The Half-Truth, Nothing but the Half-Truth

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IMAGINE that you are caught in the position of advocating a deeply unpopular belief, while being surrounded by a radically fanatic crowd who are not afraid to let you know of their disapproval. What do you do?

Maybe you should ask Nick Naylor, Chief Spokesman for the Tobacco Industry's main lobby in Washington D.C. in the movie '*Thank You for Smoking*', played by Aaron Eckhart. Nick's job is to appear in television programmes and public speaking engagements, and defend the big tobacco companies believed to be responsible for 1200 deaths a day! The film begins with a scene in which Nick Naylor is a guest at a talk show alongside an anti-tobacco representative and Robin Williams the 'cancer boy' - a teenage smoker diagnosed with cancer. Nick's name is greeted with raucous booing by the crowd. But does he immediately lash out at the crowd after receiving a not-so-warm reception? Nope, he takes his time and waits for the right moment to arrive. He starts by asking the crowd whether the tobacco industry has anything to gain out of the death of Robin, a 'valued' customer. "If anything," Nick explains, "It is to our best hope and interests that we keep this young man alive." Basically, Nick tells the audience that they both want the same thing, albeit for different reasons. Having sufficiently pacified (in other words, confused) the crowd, it is only then that Nick makes the outrageous allegation that it is the anti-tobacco agents who want Robin Williams and others like him to die so that their budgets go up and they can continue to traffic in human misery. With the desired effect of a flabbergasted opponent and a crowd unsure of the ground it stood on, Nick then proclaims the launching of an awareness campaign by the tobacco industry to discourage teenagers from smoking - a superficial move which nonetheless impresses most of the crowd.



This is what Nick Naylor does. He is the master of half-truth spinning and deflection. He is a living example of how the notion of 'personal freedom', and other words that are wonderful to hear, can be twisted and manipulated to push forward harmful platforms. When a young girl tells Nick on Career Day at his son's elementary school "My mom says smoking kills," Nick asks her whether her mom is a doctor or a scientific researcher. He then announces to the entire class that her mom is definitely not a creditable source and that they should start thinking for themselves. Instead of arguing whether smoking does kill or not, Nick attacks the validity of the source of information. At no time does Nick tell people that it is good to smoke (nor does anyone smoke throughout the entire film), because he knows he cannot win that argument.

Nick demonstrates an amazing ability to rebound his opponent's argument to save himself from a potentially embarrassing situation. When long-term critic of smoking Senator Finisterre asks whether the findings of the Academy of Tobacco Studies (represented by Nick) is biased as it is funded by tobacco companies in a senate hearing, Nick instantly replies "No, just as I am sure that campaign contributions doesn't affect *your* priorities." Needless to say, the Senator did not pursue the point further.

Watching the film raises an interesting question: why is it that so many people go on smoking cigarettes even after knowing the consequences? You will be hard-pressed to find any smoker who does *not* know about the health risks. Maybe some people do not really believe that smoking is 'that bad' for you, and that the dangerous impacts are rather exaggerated. Or maybe some people do believe that smoking is harmful, but regard the possibility of their being affected as a distant one. Maybe that is why gruesome pictures of decaying lungs on cigarette packs have cut down smoking drastically in some countries, as they help to bring the horrible truth home.

But ultimately, I believe people go on smoking for the same reason that a diabetic patient cannot resist sweets, or an obese person cannot resist junk food. They know it's bad for them, but the tangible pleasure of this instant gains precedence over what lies in store in a vague and blurry future. The momentary pleasure eclipses all other considerations. As Shibram Chakraborty, one of my favorite writers, once wrote, "I have heard that vegetarians live a long life. But what do they live for?"