

Submission to ACT Legislative Assembly Inquiry into
Billboards



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Ian McAuley



Introduction

My submission follows the five headings in the terms of reference, but my main message is a visual one, on my website:

www.ianmcauley.com/cras/cras.html

I am quite happy for this submission to be made public.

Current rules and practices concerning billboard advertising.

For the most part current rules are adequate. The most prominent shortcomings are the approval given to Canberra Airport for its massive billboards and the decision to allow advertising on buses and bus shelters.

Then there is enforcement – almost entirely lacking. The most egregious unenforced violation relates to the Canberra Centre, but there are many others, as can be seen on my website – which covers only a small sample of violations.

If the ACT is to follow the example of other jurisdictions, there is no shortage of jurisdictions that have gone for stronger prohibitions. As cities become more mixed use, with people moving into areas once considered “commercial” or “industrial”, those areas should be cleaned up and made more habitable. Even cities such as Sydney, long ago trashed by the advertising industry, don’t allow billboards in residential streets.

Now every urban area is becoming residential. As the ACT is encouraging urban infill, it is contradicting its own policies by allowing those same places to become given over to outdoor advertising.

In sum, the tenuous case for relaxing billboard restrictions seems to be:

we’ve been lax in law enforcement, therefore we’ll make it legal;

others have been lax, therefore we will be too.

Imagine such a policy rationale applied to disposal of toxic waste, or domestic violence!

Community views

The ACT should formally survey community views. It is disgraceful that there was never community consultation on advertising at Canberra Airport or on buses.

Designated areas for billboards?

The terms of reference are grossly misleading:

“potential to *enliven* urban areas”

Trashing a precinct with billboards doesn’t *enliven* it. It deadens it. It converts a precinct from public space, where people can live as citizens, to commercial space, where people exist only as customers, as sources of revenue. People don’t want to live in an urban wasteland.

People want to get out of such places as quickly as possible, or avoid them altogether.

New technologies, designed to annoy and distract – such as changing LED signs, are making those assaults on our public spaces easier to mount. They are the commercial equivalent of the all-present telescreen in Orwell's *Nineteen eighty four* – big brother (the market) is watching you and wants you to behave as a loyal consumer.

Technologies such as Google Maps and Siri are making businesses easier to find, obviating any (doubtful) benefit that businesses may have gained from outdoor advertising.

Ways to regulate billboards in the ACT

The existing regulations have been well-drafted. They need reinforcing in three areas:

- technical evasion through placing advertising behind windows, making it “indoors”;
- use of parked vehicles to carry billboards;
- prohibition of LED billboards.

Advertising should be removed from buses and bus shelters.

The ACT should cease cooperating with Canberra Airport (e.g. road access, promotion, provision of public transport), until its billboards are removed.

Other matters

Many submissions will undoubtedly address aesthetic and safety matters, which are valid concerns. My overall concern is the way outdoor advertising is a means of commercial intrusion into public space, an intrusion that has become more prominent as large corporations such as OHI and APN have made outdoor advertising into a big industry with big stakes – and no discernable public benefit. It's the twenty-first version of enclosure.

Billboards aren't about the claimed benefits of advertising – informing consumers of choice in competitive markets. They hardly ever carry useful information for customers.

They're about tagging public space, claiming possession, in the same way as graffiti vandals do, and those who proliferate them should receive the same treatment as graffiti vandals.

