

Submission to the standing committee into the inquiry on billboards in the ACT

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To the standing committee into the inquiry into billboards in the ACT

As a social researcher, wellbeing practitioner, community artist and citizen of the ACT, I write to you about my serious concerns over the suggestion to relax the restrictions on the display of billboards in Canberra. I also would like to express my disapproval of the manner in which this inquiry has taken place.

Poor public engagement and community consultation

Firstly, to my knowledge, the Ngunnawal people have not been engaged with on this matter. This troubles me, given the long history of marginalisation and exclusion in decision making of the Traditional Custodians of this land; and especially as this decision would have further negative impact on their country. In addition, there seems to be little or no knowledge of this proposition and inquiry among the broader public, based on my engagement with local community networks.

The introduction of billboards would be a backward step for Canberra

I was very surprised and disappointed to hear that Andrew Barr has suggested reducing the restrictions on billboard advertisements in the ACT. Canberra is a unique city that is well known for its aesthetically beautiful streets and views, and as a healthy city in which to live. The ACT is also widely known for its progressive social and environmental regulations that help maintain these unique qualities, which are highly regarded by both residents and visitors. One area of strong restrictions has been that of street advertising.

I believe that reducing restrictions on billboards is a dangerous proposition for the future of Canberra. Billboards in other cities are increasingly referred to as "Sky Trash" or "Litter on a stick". In Canberra they would not only create visual pollution of Canberra's natural landscapes, but are likely to alter the social fabric, health and cohesiveness of the community in insidious ways. Many cities and states around the world recognize the dangers of billboard advertising and have made progressive action to remove existing billboards and advertising (such as in Sao Paulo, Grenoble, as well as USA states of Hawaii, Maine, Vermont and Alaska^{1 2}). The current proposals to allow more billboards in Canberra therefore

¹ Five Years After Banning Outdoor Ads, Brazil's Largest City Is More Vibrant Than Ever. New Dream. <https://www.newdream.org/resources/sao-paulo-ad-ban>

seem an archaic and retrograde move. If restrictions are relaxed now, it would be very difficult and expensive to move back in the other direction in the future.

Billboards are an invasion of public space and psychologically pervasive

The public is commonly bombarded by manipulative advertising, which is an affront to society in itself. But unlike some other advertising media, billboards are an “ambush media” that cannot be “turned off”. Our engagement with billboard advertising is not optional or escapable. Billboards are specifically designed to attract visual attention away from the natural streetscape, and to tap into insecurities of passers-by, and to promote a sense of fear and guilt. Powerful, lasting and “hidden symbols”, in the form of cleverly crafted images and messages are used to manipulate people in ways often unknown to viewers. Billboards, like other advertising are designed to make people feel inadequate and to have unmet needs that can be only be resolved by obtaining the goods or services advertised — usually items that in reality are not important or needed. Much of this public persuasion and consequent decision-making is unconscious to those affected. As Carrie Snow says, “*Advertising degrades the people it appeals to; it deprives them of their will to choose.*”

Apart from the pervasive ways billboard advertising manipulates people, it also presents a moral dilemma in terms of the ownership of public space that has far reaching repercussions on the health of our communities. Billboard advertising hands public space over to private interests and sends the message that space does not belong to the people, but to private companies. These private companies profit from this usage and are essentially given primacy over public interest. This is a damaging predicament for any public space, but especially in Canberra with its role as our national capital, which is to represent the public and lead public legislation and opinion on issues of our society.

Advertising has dangerous impacts on the health of our communities

Billboards present hazards to people

There is a growing body of evidence that advertising structures like billboards can impair aspects of driving performance, such as visual search and the detection of hazards³. For example, a study in Israel found that the removal of roadside billboards on a busy highway significantly reduced the number of car crashes, and resulted in more than two-thirds of a reduction in fatal or injury crashes⁴. Billboards in particular are designed to attract a maximum of motorists' attention away from the road and to create a memorable impression in a short period time, leaving viewers still thinking about the advertisement

² Can cities kick ads? (2015) Inside the global movement to ban urban billboards. The Guardian 12 August 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/aug/11/can-cities-kick-ads-ban-urban-billboards>

³ Hasan, A. (2015) Hazardous attraction: External-to-vehicle distraction caused by billboard advertisements in Lahore. *Global Media Journal* 8 (2):1-9

⁴ Gitelman V., Zaidel D., Doveh E. (2010) Influence of Billboards on Driving Behaviour and Road Safety, <http://www.scenic.org/resources/studies-and-reports/israel-billboard-safety-study>

after they have driven past. Therefore billboards create distractions not only from visual stimulation, but also from mental and emotional distraction⁵.

Billboards and advertising have negative impacts on our wellbeing

In addition to billboards and advertising presenting hazards, they more insidiously they make us unhappy, stressed, discontent, disconnected and anxious. As media giant Jonathan Trimble (CEO of Ad agency 18 Feet & Rising) admits of advertising: *"Of course advertising makes us unhappy. There's too much of it; we can't screen it out and its premise is to promote extrinsic value – happiness being intrinsic."*

Exposure to advertising, for example to alcohol, gambling and junk food has been found to strongly influence people—especially young people and children—and their attitudes and behaviours relating to messages of “good times” and social acceptance⁶⁷. Additionally, much advertising places an intense focus on unrealistic body representations and messages about physical attractiveness, which can lead to a sense of self overly focused on body image. This focus can contribute, for example, to low self-esteem and mental states such as anxiety and depression.⁸⁹

Advertising has a particularly pervasive impact on children and adolescents.^{10 11} Research has shown that children younger than 8 years are cognitively and psychologically defenceless against advertising. Children at this age do not understand the notion of ‘intent to sell’: they commonly accept advertising claims literally and at face value¹². Extensive evidence also shows that the sexualisation of females that is common in advertising has strong negative impacts on girls and women — such as cognitive and emotional consequences, mental and physical health, and sexual development.

Mental health is not an area we can afford to be complacent about in the ACT. A recent report found that one third of 15-19 year olds in the ACT met the criteria for a serious “mental illness”; which is 10% higher than the national average. The most common issues for young Canberrans who met these criteria were stress,

⁵ Chan, M., Singhal, A. (2013) The emotional side of cognitive distraction: Implications for road safety. *Accid. Anal. Prev.* 50, 147-154

⁶ Binde, P. (2014). *Gambling advertising: A critical research review*. London: Responsible Gambling Trust

⁷ Mongan, D. (2016) Adolescents' exposure to alcohol marketing. *Drugnet Ireland*, Issue 56, Winter p. 6

⁸ Polatis, K. (2014). Extreme body image in media impacts males too. *Deseret News*. May 16.

⁹ Mayer, J.M. & Peev, P. Mark Lett (2017) Do sexy mouthwash ads leave a bad aftertaste? The interaction of sexual self-schema and brand positioning fit on female-targeted sexual advertising efficacy, *Marketing letters* 28: 321

¹⁰ Kunkel D. (2001) Children and television advertising. In: Singer DG, Singer JL, eds. *Handbook of Children and the Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 375-393

¹¹ Strasburger VC, Wilson BJ. (2002) *Children, Adolescents, and the Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

¹² Macklin MC, Carlson L, eds. (1999) *Advertising to Children: Concepts and Controversies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

depression and body image¹³. More blatant advertising is likely to exacerbate this situation. Having personally worked with a diverse range of people with vulnerable backgrounds in the ACT community sector, my belief is that more resources and attention need to be directed towards encouraging greater cohesiveness and connectivity among people to support wellbeing—rather than destructive and disconnecting societal mechanisms such as billboard advertising.

Advertising promotes unhealthy consumerism and materialism— which has negative impacts on our environment and society

The promotion of consumerism through advertising also damages our social and environmental values that are important for community health, connectiveness and cohesion. Tim Kasser in his book “*The High Price of Materialism*”¹⁴ describes research showing strong links between exposure to advertising and increased materialism – which is correlated to higher rates of depression, interpersonal violence and antisocial behaviour. Kasser explains that advertising emphasizes extrinsic values such as wealth and status, which in turn suppresses intrinsic values, that include care for others and the environment and sense of community.

Canberrans have higher average disposable income per capita than people in other cities in Australia. This is likely to be one of the main factors for Canberra having (disappointingly) the biggest ecological footprint per capita in Australia. The more unnecessary goods that people are encouraged to buy through advertising, the greater our waste and carbon footprint.

Advertising can have negative economic impacts

Some evidence suggests that billboards can have negative economic impacts on surrounding real estate and tourism. For example, a study in the US found a statistically significant correlation between real estate value (as measured by sales price) and proximity to billboards. The study also found that cities with strict billboard controls experience greater economic prosperity, including lower home vacancy and poverty rates.¹⁵

Relaxing billboard restrictions would also impact on ACT small businesses. They would be unlikely to afford billboards and would be further disadvantaged compared to large, non-locally based businesses. Increased purchases by ACT residents from large high-profile-advertising companies would generally result in financial flow of money away from the ACT. This flow is likely to greatly exceed the flow of money into the ACT from billboard advertising revenue.

In many cities today, billboards are considered to be highly expensive to maintain and keep clean of tagging and graffiti. Currently the allocated cost of

¹³ Sibthorpe, C. (2017) One in three young Canberrans at risk of serious mental illness, report finds. The Canberra Times. April 9, 2017

¹⁴ Kasser, T (2003) The high price of materialism. <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/high-price-materialism>

¹⁵ Snyder, J, (2011) Beyond Aesthetics: How Billboards Affect Economic Prosperity. http://www.scenic.org/storage/PDFs/Beyond_Aesthetics.pdf

cleaning illegal graffiti and tagging in Canberra is reported to be over \$500,000 per annum¹⁶. The introduction of billboards is likely to draw attention from many illegal graffiti artists and taggers and to result in even larger clean up expenses.

Summary

Taking all these points into account, it is hard to imagine that more advertising will "enliven" our public spaces. Instead it is likely to have overwhelmingly damaging effects on our community and our value systems. To enliven public spaces and to support the wellbeing of our communities, the ACT clearly needs to instead be directing more resources into public and community art, murals, music, local performers, events, wellbeing activities, as well as initiatives such as skills and food sharing. If billboards are being considered at this time for the upcoming light rail corridor, urgent consideration is needed of more ethical and healthier options for our community, such as the display of local and community art and cultural works along these corridors.

In view of the overwhelming weight of evidence about the damaging effects of billboard advertising on society, the ACT government needs to clearly explain to the community the basis for its proposal to reverse current restrictions from this retrogressive type of advertising.

I would like to recommend that billboard advertising remain prohibited across Canberra, and in addition that:

- The wider community, including the Ngunnawal people, should be fully informed and consulted about the issue of billboards, and should also be given instructions on how to lodge submissions;
- The deadline for submissions should be extended for a further 6 weeks after full public notification;
- Existing legislation on large-scale advertising should be amended, strengthened and enforced, including bus stop and 'wrap' advertising and advertising on buildings, fences and trailers;
- Ways be investigated to encourage promotion of local art works, as well as participation and public ownership of the spaces that will surround the new light-rail line.

I am willing to appear at a public hearing on this matter.

Thank you.

Dr Lisa Petheram

¹⁶ New graffiti coordinator appointed. ACT Government media release. 05/02/16
http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/open_government/inform/act_government_media_releases/tamsd/2016/new-graffiti-coordinator-appointed