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George Seldes on Tobacco: Fifty Years Ahead of His Time More than 50 articles from Seldes's newsletter *In fact* (1940-1950)

Introduction

Stanton Glantz, in his milestone book *The Cigarette Papers*, writes, "During the early 1950s scientists began to publish scientific studies suggesting that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer and other diseases." He goes on to write, "These results... were widely reported in newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Life*."

Professor Glantz-- whose health-and-tobacco-industry work has been consistently outstanding-- is inaccurate here on two accounts: 1) The scientific studies were published as far back as 1938 and continued to flourish throughout the 1940s, and 2) The first studies were most decidedly NOT widely reported (perhaps explaining Glantz's first error). Which brings us to George Seldes.

Seldes was a noted foreign correspondent in the 1920s turned press critic in the 1930s. His books such as *Freedom of the Press* (1935) and *Lords of the Press* (1938) told how America's press catered to Big Money at the expense of the general welfare.

In 1940, Seldes began publishing *In fact*, a 4-page newsletter devoted to press criticism and investigative reporting. He sub-titled the weekly "An Antidote to Falsehoods in the Daily Press."

In the January 13, 1941 issue of *In fact*, Seldes published his first cigarette story: a report about the 1938 study by Dr. Raymond Pearl of Johns Hopkins University that showed that heavy cigarette-smoking severely limited one's life span. By 1941, this 1938 study should not have been news. But that is exactly why Seldes wrote about it while several scientific journals had published Pearl's study at the time it came out, Seldes pointed out that almost no mainstream American daily carried the story despite the fact that it had been carried on the AP wire. The REASON for this widespread omission was obvious to Seldes: newspapers did not want to offend tobacco advertisers, one of their biggest sources of revenue.

Thus began nearly a decade of cigarette reporting by Seldes in the pages of *In fact*. What follows is the complete compilation of *In fact*'s 50-plus stories on tobacco (with a reference index at the head).

Seldes's stories covered five distinct areas: (1) the scientific studies themselves; (2) the failure of most of the press to carry news of these studies (although he also applauds the few papers who do, e.g. noting a remarkable front-page story published in the heart of tobacco country by the Durham (NC) *Morning Herald*, headed "CANCER OF LUNG INCREASE WITH SALE OF CIGARETTES"); (3) the relationship of the tobacco companies and the press (e.g. a report of a clause in the tobacco companies/newspapers contract saying the newspapers agree that "no news or and no adverse comments on the tobacco habit must ever be published."); (4) false advertising claims by the tobacco industry and the Federal Trade Commission reports that cited those ads; (5) Public policy concerning cigarettes (see December 14, 1942: "SENDING POISON TO OUR ARMED FORCES? THE SUPPRESSED STORY OF TOBACCO" and March 22, 1948 re: the U.S. exporting nearly a billion dollars of cigarettes to Europe as part of the Marshall plan.)

In fact reached a peak circulation of 176,000 subscribers (in 1947). It was by far the largest circulation left-liberal periodical of its time, outselling *The Nation* and *The New Republic* combined. But its circulation and reach fell far short of mainstream dailies and periodicals. Hence, its impact on the public debate on tobacco was limited. And because the mainstream press was missing in action in the 1940s on the cigarette story, there really was NO such widespread public debate, in spite of reports like the Pearl study, Mayo Clinic studies, and the pioneering studies by Tulane University's Dr. Alton Ochsner linking cigarette smoking and lung cancer (*In fact*, Nov. 27, 1945 et al).

In December, 1952 (after *In fact* stopped publishing), a 2-page article titled "Cancer by the Carton" appeared in *Reader's Digest*, which, with a circulation of 7 million, was the largest selling magazine in America (and which, not incidentally, carried no advertising). Finally, the public began to take notice. Periodicals like *Time* and *Newsweek* followed *Reader's Digest*'s lead and started reporting scientific studies. In 1953, cigarette smoking declined in America for the first time since the Great Depression. The episode clearly demonstrated the power of the press what COULD happen if the media reported fairly, and in the public interest, on the tobacco story.

Seldes's pioneering work on the tobacco story is a valuable archival treasure of tobacco news beginning 15 years before the mainstream media even touched the story, and the same 15 years before Glantz and other current-day tobacco historians credit the scientific community with documenting the devastating health effects of cigarette smoking. The following compendium of stories is meant to be used in any way necessary, in the fight against a public health menace that is with us still.

Rick Goldsmith, Producer/Director

[Tell the Truth and Run](#): George Seldes and the American Press

January 13, 1941, pp. 1-3, "Tobacco Shortens Life."

January 27, 1941, p.4, "Tobacco Shortens Life (Part 2)."

January 27, 1941, pp.3-4, "Big Money in Cigarettes."

September 14, 1942, p.3, "Fake Cigaret Ads."

November 9, 1942, p.2, "Tobacco 500 to 1."

December 14, 1942, pp. 1-4, "Sending Poison to Our Armed Forces? The Suppressed Story of Tobacco Tobacco Does Shorten Life Tobacco Smoking and Longevity Nothing Can Be Said in Favor of Smoking.", "The Clinical Aspect of Tobacco Smoking."

March 29, 1943, p.4, "Smoke In Your Eyes."

May 24, 1943, p. 4, "Manpower for Tobacco, Not Food."
 December 13, 1943, p.4, "For Camel Smokers."
 January 1, 1945, p.2, "Cigarettes and The Press."
 January 29, 1945, p.2, "Cigaretts and Long Life."
 February 12, 1945, p.3, "Columnist a Suicide."
 November 26, 1945, p.4, "News Usually Suppressed."
 December 2, 1946, p. 1, "Everybody Suppresses."
 January 20, 1947, pp.3-4, "Suppressed: Cigarette Advertising is the Bunk."
 July 28, 1947, pp. 1-4, "'Stop Cancer' Drive Suppresses Scientific News
 Linking Disease to Well-Advertised Cigarettes New Evidence on Tobacco."
 August 4, 1947, pp.2-3, "Army Dr. on Tobacco."
 September 8, 1947, p.3, "Smoking and Cancer."
 November 10, 1947, pp. 1-4, "Suppressed News: FTC Brands Million Dollar Advertising Press & Air Campaigns False Only I Paper in U.S. Reviews a Book."
 November 17, 1947, p.3, "Tobacco and Cancer."
 February 2, 1948, pp. 1-3, "Radio Exposes Tobacco, Sacred Cow of the Press."
 March 22, 1948, pp. 1-2, "U.S. To Force Europe to Take \$911, 100, 000 in Tobacco, Only 2 Billion in Food in ERP Plan."
 April 19, 1948, pp.2-3, "On the Credit Side."
 April 26, 1948, pp. 1-3, Congress Debates Tobacco 3 Months; Press Omits News."
 May 17, 1948, p.3, "State Dept. On Tobacco."
 May 31, 1948, p.2, "Tobacco Story (Conc.)"
 August 2, 1948, pp. 1-2, "AP Softens New Warning Linking Cancer to Cigaretts."
 January 3, 1949, p. 3, "1% Honor Roll."
 March 14, 1949, p. 1, "Headlines."
 October 24, 1949, p.2, "Cost of Cigarets."
 November 14, 1949, pp. 1-4, "Most Papers Suppress, Some Important New Medical Report on Cigarets and Cancer."
 August 7, 1950, "Tobacco & Cancer."
 October 2, 1950, "Cancer and Tobacco News Suppressed."

Tobacco Shortens Life

In fact
 Jan. 13, 1941
 (No. 18) Vol. 11, No. 5

Smoking shortens life. Between the ages of 30 and 60, 61% more heavy smokers die than non-smokers. A human being's span of life is impaired in direct proportion to the amount of tobacco he uses, but the impairment among even light smokers is "measurable and significant"

The facts for the foregoing statements come from Johns Hopkins University, department of biology. They constitute one of the most important and incidentally one of the most sensational stories in recent American history, but there is not a newspaper or magazine in America (outside scientific journals) which has published all the facts.

The mention by Secretary Ickes of the suppression of this story resulted in one of the major scandals of American journalism. Many prominent newspapers which had suppressed the story published false statements and refused to print corrections.

Here are the facts.

"Make Users' Flesh Creep"

FOR generations there have been arguments about tobacco. Moralists preached against cigarettes. Scientists differed. But in Feb 1938 Dr. Raymond Pearl, head biologist, Johns Hopkins, gave the New York Academy of Medicine the scientific result of a study of the life histories of some 7,000 Johns Hopkins cases which, for newspapers, should have constituted a story "to scare the life out of tobacco manufacturers and make the tobacco users' flesh creep," as Time commented (March 7 1938).

The Associated Press, United Press and special correspondents of New York papers heard Dr. Pearl tell the story. But a paragraph or two buried under less important matter, in one or two papers was all the great free press of America cared to make known to its readers, the consumers of 200,000,000,000 cigarettes a year.

Science News Letter (March 12 1938 p. 163) had this to say:

"Scientists can tell you whether or not groups of men are marked for early death.

"They can do this while these men are still In good health, years before the first appearance of any signs of the disease that will eventually kill them.

"The studies which make this possible were reported publicly for the first time by Dr. Raymond Pearl. . . .

"Tobacco, smokers do not live as long as nonsmokers. This conclusion was based on life tables for the number, out of 100,000 non-smoking men, 100,000 moderate smokers (men) and 100 ,000 heavy smokers (men) who were still alive at each age level after 30 years. At age 60, for example, 66,564 of the 100.000 non-smokers were still living, 61,911 of the moderate smokers were living, and 46.226 of the 100,000 heavy smokers were still living. . . .

"The studies show that smoking is associated with a definite impairment of longevity. This Impairment in proportional to the habitual

amount of tobacco usage by smoking, being great for heavy 100,000 heavy smokers (men) who were still alive at each age level after 30 years. At age 60, for example, 66,364 of the 100,000 non-smokers were still living, 61,911 of the moderate smokers were living, and 46,226 of the 100,000 heavy smokers were still living . . .

The studies show that smoking is associated with a definite impairment of longevity. This impairment is proportional to the habitual amount of tobacco usage by smoking, being great for heavy smokers and less for moderate smokers, but even in the latter, sufficient to be measurable and significant."

61% Excess Deaths

WRITING in La Follette's Progressive (no advertising taken) Francis A. Porter popularized Dr. Pearl's tables as follows:

Deaths from age 30 to 60 among:

per 100,000 per 100

1. Non-smokers 3,436 33
2. Moderate 38,089 38
3. Heavy 53,774 54

Percentage of excess deaths:

1. Moderate smokers 14 per cent
2. Heavy smokers 61 per cent

Alcohol versus Tobacco

WRITING on the subject of longevity in Scientific Monthly (May 1938) Dr. Pearl said of the use of alcohol:

"The problem of the effect of such usage upon longevity has excited violent and unreasoning prejudice on the part of large numbers of people. They contend that alcohol always and everywhere shortens the life of its users. There is much evidence, experimental, statistical and actuarial, that this is not a universally valid generalization." Dr. Pearl had previously studied the use of alcohol. He now concluded: "Moderate drinking does not significantly shorten life when compared with total abstention from alcohol, while heavy drinking does seriously diminish the length of life." This too would have been a big story for any newspaper which had the courage to publish anything about such matters.

Of tobacco, Dr. Pearl explains bow he picked his 7,000 cases, and concludes:

"These are not large numbers from an actuarial point of view, but are sufficient to be probably indicative of the trends that would be shown by more ample material. Naturally the men included in the observation were an unselected lot except as to their tobacco habits. That is to say they were taken at random and then sorted into categories relative to tobacco usage." The result of the study is summed up in Dr. Pearl's life and death table, which follows:

Death rate (1000 q.), at 5 year intervals, starting at age 30; % (a) non-users of tobacco; (b) moderate smokers who did not chew tobacco or take snuff; (c) heavy smokers who did not chew tobacco or take snuff.

Age Non-Users Moderate Smokers Heavy Smokers

30	08.18	07.86	16.89
35	08.78	09.63	21.27
40	10.01	11.89	23.91
45	12.04	14.80	25.69
50	15.16	18.61	27.49
55	19.82	23.67	30.09
60	26.73	30.49	34.29
65	36.88	39.83	41.20
70	51.69	52.84	52.72
75	73.02	71.28	72.33
80	103.22	97.95	100.44
85	142.78	136.50	139.48
90	197.49	190.23	193.68
95	273.2	265.10	268.90

"The net result is obvious. In this group of nearly 7,000 men, the smoking of tobacco was associated definitely with an impairment of life duration and the amount or degree of this impairment increased as the habitual amount of smoking increased. The contrast between the life tables relative to the implied effect upon longevity of moderate smoking on the one hand and the moderate use of alcoholic beverages on the other hand is very striking. The moderate smokers in this material are definitely shorter lived than the total abstainers from tobacco; the moderate drinkers are not significantly worse or better off in respect of longevity than the total abstainers from alcohol. Heavy indulgence in either tobacco or alcohol is associated with a very poor life table, but the life table for heavy smokers is definitely worse than that for heavy drinkers."

Other Scientific Evidence

IN 1927 the present editor of IN FACT, then representing the Chicago Tribune in Berlin, went to Prof. Dr. Johann Plesch, head of the medical school of the University of Berlin, for treatment of malaria. Dr. Plesch suggested cutting down on tobacco. He himself was not an anti-nicotine fanatic, but he was an authority; he had written a heavy tome on the subject. He named arsenic, prussic acid, other deadly poisons as present in tobacco, and laid down this law: inasmuch as all tobaccos contain poisons, the continued use of certain kinds of cigarets is dangerous. To escape danger to one's health, the tobacco user must continually change the kind of tobacco he uses, so that the

minute amounts of poisons they contain may not affect him. This does not mean switching from Camels to Old Golds, from Chesterfields to Luckies, as these contain exactly the same tobaccos and same poisons; it means switching from American tobacco to Turkish or to Greek or South African.

This story was sent to the Chicago Tribune and its newspaper syndicate, but if any paper in America used it, it escaped the eye of the clipping bureaus.

Doctors still argue whether or not smoking is a cause of heart disease. Dr. Frederick Arthur Willius of the Mayo Clinic says it is. With two assistants he studied several thousand cases and concluded that there was three times as much heart disease among 569 smokers aged 40 to 59 as among that many nonsmokers.

Dr. Edwin E. Barksdale warns people allergic to arsenic to stop smoking. Farmers spray tobacco plants with arsenate of lead to kill horn worms and apparently there is no way to remove the poison from the leaves.

Radio Also Suppresses

SOME years ago Lucky Strike's slogan was "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet," an appeal to women who wanted to reduce. Authorized by the New York medical association, Dr. Benjamin Jablons prepared a speech in which appeared the lines: "Excessive use of tobacco to kill the appetite is a double-edged sword, for nicotine poisoning and starvation both leave dire results in their train." This statement was censored by the radio stations and press.

How to Save Your Life

MEDICAL authorities differ as to what constitutes heavy, medium and light smoking. Readers should consult their doctors. It is now scientifically established that smoking involves taking into the system not only nicotine and arsenic, but ammonia, pyridine and pyridine derivatives, cyanides and sulpho-cyanides. One authority holds that "it is not the nicotine . . . but something much more subtle or poisonous that causes the unfortunate results. Whatever it is, and this is as yet unknown, it is contained in the protein which results from the burning of the cigarettes." (Commonweal April 9 1937.)

Most doctors believe that 40 cigarettes a day mean heavy smoking, but the most important disclosure by Dr. Pearl was that even light smoking shortens life.

TOBACCO SHORTENS LIFE (Part 2)

In fact
Jan. 27, 1941, p. 3-4

No publication in America, outside of scientific journals, told the whole story of how tobacco shortens human life, as detailed in the last issue of IN FACT. (In brief: Dr. Pearl, biologist at Johns Hopkins, published documented findings from 7,000 cases proving that between the ages of 30 and 60, 61% more heavy smokers die than non-smokers, and that the impairment to longevity among light smokers is "measurable and significant.")

In New York the Herald Tribune, Sun, News, Mirror, Post, and Journal-American suppressed this story, although the Associated Press, United Press and Hearst's International News sent it out, and although science reporters turned in stories. The Times and World-Telegram buried a few lines, omitting Pearl's frightening death tables.

Then, after having suppressed the story, the same newspapers attacked Sec'y of the Interior Ickes because he intimated that "the press" suppressed the story without qualifying his statement by adding that a mere 98 or 99% of the press suppressed it.

Here follows the evidence of the venality of the press as regards tobacco--an industry which pays the press \$50,000,000 a year.

Venal Metropolitan Press

The American press bears other grudges against Ickes, who is the hatchet man of the Administration when it comes to newspapers. Editors and publishers let loose a terrific campaign in which not one of Mr. Ickes' main arguments was answered.

The Herald Tribune's editorial, headed "Mr. Ickes Stumbles," said that "he was guilty of more misstatements and misrepresentations of fact than we have been led to expect from even a spokesman of the Administration." Mr. Ickes had also said that the HT refused an ad for Lords of the Press. Continued the HT editorial: "No advertisement of this book was ever refused by the Herald Tribune." This is a falsehood. Photostats of the proofsheets of the censored ad, set up by the HT, appeared in the labor press throughout the U.S.

The Federated Press, serving the labor press (which is not venal, and which gets precious little cigaret advertising) reported that the HT not only suppressed the tobacco story but claimed it never saw it. FP said: "Wilbur Forest, executive editor (said) his paper had been scooped on the tobacco story. Asked how an Associated Press member could be scooped on an AP story, he explained that the HT does not get the AP local service. This excuse was punctured by AP executives, who insisted that the story went not only to the HT but also to other NY papers that failed to print a line." Here is the private FP report of Jan 20 1938: "Talked with X of AP (he did not want his name used) and he put the finger on Forrest. After I got it straight that the HT did receive the story, I told X that they denied it. He stuck to his story, even called back to say that Howard Blakeslee, science editor, had personally covered the Pearl story."

Where Was Doctor Pearl?

Jan. 27, 1941 P.4

A large part of the controversy hinged on Dr. Pearl. In preparing the evidence, the present editor of IN FACT wrote Dr. Pearl, who replied:

"I may say that the newspaper coverage on my statement regarding the association between tobacco smoking and longevity was very widespread. Without taking the trouble to count them, for which I have not the time to spare, I should say that the point was amply and promptly reported in no less than 250 daily and weekly newspapers in this country."

Inasmuch as a search at the New York Public Library revealed that no San Francisco, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati newspaper, or, in fact, any big newspaper besides the Washington Post, had covered the story, Dr. Pearl was asked to name two or three newspapers, outside of country dailies and country weeklies (which are not subsidized by tobacco advertising) which ran his story. He refused to answer.

There are 300 big daily papers in America, some 1,700 fairly big dailies and 18,000 weeklies. Apparently Dr. Pearl had 249 country paper clippings plus the Washington Post. Science Services, asked to look through its files, found only the Washington Post story and the two buried references in New York.

But no sooner had Ickes mentioned Pearl than the AP rushed out a column story which the Times headlined: "Contradicts Ickes On Tobacco Story--Johns Hopkins Biologist Says Report . . . Was Widely Published.--'No Press Suppression.'"

Since then several senators, librarians and others have asked for details from Johns Hopkins biology department. It has steadfastly refused to reply.

Medical Journal Confirmation

When Wm L Laurence, science writer, told Managing Editor Edwin L James of the Times (Mar 12 1939) that there was an interesting story on tobacco in the Journal of the American Medical Association, James, who has been very sensitive to charges of venality on the great American Thunderer, asked, "Does it confirm or deny what Seldes said against the Times?" Laurence replied it pretty well confirmed the Johns Hopkins findings. James was disappointed.

The Journal reported that studies at Northwestern showed that excessive cigaret smoking provokes vomiting and diarrhea, while in any particular person "the functioning of one of the bodily systems may be affected more than another." Experiments were made by Dr J G Schedorf and Prof A C Ivy. In patients suffering from gastro-intestinal complaints, some apparently deleterious effects of tobacco may be secondary to disturbances of the heart and blood vessels. Persons with marked changes in heart rate or blood pressure in response to smoking should be advised to stop as "these changes determine the deleterious effect of smoking on the heart and blood vessels," the physicians concluded.

Mr. Laurence then added to his story a summary of Pearl's findings, 28 lines, giving the facts which the Times had partially suppressed one year earlier. (Source: Mr. Laurence.)

Big Money in Cigarets

January 27, 1941, pp.3-4

Six cigaret companies grossed \$200,000,000 in 1937 (SEC report). A combined profit after all charges of \$83,000,000 that year was reported by the Census of American Listed Corporations (April 5 1939).

The major companies spent as high as \$50,000,000 a year on advertising, notably:

Company	Best-Known Brand	1937	1939
Reynolds	Camels	\$15,422,744	\$9,296,470
Liggett & Myers	Chesterfield	14,822,120	8,926,148
Lorillard	Old Gold	9,714,286	1,722,663
American Tobacco	Lucky Strike	7,441,554	5,002,056

The newspapers, Editor & Publisher, Saturday Evening Post, all say that advertising has nothing to do with editorial policy. The facts are:

1. The cigaret companies spend up to \$50,000,000 a year.
2. News inimical to tobacco is not published.
3. 99% of the American press suppresses government fraud orders against advertisers.

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