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Why your kids have taken up vaping

PUFF PIECE: HOW PHILIP MORRIS SET VAPING ALIGHT (AND BURNED DOWN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE)

John Safran
Penguin Australia, Nonfiction

368pp, \$27

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Puff Piece is an important book. I was surprised, because I did not think John Safran wrote important books. I thought he just did stunts, like the Chaser boys but without any mates. It is about the rise of vaping and, in particular, the depthless cynicism of tobacco companies Philip Morris International and Philip Morris USA in the marketing of their product, IQOS (an acronym which, like Philip Morris, does not appear to stand for anything).

It is also concerned with the deliberate destruction of meaning in language. An IQOS, for those who do not know (and I did not), is a device for smoking HeatSticks. A HeatStick is tobacco rolled in paper with a filter at one end: just a cigarette that suffers from irregular appella-tive capitalisation.

As far as any one can gauge, a HeatStick does almost everything that any other cigarette does, from causing cancer and addiction to ending up as litter on the streets. What a HeatStick does not do is emit much smoke, and the smoke that it does produce is shrouded in steam and hence referred to (by Philip Morris) as aerosol. A HeatStick heats rather than burns tobacco, so a smoker who takes hot tobacco into their lungs through a HeatStick is not smoking because, well ... because Philip Morris says so.

On United Nations' World No Tobacco Day, Philip Morris took out full-page advertisements

in newspapers to declare that the company had decided to build its future "without cigarettes". It planned to "unsmoke" the world.

As Safran points out, the word "unsmoke" (like the word "HeatStick") did not exist before it slithered out of the marketing department at Philip Morris. And, like HeatStick, it serves to obscure rather than clarify a concept. It is an unword™, or perhaps an un-word™.

The best that Philip Morris can claim for IQOS is that the company's studies "indicate that it has the potential to present less risk of harm" than the alternatives, which you could say about anything from pink bullets to strawberry-flavoured rabi-les if your studies were incomplete.

In fact, a HeatStick might be more deadly than other cigarettes. While Philip Morris likes to claim that 58 "harmful and potentially harmful" constituents in cigarette smoke show up at a lower rate in HeatStick aerosol, the US Food and Drug Administration found that the aerosol registered higher concentrations of 57 other harmful and potentially harmful constituents than cigarette smoke.

Philip Morris International CEO Jacek Olczak has said that he would like World No Tobacco Day to "evolve" into "World No Smoking Day". If that were to happen, of course, people could carry on smoking tobacco in HeatSticks while Philip Morris pretended that they were doing something else.

Philip Morris markets IQOS as if it were a device to help you quit smoking tobacco. This is not what it is, and this is not what it is for: it is a device to get you addicted to smoking tobacco using IQOS.

Safran demonstrates this beyond doubt at the conclusion of *Puff Piece*. I am sorry to give away the ending, but there are people who will read this review and not Safran's book and they should know, too.

Because Philip Morris is a publicly traded company, it has a legal obligation to strive to deliver a dividend to its shareholders. It cannot legally destroy its own markets with a late onset blossoming of benevolent intentions.

Safran buys shares in Philip Morris to gain access to the company and, as a concerned shareholder, he calls Philip Morris Internation-



al Investor Relations to share his worry that smokers who move on to IQOS will not remain long-term customers.

Investor Relations reassures Safran that there "tends to be a one-to-one" replacement between cigarettes and HeatSticks. That is, addicted smokers who smoke 20 cigarettes a day will probably become addicted smokers who smoke 20 HeatSticks a day. In addition, Safran is told, IQOS use "doesn't seem so far to be changing the rates of cessation, or quitting tobacco use altogether".

In other words, IQOS does not help you quit smoking. If it did, it would be no use to Philip Morris. "Unread" that.

Safran is a brave man (perhaps because he fears that he is a coward) and a fine journalist (perhaps because he worries that he is a fraud). He is also a serious moral philosopher (sorry, but I can't offer a facile pop-psychological explanation for that one).

He writes wonderfully about the ethical obligations and contradictions in the life of an investigative reporter. He explores profound questions about the nature of evil, guilt and complicity and manages to stay funny the whole time. Even his puns ("a Fleming can go on phlegming") improve – or, at least, drop off –

as the book goes on. Safran tries to anticipate how Philip Morris will react to *Puff Piece*. I would imagine the company will respond that hey, they love John Safran as much as anybody else.

He is such a funny guy. Obviously not meant to be taken seriously. A bit of a conspiracy theorist, maybe. And psssst, did you realise that he is using Philip Morris to make money out of his book?

More than that, Philip Morris will say that it welcomes *Puff Piece*, because it "opens the debate" – and thus allows a well-funded, well-disguised network of lobbyists (whose identities Safran sensationally reveals) for one of the world's most powerful corporates to demand a "right of reply" to a 49-year-old single guy who, apparently, lives alone in a flat in St Kilda.

This should not be allowed to happen. *Puff Piece* should not open the debate but close it. Philip Morris should not be permitted to market IQOS in Australia.

Doubters need only read this book to enlighten themselves.

Mark Dapin is an award-winning author and journalist. He gave up smoking in 1995, using nicotine patches.

