, Don's cough emerges (as well as his problems with alcohol), which does not stop him smoking. There are mentions of other risks linked to smoking. Perhaps one should highlight that the explosion that unleashes one of the main plot strands (Don's false identity after the war) is the result of him dropping his lighter in spilled fuel. There is even a scene in which Megan's mother falls asleep in bed with a lit cigarette, posing a risk that her daughter discreetly resolves. In general, the consequences of tobacco are present, but given little space. So, while it is true that the series does not flinch from such consequences, they are barely communicated to viewers. Regarding tobacco, Mad Men viewers basically receive many images of people smoking a lot, which sends out a message that smoking is normal behavior. This was the social perception in the 1960s, but fortunately nowadays this is not so, neither in the US nor in Spain. From this, a certain dissonance arises.

### **Tobacco and freedom of expression**

As other TV series and films, Mad Men poses certain dilemmas. As mentioned earlier, it is well-known that for years the big tobacco companies paid the film and television industry to guarantee its presence on-screen as a form of promotion. Tobacco is overwhelmingly present in Mad Men, and naturally the Lucky Strike brand fea-



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tures. Throughout the series, many other product brands appear, many of which remain on the market today (Jack Daniels, Gillette, Playtex, Maidenform, Cadillac, Volkswagen, etc.), so there has been a lot of speculation about product placement. According to Matthew Weiner, the series creator and executive producer, only three companies paid for placement: Jack Daniels, Heineken and Unilever (and also the Hilton, which apparently made a payment after appearing in an episode, as an expression of gratitude). The other brands and products that appear (up to a hundred) were placed to give the series more realism, with no commercial agreements. One should not forget that there are storylines, especially in certain periods and places, where the absence of tobacco could affect their authenticity. This is not just true for tobacco, but also for alcohol, for sex and, in reality, for many human behaviors and aspects of daily life that can be related to health or the beliefs of a segment of viewers.

We know that to reduce tobacco smoking in adolescents, different forms of their advertising and promotion must be prohibited. I personally documented the artful practices of the tobacco industry in our country, which were totally at odds with the self-regulating codes they claimed to adopt. I was also an active agent in the process leading to Spanish Law 28/2005 that regulated this issue in a positive manner. Nevertheless, I believe that the border between freedom of expression and censorship is sometimes tricky to

demarcate. My values are also in favor of freedom of expression, even when this challenges hegemonic opinions. I can confirm that every time I see a rerun of *Die Hard* showing Bruce Willis smoking with gusto, I curse the tobacco companies, which paid to ensure its inclusion. And yet, when I see the third film in the *The Godfather* trilogy, which also received funds from the tobacco industry, I cannot do so. Perhaps the difference is in the distinct pleasure that one and not the other give me, but maybe this is simply a reflection of the dilemmas that we perceive life throws at us at certain ages.

Like many other complex works, *Mad Men* can be read on several levels. For a superficial and occasional viewing of the series, I think it transmits a favorable message about smoking—that which is visible. On another level, of full viewing, the message is more complex. And on yet another, a fuller and perhaps even more sophisticated reading will capture the series' finer details, where a message against smoking will emerge, as will a characterization of the industry and the visibility of its consequences at the series' end. It seems that, on the whole, in the lives of people who watch *Mad Men*, the overall impact we hope it may have on our attitude to tobacco will probably be modest. And so, aware not only of tobacco's role in the show, but also of the enjoyment the series has given me, and bearing in mind the values in which I believe, I wholeheartedly recommend it to my friends.