

This bus stop brought to you by prohibitionists

Author: KURT IVESON - Dr Kurt Iveson is a senior lecturer in urban geography at the University of Sydney
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The refusal to display atheist advertisements on public transport in Australia by the advertising company APN Outdoor is not the first time a billboard has ignited controversy, but it does reveal a troubling change for outdoor media.

Outdoor advertising is used by all sorts for many purposes, from governments and companies, to political groups, charities, musicians and people finding housemates and lost cats. It is more anarchic than other media. Some objects are designed to carry messages, such as street signs and billboards. But walls, power poles, building site hoardings and bus stops are frequently used in unintended and unsanctioned ways.

Even sanctioned forms can be hacked by different messages. In the 1970s and '80s the activist graffiti group **BUGAUP** made "adjustments" to cigarette billboards, asserting their "write of reply" to the tobacco companies. "Anyhow, have a Winfield" became "Anyhow, have a Wank, it's healthier!"

Its relatively open nature made it attractive to a variety of groups and messages. But increasingly, ownership and regulation of outdoor media space is concentrated in a small group of multinational companies.

In Sydney, billboards are dominated by APN Outdoor and Eye Corporation. Both are part of larger advertising companies; APN News & Media has holdings in newspapers and radio throughout the Asia-Pacific, and Eye Corporation is owned by Network Ten.

Bus stops and other street furniture include media space, and again, their ownership is concentrated in the hands of two companies. JCDecaux (with its headquarters in France) and Adshel (part of the global APN and Clear Channel groups) have contracts with councils and other agencies to install and maintain them in return for the right to sell profitable advertising space.

The growth of paid outdoor advertising space has been accompanied by clampdowns on unsanctioned forms of outdoor media. Bus stops maintained by outdoor advertising companies are frequently checked for unsanctioned community notices and graffiti, which are promptly removed, and bill posters are under increasing regulatory scrutiny. These free forms of outdoor media are removed because they detract from, or compete with, paid outdoor advertising; it is harder to monetise outdoor advertising space while free opportunities exist.

The censorship of the atheist advertising is significant in this context. Unlike the controversy over the "Longer Lasting Sex" billboards, censored after complaints to the independent Advertising Standards Bureau, the atheist ads were censored by APN itself.

During the recent US presidential election, Clear Channel Outdoor (co-owners of Adshel in Australia) refused to display an advertisement by the Union of Concerned Scientists disagreeing with Senator John McCain's policy on nuclear weapons. The ad was initially displayed at Minneapolis-St Paul airport, targeting delegates to the Republican National Convention. It was removed by Clear Channel under pressure from Northwest Airlines, the official airline for the convention.

Neither ad breached advertising standards. Rather, they did not fit the ideology of the media company. Outdoor media companies such as APN have always claimed the right to refuse

advertising they feel is inappropriate just as television networks, radio stations and newspapers have done.

But the increasing concentration of ownership endangers the diversity of outdoor media. We may not want a free-for-all, but with the companies increasingly controlling access, we ought to be vigilant in scrutinising their content policies, as we are with other media companies. Urban authorities might welcome the provision of "free" urban infrastructure, but this should not destroy a vibrant and alternative outdoor media landscape.