

A global media scan on plastic waste using Tobacco Watcher: Opportunities for tobacco control

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Dear Editor,

In March 2022, under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), 175 nations agreed to initiate the development of a UN Treaty to end plastics pollution¹. At COP10 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (February 2024), the Article 18 Decision recognized that cigarette filters are considered problematic plastics². It is well established that cigarette filters are the most commonly littered item in the world³.

We examined international media to assess how plastic waste from tobacco products was being discussed in media stories covering the plastics treaty.

We used Tobacco Watcher (TW), an AI-powered tool that compiles a repository of tobacco-related news stories published in 22 languages from 147 countries⁴. The search included articles in TW inclusive up until 3 January 2025. Within this sample, we used the search terms: 'plastics treaty' OR 'plastic treaty'. We identified the article's publication date and country of origin. We content-coded each article to identify the type of plastic waste discussed in the article, and the article style (news story or opinion piece). We also summarized how tobacco waste was discussed, and organized these story angles into thematic codes. Articles were coded by the authors, with discrepancies resolved by consensus. Articles published in a language other than English were translated using Google Translate.

The initial search identified 151 articles. After removing duplicates and non-relevant articles, our sample included 32 articles published between May 2022 and May 2024. Articles originated from both high-income countries (HICs, 66%) and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs, 34%). Articles were published in most of the WHO regions of the world, including the Americas (38%), Europe (28%), the Western Pacific (15%), Africa (13%), and Southeast Asia (6%). There were no articles from the Eastern Mediterranean region.

All articles mentioned cigarette filters, and about one-third (31%) also mentioned plastic waste from e-cigarettes (12%), or the plastic packaging waste associated with e-cigarettes/vape products (3%). Most of the articles were classified as news stories (60%). Other articles were opinion/editorial stories (9%) or news stories posted on NGO websites (31%).

Articles contextualized plastic waste from tobacco products as being relevant to environmental health, public health, and/or discussed how there was policy support for addressing tobacco waste. Several articles put forward arguments for banning cigarette filters.

This examination of global media demonstrates that plastic waste from tobacco products is being discussed in articles covering the plastics treaty in most regions of the world; however, the scale of this coverage is relatively small.

In August 2025, discussions in Geneva concluded without an agreed text, and

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the International Negotiating Committee set up by the UNEA adjourned. However, the issue of plastic pollution remains, and the tobacco control community has ongoing opportunities to ensure national and subnational policies are enacted to address the broad range of environmental and health issues created by plastic wastes from tobacco products.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have each completed and submitted an ICMJE form for disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests, financial or otherwise, related to the current work. R.D. Kennedy reports that since the initial planning of the work, this study was supported with funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies' Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use (bloomberg.org) and that in the past 36 months this study received grants or contracts from the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use – JHSPH (Bloomberg Philanthropies/Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use; PI: J.E. Cohen) and from the NIH – R01 DA055962-01 Spindle TR (Contact PI)/Moran MB (MPI); Role: co-investigator 04/01/2022-03/31/2027. Finally, R.D. Kennedy reports that in the past 36 months received an honorarium for giving a lecture at Roswell Park Cancer Institute, December 2024. E.K. Walker, H. Kaur and K. Welding report that since the initial planning of the work, this study was supported by the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use (Funding number 110801) (paid to the institution). Furthermore, K. Welding reports that in the past 36 months grants or contracts were paid to the institution from the NIH/NIDA, World Health Organization, FDA Center for Tobacco Products, Pan American Health Organization, University of Augusta and payment or honoraria for lectures, presentations, speakers bureaus, manuscript writing or educational events paid to the individual from Bath University. Finally, K. Welding reports that in the past 36 months he held an unpaid leadership or fiduciary role in the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (University of Washington)–Tobacco Metrics Advisory Group.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT

Ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

RDK and EKW: research concept and design, collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, writing and critical revision of the manuscript. HK: collection and/or assembly of data, data analysis and interpretation, critical revision of the manuscript. KW: research concept and design, critical revision of the article. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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