

God is watching: history in the age of near-infinite digital archives

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Knowledge is power; Francis Bacon recognized this 400 years ago. But ignorance can also be power, a disturbing fact in our own Orwellian world of strategic misinformation. Nowhere is this more diabolic than in the world of corporate malfeasance that flourishes when bad actors are able to connive in the dark, unseen. Which is also why gaining access to internal documents can help us combat corporate connivance: a fungus grows best in the dark, and sunshine can be a good disinfectant.

One reason litigation against the cigarette industry has been so successful, for example, is that we now have access to tens of millions of pages of internal documents, many of which are quite damning. Cigarette makers talk internally about filters being “gimmicks” and “an illusion”; in a notorious 1953 memo, we find the research chief of the American Tobacco Company calling filters “purely a merchandising and sales promotion proposition.” We also find cigarette makers referring to young smokers as “rookies,” “learners,” “young triers,” “novices,” and “replacement smokers.” In many documents, we find cigarette makers talking about their campaign to repudiate the truth. Philip Morris’s R&D chief in 1970, for example, confesses to his superior: “Let’s face it. We are interested in evidence which we believe denies the allegation that cigarette smoking causes disease.” Elsewhere, cigarette manufacturers talk about their conspiracy as an engine of obfuscation. Brown and Williamson, makers of Kool and Viceroy cigarettes, in a notorious 1969 meeting captured their cabal in a nutshell: “Doubt is our product.”

The beauty of such documents is that they demonstrate meaning and intent. In 1953, for example, we find a top industry researcher telling Hill and Knowlton public relations gurus with regard to the smoking habit: “Fortunately for us, it’s a habit they can’t break.” That clearly reveals the industry’s appreciation of addiction,

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and also their regard for this inability (to quit) as “fortunate.” In other documents, the industry talks about youth marketing prospects as a “bonanza” or “strategic opportunity,” even as they brag about their ability to keep most members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives as “Grade A contacts.”

Having access to such documents in full-text searchable form is creating nothing short of a revolution in historiography. In the cigarette instance, 85 million pages of formerly secret industry documents are now full-text searchable at <https://www.industrydocumentslibrary.ucsf.edu/tobacco/>. More subtle interrogations can be conducted via Stephan Risi’s and my recently launched Tobacco Analytics site (<http://www.tobacco-analytics.org>), which improves methods for guided search and facilitates topic modeling and network analysis using metadata. Sites such as these—joined now by <https://www.ToxicDocs.org>—allow us to comb through millions of documents virtually instantaneously, elucidating patterns formerly obscure.

But combing is just the beginning. New search tools make possible new kinds of history: ‘affect history’ (history of motives and desires), histories of denialist networks, and histories of rhetorical strategies and taboos. Digital access means that we can now find all documents containing the words “happily” or “luckily” or “fortunately for us.” The researcher can then simply click on the document and read to discover what some party within considered fortuitous or pleasing. By similar means, we can learn what was regarded by whom as alarming or dangerous. Online access means that anyone with an Internet connection can search for all documents containing the phrase “our concern” or “please destroy.” Documents can be ordered by time or by author or document type, revealing how agency (and blame) is attributed through choice of particular nouns and verbs (like “smoker” vs. “customer,” or “blurt” vs. “explain”).

Given the power of such archives, we are going to have to think much more carefully about search strategies and archival ‘eavescasting’: nominally private rhetoric that has in fact been crafted to neutralize damage in the event of future discovery (it is a cross between ‘eavesdropping’ and ‘broadcasting’). Most analyses conducted thus far have been confined to narrative reconstruction: documents are pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle, to reveal some broader landscape. But entirely new kinds of research will be enabled.

Crucial to keep in mind is that these archives are not innocent. In the tobacco case, we know that many documents have been destroyed and that many of the most explosive documents we do have—like Ron Tamol’s notebooks seeking to determine “minimum nicotine required to keep smokers hooked”—came not from litigators but from whistleblowers. (Tamol’s notebooks came to light when a jilted lover kicked Mr. Tamol out of her house and then turned his Philip Morris notebooks over to the FBI.) Many of our ‘hottest’ documents come from such sources—rather than from responses to subpoenas.

We can expect great things from Toxicdocs. The new portal broadens access to crucial traces of corporate malevolence, and in this sense serves as a democratizing force. We will always have bad actors, but now, at least, there is a greater chance that someone will be watching. ToxicDocs is like a window opened onto a new and foreign world, a world known previously only to parties in litigation. Archives of



this sort give us some very powerful telescopes, and the task is now to learn where they can be most profitably pointed.

Reference

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