

The Sexualisation of Girls in Popular Culture: Neoliberalism, Choice and Invisible Oppression.

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Introduction

The sexualisation of girls in popular culture has captured both scholarly and public attention in Australia. Almost as soon as Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze's reports, *Corporate Paedophilia* (2006a) and *Stopping the Sexualisation of our Children* (2006b), presented evidence that corporations were sexualising children through their advertising practices, others heralded these claims as obsolete (Egan & Hawkes, 2008). The concerns articulated in the Rush and La Nauze reports, however, have not abated; instead, activists from a range of backgrounds have mobilised against corporate advertising, professionals have published advice books for parents on bringing up girls in this current context, and governments have considered a range of public policy responses (Albury and Lumby, 2010a; Smith and Attwood, 2011). We argue that at this time of heightened awareness and debate it is important to use a feminist lens to examine the way the sexualisation of girls has been framed and discussed. The research reported here specifically examined the way experts and members of the public identified and talked about the sexualisation of girls on a televised debate and an Internet discussion board that followed the broadcast.

Defining Sexualisation

In the last five years the terms 'sexualisation' and 'sexualisation of children' have been thoroughly problematised for being 'too general' and 'difficult to operationalise' (Gill, 2011 p. 65), 'vague and obscure' (Smith and Attwood, 2011 p. 329), and potentially mis/read as anti-sex (Jeffreys, 2011). But at the time of the televised debate, and arguably since, they served to denote a common-sense understanding that children had become a new market and product for a particular version of commodified sexuality.

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Why Focus on a Televised debate and Discussion Board

In 2007, ABC television broadcast the debate-style program *Difference of Opinion: Sex Sells – but at what cost to our kids?* The program focussed on the sexualisation of children in popular culture, and was the first televised debate on this topic whose website included a discussion board forum rather than a comment only page. This televised debate also occurred at a significant moment in the public discussion about the sexualisation of girls in popular culture, when the debate was "simmering and gathering heat" (Albury and Lumby, 2010a, p. 56) as the Rush and La Nauze (2006a & b) reports entered the public arena and just before the publication of the Australian Senate's *Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment* (2008), and the explosive public reaction to Bill Henson's 2008 art exhibition. The *Difference of Opinion* debate captures a moment when experts and the public were finding their voices in the sexualisation debate and provides insight into the underlying discourses that frame the current debate.

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The Format of the Show

In Australia opinions about the sexualisation of girls can be characterised by a division between those experts who identify the issue as a problem, and those who deny the issue really exists. The ABC's *Difference of Opinion* program had four

expert panellists split along these lines: Professor Catharine Lumby and Associate Professor Alan McKee denied the sexualisation of children in popular culture and, in contrast, social commentator Melinda Tankard Reist and Professor Louise Newman proposed that popular culture is sexually saturated and is adversely impacting children, particularly girls. A subsequent Internet discussion board, hosted by *Difference of Opinion*, attracted 582 posts from 189 contributors responding to the *Sex Sells* debate, providing an insight into the way members of the public understood these issues in 2007. Of course television shows and their accompanying internet forums draw a self-selecting audience and contributors and, therefore, are potentially unrepresentative of wider views. However online forums, Fayard and DeSanctis (2010) maintain, do provide opportunities for “In-depth conversation and a high diversity of participation...because contributors...need only share an interest in a topical area and have access to the Internet (p. 383).

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The contemporary position of women and girls

Feminists working across different academic disciplines have sought to understand the role sexuality plays in the lives of young women and girls in the ‘post-feminist’, neoliberal political landscape.

Young women, in particular, are seen to embody the values of a new meritocracy and to be the major beneficiaries of neoliberal modernisation (McRobbie, 2007). Angela McRobbie proposes, however, that this neoliberal meritocracy is underwritten by a new sexual contract where young women are invited, through consumer culture, to become ‘phallic’ girls, appropriating the sexuality previously reserved for young men. Rosalind Gill suggests that demonstrating sexual agency requires a ‘technology of sexiness’ to be normative; “... indeed a ‘technology of sexiness’ has replaced ‘innocence’ or ‘virtue’ as a commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace” (2007, p.5). The new sexual contract, identified by McRobbie, regulates women within neoliberal political economies through the extension of consumer culture into political and social fields, a situation she says could be read “as a feminist tragedy” and the “fall of the public woman” (2007, p.734).

Joanne Baker describes a celebratory notion of modern femininity, the ‘girl power thesis’, as hiding the difficult freedoms girls and young women face behind “the lauded concept of choice” (2008, p.3). Baker argues that a discourse of choice has led to a dramatic overstatement of women’s advancement and has disguised social inequality as poor choices that are pathologically based.

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Walkerdine (1997) identifies a discourse of the ‘innocent’ and the ‘precocious’ as the central discursive framework employed to explain girls’ relationship to sexuality, a framework, again, largely mediated through class. However, although girls’ positions within the sexual political landscape are experienced in classist and racially specific ways, a sexualised gaze it is not limited to just some girls. Debunking a key myth that the eroticisation of little girls is the work of a few perverted men who can be accounted for as pathologically sick, Walkerdine argues it is a much more ordinary phenomenon:

Blame is laid at the door of abuse and therefore of pathological and bad men who enter and sully the terrain of childhood innocence and of course

conversely, with the little Lolitas who lead men on. But, popular images of little girls as alluring and seductive, at once innocent and highly erotic, are contained in the most respectable and mundane of locations ... This is not about a few perverts, but about the complex construction of the highly contradictory gaze at little girls ... (1997, p.171).

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Many theorists post 2007 (Thompson, 2008; Albury and Lumby, 2010b) argue that it is time to move beyond the moral outrage of the 2007 'moment' and more critically examine the assumptions, values, anxieties, and assumed evidence and definitions that underlie earlier critiques. We argue that the danger of this recent theorising is not what it draws our attention to but what it does not draw our attention to – the identification of wider practices of power, noting in particular, feminist disavowal, or hesitancy at best, to situate 'complications' within a capitalist context where culture making industries derive profit through sexism (Bray, 2011; Dines, 2011). We agree with Rosalind Gill (2011, p.61) that it is time for feminists to "get angry again!".

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The Methodology

We have analysed the statements made by the panellists appearing on the *Difference of Opinion* televised debate and, also, the responses of members of the public recorded on an accompanying internet discussion board. It is important to note that the participants in the discussion board forums form a convenience or accidental sample and may not be representative of the wider population, but rather a small group of interested viewers and, therefore, display group bias (Herring, 2002).

Transcripts from the program and the discussion board were analysed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). We have used the Internet alias used by each contributor on the discussion board as these aliases are in the public domain. The length and frequency of speech by debate panellists were measured, as were the number and frequency of posts on the Internet discussion board. Debate panellists Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee, whose position was to deny the sexualisation of children in popular culture, dominated the debate, with Lumby speaking for twice as long as other panellists.

On the discussion board 582 posts were organised under 92 threads of discussion, of which 60 threads received at least one reply.

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Findings

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Sexuality: sticky notions of determinism

The position of individuals in a social world dominated by neoliberalism was also clearly evident in the way that contributors sought to express dissent against the sexualisation of girls in popular culture. Frequently posts started with a qualifier designed to ward off counter-criticisms of wowsersism, such as "I'm not a prude" (Not_A_Dodo) or "I'm ... not prudish" (Megan) or "I'm no prude by any stretch of the imagination" (ripley). It seems that libertarian positions towards sexuality function within a hegemony that compels people to frame any alternative views, including views not based on religion or biological objections, in terms of such hegemony. Speaking up about their concerns entailed a backlash risk for contributors of being dismissed as 'prudish'. Abigail Bray (2008) argues that public concerns about the

sexualisation of children are often dismissed, regulated and managed through the labelling of such concern as unsophisticated and intolerant moral panic. "Tolerance" Bray writes "has ... emerged as the dominant emotional signature of a cool, politically sophisticated, neoliberal middle-class subjectivity, while intolerance is associated with the vulgar, emotional instability of the reactionary lower-class other" (2008, p.325). Bray convincingly argues that tolerance, as the emergent ruling virtue under neoliberalism, has converged with the corporate sexualisation of girls, leaving people who feel unease about the situation of women and girls vulnerable to being labelled intolerant, or worse, as abusive and harmful.

However, despite a clear unease at the sexualisation of children in popular culture, any feminist understandings of sexual politics were largely absent from the views presented on the discussion board. Instead, discussion board posts were heavily weighted in favour of biological explanations, a re-emerging trend according to Walters (2010), and individualist notions of choosing (Baker 2005) that served to naturalise inequality as inevitable.

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Denying the sexualisation of girls

Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee also denied concerns about sexualisation of girls as being of any importance by claiming that popular culture has no relationship to the sexual abuse of children. Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee sought to place responsibility with perpetrators, but overlooked the social milieu in which sexual abuse happens. On the other side of the debate, panellists Melinda Tankard Reist and Louise Newman disputed the claim that images in popular culture had no impact on paedophilia, arguing that popular culture fetishizes the bodies of young children, sending mixed social messages (also see Walkerdine, 1997; see Bray, 2011 on child pornography).

Catharine Lumby and Alan McKee's suggestion that the representation of children in popular culture cannot encourage paedophilia and, instead, discourses which raise concerns about children's representations actually work to sexualise children, was not accepted by the majority of contributors to the discussion board.

Feminist activist Liz Kelly (1996) rejects the use of the term paedophile for the way it enables a comfortable distance to settle in between 'us' and 'them'. Kelly instead talks about sexual abuse being on a continuum of violence; a continuum that allows for different manifestations of the same pattern to be identified. We argue a continuum makes visible the commonalities and patterns between child sexual abuse and a sexualised gaze at children within society and renders redundant an analytical construct which posits physical sexual abuse as a real problem, against a denial of the sexualisation of children as existing or, when acknowledged, as unrelated to physical sexual abuse.

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Education and regulation: producing the neoliberal girl

Parents were widely held primarily responsible for protecting their children and this responsibility meant teaching their children media literacy skills. The education system was also held accountable for teaching such skills but not to the same degree as the parents. Educating consumers through media literacy does not disrupt the ideology of choice; girls are simply being empowered to 'choose better'. In effect, discussion focussing on media literacy individualised the problem to the extent that

individual mothers were either good or bad, and individual girls were either media literate or not. The gendered nature of parenting was largely hidden by the use of the neutral term 'parents'. With mothers doing the vast majority of parenting of children, it is women who are held responsible for the impact sexualisation is seen to have on their children. Women carry the double burden of being objects of sexualisation, as well as being held responsible for educating their children in order to protect them from sexualisation.

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Conclusion

This article provides a valuable insight into the discourses that framed the public debate about the sexualisation of girls in popular culture at a particular point in time. Although the ABC's debate-style program *Difference of Opinion: Sex Sells – but at what cost to our kids?* set up opposing sides between those who identified the problem and those who denied it, the discussion board evidenced no such split. Instead, contributors to the discussion board overwhelmingly identified the sexualisation of girls in popular culture as problematic. A position contributors frequently preface by referencing the dominant normative libertarian sexual mores; commonly saying 'I'm not a prude, but'.

Throughout our discussion of key themes: the sticky nature of sexual determinism, the denial of the problem and the educative regulation of girls, it is the hegemony of a neoliberal discourse of choice that is most evident. This was seen in the way that both debate panellists and discussion board contributors explained the way sexualisation of children happens and what the solutions might be. The gendered nature of the sexualisation of women and girls in society was readily identified at a societal level, but at an individual level such context was obscured with a discourse of choice overriding broader explanations of the experiences of girls and women. Solutions were also heavily individualised; media literacy was widely held as the key to assisting girls, effectively allowing girls to 'choose better' and reinforcing the discourse of choice. Even regulation, which can be understood as operating at a collective, structural level of society between governments and corporations, was discussed in terms of its impact on individuals. Although this was most clearly seen when regulation was being rejected and seen as 'giving away your freedoms', it was also evident when regulation was being promoted as assisting parents. Feminist explanations were largely absent from the discussion board, with the different levels of gendered power within sexual realms being frequently understood as biologically natural or socially inevitable. This led to confusion about who benefits from a social arrangement where women and girls are the subjects of a popular sexualised gaze.

In conclusion, through our analysis of the way experts and members of the public discussed the sexualisation of children, we argue this research demonstrates the usefulness of maintaining a sustained critique of hegemonic neoliberal ideas around individual choice. Doing so enables the socio-political context choices are made within to be kept in focus, and politicises who benefits and who pays the price for choices made.



Community perceptions research 2012 - overview

In 2012 the Advertising Standards Bureau commissioned research to test, once again, the five core provisions of the AANA Code of Ethics. This research conducted by Colmar Brunton Social Research assessed current community attitudes and also sought information about possible shifts in community standards and the Board's alignment with those standards.

Since 2007 the Bureau has conducted research into the extent to which Board decisions about advertisements align with how the community would apply the Codes and whether or not they meet with requirements of the AANA Code of Ethics.

In 2007 we first tested the five key provisions of the Code of Ethics: discrimination and vilification, language, sex, sexuality and nudity, violence and health and safety. In this first research community views aligned closely with Board decisions in the areas of language, violence and health and safety. Community views indicated a level of conservatism in relation to advertising containing sexualised images of women and sexual references – while indicating a greater degree of tolerance of advertisements using humour based on ethnic or racial stereotypes.

In 2009 we focused more closely on Board decisions around violence to assess community attitudes against more detailed aspects of violent images or images and depictions considered graphic in advertising. We found a very high correlation between Board decisions and community views, with the one area of discord being a higher level of concern in the community about graphic images in government advertising around health and safety.

In 2010, we devoted research resources to carefully considering the extent to which the Board's decisions aligned with community views around the acceptability of references to and images of sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising. The results of this research indicated that the community had greater concerns than the Board as a whole around sexualised images in public places. Community concerns centred on graphic or unsubtle images that children would see, but accepted that there is a place in advertising for references to sex, sexuality and nudity. Placement of the advertisement, subtlety of the sexual reference and relevance to product being key factors in whether the community considered such advertising acceptable.

Research results in brief

Our 2012 research indicates that community views and Board decisions appear to have shifted relative to each other in a couple of areas.

Our research also shows a continuing high level of support for the self-regulation system and the Code of Ethics administered by the ASB, as well as a continued high level of unprompted recognition of ASB (62%). In almost all cases tested, the research shows the Code sets tougher standards than the community itself would apply.

Overall in 2012 we find that:

- the community is in general more conservative than the Board regarding themes of strong language and sex, sexuality and nudity. With regards to language there was widespread concern over the exposure of children to strong language. This is an area where community views appear to have become more conservative since 2007.
- the community is less conservative than the Board regarding issues relating to Health and Safety, Violence and Discrimination. This appears to be the case particularly with regards to the use of racial or religious references in a humorous context, but less so with regards to depictions of women.
- the highest level of community unacceptability for any advertisement shown in the research was 54%.
- the mediums of advertisements potentially providing children access to advertisements were a substantial source of concern for those ads with the highest levels of unacceptability.

Research details about sections of the Code

Section 2.1 - discrimination and vilification

The areas of discrimination and vilification (**section 2.1 of the Code**) provided results consistent with those of 2007. In 2012 only a small section of the community (28%) agreed with the Board that the use of a racial stereotype in what was intended as a humorous situation was a breach of the Code. There appears to be slightly more community concern (43%) about the humorous use of a religious reference which the Board considered not discriminatory.

Section 2.2 – violence

With regards to violence (**section 2.2 of the Code**), Board and community views align fairly closely, although a low level of community concern (26%) about a radio advertisement which suggests that a woman hits her husband with a tool, can indicate that suggestions of violence have less impact and is not considered to be unacceptable.

Section 2.3 – sex, sexuality and nudity

Sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising (**section 2.3 of the Code**) is still an issue of concern – although concern seems to have crystallised in relation to images available to children. In both 2007 and 2010 research indicated a level of concern in the community about sexualised images appearing where children can see them or of images which represent young looking women in sexually suggestive poses or wearing little clothing. This appears to still be a concern with the 2012 advertisements showing a low level of community concern (37%) about a PG rated advertisement showing a couple kissing passionately but the majority of the community (59%) finding the side of bus image of a woman lying on a fur rug wearing no top (but with no breasts visible) a breach of the Code.

Section 2.5 - language

In 2007 community and Board views aligned closely around the use of language (**section 2.5 of the Code**). In 2007 both the Board and the community (58%) considered references to ‘fat arse’ were unacceptable, with both the Board and the community agreeing that the phrase ‘bloody idiot’ used by a child and a parent were acceptable. In 2012 however the Board’s decisions to dismiss complaints about the use of the terms ‘bullshit’, ‘wtf’ and an incompletely beeped out ‘fuck’ were all considered by the community (64%, 49% and 58% respectively) to be terms that breached the Code of Ethics. While the language tested in 2012 is objectively stronger than that tested in 2007, it does indicate that there is a level of community concern about language that the Board needs to consider.

Section 2.6 – health and safety

Health and safety (**section 2.6 of the Code**) is an area of the 2012 research which also showed some interesting results. In 2007 the image of a child ironing her hair was considered by both the Board and the community to breach the Code. Similarly, both Board and community agreed that an over-the-top action adventure style advertisement showing a variety of illegal and unsafe activities was so fanciful that it did not breach the Code. There was not such a congruence of views in 2012.

Social media – new issues tested

Two advertisements tested in 2012 concerned suggestions around the use of social media. One advertisement stated specifically that ‘stalking is a victimless crime’ and even though the statement was made in the context of facebook stalking, both the Board and the community (44%) considered that the complaints should be upheld. On the other hand, only 29% of the community agreed with the Board’s view that an advertisement depicting a man uploading images of a dog and tagging them as his friend’s girlfriend, was a depiction of behaviour contravening community standards on safety.

THE POLITICS OF PORNOGRAPHY AND PORNOGRAPHICATION IN AUSTRALIA

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The pornographication of culture in the West is becoming an increasingly acknowledged trend in both the mass media and the academy (Attwood 2002, 2006; Maddison, 2004; McNair, 2002). For more than a decade, cultural commentators, journalists and scholars have been noting changes in the accessibility and acceptability of pornography, as well as the ways in which pornography and pornographic imagery are fragmenting and blurring into traditionally non-pornographic forms of popular culture. These trends, often referred to as the mainstreaming of porn (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Dines, 1998; McNair, 1996; Sørensen, 2003), or “porn chic” (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Jeffreys, 2005; McNair, 1996, 2002), take a variety of forms. The mainstreaming of pornography has been documented in areas as diverse as popular music, higher education, clothing and fashion, high art, sport and technology (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2002; Jeffreys, 2005, p. 67-106; Levy, 2005; McNair, 1996, 2002; Maddison, 2004). At this time, however, pornographication is still relatively there are not yet any academic texts dealing specifically with pornographication in Australia. Furthermore, public discussion and media coverage of pornographication in Australia is largely obscured by debates regarding the sexualisation of children.

This paper will consider the current strengths and weaknesses of the growing international academic literature on pornographication before analysing the framing of related debates in Australia through an examination of recent media coverage on pornographication and the sexualisation of children. It will be argued that the public debates on ‘sexualisation’ in Australia must be seen in the context of pornographication and should be broadened to include a discussion of potential harms to the status of women.

BACKGROUND AND ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The trend towards pornographication is still a reasonably new area of academic study and as such the development of definitions of porn chic, pornographication and the mainstreaming or normalisation of pornography have been relatively *ad hoc*. The majority of the literature on pornographication has emerged in the years since 2000, and while a number of authors cite the work of Brian McNair (e.g. Attwood, 2006; Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Maddison, 2004; Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007; Sørensen, 2005) there is often little acknowledgement within works on pornographication that there is any pre-existing literature to be built upon. Thus, multiple, varied understandings have been created simultaneously by different scholars focusing on different areas. For the purposes of this paper, it is therefore useful to provide a brief overview of the available definitions and the possible advantages and disadvantages of each for understanding the political implications of pornographication, particularly for women.

Pornographication

The term pornographication first appears in Brian McNair's 1996 work *Mediated Sex: Pornography and post-modern culture*. McNair's work is often cited as the first in depth academic study of the use of pornographic imagery and references in mainstream popular culture (e.g. Attwood, 2002; Sørensen, 2003). His initial understanding of pornographication was quite narrow. In *Mediated Sex* (1996) McNair defines the "pornographication of the mainstream" as: "the incorporation of pornographic imagery and iconography into a variety of popular culture forms, such as advertising, popular fiction and Hollywood cinema" (p. 137). Indeed, much of the book is devoted to specific examples of the use of pornographic representations in popular art, television and movies. The focus remains firmly on how images and representations of sex similar to those found in pornography are appearing more frequently in media forms that are firmly entrenched in popular culture. Ane Stø in her paper on the "pornografication of youth culture", from the Third Baltic Sea Women's Conference in 2003, uses a similar definition, explaining that "[t]he term pornografication [sic] is used to describe the phenomenon where other cultural media borrow expressions from the pornographic industry" (Stø, 2003, n.pag.). This still only offers a relatively limited understanding of the processes of pornographication, concentrating again on media, but it at least extends pornographication beyond the realm of popular culture to potentially include forms of more respectable or "high culture" overlooked by McNair's original definition.

Porn / Porno Chic

In 2002, McNair released another work on pornographication, titled *Striptease Culture: Sex media and the democratization of desire*. In this book, McNair regularly employs the term "porno-chic" which he defines as:

[T]he representation of porn in non-pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn; the post-modern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artefact for a variety of purposes...advertising, art, comedy and education (McNair, 2002, p. 61).

This excerpt has found further influence since it was employed by Linda Duits and Liesbet Van Zoonen in their notable article "Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining girls' bodies in the multicultural society" (2006) which appeared in the *European Journal of Women's Studies*. This definition of porno-chic extends McNair's previous, limited definition of pornographication. The focus is no longer only on popular culture specifically, the terminology shifts to "art and culture". The porno-chic definition also includes forms of culture outside media, evident in the inclusion of comedy and education. The definition, however, still remains significantly flawed.

Firstly, McNair continues the highly dubious separation of pornography from porn chic, that is, as soon as pornography is used for advertising, art or comedy it is automatically no longer pornography. To this end, McNair clearly states that "porno-chic is not porn" (p. 61). The main problem here is that suggesting that porno-chic is not porn may misrepresent the processes of pornographication which operate not only to filter pornographic imagery into the mainstream but also to further legitimise pornography itself (Dines, 2010). Secondly, McNair (1996, 2002) represents pornographication and porno chic as relatively unproblematic, even positive developments which have led to a society more open and accepting of sexual representation. His definitions fail to include a way to understand porno chic as a political issue that may potentially affect the status of women.

A number of feminist scholars have adopted broader understandings of porn / porno chic which, can be seen as much more useful in understanding the political implications of pornographication for

women, and in particular its effects on women. Sheila Jeffreys for example, uses the term porno chic in *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West* (2005) to explain the way in which pornography now constructs standards of beauty and fashion. She explains: "The values of pornography, and its practices, extended outwards from magazines and movies to become the dominating values of fashion and beauty advertising, and the advertising of many other products and services" (Jeffreys, 2005, p. 67). The explanation here is not just that the *representation* of pornography has been adopted in mainstream media forms but also the values and practices of pornography. The values and practices of pornography present serious harms to women, as Jeffreys (2005) goes on to argue: "It makes looking as if you are in the sex industry chic and thereby helps sex industrialists by normalizing their business of the international traffic in women" (p. 75). The normalisation of pornographic representations in the mainstream can be seen as directly linked to the normalisation of pornography and the sex industry more broadly. Recognising these links creates a greater understanding of the material context in which pornographication is actually occurring.

The importance of understanding normalisation as an aspect of porn / porno chic is taken up in definitions provided by Bockelmann (quoted in Harvey & Robinson, 2007) and Sørensen (2003, 2005). Nicola Bockelmann uses the term "porn-chic" to describe "the infiltration of representations of pornography into mass culture, thereby becoming an accepted, even idealized cultural element of the mainstream" (Bockelmann quoted in Harvey & Robinson, 2007, p. 68). Although the focus here returns to *representations* of pornography Bockelmann highlights not only the acceptance or normalisation of such representations but also the trend towards elevating pornographic imagery to the status of an ideal. Annette Sørensen follows a similar line in her work on "the pornophication of public space" in Denmark (2003, 2005). She uses the terms "porn chic" and "the mainstreaming of pornography" interchangeably to designate "the cultural processes by which pornography slips into our everyday lives as a commonly accepted and often idealised cultural element" (2003, n.pag., 2005, n.pag.). Sørensen refers directly to pornography rather than simply representations of pornography but, like Bockelmann, highlights the way in which pornography is not just accepted but can be seen as idealised.

The Normalisation of Porn / The Mainstreaming of Porn

The issue of normalisation is also taken up directly by Rick Poynor in *Designing Pornotopia: Travels in visual culture* (2006). Much like the influential writings of Brian McNair, Poynor adopts an almost celebratory approach to understanding the impact of pornographication; he notes that "[i]n the last decade, the rapid normalization of porn and the complete turnaround in social attitudes to it is one of the most momentous developments in everyday life" (Poynor, 2006, p. 132). The labelling of these changes as "momentous" puts a rather more positive spin on pornographication than the outlook offered in the feminist analyses of Sørensen (2005) and Jeffreys (2005). It is important to note, however, that despite such differing interpretations regarding the *outcome* of pornographication it can be seen that there is widespread agreement that pornography has gained increasing public acceptance and that this is both a significant and recent change.

The concept of mainstreaming pornography is also commonly employed by scholars. Much like the term "normalisation", "mainstreaming" is often used in reference to pornography's position as a normal or mainstream fixture of culture. For example, in "Pushing the Envelope: The role of the mass media in the mainstreaming of pornography", Katherine Kinnick (2007) argues that the trend towards mainstreaming is clear as "the line between pop culture and porn culture is blurring, as the sexual themes, language and production techniques that have made porn a multibillion dollar industry are increasingly, and intentionally, cropping up in mainstream music, movies, TV and video games" (Kinnick, 2007, p. 7). Kinnick contextualises pornography as a multibillion dollar

industry, offering some understanding that the financial weight of the pornography industry may play a role in the blurring of pornographic and popular culture. Juris Dilevko and Lisa Gottlieb (2002) also highlight the way in which the burgeoning pornography industry itself has helped to make pornography inseparable from popular culture. In reviewing statistics on the profits of the pornography industry and the widespread consumption of internet pornography Dilevko and Gottlieb state that: "These figures suggest more than just a proliferation of pornographic materials. They introduce a larger issue – the difficulty in distinguishing between pornography and mainstream entertainment. Pornography can no longer be treated as the domain of fringe elements of society" (2002, p. 114). This acceptance of actual pornography in the mainstream must be seen as integral to the processes of pornographication more generally, such as the use of pornographic imagery in traditionally non-pornographic forms of culture.

Pornification / Pornophication

The terms "pornification" and "pornophication" are used predominantly in literature addressing the Scandinavian context. Pornification, for example, is used throughout the collection *Pornification: Sex and sexuality in media culture*, edited by three Scandinavian researchers Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen and Laura Saarenmaa (2007). In *Pornification* the focus is still limited to media but the editors do offer a more in depth definition of process. They state that pornification operates on three levels. The first concerns changes in media technology and the expansion of the pornography industry (p. 2) and the second involves changes in media regulation which have seen pornographic imagery infiltrate public space (p. 6). Finally, the third level, referred to as "porno chic" is defined as the "sexualization of culture" (p. 8). The third level is problematic as it conflates pornographication and sexualisation, a common (mis)understanding of pornographication which will be discussed further on.

Sørensen (2005) applies a similar, but ultimately more useful, three pronged approach with the term "pornophication" in her work, also based in the Scandinavian context. Sørensen states that the processes of pornophication can be broken up into "three interacting tendencies": volume, clean-up and fragments. Volume relates to the increasing amount of pornography available and also the ease with which pornography has become more available. There is significant cross-over here with the first level of pornification as outlined by Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa (2007). Like these authors, Sørensen highlights the importance of changes in media technology which have created new and more anonymous ways for consumers to access pornography. The second tendency noted by Sørensen is the clean-up, which relates to the increasing legitimacy of pornography, in particular the way in which pornography and the pornography industry have become widely covered topics within the mainstream media. This aspect of pornophication is most like the definitions offered by scholars using the terms mainstreaming or normalisation of pornography.

The third aspect of Sørensen's definition is fragmentation, denoting the way in which "there is an increasing use of figures, stylistic features and verbal expressions" (2005, n.pag.) which draw on pornography. It is this final area which tends to be the most visible. Often referred to as porno chic in other literature, this is the aspect which is most commonly the primary focus in both academic and popular work dealing with pornographication. This is certainly true in the Australian context, where media coverage about the mainstreaming of pornography fits mostly into the category of fragmentation with a focus on the ways in which pornographic imagery is being adopted in popular culture.

(MIS)UNDERSTANDING PORNOGRAPHICATION

Much of the available work to date which deals with the mainstreaming of pornography is focused on providing specific examples of pornographication. The edited collections *Pop-Porn* (Hall & Bishop (eds.), 2007) and *Pornification* (Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa (eds.), 2007) are typical examples, offering chapters which centre on a different aspects of mainstreaming pornography such as music videos (Railton & Watson, 2007) or fashion (Bishop, 2007). As this is a relatively new area of study, the literature often ends at offering definitions of pornographication and documenting relevant examples, as a result pornographication as a process remains under-theorised (Attwood, 2006). To date, few authors have offered a cohesive understanding of pornographication and its possible meanings (cf. McNair, 1996, 2002). There are, however, implicit assumptions about pornographication which emerge in the body of literature currently available. One the more prominent, and it is argued here, flawed, assumptions is that pornographication is synonymous with sexualisation. It will be suggested that pornographication should not simply understood as “sexualisation” and that, in the Australian context at least, this conceptual blurring prevents a discussion about the potential harms of pornographication, especially in regard to adult women.

Positioning pornographication as sexualisation is one of the more common ways of understanding pornographication . In much of the available literature, the explosion of pornographic imagery and references to pornography in popular culture are presented as simply the explosion of sexualised imagery and references to sex and sexuality in popular culture. Pornography becomes synonymous with sex. For example, in Feona Attwood’s review of a variety of literature dealing specifically with the mainstreaming of pornography, she frames the issue as “the study of sexualization” (Attwood, 2006, p. 81). Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa (2007), in the introduction to *Pornification* state that the infiltration of pornography into popular culture “connects to the general sexualization of culture, or the mainstreaming of sexuality” (p. 8) and moreover, that pornography plays an important role in breaking taboos because it “makes sex public” (p. 14).

McNair also argues for the positive influence of pornography in breaking taboos (McNair, 1996; 2002) and his work offers particularly useful examples of the common conflation of pornographication and sexualisation. In *Mediated Sex* McNair explains his initial rationale for having investigated pornographication as follows:

That contemporary capitalist societies have become ‘obsessed’ with sex – in the form of art and popular culture, as well as in pornography, in fashion and in advertising – was the main starting point for this book, and the common thread weaving through the different aspects of sexual culture which have been examined (McNair, 1996, p. 170).

The majority of the book, however, is dedicated to the ways in which *pornographic* imagery is infiltrating art, popular culture, fashion and advertising. Instead of this trend being positioned as part of an increasing “obsession” with pornography, it becomes an obsession with sex. This reverts to the idea, often employed in non-feminist works that pornography and prostitution are “just sex” (Jeffreys, 1997). This conflation obscures the fact that prostitution and pornography is not just sex, but a particular model of sex, which is premised upon women’s subordination (Jeffreys, 1997, 2005).

The conflation of sex and pornography is also evident in McNair’s *Striptease Culture* (2002), where he uses the terms “cultural sexualization” (p.7, 111, 205), “sexualization of contemporary capitalist culture” (p. 100) and “sexualization of mainstream culture” (p. 81). These are used interchangeably with McNair’s concept of pornographication¹ and the associated terminology of “the

pornographication of the mainstream” and “porno-chic”. Moreover, McNair equates pornographication with an increasing public interest in sex and sexual representation:

Porno-chic was (and continues to be) a further stage in the commodification of sex and the extension of sexual consumerism to a broader mass of the population than have previously had access to it...[P]orno-chic would not have happened in the absence of popular demand for access to and participation in sexual discourse (McNair, 2002, p. 87).

There are two key problems with the understanding of porno-chic presented in this excerpt. First, there is the issue of commodification. McNair's contention that porno-chic is a stage in the commodification of sex is oft repeated in literature on pornographication (Hamilton, 2003; Kinnick, 2007; Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007). While commodification is sometimes represented as the problematic application of the marketplace to the “private” realm of sexuality (e.g. Hamilton, 2003; Kinnick, 2007), McNair argues that the greater commodification of sex has resulted positively in greater choice for consumers. He often refers to this process as the “democratization of desire” (McNair, 2002, p. 5, 11, 13, 42, 88, 179, 182). What is generally missing in these accounts is an understanding of the relationship between commodification and objectification. Commodification, far from being harmless, can be seen as a severe form of objectification which creates dissociation and dehumanisation (Barry, 1995). When this relationship is taken into account, it remains difficult to maintain that commodification is simply the democratisation of desire.

Second, and related to the misrepresentation of commodification, is the issue of exactly what model of sex is being demanded by consumers in this process of pornographication and who is doing the demanding. As Vicki Mayer (2005) argues in regard to academic commentary on the “sexualisation of television”:

Critical media scholars must begin to unravel the myth that the presence of sex on television reveals a popular demand for more sex in popular culture. The word ‘popular’ here is key, for it ignores the political economy that fosters and supports the production of television, as well as the word ‘sex’ which ignores the particular constructions of gender, race and age in the specific contexts of their production, distribution and exhibition (Mayer, 2005, p. 302).

McNair's representation of the mainstreaming of pornography as the “democratisation of desire” is also problematic from a feminist perspective as it suggests pornographication is an organic process, a type of bottom-up social movement where (gender-less) people have demanded greater access to pornography and pornographic imagery and this has been delivered as requested. As Attwood (2006) has pointed out, at the very least this “implies a rather too direct relation between radicalism, demand, capitalism and media output” (p. 82). It also represents pornography as somehow the legitimate representation of a community's combined sexual desires, once again, as though pornography is not a specific model of sex but rather represents all there is know about sex. Again, sex and sexual desire is equated with pornography and pornography is equated with sex rather than a particular kind of sex which has implications for the status of women.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Conceptual confusion regarding pornographication and sexualisation is also evident in public discourse about pornography and pornographication in Australia, albeit in a slightly different manner to the international academic literature. The conflation of pornographication with sexualisation raises the same issue of pornography being allowed to stand in for all possible models

of sex. In the Australian context the most common problem is that clear examples of the fragmentation (Sørensen, 2005) of pornography into popular culture are mislabelled as instances of “sexualisation”. Indeed, there is a deep confusion about whether or not there is any difference between the terms. As a result of this conceptual blurring, the debate has centred on the inappropriate exposure of children to sexual imagery rather than the infiltration of pornographic imagery into public life.

Media Coverage

The overall focus of media coverage in Australia is on the issue of what commentators label “sexualisation” rather than pornographication. In the last two years, for example, *The Age*, *The Sunday Age* and *The Australian* have run a combined total of 89 articles which mention the term “sexualisation”. In contrast, there are only six articles during this time period which mention the term “pornographication” or the alternate term “pornification.” The line between the way in which the concepts are used, however, is quite blurred. In those articles mentioning pornographication / pornification the term was often used interchangeably with sexualisation. Emma Tom, writing in *The Australian*, for example, runs together “[s]exualisation, pornification, slutification...” (Tom, 2010, p. 8) at the beginning of her article arguing the concern over child sexualisation is overblown. Mary-Anne Toy in *The Age*, writing about sociologist Anastasia Powell’s work on the pressure Gen-Y women and girls feel to have sex, describes the situation as “the sexualisation or pornification of society - the preponderance of sexualised imagery in media, music and other popular culture” (Toy, 2010, p. 1).

The confusion of pornographication and sexualisation is not only apparent in media commentary on the issue, but is also evident in quotes from experts. Child psychologist Michael Carr-Greg, for instance, is quoted in *The Australian* as giving the following examples of “the pornification of our culture”: “billboards telling us to have longer lasting sex, Disney cartoons with highly sexualised images and those dreadful Bratz dolls” (Elks, 2009, p. 7). It is not clear, however, that a billboard which mentions longer lasting sex is actually an instance of the fragmenting of pornography and pornographic imagery into popular culture. Indeed, his further examples of “pornification” are similarly questionable. Then, after initially describing the situation as one of pornification, Carr-Greg goes on to state the problem as one of “early sexualisation” (Elks, 2009, p. 7) thus further highlighting the lack of conceptual distinction between the two in Australian public discussion on the issue.

The other clear trend to emerge is that the articles dealing with sexualisation almost exclusively focus on the sexualisation of children. When the term “sexualisation” is used it is generally in reference to the sexualisation of children rather than posing sexualisation as a wider problem. Headlines such as “Freedom of speech has limits *when it’s about exploiting children*” (Nicholson, 2009) and “Sex driven culture *bad for kids*” (Elks, 2009) make the narrowing of the issue to children quite clear. Despite the persistent use of the term “sexualisation”, however, most articles, unlike Carr-Greg’s analysis, are not focused on the growing exposure of children to information about sex, or even images of sex, but rather the exposure of children to specifically *pornographic* imagery. For example, in a piece by former family court chief justice Alistair Nicholson, reprinted in *The Age*, Nicholson mentions that:

Porn stars have become celebrities and young girls in particular are encouraged to think that there is something wrong with them if they do not engage in sexual activity. Likewise, boys are given the impression that girls exist for their satisfaction (Nicholson, 2009, p. 9).

The article was an excerpt from Nicholson's address to a conference on the sexualisation of children held in Melbourne in August, 2009. In the remainder of the speech he gives several other examples of children's exposure to pornography while labelling them a problem of "sexualisation". The problem he describes, however, goes much further than children viewing sexual imagery. Nicholson states that porn stars are celebrities and that the sexual dynamic set up by this instance of, I would argue *pornographication*, leads boys to objectify girls to the point that they believe girls exist for their own sexual satisfaction. The real problem then is not simply that children are exposed to sexual imagery *per se* but that they are exposed to a particular model of sexuality (i.e. an objectified sexuality with a notable power-imbalance) which is deemed objectionable.

In a similar vein, Suzy Freeman-Greene, a senior writer for *The Age*, expressed her concern earlier this year about sexual imagery in popular music videos and the use of explicit and often degrading sexual language in pop song lyrics (Freeman-Greene, 2010). In her article, "Pornification of pop is bottom of the charts for children" she does mention the influence of pornography as a central issue stating that: "My problem is the way so many videos depict women as being endlessly sexually available, in the style of porn" (p. 15). The article title even includes the term "pornification" yet the issue becomes quickly reframed as one of *child sexualisation*. The title says it all, the infiltration of pornography into popular culture is a problem but a problem for children only, posing no wider issues for adults.

A significant problem with framing pornographication as a children's rights issue is that it prevents the discussion from going any further. It seems there is widespread agreement amongst commentators about the potential harms of sexualisation or pornographication on children. Only two of the 89 articles surveyed were overtly critical of this idea, in one instance attacking the conflation of exposure to sexual imagery with sexual abuse (Tom, 2010) and in the other, recasting the issue as one of commodification of childhood rather than sexualisation (Croyden, 2009). Either way, the media coverage remains firmly focused on children. No-one is asking why adult women should have to put up with frequent exposure to images of women being "endlessly sexually available" or the idea that they exist purely for men's sexual pleasure. Subsequently, there is no real discussion yet in Australia of the harms that pornographication may have for individual women or the status of women more generally.

Advertising

The effects for women of the focus on children and the related conceptual blurring between pornographication and sexualisation in Australia have been particularly obvious in regard to advertising standards. A striking example of this was the response of the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) to numerous complaints received in 2003 about a Lee Jeans billboard which featured (according to the ASB's description): "a young woman lying down and looking towards the camera with open mouth and holding a lollipop to her tongue. She is wearing navy shorts and a blue striped top which is unbuttoned" (ASB, 2003, n.pag). The complaints, according to the ASB's own case report, were primarily about the billboard being pornographic and degrading or demeaning women. The quoted complaints include:

No advertiser has the right to place such sexually explicit pictures in public. The ad is semi pornographic. The shorts supposedly being advertised can hardly be seen. The lollipop being sucked is obviously analogous to oral sex. The t-shirt is open and the breast half exposed. The legs are spread and the immediate focus of the eyes are on the thigh and thus the woman's crotch (read vagina).

It teaches young girls that women are simply there for their bodies and it teaches young boys the same thing- woman (sic) are to be used and seen as sexual objects.

The clothes can hardly be seen. We all must play a role in reducing violence including sexual violence in our society. This type of ad demeans women. Portraying women as just sex objects also contributes to women being abused, objectified and treated violently (ASB, 2003, n.pag).

The Board, however, dismissed the complaints and argued that the ad was neither pornographic nor demeaning to women:

The Board first considered whether the advertisement breached section 2.3 of the Code by treating sex, sexuality or nudity without sensitivity to the relevant audience... the Board considered that the woman in the advertisement was clearly not an underage or young girl – but was a mature young woman. While there were sexual overtones in the pose struck by the model and her consumption of the lollipop, the Board considered that the representation was not inappropriate for a billboard. Specifically the Board noted that the woman is over 18, is fully clothed in attire that is fashionable amongst young women for summer, and that there is no nudity. The Board considered that a degree of sexuality in advertising is not unacceptable and that the woman's pose was not inappropriately sexual. The Board also noted that consumption of this style of lollipop is now common amongst people over 18.

The Board also considered whether the advertisement was demeaning to women. The Board considered that the image of an attractive young woman, in a confident but sexy pose was not demeaning to women. (ASB, 2003, n.pag).

There are a two particularly noteworthy aspects to the Board's final decision. Firstly, the Board does not engage with the complaints about the pornographication of public space and the possible effects on women, instead reframing the issue as the potential sexualisation of a minor. Even though none of the quoted complaints make mention of the model's age, this becomes a central point in the Board's decision to dismiss them; it is noted that she is over 18 and in the Board's opinion "a mature young woman". From the Board's perspective, as this is not an issue of the inappropriate sexualisation of children there is, in fact, no issue. Secondly, although one of the complaints mentions that the ad is "semi pornographic" the Board does not address this and instead defends the woman's pose as "not inappropriately sexual", again slipping between the pornographic and the sexual as though the two are synonymous.

What is especially interesting about the Board's defence of this particular billboard and their refusal to engage with the claim that it is pornographic, is the fact that the advertising campaign in this case was actually shot by a pornographer turned fashion photographer, Terry Richardson. Richardson has gained particular notoriety in the fashion world for his explicit photography, often using the visual cues of pornography and prostitution (Jeffreys, 2005). The Lee Jeans billboard, for example, shares much in common with his other work, such as the "Farming" and "Las Vegas" campaigns for clothing brand Sisley. The brief in the Las Vegas campaign was to show women dressed as strippers and call girls, a variation on porn-chic, directly mimicking the styles of street prostitution. The similarities between Richardson's shots for the Sisley and Lee campaigns can be clearly seen in Appendix I, right down to the use of the lollipop as a prop.

The billboard is therefore a clear example of what Sørensen (2005) describes as the fragmentation of pornographic imagery into popular culture, an issue which, in Scandinavia, is seen as potentially

threatening women's equality (Sørensen, 2003, 2005; Stø, 2003). In this Australian example, however, the complaints about public exposure to pornographic imagery and the degradation of women are swept aside by stating that the woman in question is over 18 and, therefore, as the billboard does not display an image which sexualises a child, it is deemed unproblematic. The framing of the issue as one of sexualisation and the rights of children rather than one of pornographication and the rights of women has very clear and concrete consequences in this instance, as citizens are denied the grounds to complain about advertising that promotes a pornographic model of sexuality, based on the objectification of women.

Conclusions / Broadening the Discussion

The classification of pornographication as a children's rights rather than a women's rights issue has been mirrored in the recent coverage of debates over the stocking of so called "soft-core" pornography at newsagents, petrol stations, milk bars and supermarkets. The display of these "soft core" magazines has been cast as problematic because children are exposed to "sexual imagery". Tony Abbott, for example, recently weighed in to the debate, stating that there needs to be a new media classification system to "protect children against harmful sexual messages" (Wright, 2010, p. 6). Thirty "child experts" also recently signed an open letter to the attorneys-general asking for a ban on the sale of "soft core" pornography and "lads mags" in venues such as newsagents and milk bars. These "soft-core" magazines, however, such as *Zoo* and *Ralph* frequently have covers with imagery which would likely be illegal to display in an Australian workplace under sexual harassment lawⁱⁱⁱ. Yet the fact that adult women are also exposed to these magazines is not considered part of the issue.

This stems, at least in part, from the improper use of the term sexualisation rather than the more accurate pornographication. As long as the issue is framed as the inappropriate or early sexualisation of children it appears there will be almost unanimous agreement among media commentators and public figures that child sexualisation is a problem and thus the discussion largely ends there. What is generally being described by media commentators, however, is pornographication and beneath the surface arguments the main concern appears to be that children are being exposed to an objectifying model of sexuality which is rightly considered to be problematic. As long as the focus remains on the children's exposure aspect of this, rather than the model of sexuality aspect, it will remain difficult to move the discussion forward, or adequately capture how the Australian context fits the international trend towards pornographication. It is therefore important that sexualisation be recognised, where appropriate, as pornographication and that discussions about pornography and pornographication in Australia be broadened to consider the potential affects on adult as well as child sexuality. This is not to say that unwanted or accidental exposure of children to sexual imagery is not an issue worthy of discussion but that the framing of the debate, as it stands now, prevents an examination of the potential harms to the status women, an issue which is certainly equally worthy of discussion.

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APPENDIX I

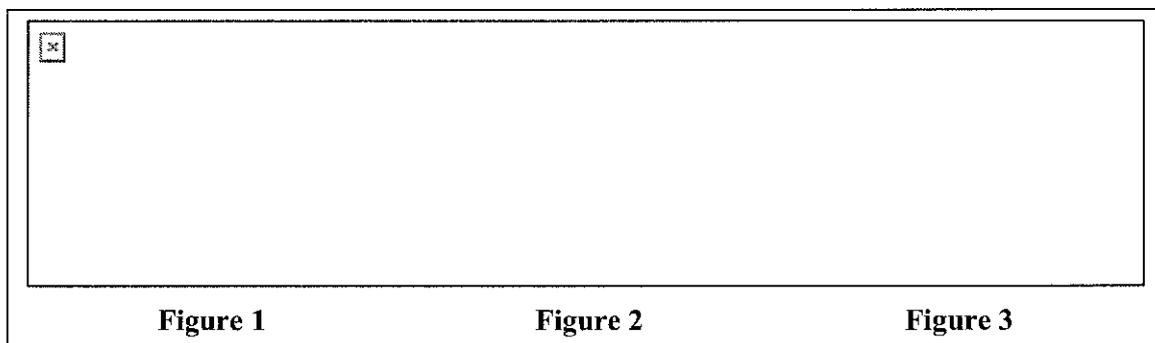


Figure 1: Image from the Sisley “Las Vegas” campaign
Figure 2: Image from the Lee Jeans campaign (billboard)
Figure 3: Image from the Sisley “Farming” campaign

All images available from: <http://jozworld.club.fr>

ⁱ McNair does provide a footnote on page 216 which separates out pornographication from sexualisation to a degree. He states: “Notwithstanding the argument by writers such as D. Kirk Davidson that ‘pornography is encroaching on mainstream television’ through the treatment in sitcoms, dramas and daytime talk shows of previously taboo topics like rape, prostitution and child abuse... This encroachment constitutes part of the sexualization of popular culture, to be sure, but not ‘pornographication’ as I described it in the previous chapter.” This is the only clear statement McNair offers to suggest that there is any discernable difference between instances of pornographication and sexualisation. He does not offer any explanation as to why the normalisation of prostitution in public discourse cannot be considered under the banner of pornographication and the commercialisation of sex more broadly.

ⁱⁱ Search conducted on the 22/06/2010 using the *Factiva* newspaper database. Date range: 22/06/2010 – 22/06/2008. Source: Publication: *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia) Publication: *Sunday Age* (Melbourne) Publication: *The Australian*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The display of pornographic or sexually explicit material in the workplace is prohibited under the Sexual Discrimination Act (1984) – see section on sexual harassment. In a recent case, RailCorp in New South Wales suspended and eventually dismissed managers who sexually harassed an employee. The harassment included intentionally exposing a woman to explicit imagery in magazines such as *Ralph* and *Zoo* (Hildebrand, 2009; Hildebrand & Aston, 2006).

Bravehearts Position Statement



Billboard Advertising and Sexualised Images

The sexualised images of young girls and women are used extensively in mass media, advertising and entertainment mediums. The hyper-sexualisation and objectification of young girls as well as the hyper-masculinisation of boys perpetuate and reinforce each other as unrealistic ideals and can have devastating consequences on their psycho-sexual development.

Advertising is a medium that is used extensively to promote a product or service. The purpose of billboard advertising is that it is designed to attract attention and placed in a location where it is highly visible. As with other forms of advertising an individual is unable to 'turn it off' or 'turn it down' and is therefore considered intrusive and unavoidable.

The Australian Senate¹ & ² and the House of Representatives³ have conducted enquiries into sexualisation of children in media billboard advertising and provided the industry with recommendations with no effective result. The WA Government found in their Submission on the Regulation of Billboard and Outdoor Advertising that inappropriate sexualisation of children in advertising is on the increase and of a real concern. Most Government recommendations support all billboard or public advertising should carry a 'G' rating.

The regulation of advertising on billboards is covered by the advertising industry through self regulation and with very little impact. Complainants advise that it can take months for a complaint lodged with the Advertising Standards Board to be resolved and the advertiser is not legally or legislatively bound to accommodate any decision made by them.

All of the mentioned Government Enquiries have provided recommendations for the billboard advertising industry to introduce more control and regulation but to date it appears the Advertising Standards Board is nothing more than a 'toothless tiger' advocating on behalf of advertisers. Their Code for Advertising & Marketing Communications to Children is flimsy to say the least and provides very little direction.

¹ Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts, Inquiry into Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media (2008)

² Commonwealth Parliament, Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, Review of the National Classification Scheme: Achieving the right balance (June 2011)

³ Commonwealth Parliament, House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs, Report of an Inquiry into Regulation of Billboard and Outdoor Advertising (July 2011)

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Bravehearts Position Statement



A report commission by the UK Government on the sexualisation of young people⁴ found the psychological impact on young people can distort their perception as to what is socially acceptable. The report provided an evidential link between those who have been exposed to 'sexual callousness' and hyper-sexualisation and objectification of both genders to violence. Numerous reports expound the effect of sexually objectifying either gender and how it can contribute to body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, depressive affect, and even physical health problems in high-school-aged girls and in young women⁵ Prolonged exposure to this imagery could increase the likelihood of an individual consuming material that depicts images that can be classified as harmful or sexual behaviours which could be classified as extreme.

At the far end of the scale of female and male hyper-sexualisation, masculinisation and objectification there is child sexual abuse. The depiction of a young child dressed provocatively as an adolescent is an open invitation for exploitation by predators.

Bravehearts recognises the right of advertisers to promote their products providing they are aware that the viewing audience is diverse in age.

Sexual curiosity is a normal feature of childhood and we need to provide children with the tools to deal with sexual content safely and successfully. This would mean that all forms of advertising mediums need to be presented to children in a realistic format, with non-exploitative representations of gender and sexuality which will ensure that they develop a healthy emotional and sexual reference that is pivotal to gender equality.

Bravehearts believes that it is now time for the community to demand that there is a legislative requirement and regulation for the classification of billboard advertising that will meet community and social expectations. Pressure needs to be placed on Australian Federal Government and State Governments to impose reforms and we look to you, the community for support. You have the power to make the Government enforce these regulations and ask that you ring your local, State and Federal representatives to voice your concern.

⁴ <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/sexualisation%20of%20young%20people%20review.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

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Bravehearts Position Statement



Bold Billboard: the advertisement seen from Beaudesert Road at the Salisbury overpass. Source: Quest Newspapers



The "Want longer lasting sex?" billboards were ordered to be taken down by the Advertising Standards Bureau in 2008

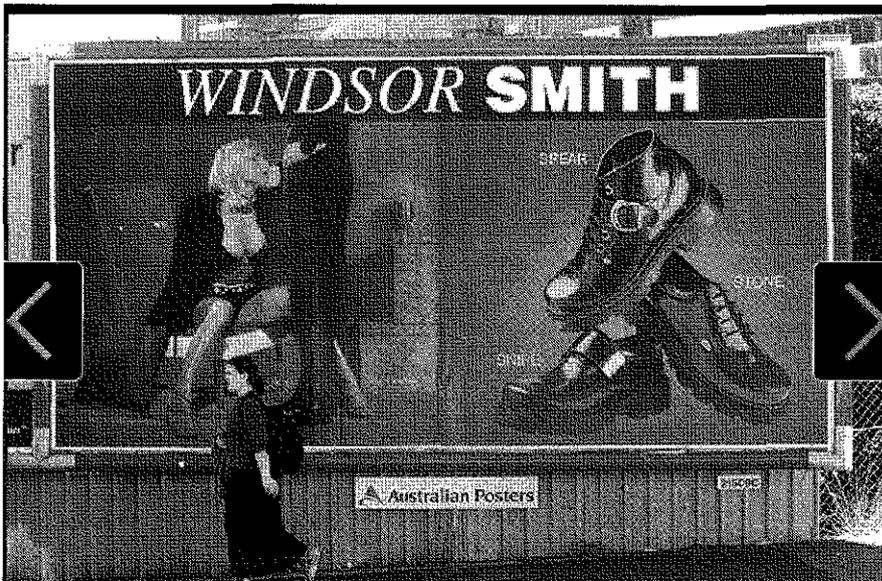
<http://www.news.com.au/business/the-most-complained-about-ads-of-the-past-decade/story-e6frfm1i-1226240748206#ixzz2Mtt7nnT3>

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Bravehearts Position Statement



<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/photogallery/queensland/controversial-billboards-you-be-the-judge-20111011-1lj39.html?selectedImage=0>



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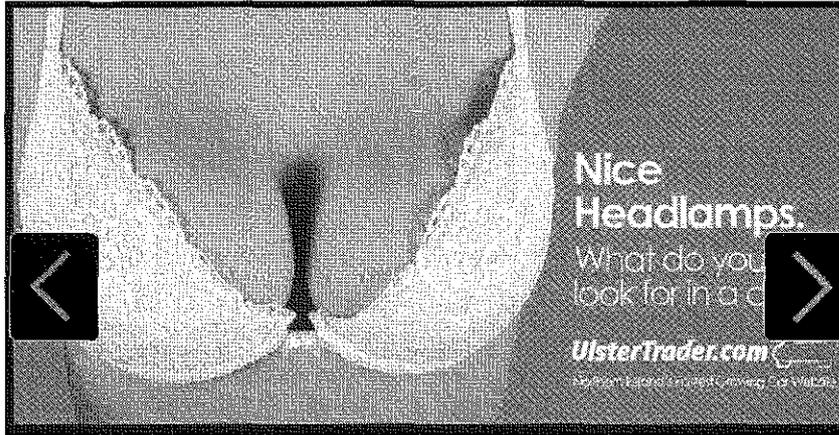
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The Sexpo billboard on Brisbane Street at Dinmore
Read more: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/sexpo-billboard-too-sexy-for-ipswich-20100203-nbiw.html#ixzz2Mu1FMIYv>

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PREMATURE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN – Position Statement

Women's Forum Australia (Women's Forum) is deeply concerned that the pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age has increased dramatically over recent years. There is a saturation of sexualised representations of adults, teenagers and even children in advertising and popular culture.

*"Premature sexualisation can be defined as the imposition of adult sexual themes and images at a developmentally inappropriate stage and in a way which may compromise child psychological development."*ⁱ

Children are interested in their own bodies, experience sexual feelings and have emergent models of sexuality.ⁱⁱ Childhood sexuality is part of a natural developmental process. However, there are clear distinctions between adult and child sexuality. Excessive sexual arousal of children or involvement of children in adult-type sexual imagery and adult sexual behaviour can result in developmental problems, confusion and disturbing anxieties.ⁱⁱⁱ Condoning this activity or ignoring it is an unacceptable abrogation of responsibility.

Children and teenagers do not have the same capacity as adults to make informed decisions and exercise appropriate judgment.

Between the ages of six to ten, children learn to think in images and are unable to properly interpret certain situations.^{iv} Researchers have found children who thought TV was realistic were more influenced by it, and were swayed towards being more permissive towards sex.^v

Several new studies have also shown the adolescent brain, once thought to be mature by age 14, is in fact undergoing a rebuild at this age and judgement is subsequently affected. It is at this time that teenagers are most vulnerable to

media messaging. To navigate this period successfully, teenagers need outside help, and caring involvement from responsible adults well into the late teens.^{vi}

"Premature sexualisation impedes cognitive development, limits children's freedom and is linked with serious mental health problems."^{vii}

Research has shown sexualised images imposed on children and teenagers through the media and popular culture are associated with a range of health issues. These include: eating disorders; increased anxiety, low self-esteem and body-image concerns; and damage to the development of healthy sexual self-image.^{viii}

According to the American Psychological Association, premature sexualisation of girls also places them in increased danger of becoming victims of prostitution, violence, and unwanted forms of pornography.^{ix} This is deeply concerning. Women's Forum considers this situation warrants immediate action at government and community levels.

"Restrictions on advertising to children and scrutiny of the sorts of representations children are exposed to are not censorship, but a process of child protection that takes account of the developmental vulnerabilities of children and their unique developmental pathways."^x

The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts conducted an inquiry in early 2008 into the *Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media Environment*.^{xi} Amongst parents, community groups, non-government organisations and expert bodies, there was resounding agreement that 'the sexualisation of Australian children is excessive, harmful and must be addressed.'^{xii}

Women's Forum believes immediate precautionary action needs to be taken to ensure the safe and healthy development of our future generations. In particular, Women's Forum advocates the following:

- Revisiting the Senate inquiry to take more decisive and appropriate measures to address the concerns of parents, community groups, non-government organizations and expert bodies.
- Strengthening the current Advertising Standards Bureau self-regulatory systems by:
 - Taking a more proactive approach by monitoring advertising to detect possible violations of the standards.
 - Pre-vetting advertisements where an advertiser or agency has regularly produced advertising material that has been the subject of complaints.
 - Educating board members and senior executives of media organisations about the risks associated with premature sexualisation.
 - Introducing a disincentive for sexualised advertising such as denying advertising space to offenders.
 - A mass media campaign to boost community knowledge of the existence of the ASB and the complaints handling system.
- Developing and implementing sexual health programs in schools that focus on building and maintaining healthy relationships, having realistic expectations of relationships, and the importance of having respect for oneself and others.
- Developing and implementing education strategies to equip children with critical analysis and media literacy skills from the first year of schooling.

Women's Forum also encourages parents to help prevent the premature sexualisation of their own children by:

- Seeking out literature and information websites that assist in making appropriate, child-friendly decisions.^{xiii}
- Ensuring, as parents, they are well-informed about the issues associated with premature sexualisation of children and the pitfalls of media advertising and popular culture.
- Talking about the issues in a calm manner with their children in a safe and non-threatening environment.
- Monitoring their children's use of the internet, television and other forms of media and taking action to limit or prevent access to inappropriate programs, websites etc.
- Notifying the Advertising Standards Bureau if they consider certain advertisements targeted at children contain inappropriate sexual material.
- Providing a positive role model for their children.

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children

- *Nelson Mandela*

ⁱ Newman L, 'The psychological and developmental impact of sexualisation on children', in: Melinda Tankard Reist (2009), *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, Australia: Spinifex Press, p. 76.

ⁱⁱ Newman (2009), p. 78

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} Princi, R (2009), 'Too sexy, too early! Children and the Sexualised Media: Risks, Reviews and Regulation Conference, 04/08/09.

^v Taylor LD (2005), 'Effects of visual and verbal sexual television content and perceived realism on attitudes and beliefs,' *The Journal of Sex Research*, May 42(2): 130-137.

^{vi} Princi (2009)

^{vii} American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls (2007), *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

^{viii} *Ibid*

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 31

^x Newman, L (2009), p. 84

^{xi} Handsley, E SCECA (2008) *Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media. Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts*, The Senate. June [online: http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/index.htm]

^{xii} Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts (2008), *Sexualisation of children in the contemporary media*. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra.

^{xiii} Young Media Australia offers up-to-date information about media and children for parents and caregivers. <http://www.youngmedia.org.au/>

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

SUBMISSION FROM
VICTORIA'S CHILD SAFETY COMMISSIONER

The Inquiry's Terms of Reference:

The Senate has referred the following matter to the Committee for inquiry and report by the 23 June 2008.

The sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment, including radio and television, children's magazines, other print and advertising material and the Internet.

In undertaking the inquiry, the committee, in particular, will:

- a. examine the sources and beneficiaries of premature sexualisation of children in the media;
- b. review the evidence on the short-and long-term effects of viewing or buying, sexualising and objectifying images and products and their influence on cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs; and
- c. examine strategies to prevent and/or reduce the sexualisation of children in the media and the effectiveness of different approaches in ameliorating its effects, including the role of school-based sexuality and reproductive health education and change in media and advertising regulation such as the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice.

SUMMARY

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner (Victoria) welcomes the decision of the Senate to conduct an inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media. The issue of premature child sexualisation is one of significant concern to this office.

Whilst acknowledging that the sources of premature sexualisation of children in the contemporary media include: radio and television, children's magazines, other print and advertising material and the internet, the focus of this submission is upon sexualised imagery of children used in advertising, and sexualised merchandise for children. (eg. Clothing)

In considering the nature and effect of sexualising influences upon children it is necessary to acknowledge that it is virtually impossible to either eliminate, or shield children from, all potentially sexualising influences in society. Many of these influences are intended for adults and are not focused at, or intended for, children. However, we have entered an alarming and challenging new domain in relation to the sexualisation of children. Previously, the sexualisation of children occurred via exposure to images and portrayal of adult and teen sexuality in the mass media and popular culture. Now, however, children themselves are directly sexualised in their portrayal in the advertising industry.

"The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in images or directed to act in advertisements in ways modelled on adult sexual behaviour, is a new development. The pressure on children to adopt sexualised appearance and behaviour at an early age is greatly increased by the combination of the direct sexualisation of children with the increasingly sexualised representations of teenagers and adults in advertising and popular culture." **(Letting Children Be Children, Australia Institute, Dec, 2006, p 1)**

DEFINITIONS

It is important to define 'sexualisation' and to differentiate it from normal, healthy sexual development which is an important part of physical and psychological health. In contrast sexualisation occurs when:

"a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;

a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;

a person is sexually objectified- that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or

sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person." (Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls, 2007, p2)

It is necessary also to define the term 'child'. Under the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (Vic) 2005*, under which the Child Safety Commissioner was established, a child is defined as any person up to 18 years of age.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) also defines a child as any person up to the age of 18 years.

CHILDREN'S CLOTHING

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, Victoria, has been concerned about the sale of children's clothing and underwear displaying sexually suggestive slogans. Given that some of this clothing is available for toddlers who cannot even read the messages and that the messages suggest sexual availability and character traits not attributable to, or desirable for children, it is clear that the 'beneficiaries' of this clothing are adults. What benefit or satisfaction adults could obtain from purchasing children's clothing with slogans such as: "Ms Floozy", "Mr Well-hung", "Mr Pimp", "Mr Asshole", "All Daddy wanted was a blowjob", "Naughty butt nice", "Bite this" and "\$\$\$ Worth it", and "I only *look* innocent", is difficult to comprehend.

Community Standards

Public outcry over crude and negative messages on children's clothing was discussed in the print media in January and February of this year, eventually resulting in one manufacturer, Jay Jays, withdrawing its line of "Little Losers" T-shirts from sale, after a similar public response and withdrawal in New Zealand. Other chain stores and manufacturers were identified as selling or producing clothing with sexualised messages for children. It is not known whether they have also withdrawn these items of clothing from sale in response to public reaction. (***Outcry over sexy slogans for kids, Herald Sun, February 3, 2008***), (***Row over lewd clothes for kids, The Daily Telegraph, January 11, 2008***), (***Vulgar kids clothing labels, Yahoo 7 News, 11 January, 2008***).

The public outcry in response to the sale of children's clothing displaying sexualised messages reflects the fact that the sale of such merchandise is clearly out-of-step with community standards and attitudes. Most people are shocked that merchandise for children displaying the slogans detailed above even exists, and more so to learn that it is freely available for sale. This episode illustrated that the relative freedom of self-regulation as enjoyed by the advertising industry has resulted in advertisers, marketers and retailers stepping outside community expectations and standards.

As a society we need to ask whether this sort of merchandise should be available for sale, and what messages we send out by allowing the sale of such products.

Regulation

Of concern is the fact that this merchandise (which also included pencil cases with the same slogans) was only withdrawn from sale after public outcry and extensive media exposure of the products and discussion of the issues. It is not known whether other clothing displaying the sexualised slogans identified has been withdrawn from sale. While it is not available in some stores this does not necessarily mean that it is not available in other branches of the same store. The offending clothes were not available in on-line advertising catalogues but unfortunately this does not necessarily mean that they are not available for sale. This example suggests an adhoc way of regulating the availability of potentially harmful children's products and is of concern to The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner. It suggests the industry is not able to responsibly regulate itself in accordance with current community standards, but rather only acts when forced into a corner under public pressure.

Responsible choices by parents

The fact that adults purchase this sort of clothing for their children illustrates that unfortunately not all parents and adults make appropriate choices for children. What choices, rights and liberties does a child have when forced to wear clothing adorned with overtly sexual messages? Perhaps more importantly, what impact does the wearing of such messages and slogans have on those who come into contact with the child? The wearing of sexualised slogans by children suggests a sexual identity, preparedness and availability beyond their years. In so doing, the wearing of the clothing conveys an illusory sense of precociousness upon the child, which in all likelihood increases their vulnerability to the risk of sexual assault by someone with poor impulse control. It can be argued that the purchase and forced wearing of such clothing by children constitutes child abuse. The messages are clearly emotionally abusive in nature, whether the intent of the purchaser is to ridicule, denigrate, objectify or sexualise the child.

As important as the offensive nature of the message is what its selection conveys about the value the child's parent places on them. An observer or other adult in contact with the child wearing clothing with such slogans, will invariably internalise understandings about how the parent views their child and the degree of respect or otherwise which they attribute to them as a child, an individual and a human being.

Given that not all parents and adults make sensible or wise choices for children, as evidenced by the apparent demand for children's clothing carrying sexualised messages, it is incumbent upon society, governments and legislators to protect children by putting in place appropriate measures to prevent the production and manufacturing of clothing with abusive, derogatory and sexualised messages.

Parent Education

As part of assisting parents to better protect their children, it is recommended that parent education form part of a solution focused strategy with the aim of reducing the incidence and impact of the sexualisation of children. Parents and the community more broadly, need to be educated about the potentially harmful effects of the premature sexualisation of children and to carefully consider the developmental appropriateness of merchandise they purchase for their children. The challenges of making and supervising wise choices for children in an increasingly consumerist society are greater than ever. In acknowledging that it is not possible to legislate or regulate to protect children from exposure to all inappropriate products or undesirable marketing, it is necessary to educate parents about the potential risks of sexualising materials and advertising.

BENEFICIARIES

The beneficiaries of sexualised advertising and merchandise involving and/or marketed at children, are clearly not children. Those who benefit are adults, who either purchase the products and/or gain some satisfaction from children wearing them, or who obtain pleasure from viewing advertisements using sexualised images of children. The other beneficiaries are corporations and manufacturers who produce the merchandise and the advertisements.

Sex offenders and people with paedophilic tendencies

Of particular concern is the potential impact of viewing such readily accessible sexualised images of children, such as those found in advertising material, upon child sex offenders and those with paedophilic tendencies.

The Australia Institute report, ***Corporate Paedophilia: Corporate sexualisation of children in Australia, (Australia Institute, October, 2006)***, identified two distinct purposes of child sexualisation within advertising, being to promote sales to children, and the sexualisation of children to promote sales to adults. The report stated, "the implicitly paedophilic connotations of this are even more disturbing." (p11) The fact that advertisements can be identified as containing sexualised images of children with the aim of appealing to adults, is alarming. *Corporate Paedophilia (2006)*, documents details of complaints about such advertisements to the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB).

There is a growing body of material suggesting an interest in, or use of, sexualised images of children within advertising material, by those with paedophilic tendencies. The authors of ***Letting Children Be Children (Australia Institute, December, 2006)*** conclude that, "the sexualisation of children also risks normalising and possibly encouraging paedophilic sexual desire for children". (p2) Similarly, ***Corporate Paedophilia*** states that "the sexualisation of children could play a role in 'grooming' children for paedophiles." (p ix) , and cites Bill Glasser, a forensic psychiatrist at the University of Melbourne stating that convicted paedophiles say 'here is all

this advertising around the place and surely it cannot be wrong, seeing it is on public display.' (*Corporate Paedophilia, Australia Institute, October, 2006*)

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner, through its work in Victoria, has been advised by professionals who work with sex offenders, of their client's interest in, and use of, sexualised images of children within advertising and marketing. Patrick Tidmarsh, Manager of Forensic Interviewing of Sexual Offenders, Victoria Police and member of the Child Safety Commissioner's advisory group said, "what sexualised/eroticised child images in advertising obviously do is provide validation for those considering further exploration of children and sex, as part of a pernicious descending spiral".

Karen Hogan, Co-ordinator of the Royal Children's Hospital, Gatehouse Centre, stated that staff working in a treatment program with children and young people who engage in sexually abusive behaviour, have noticed a marked increase in perpetrators using underwear advertising magazines for stimulation that are delivered to homes. She continued, "Males tell us that they are particularly interested in the children's section and that they can use these magazines without detection as it is so common place to have this material delivered to their homes."

With this knowledge, there can be no justification for advertisements that contain sexualised images of children; particularly when marketing adult products appears to result in normalising paedophilic tendencies and desires. Given that paedophilia is unlawful, it is a paradox that the advertising industry and regulatory environment arguably promotes such thinking and behaviour.

Corporations

Corporations are the other beneficiaries of sexualised images of children, who presumably believe that their use helps to sell their products. The use of sexualised images of children to market products constitutes the exploitation of the most vulnerable section of society with the express purpose of expanding a corporation's sales and profits. The concept of rigorous, scrutinising self regulation is fundamentally inconsistent with corporations' modus operandi of making money, particularly if sexualised images of children, as part of a marketing strategy, are seen as a means of increasing revenue.

EFFECTS UPON CHILDREN

General effects upon society of sexualised images of children.

It is important to acknowledge that the sexualisation of children not only has negative effects upon an individual child's cognitive, physical and mental health, and attitudes and beliefs, but ultimately the sexualisation of children contributes to the diminution of childhood. This diminution involves both a shortening of, or hastened experience of, childhood, and also, a devaluing of the period of childhood as an intrinsically valuable and significant period in a person's life. Hence, the sexualisation of children impacts not only on individual children, but upon society as a whole.

Through use of sexualised images children are portrayed as mini-adults or adults-in-the-making, which serves to devalue the experience of childhood. This affects the way that both adults and children perceive the period and significance, of childhood, and has implications for the position of children in society and the worth that as a society we place upon children.

The position of children in society impacts upon almost every aspect of a society's function. The way children are valued and treated, and the extent and manner in which children are the subject of public policy, tells us a great deal about the society in which we live.

Children are influenced, too, by the increasing use of sexualised images of children and childhood. As a consequence of exposure to these images through products, advertising and the mass media they internalise the view that not only is 'sexy good' but 'young sexy' and 'child sexy' is desirable and something to aspire to. Children are strongly influenced by advertising messages and fashion trends. They want to be 'in fashion', to 'look cool' but be 'hot'. Whether or not they or their parents purchase the product which is the source of the sexualised message, children are invariably influenced by viewing or hearing it. These messages ultimately contribute to the growing phenomena of a shortened or reduced childhood and a quicker transition to adolescence. Even if the product is denied, and even if parents have educated the child in the importance of resisting peer, fashion and marketing trends; and the intricacies of the corporate advertising world; children will inevitably be influenced by these forces as they make up part of the social milieu that is the child's experience.

Influence upon children's cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, attitudes and beliefs

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner would like to direct the Inquiry to the discussion of risks to children of sexualisation of children in advertising and marketing, as discussed in ***Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia*** (The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper Number 90, October 2006); where it is argued that the sexualisation of children potentially places children at risk in relation to every major area of development and increases their likelihood of physical, psychological, sexual and attitudinal harm.

Research evidence has linked the premature sexualisation of children with increased risk of depression, self-esteem and identity disorders, premature sexual activity, sexually transmitted diseases, reduced educational attainment and success, constrained and stereotypical ideas about gender roles and negative consequences for cognitive, physical and psychological health. **(APA, 2007) (Australia Institute, Oct, 2006), (Australia Institute, Dec, 2006), (Gale, 2008), (Young Media Australia, 2002)**

The insidious nature of the premature sexualisation of children is evidenced by the fact that not only is child sexualisation influenced by society (including the contemporary media environment), and a child's family and peer group, but ultimately by a phenomena termed *self-sexualisation*, which occurs when girls in particular, internalise that sexualised behaviour and appearance are desirable and thus engage in such behaviour. **(Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls, 2007, p3)**

There is evidence that many Australian parents are concerned about the need of children to freely develop and mature at their own pace, and the restriction placed upon this by the sexualising pressure inherent within the advertising industry and the broader media. This is evidenced by the Australian Psychological Society's publication of a tip sheet for parents of girls entitled, **"Helping girls develop a positive self image." (2008)**

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner supports the view that whilst many parents try to protect their children from these risks, "Children are only likely to be able to develop freely if government assists parents by limiting this sexualising pressure at its source-advertisers and marketers." **(Letting Children Be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia, The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper Number 93, December 2007)**

CHANGE IN MEDIA AND ADVERTISING REGULATION

The need for a child focused approach

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner believes that whilst it is not possible to protect children from all representations of sexualised behaviour and sexualising influences within the contemporary media and popular culture, there is a need to focus specifically upon the portrayal of children in a sexualised way in advertising and marketing material. *Letting Children Be Children* states that "at a minimum, existing codes of practice for advertising, television programming and children's magazines could be amended to allow for recognition of the fact that sexualising children, whether directly or indirectly, leads to a range of risks for children." **(Letting Children Be Children, Australia Institute, Dec, 2006, p37)** In addition there needs to be recognition of the growing role that the mass media is playing in children's lives and the fact that advertisers and marketers are now targeting children more than ever before.

Of particular concern is the fact that the Advertiser Code of Ethics, which Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) members use when considering a complaint, contains no reference to the sexualisation of children. We note with interest the proposed changes to the AANA Code for Advertising to Children, which were announced on 16th April, 2008, and which involve the addition of a clause relating to the sexualisation of children. (Previously the AANA Code for Advertising to Children contained no reference to the sexualisation of children.) Whilst the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner welcomes the introduction of any measures which seek to promote the safety and wellbeing of children, the OCSC believes that the proposed amendments do not go far enough in terms of protecting children from premature sexualisation within the advertising and marketing industry.

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner is particularly concerned by the definition of children used within the newly named *AANA Children's Advertising and Marketing Communications Code*. Under the code, children are defined as persons 14 years or younger. This definition is clearly unacceptable. Astoundingly, the AANA states that "the majority of the research and evidence we have reviewed points strongly to a definition of 12 years old or younger for the definition of a child." (***AANA, Major Changes to Advertising to Children Code***.) As previously identified, Victorian law, under the ***Child Wellbeing and Safety Act***, and international law through the ***United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child***, define children as persons up to the age of 18 years.

The proposed new AANA code states that advertising or marketing communications to children must not include sexual imagery in contravention of "prevailing community standards". This raises the question of who is the arbiter of community standards, and how are community standards determined and monitored? Given that the AANA's proposed new requirements will operate as a voluntary code, and in view of its assertion that children are persons of 12 years and under, which is clearly out of step with community opinion and standards, society cannot confidently rely upon the AANA to effectively regulate the industry.

A more effective regulatory environment requires a specific focus upon the needs and interests of children and is particularly important given the voluntary nature of relevant regulatory codes. This focus needs to be much more encompassing than the current complaints based regulatory system in which individuals are required to make specific complaints about a particular advertisement. This approach does not reflect the reality that harm from premature sexualisation is cumulative, and that sexualised representations of children in advertising effect, and reflect upon, all of us in society.

A new child-focused approach to regulation would be cognizant of the potential effects of premature sexualisation upon all aspects of child development, and that harm caused to children by this process is cumulative, rather than a clear cause-and-effect reaction being discernible from a single advertisement.

A more child-focused approach to regulation is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Australia ratified the Convention in 1990 and in so doing committed to protecting and ensuring children's rights and to being accountable for this commitment before the international community. [Please see Attachment A for specific articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which have applicability to consideration of contemporary media regulation and the sexualisation of children. Articles: 3, 13, 17, 18, 19, 34 and 36] The UN Convention details the responsibility of institutions, administrative authorities and legislative bodies to have the best interests of the child as a primary consideration. (Article 3) Article 17 makes specific reference to the responsibility and power of the mass media. Article 17e states that in promoting the social, spiritual, physical and mental health of the child that State Parties shall:

"e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18".

Articles 19, 34, and 36 refer to the responsibility of State Parties to take all appropriate administrative, legislative, social and educational measures to protect children from all types of abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation.

A more child focused approach to regulation of the advertising and marketing industries would also be consistent with Victorian legislation regarding the protection and wellbeing of children.

The **Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (Vic) 2006** states that:

"Every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in his or her best interests and is needed by him or her by reason of being a child." (17:2) [See Attachment B]

The **Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (Vic) 2005**, under which the Child Safety Commissioner was established, states that:

"The development and provision of services for children and families should be based upon the fundamental principles that-
(a) society as a whole shares responsibility for promoting the wellbeing and safety of children." (5:1a) [See Attachment C]

A New Regulatory Framework

The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner believes that the existing codes of practice (the AANA Code for Advertising to Children and the Advertiser Code of Ethics) should be amended to include specific reference to the potential harm from the portrayal of children in a sexualised way in advertising and marketing material, with children being defined as persons up to the age of 18 years.

Furthermore, the OCSC supports the establishment of a children's body with the express purpose of monitoring and regulating the portrayal of children across all modes of media including television, children's magazines and print and outdoor advertising and the retail sector. This body may take the form of an advisory body to the Rudd Government's proposed National Children's Commissioner with the function of monitoring the advertising and media industries with respect to the sexualisation of children. Consistent with the recommendations of *Letting Children Be Children*, this body should be staffed by people with expertise in child development, psychology, education and criminology that have professional knowledge and understanding of the potential harm associated with the premature sexualisation of children.

In addition to the establishment of an advisory body focused specifically upon the portrayal of children in advertising and the media, the membership of the Advertising Standards Bureau (ASB) should be expanded to include a member whose specific focus is child advocacy and who has special expertise in the area of child psychology, education, health or welfare. This position would ideally be filled by the proposed National Children's Commissioner whose specific focus is the best needs and interests of children.

The issue of regulatory review needs to be on the national agenda as it involves both Commonwealth and State laws. The safety and wellbeing of Australia's children is too important to be left to chance. A consistency and clarity of approach across jurisdictions is vital in order to protect children as far as possible from the insidious and pervasive influences of premature sexualisation.

CONCLUSION

The issue of premature child sexualisation has been the subject of limited research in Australia, and there is a lack of data in relation to all aspects of this subject. This Senate Inquiry will presumably be the first step in a vital process of consultation, evidence building, and where a need is established, ultimately reform. The Office of the Child Safety Commissioner believes that this inquiry will demonstrate that there is considerable community concern in relation to the issue of the premature sexualisation of children within contemporary media. However, there would be merit in undertaking further research and expanding the focus of any further work by the Senate Committee beyond the media environment to include all potentially sexualising influences within society.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by Australia in 1990, prescribes that Australia has committed to protecting and ensuring children's rights and to being accountable for this commitment before the international community. The Senate Inquiry into the sexualisation of children within contemporary media is evidence to some extent that Australian children need protection from premature sexualisation, and that we need to have regulations to limit its impact.

Importantly, we must acknowledge for regulatory purposes that children are persons aged up to 18 years of age.

The current system of self regulation of the advertising and marketing industry is clearly inadequate. This is evidenced by the announcement on April 16th, 2008, by the Australian Association of National Advertisers, of proposed changes to the Advertising to Children Code, in which children are defined as persons 14 years and under. Furthermore, the new clause states that advertising or marketing communications to children must not include sexual imagery in contravention of prevailing community standards. It can be strongly argued that sexualised imagery of 15 years olds would be in breach of community standards, but paradoxically this would not breach AANA regulations. Consideration needs to be given to the viability in the longer term of relying upon a voluntary code and whether a mandatory code is necessary in order to protect the best interests of children.

The membership of the Australian Standards Bureau should be expanded to include a member with a specific child advocacy focus. This position could be occupied by the proposed new National Children's Commissioner who would required to:

- monitor the portrayal of children across all modes of media including television, children's magazines and print and outdoor advertising;
- monitor the retail sector, focusing on children's merchandise and clothing with abusive, derogatory and sexualised messages, or sexualised content; and
- seek and represent the views of children and young people on these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation One:

That the existing codes of practice (the AANA Code for Advertising to Children and the Advertiser Code of Ethics) be amended to include specific reference to the potential harm from the portrayal of children in a sexualised way in advertising and marketing material, with children being defined as persons up to the age of 18 years.

Recommendation Two:

Following adoption of recommendation one above, that a two year pilot be undertaken to identify whether the amendments result in reduced incidents of sexualisation of children within marketing and advertising.

Recommendation Three:

Upon completion of the pilot that an evaluation be conducted to determine whether the optimum longer term approach is operating a voluntary code or adopting a mandatory code.

Recommendation Four:

That the membership of the Advertising Standards Bureau be expanded to include a member with a specific child advocacy focus such as the proposed National Children's Commissioner who would be required to:

- monitor the portrayal of children across all modes of media including television, children's magazines and print and outdoor advertising;
- monitor the retail sector, focusing on children's merchandise and clothing with abusive, derogatory and sexualised messages, or sexualised content; and
- seek the views of children and young people on these issues.

Recommendation Five:

That parent education is undertaken regarding the potentially harmful effects of the premature sexualisation of children.

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ATTACHMENT A

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 3

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

2. States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.

3. States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform with the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.

Article 17

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

To this end, States Parties shall:

- (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;
- (b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;
- (c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;
- (d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;
- (e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18.

Article 18

1. States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.
2. For the purpose of guaranteeing and promoting the rights set forth in the present Convention, States Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.
3. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.
2. The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:
 - (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
 - (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (order public), or of public health or morals.

Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

Article 34

States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:

- (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
- (b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
- (c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

Article 36

States Parties shall protect the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.

ATTACHMENT B

Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act (Vic) 2006

17 Protection of families and children

- (1) Families are the fundamental group unit of society and are entitled to be protected by society and the State.
- (2) Every child has the right, without discrimination, to such protection as is in his or her best interests and is needed by him or her by reason of being a child.

ATTACHMENT C

Child Wellbeing and Safety Act (Vic) 2005

5 Principles for children

- (1) The development and provision of services for children and families should be based upon the fundamental principles that—
 - (a) society as a whole shares responsibility for promoting the wellbeing and safety of children;

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Executive summary

As long as there has been something to sell, there has been something to advertise. Advertising plays an enormously important role in our economy and culture, and it is important to recognise this. However, the extent and nature of advertising is changing dramatically and as a society, rather than just a market (or Meerkat as we now know it), we need to understand the consequences of the changing nature of advertising and make decisions about what, if anything, should be done to counter it. This document is being published to spark a long overdue debate about an industry that in recent years has changed dramatically, and ask whether regulation needs to catch up.

'The central argument of this report is that this changed advertising environment should not happen by stealth; instead it should be discussed in the open and ultimately be up to society to decide what is advertised, when, where and how.'

We live in a moment of ongoing financial difficulty caused in part by a toxic mix of greed and debt that many have argued was fuelled by an insatiable desire for more. It is for this very purpose that the advertising industry exists – to persuade us we always need more. We live also in an age of climate change, brought on and exacerbated again in large part by the West's desire for more: more flights, cars, fridges, gadgets and just about anything else you can think of. A desire for more that is transported around the globe by advertising that projects only one way to achieve happiness and one route to progress. Other ways of living are at best ignored and at worst undermined by adverts exported around the world designed to persuade everyone to live the life of the fully loaded Western consumer. This is now reaching what appears to be a crisis point, a point where we must pause and start to ask the big questions: How do we want to live our lives? Is

society broken? and why are we getting richer but not happier?

There is little point for hysteria here but we do need a discussion about the future of advertising. Although advertising is just one part of a much bigger system it would be wrong to ignore the role that advertising is playing; the influence it has over us as individuals is significant. Why else would industries pour billions of pounds into it? In turn it has an impact on society by establishing a mono-cultural view of a particular 'good society'. This view is purposefully designed to rule out other visions of what it means to be human, which we would argue are more in touch with our real desires, needs and emotions.

This report also recognises, and is concerned by, the increasing grip and influence of advertising on our lives and behaviour. However, perhaps more concerning is the fact that in many ways what we are seeing now is just the crest of a wave of what can be sold to us and how. Advances in technology, neurology and psychology combine to put Westernised societies at the forefront of a revolution in advertising that could lead to a situation in which we are simply 'born to buy'.¹

The central argument of this report is that this changed advertising environment should not happen by stealth; instead it should be discussed in the open and ultimately be up to society to decide what is advertised, when, where and how. This is not a new idea. The decision in principle to regulate the scope, content and process of advertising is well established. As a society we already recognise this. Because of its powers of persuasion and influence, governments have long since determined that it is in the public interest to legislate to restrict and limit advertising. From the earliest standards on accuracy, to bans on most advertisements for tobacco and now alcohol, from lines drawn in the sand about the advertising of medicines and watersheds for children's TV, governments have always had to intervene on behalf of society.

However, this regulation is now being outpaced by changing business practices and advertising techniques, which is why this report argues that it is time once again to decide when and how to intervene in the interests of people over profits. The report identifies seven areas of concern:

1. In a free society we should be able to decide when and where we are subjected to advertising. If we as individuals decide to read a magazine or watch a commercial TV channel then we are accepting the adverts that come with them. However, when we walk outside our front door why should we be bombarded with brand images and slogans we never choose to see, on billboards, trains, the tube, bus shelters, buses and taxis, to name just a few? In today's commercialised world we cannot opt out or choose to look the other way because nearly everywhere you look there is an advert. It is time to take back our streets, towns and cities as places to be citizens rather than just consumers. **So the report calls for a ban on all advertising in public spaces, a limit to be placed on shopfront marketing, a ban on buzz marketing (public viral marketing techniques that are contrived to look authentic) and continuing restrictions on product placement on television.**
2. The advertising industry increasingly uses children's vulnerability to its persuasive powers to unlock their parents' purse strings. Studies show that children under 12 do not have the cognitive ability to know whether they are being sold to, let alone make decisions on what they like, or choose to ignore the marketing altogether. The government recently called for the provision of improved education for children to deal with the growth in adverts they face. But as this report shows, many of these adverts are aimed at securing an emotional rather a rational response and therefore cannot be filtered out through education alone. The leader of the Conservative party, David Cameron, has also recognised this and recently called for shops to stop selling sexualised products to younger children – recognising that what is good for business is not always good for society. **So the report calls for a ban on all television advertising to children under the age of 12. It also calls for an open debate on a ban on all alcohol marketing, recognising that teenage alcoholism can have a damaging effect on young people's health. Banning advertising of alcohol could help reduce this. The government should follow the example now set by Spain, which outlaws**

'cult of the body' adverts before the watershed; these are linked to the rise in anorexia and bulimia in young people.
3. Third, the advertising industry is increasingly working online and capturing the Internet by surveying and storing every click of information we make. This information is then used to target adverts directly at us. The Internet should be a socially valued 'common good' and its commercialisation for private gain should be resisted. **So the report calls for Ofcom to review introducing new regulations to limit the amount of information being gathered, stored and used without our expressed permission.**
4. Excessive advertising turns a never ending series of new needs into new wants, and crowds out the space for other visions of the good society, where time and relationships matter more than what we buy. Advertising encourages us to run ever faster on the treadmill of modern consumer life; in so doing it contributes to growing consumer debt, a number of social problems which this report discusses, and to the very real prospect of climate change beyond our ability to manage. **So the report calls for a tax on all advertising that encourages greater consumption to limit its scope and slow the pace of growth for the good of society and the future of the planet.**
5. In recognition of the enormous creative skills in the industry and the potential to use their powers of persuasion for good social and environmental causes, and not just profit, **the report calls for a time and resources levy to be placed on the advertising companies themselves, so that a small percentage of their workers' time is used for constructive social purposes – not always for commercial interests. People could then be better persuaded to recycle, donate or volunteer.**
6. This report argues that the industry should be held to account for the adverts it creates. Companies are responsible for the products they make and we believe that advertising should be no exception. **So we are calling for regulations to stipulate that advertising**

agencies have their name or logo on all the adverts they are responsible for creating. Transparency is important; advertising agencies should be recognised for their contribution to good causes as well as held to account for any work deemed to be harmful.

7. The bulk of advertising is still 'regulated' voluntarily through the Advertising Standards Authority. Given the importance of the industry and its reach and impact on so much of our lives, this is no longer acceptable. **This report calls for the Advertising Standards Authority to be put on a statutory basis, setting out criteria on what types of adverts are unacceptable. It should:**
 - **strengthen local authorities' powers to restrict outdoor advertising**
 - **introduce in some circumstances a right of reply by charities etc to claims made in TV advertising**
 - **ban advertising on mobile phones.**

These suggestions are not exclusive but they are a contribution to the necessary debate on the role

of advertising. This report argues that we must now take steps to rebalance the relationship between the needs of society and the demands of the market. In many ways the cultural signals we send out are more important than the laws that governments pass; a debate about advertising and the demand to restrict its influence demonstrates what kind of 'good society' we want to live in: one where more and more things are only valued because they can be bought or one where time, sustainability, caring and other pleasures have at least some space to flourish?

We are still coming out of the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s; the advertising industry and the big corporations they serve want not just to get us back on the treadmill of consumption as soon as possible, but for us to buy more than ever, using new techniques, technology and science. This puts us at a turning point: we either go back to where we left off on the route to the world of consumption or we decide to live a better and more balanced life in which we take more collective and democratic control over the world and in particular the market, which should exist to serve our interests – rather than us serving those of the market. To do that we must address the advertising effect.

Introduction: advertising and the good society

During one day, on average, we will see over 3,500 brand images: on bus stops and buses; on trains and in tube stations; on taxis and inside taxis; on railway station name boards where we are welcomed not simply to a town or city but to the home of some estate agent or local solicitor; on shop windows; on billboards; on Internet pop-up ads and PC games; on product placements at the cinema; and through the sponsorship of sporting and cultural events and arenas like the O2 and the Emirates. The world it seems is becoming a vast advertising hoarding to sell us more stuff.

But in many ways we are just at the forefront of this advertising, persuasion and selling revolution. Not content with advertising on tube trains and in underground ticket halls and walkways, Coca-Cola is now sponsoring the 33 busking pitches on London Underground and over the new year of 2009/10 went even further by trying to persuade buskers to play their advertising theme. With 3.5 million people using the tube each day who could hear their Christmas jingle, it's an obvious step for Coca-Cola, but is it good for us? The buskers' pitches now match the video walls of films and images that move up the escalator as you do. Out on the street you might wonder why your mobile is buzzing. It could be because the shop windows you walk past are transmitting messages via Bluetooth to tell you about their latest in-store deals. You walk into a bar for a drink and wonder why a group of good looking young people at the bar is talking so loudly about a particular drink? Could they be part of the buzz marketing trend of paid for advocates acting as 'ordinary people' who are blurring the lines of normal life and solicitation?

If you make it to the sanctuary of your own home surely there you will be free from advertising? But only if you don't switch on the television or go on the Internet. ITV is lobbying hard for product placement on programmes and the government has indicated that, with some exceptions, it can have its way. The pharmaceutical

companies would like the same access to our minds and wallets as they get in the USA, with adverts on television for prescription drugs. The advertising focus is growing on the Internet, too. Britain has become the first major economy where advertisers spend more on the Internet than they do on TV: 23.5 per cent in the first half of 2009 compared with 21.9 per cent on television.² But why, when you are searching online, are you increasingly bombarded with adverts that seem tailor-made for you? It is because they are tailor-made for you. Google and other search engines now collect data on what you search for so that they can direct messages from their clients which you are more likely to respond to. Car enthusiasts get adverts on cars; music aficionados get helpful suggestions on gigs and new DVDs, and children get information about the latest toys. Online advertising is virtually unregulated, as brands 'friend' individuals through social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace – this is the new frontier of advertising and it is outpacing regulation. Advertisers are now designing TV adverts to be watched in fast forward, to make sure modern technology doesn't limit their influence.

Meanwhile neurologists are working out what images will trigger the buy button in our brains. In the studies, machines are being used to shed light on brain mechanisms that play a central role in consumer behaviour: circuits that underlie reward, decision making, motivation, emotions and the senses of self. An article in the *New York Times* by Sandra Blakeslee called 'If your brain has a "buy button," what pushes it?' looks at a study of consumer preferences for Coca-Cola over its rival Pepsi.³ Dr P. Read Montague, a neuroscientist at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston who led the Coca-Cola versus Pepsi study, said he was fascinated by the way cultural images made their way into people's choices. The study of Coke and Pepsi, financed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the Kane Family Foundation, showed that two different brain systems were at play. When subjects used their sense of taste alone to choose a preferred drink, an area of the brain called the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex lit up. When told they were drinking 'the real thing', as Coke is widely known, a memory region called the hippocampus and another part of the prefrontal cortex lit up. The study showed that some people did not choose a

2. Mark Sweney, 'UK advertisers spend more on Internet than TV', *Guardian*, 30 September 2009.

3. Sandra Blakeslee, 'If your brain has a "buy button," what pushes it?', *New York Times*, 19 October 2004.

drink based on taste alone. They chose a drink plus what it conjured up to their medial prefrontal cortex, namely the strong brand identity of Coca-Cola. If companies can work out how to trigger certain parts of our brains then that will be commercial gold dust.

Advertising running wild has long formed a part of visions of a future dystopia. In *Blade Runner* the inescapable corporate advertising boards fill the skylines; in *Wall.E*, the children's Disney film, humans are forced from earth by their own waste, and their future lives, moods and activities are dictated by advertising from a single central company, BnL. In *Minority Report* the billboards speak to us as individuals and tailor their messages accordingly. In the classic George Saunders' short story 'Jon', the young adults can only communicate emotions to each other in the slogans and jingles of product endorsements.⁴ None of this now feels far off, because it isn't. Parents are now naming their children after products such as Armani and L'Oréal. Science fiction is fast becoming science fact. A dystopian vision of advertising on school uniforms; of personalised advertising designed to tap into your individual fears, hopes and dreams; of a future where adverts are projected on to the sky; awaits us. None of this is by accident; all of it is by design. The question is why?

The motor behind this unprecedented expansion of advertising is of course the market. The market is a fabulously inventive and naturally expansive machine. The goal is to maximise profit by selling as much as possible at the biggest margin possible. To do this we must buy more and more things at a faster and faster pace. This is the crucial role of advertising: creating wants and turning them into needs. Not as a one-off event but as a never ending series of desires. The trick of the advertiser is to persuade the individual both to stick with their product and wherever possible make us want something new by persuading us that what we currently have is somehow unsatisfactory. To do this they plug into our natural human desires to both belong and be different, to gain respect and recognition from others, which they link to what we buy and not what we do, and then apply those desires to the next new product and then the next.

This marketing machine can never rest. This year's profits have to beat last year's otherwise the

bonuses and the status of the investors and the executives are lost. The City and the analysts have to be appeased. If your company doesn't sell more then another will. It's dog eat dog in the world of global competition; and the competition is for the money in our wallets and purses, which is unlocked through advertising, or more likely for the debt on our credit cards.

The goal of advertising then is not the creation of happiness and consumer fulfilment. Instead the purpose and consequence seems to be the creation of a mood of restless dissatisfaction with what we have got and who we are so that we go out and buy more. Advertising is no longer there to inform about the advantages of one product over a rival. Society, in an age of relative abundance, has long since gone past the point of rational decision making when it comes to purchasing. Everything is about emotion and in particular the ability to tap into our deepest needs and insecurities to get us to buy more. Today happiness can only be fleeting, and must last little longer than the time it takes to carry the latest purchase home; then the process of wanting more and needing more must be started again.

Academics have now proved that advertising does have a 'hidden power', which enables it to work without our attention or recall. As this report shows, this is particularly important to children whose brains are not yet fully developed in a way that enables them to deal with such emotional pulls. The Low Attention Processing Model developed by Heath shows how advertising can work without high levels of attention being paid and places the primacy of feeling over thinking.⁵

An absurd example of this involves razors: advertisers have persuaded us that we need a six-blade shaving razor only until enough time has elapsed before they can tell us that only seven will do. At one level this is ludicrous, but at another quite sane: six blades are better than five no matter how marginally and what else is there to do but aspire to a seventh blade? And if someone else deserves 'the best a man can get', then why not don't I? But at a more worrying level, the use of the Low Attention Processing Model shows how innocuous adverts that don't seem to want to sell us anything work away at our subconscious to implant brand images and positive messages to drive up sales. The Cadbury Gorilla or the Sony

4. George Saunders (2003) Jon. www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/01/27/030127a_flcdon.

5. R.G. Heath, *The Hidden Powers of Advertising*, Admap Monograph 7, 2001.

Bravia bouncing balls seem like just a bit of harmless fun when the intention is much more directly commercial.

More of this later. For now we should reflect on a world where everyone is on a consumer treadmill, spurred on in large part by the role of advertising in creating ever more new things to need. Others have it, so we want it. In this way advertising takes the form of a collective action problem. Driven on by the seductive images of success and aspiration we compete with each other for status, but simply make ourselves feel like failures as we out bid each other for the latest car, gadget or holiday. We cannot win this race because there is no finishing line as an endless stream of new things to desire are created and sold to us. In the crowd, if the person at the front stands on tip toes then we all have to; and everyone is worse off.

The upshot is that we are richer but no happier; the fabric of society and the quality of our own lives is weakened as we take more and more individual purchasing decisions in an exhausting search for the good life, and of course the environment is threatened as we live eight planet lives, rather than just the one planet life we are obviously restricted to, in the pursuit of more and more. As recently as last year President Sarkozy in France commissioned a group of eminent economists led by US Nobel prize winner Joseph Stiglitz to look at the issue of happiness. They concluded that societies should be judged not solely on their economic production, but on the degree of well-being experienced by the people who live in them, and whether this well-being can be sustained into the future.

The recession provides a moment to stop and take stock. Many of us are having to cut back because credit is drying up, house prices are falling, wages aren't rising or jobs have been lost. All this creates real spending pressure, but can it be used as a turning point? Are we going to allow the advertisers to get us back on the treadmill as soon as the recovery picks up? Can we at least try and rebalance our lives just a bit by reining in the effects of advertising?

In suggesting this we are not saying that people should stop buying or advertisers should stop advertising altogether. Buying things is important to us as an expression of identity, sense of belonging and difference, but many of us buy too

much. Advertising, in turn, plays an important cultural role in society and clearly helps the economy. At its best it can help us as individuals make an informed decision about what to buy and where the best deals are available – but its reach is going too far. When more three years olds recognise the McDonald's symbol than recognise their own name – perhaps we should be asking if we have a problem? The nature and extent of advertising need to be questioned as new techniques and new technology see advertising spiralling out of control, often – as we will see – with damaging consequences.

The good society

Money makes some things easier – it means you don't have to worry about a big gas bill, or how to pay for the next school trip – but happiness is elusive and can't be bought. We are social beings and it is social relationships that make and direct our lives; the thousands of tiny social interactions change our mood, and shape who we are and who we will become. Advertising recognises this – which is why Nokia, the phone manufacturer, has the catch line 'connecting people', and there is a range of snacks called Friendchips. Volvo tells us that 'Life is better if lived together' and Orange that 'Without others I am nothing'. Advertising tries to convince us that we need to purchase to experience fulfilling social relationships. But in attempting to purchase the relationships we need we degrade and damage them.

Solid and enduring social relationships can't be purchased but need something that many of us are lacking – time. Many of us are time poor. To develop the social relationships we need to live fulfilling and enjoyable lives we need time. Time for a life with family and friends to do more of the things that make us happy. Of course advertisers also know how important time is to us, so they advertise Blackberrys with statements about how they will get rid of wasted time in your day to allow more time for the good things in life – but all the Blackberry does is make sure you are never free from work – in fact people with Blackberrys work an extra 15 hours a week.⁶

Advertising tries to make us feel as if we are in control of our lives and making the decisions that really affect us. But the promises of adverts are often

6. Hamish McRae (2009) 'We need to do more and email less' *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/hamish-mcrae/hamish-mcrae-we-need-to-do-more-and-email-less-1777151.html>.

illusory. Microsoft is currently spending millions trying to tell us that we invented Windows 7. If we think we built it then they think we will buy more of it. Real freedom and control come not just from the high street but through collective and democratic decisions that shape our world: what sort of society, economy and public services do we want? When and how do we get to choose not to choose? For a better society we need to get the balance right between decisions made as consumers and as citizens. Too much advertising that encourages too much consumerism undermines the chances of a good society and a good, well-balanced life.

Advertising can be an important part of the good society but it should be about providing information to us as consumers and citizens. No one wants a world in which we don't all share the enjoyment of funny adverts. And in times of crisis, like wars or natural disasters, public adverts can play a critical role in mobilising shared effort. But there has to be a balance and when technology and techniques change it is important that society decides democratically whether and how advertising is regulated in a way that benefits not just commercial interest but the public interest.

The current rules on advertising were drawn up in a time before many of the current technologies and psychological insights had been developed. The regulations now have to catch up with a new reality.

The principles behind the regulation of advertising

If society is to look again at whether and how advertising is to be more effectively regulated than we need to be clear about the principles behind any public decisions.

The first is the issue of **choice and place**. People should have the freedom to choose when they are exposed to advertising: when to look at product information and when not to. If we decide to buy a newspaper or magazine, or to subscribe to a television channel, then we are making the choice to look at the adverts that come with it. But in the street or when using public services or public transport it should be different. Here we should be free from private and commercial interest, and billboards and shop signs should not be allowed to disfigure our towns and roadsides.

Second, our civil liberties demand that the Internet should be a site for common good and not commercial practice without our permission. What we look at and search for **should not be recorded without our expressed permission** so that it can be used to compile data to sell us more.

Third, **children should be better protected**. Children cannot deal with the increasing blitz of advertising they are exposed to; they do not understand its purpose and are at risk of exploitation. Armies of psychologists and child development experts are recruited to work out how to sell more to children at an age when they don't even understand the concept of being sold to. They need our protection. There is a large body of academic work – including recent studies by Dr Richard Ryan and Dr Tim Kasser, professors of psychology at the University of Rochester and Knox College – arguing that seeking satisfaction in material goods is not only unfulfilling, but that people who put a primary focus on affluence also tend to experience a high degree of anxiety and depression, a lower sense of well-being, and greater behavioural and physical problems. These problems are heightened in vulnerable groups. A study by the Children's Society found that hyper consumption is causing a range of problems for children, including high family break-up, teenage unkindness and pressures towards premature sexualisation.

In a recent paper called 'Measuring the hidden power of emotive advertising', Robert Heath from the Bath School of Management and Pam Hyder from Standard Life look at the Low Attention Processing Model, which describes how advertising can work without high levels of attention being paid, and without being recalled. Note that this was formerly known as the Low Involvement Processing Model, which caused confusion in the USA with models that use involvement to refer to product or category involvement. Heath and Hyder summarise the Low Attention Processing as follows:⁷

1. Because brands match each other's performance so swiftly, and consumers exist in a time-poor environment, considered choice tends to give way to intuitive choice, in which emotions are more influential.
2. This situation inhibits the consumer's desire to seek out information about brands, and

7. R.G. Heath and P. Hyder, 'Measuring the hidden power of emotive advertising', *International Journal of Market Research*, vol 47, no5, 2005.

minimises the need for them to pay attention to advertising. Brand information can, however, be 'acquired' at low and even zero attention levels, using two distinct mental processes. The first process is passive learning, which is a low-attention cognitive process. Passive learning has been shown to be poor at changing opinions and attitudes but is able to record and link together brand names and other elements in an advert.

3. The second process is implicit learning, which is a fully automatic non-cognitive process that has been shown to be independent of attention. Implicit learning cannot analyse or reinterpret anything: all it is able to do is to store what is perceived, along with any simple conceptual meanings we attach to these perceptions.
4. Because of this limitation, implicit learning does not establish strong rational brand benefits in the consumer's mind. Instead it builds and reinforces associations over time and these associations become linked to the brand by passive learning. These associations are extraordinarily enduring, and can trigger emotional markers, which in turn influence intuitive decision-making.
5. Passive and implicit learning are semi-automatic and fully automatic mental processes. As such they will be used every time an advert is seen or heard, regardless of how little attention is being paid. Because attention to advertising tends to diminish over time, the occasions on which an advert is processed attentively will be outnumbered many times by the occasions on which it is processed at lower attention and its content is learned passively and implicitly. So advertising that exploits low-attention processing will work better when seen several times.

It is this subconscious effect that is so worrying for the development of children. This low attention processing advertising will not be affected by increasing children's educational awareness, which is why the government report on how to deal with advertising, which called for greater education to help children deal with the onslaught of adverts they face, will prove inadequate.⁸ The prefrontal cortex, which helps

mediate consumer choice, develops later in children and is impaired in older people, groups that are highly susceptible to advertising. Young children are often sucked in by advertisements for sugary foods, while the elderly, for example, can fall victim to buying fake insurance policies.

Fourth, **society as a whole, working through government, should decide what constitutes the good society and what role advertising should play in it.** We believe we should rebalance consumption with time and in the process look to redistribute income and wealth. This we believe means deterring excessive advertising, not least to help deliver the culture in which environmental sustainability is possible.

Fifth, the advertising industry, because of the leading role it plays in the creation of a consumer society, **has a responsibility to provide at least some help for 'good causes' free of charge and should be praised for the good campaigns it runs and held to account for those that are socially or environmentally damaging.**

The principle of placing necessary restrictions on advertising already exists. As a society we already recognise that advertising can and does go too far, which is why we already regulate it and have a body to ensure it abides by the regulations in the form of Ofcom. But new technology and the move towards more and more public forms of advertising, especially to young people, means new boundaries and guidelines now need to be set. This is why we believe the self-regulating Advertising Standards Authority should be replaced by a statutory body which is capable of effectively regulating this industry.

An awareness of the potential for advertising to go too far is the reason many developed countries regulate advertising to limit its more damaging effects. In Sweden, it is recognised that children struggle to deal with advertising and so advertising on television is banned. In São Paulo in Brazil advertising in public spaces is prohibited. Greece does not permit stations to run commercials for toy guns, tanks or other instruments of war, and bans adverts for all other toys between 7am and 10pm. In Spain adverts that promote the 'cult of body' in harmful way to girls have been outlawed. These are examples of redrawing not just the regulatory boundaries but also the moral boundaries of society. It is time Britain had such a moral debate.

8. David Buckingham (2009) *The impact of the commercial world on children's well-being*.

The problems caused by the advertising effect

Left unchecked, advertising in its new forms will make a substantial contribution to social and environmental problems. Given advances in technology and science there is now a strong public interest in deciding again when and where advertising should be allowed. There are pressing reasons why a new approach to advertising regulation is needed.

Sowing too many seeds of unhappiness

Advertising works today, in large part, by making us dissatisfied. We won't buy the next thing unless we are encouraged to believe that what we have got is no longer good enough. The goal of the advertiser is to make us dissatisfied so they can close the next deal and then the next. The myth that with the purchase of consumer durables you could live a satisfying life has been brilliantly perpetuated by the marketing industry. This is one of the key reasons why we are wealthier as a society but no happier, as Lord Layard has argued in his book *Happiness*.⁹

The number of people reporting themselves as very happy has declined over the past 40 years, according to Dr David Myers, an expert on the topic of subjective well-being and a professor of psychology at Hope College. Myers shows that compared with 40 years ago Western consumers are twice as rich and no happier; meanwhile, teen suicide tripled, reported violence almost quadrupled, and depression rates have soared, particularly among teenagers and young adults – those most vulnerable to the pressures created through advertising. It is impossible to prove a causal link with the growth in advertising but in his book *Affluenza*, Oliver James describes this new consumerism as a form of selfish capitalism, intimately intertwined with cyclical consumerism: the more anxious and depressed we are, the more we must consume, the more we consume, the more anxious and depressed we become – unable to break the cycle this will only get worse.¹⁰ Advertising is the fuel that is driving this system;

it persuades us to buy material possessions in the quest for happiness – but this is only making us unhappy.

The problem is that through advertising we are constantly being told that we can find satisfaction in material goods.

This is only exacerbated for vulnerable groups such as children and young people. A study by the Children's Society found that hyper consumption as part of the individualistic society is causing a range of problems for children, including high numbers of family break-up, teenage unkindness, and commercial pressures towards premature sexualisation.¹¹ Commenting on the Good Childhood Inquiry, Professor Philip Graham, Emeritus Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Institute of Child Health, London, and an inquiry panel member, said that commercial pressures may have worrying psychological effects on children. According to Graham:

One factor that may be leading to rising mental health problems is the increasing degree to which children and young people are preoccupied with possessions; the latest in fashionable clothes and electronic equipment... Evidence both from the United States and from the UK suggests that those most influenced by commercial pressures also show higher rates of mental health problems.¹²

Indeed David Cameron recently spoke out against the 'harmful and creepy' sexualisation of children, blaming irresponsible business for its aggressive approach: 'The marketing and advertising agencies even have a term for it: KGOY "Kids Growing Older Younger"... It may be good for business, but it's not good for families and it's not good for society, and we should say so.' Cameron has said that unless firms showed more responsibility he would not be afraid to introduce new laws and regulations. He has said he wants to reduce the 'cruder elements of commercialisation... Children today are being sold the idea that the path to happiness lies through excessive consumption... We can't go on like this. It's time we gave children back their childhood and got adults to behave like adults.'¹³

In this David Cameron is right – what may be good for business is not always good for society. Children need to be protected from this corrosive influence. We need to recognise that this is prob-

9. Richard Layard, (2006) *Happiness: lessons from a new science*, Penguin.

10. Oliver James, (2007) *Affluenza: how to be successful and stay sane*, Vermillon.

11. www.childrensociety.org.uk/all_about_us/how_we_do_it/the_good_childhood_inquiry/report_summary/13959.html.

12. www.childrensociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/6486_news.html.

13. Paul Waugh, 'Cameron: will stop shops sexualising children for gain', *Evening Standard*, 11 January 2010.

lematic and to protect children, who often are unaware they are even being solicited.

Advertising is the business of creating discontent and unhappiness, and it is working. We are buying more but are increasingly less fulfilled and a multi-billion-pound industry is working flat out to make sure we stay that way.

Consumer debt

'Everyone cares what gorgeous says', 'Gorgeous trumps everything', 'Gorgeous pays for itself', 'Gorgeous is worth it' proclaims the now infamous Jaguar commercial, while attractive young women and wealthy 'older gentlemen' enter and leave exclusive hotels, parties and bars. Most people probably won't get into debt to buy a Jaguar – often it is purchases of more trivial things like clothes and shoes that lead people gradually to creep into greater debt and sometimes it is the basics like rent and food that drive people to borrow more. But this advert is synonymous with the idea that excessive consumption is normal – that although these cars are out of the reach of all but the wealthiest aspiring to purchase them is a commendable aim.

To pay for our increasingly lavish consumer lifestyle there are two options: work harder and longer, or borrow. We are doing both. Driven by the pressure placed on us to continue spending and the desires created through advertising many of us have chosen to borrow to supplement our wages, which despite working longer hours for many have decreased in real terms.

In the UK as individuals we now owe a collective £1.3 trillion on credit cards, store cards, mortgages and loans. This figure is around 140 per cent of household income and has increased dramatically over the last decade; it stood at 105 per cent just ten years ago.¹⁴ Our total individual borrowing is equivalent to a third of the UK's total GDP, which in 2008 stood at £3.1 trillion.

Financially vulnerable individuals are increasingly encouraged to take out unsecured personal debt and as a result we have seen an increase in low-income individuals accessing unsecured debt in the form of credit cards, store cards and personal loans. These often come with harsh penalties for missed payments and high interest rates. In 2008, at the peak of the crash, Argos was

offering a store card with a 222 per cent interest rate. The card, which allows you to spend between £300 and £500, was advertised as being a good way to keep a check on what you spend – but most customers surely wouldn't realise that £300 repaid in £9 payments over 56 weeks becomes £504 in interest alone. Low income households with debt have the highest level of debt in relation to their income, meaning that their financial insecurity is much greater than those even slightly up the ladder, and this has got worse over the last decade.

'Debt is crucial to turning the ever faster wheels of our consumer society; it is the West's dirty secret as individuals have been encouraged – often by day-time TV adverts – to take out more and more debt to live the life as advertised'

Most people are home owners – about 70 per cent of people own their own homes. These people have an asset which in many cases is larger than the value of their debt, both unsecured and secured, and in a recent survey 40 per cent of householders agreed with the statement: 'My house value has risen so much that I do not worry about other debts I may have.'¹⁵ With house prices – which have acted as an illusory cushion for other financial problems – now in an unstable state – secured and unsecured debt are likely to become an increasing problem.¹⁶ We are already seeing the result of this in the form of higher bankruptcy rates: in 2005, before the crisis started, 67,584 declared bankruptcy; by 2008 this figure had risen to 106,544, if it wasn't for significant government intervention this number would be even higher.¹⁷

This level of debt is bad not just for individuals but for economic stability, as the root of the current financial crisis has been traced to the collapse of the sub-prime market and easy credit. But debt is crucial to turning the ever faster wheels of our consumer society; it is the West's dirty secret as individuals have been encouraged – often by day-time TV adverts – to take out more and more debt to live the life as advertised.

14. www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/quarterlybulletin/personal.htm.

15. From a survey conducted by NMG Research in March 2004 on behalf of Bradford & Bingley. The survey asked 2,000 individuals aged between 18 and 75 who had bought their main home with a mortgage, and were solely or jointly responsible for financial matters in their household, about their mortgaging behaviour and their attitudes towards mortgages.

16. See Toby Lloyd (2009) *Don't Bet the House On It: no turning back to housing boom and bust*.

17. The Insolvency Service www.insolvency.gov.uk/otherinformation/statistics/insolv.htm.

Time

We are also working harder and longer in order to stay on the treadmill, to make the money necessary to conform to the model of human life that is advertised. This means that we are increasingly time poor.

As we are forced to work flexibly our work-life balance is being degraded. To stay on the work-to-spend treadmill many of us are giving up things that make us happier – our social relationships. There are 442,000 individuals in Britain who are working in jobs that they think are causing them work-related stress at a high level. A further 13.6 per cent of working individuals think that their job is very or extremely stressful. Attempts to limit the encroachment of working time on our lives have halted. The UK is one of very few countries to have so watered down the European Working Time Directive that it is meaningless.¹⁸ Furthermore, many in the younger generation have reconciled themselves to never retiring and continuing to work in unfulfilling and stressful jobs into old age. Lack of pension security means individuals' life choices are limited and people will stay on the earn-to-spend treadmill longer and longer. In part this is because they are spending today, rather than saving for tomorrow.

We need time to be parents, friends, neighbours, volunteers and citizens. But we are constantly rushed and harried, in a long hours, high-spending culture. Working and spending is now prioritised over other social activities, particularly care. There is a finite amount of time and we all have a finite amount of money – if we choose to spend our time and money consuming we lose out on the other things. Advertising contributes to this loss of balance through the pressure it places on us to consume.

The environment

Advertising is contributing not just to our levels of debt and unhappiness but also to the unsustainability of the planet. As all companies produce new wants and then use the advertising machine to persuade you they are needs, we use and abuse more and more of the earth's – often finite – resources. Advertising functions to crank the machine:

Even assuming rapid progress in stabilizing human numbers and great strides in employing clean and

efficient technologies, human wants will overrun the biosphere unless they shift from material to nonmaterial ends. The ability of the earth to support billions of human beings depends on whether we continue to equate consumption with fulfilment.¹⁹

Gross levels of advertising are now fuelling an economic system that has huge environmental impacts. Economic growth has had a mushrooming impact on ecosystems.²⁰

The enormous buying capacity of the wealthy West's 'consuming classes' accounts for a disproportionate amount of the worldwide human impact on the environment and depletion of its resources. Industrial countries account for about 20 per cent of the global population, but consume about 80 per cent of many vital materials.

The average resident of an industrial country consumes ten times as much energy, three times as much fresh water, and nineteen times as much aluminium as someone in a developing country. We are using far more than our fair share.

The resource and environmental demands of bringing the world's population up to 'consumer class' styles of living would be disastrous in terms of ecological impact. This would triple greenhouse gas emissions, mining and logging. It would take multiple Earths to sustain this simply in terms of resources, let alone waste and destruction. This is made worse when the impact of international population growth is considered – eventually to reach eight or ten billion. This would double resource and environmental requirements even with limited increases in living standards globally. The West has a responsibility to future generations and to developing countries – it must play its part, but this is difficult when advertisers are constantly telling us not to consume less but to consume more.

This is affecting our living environment. Clean air is increasingly becoming a scarce resource in many of the world's cities. Over one billion people don't have access to clean water – much of this is the result of pollution created in the production process or in the disposal of waste. More than 10 per cent of the earth's fertile soil has been eroded or otherwise degraded through logging, deforestation and the clearing of land for agricultural use. Further, biodiversity is being lost at a rapid rate as ecosystems are destroyed through overdevelopment.

18. Ian Traynor (2008) Guardian www.guardian.co.uk/money/2008/dec/18/european-union-working-hours-brown.

19. José Goldenberg et al., (1987) *Energy for a Sustainable World*, World Resources Institute.

20. Clive Ponting (1993) 'Creating the affluent society'. In A. Green, *History of the World*, Penguin Books, 315–45.

In Britain today we live with an epidemic of waste:

- Almost half of the clothes in British wardrobes go unworn – this is around 2.4 billion items.²¹
- 900 million items of clothing are sent to landfill each year.²²
- We waste 500,000 tons of food per year; it is worth £400 million and disposal costs another £50 million – only a fraction is handed to charitable organisations that could use it.²³
- An estimated 13 million toys end up in landfill sites every year.²⁴
- 1 million tonnes of electronic goods are discarded in the UK every year.²⁵

Although factors such as technology and population growth are obviously important, consump-

tion levels have a key role to play in averting environmental disaster. Technological change and population stabilisation alone cannot save the planet; a complementary reduction of material wants must take place. Worldwatch Institute research associate Erik Assadourian argues that demand management is now essential for combating global warming:

*It's not simply greenhouse gases that cause climate change, it's our consumer lifestyle that causes the greenhouse gases that cause climate change. Until we end consumerism and the rampant advertising that drives it, we will not solve the climate crisis.*²⁶

Advertising, a profession that should be helping us, is acting to hinder us. It is time to work out how we might better control it for our own good.

21. YouGov survey, January 2008.

22. www.bournemouth.gov.uk/Residents/Waste_Recycling/Recycling/Waste_Facts.asp.

23. Energy Saving www.reduceituse.co.uk/Page/Waste/Wastefacts.htm.

24. www.uk-energy-saving.com/recycle_toys.html.

25. Waste Online www.wasteonline.org.uk/searchresults.aspx.

26. World Changing (2007) São Paulo Bans Outdoor Ads in Fight Against Pollution <http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/>

How can we counter the advertising effect?

Here we outline seven ways to rebalance the scope of advertising and use the industry to better effect.

I Ban advertising in public spaces

In public spaces we must be free from excessive solicitation.

Like many cities, until recently massive billboards and skyscraper-sized hoardings lined the streets of São Paulo in Brazil, but since 1 January 2007 advertising in public spaces in the city has been banned. In September 2006 the Mayor, Gilberto Kassab, submitted a bill to the São Paulo City Council that would completely change the urban environment, prohibiting practically all outdoor ads – which Kassab calls ‘visual pollution’ – in their present form.

‘Lei Cidade Limpa’ – Clean City Laws – ban all forms of outdoor advertising, including ads on taxis and buses – even ads on shopfronts are restricted, their signs limited to 1.5 metres for every 10 metres of frontage. The admen fought a ferocious campaign to stop it happening, forecasting massive unemployment. But the law was approved by a vote of 45 to 1 on the city council in September 2006.

As the world’s fourth-largest metropolis and Brazil’s most important city, the changes in São Paulo, a city of 20 million people, are highly significant. The law was hailed by writer Roberto Pompeu de Toledo as ‘a rare victory of the public interest over private, of order over disorder, aesthetics over ugliness, of cleanliness over trash’.

Since it was implemented nearly \$8 million in fines have been issued against transgressors. Although legal challenges from businesses have left a handful of billboards standing, the city is now stripped of its 15,000 billboards, 1,600 signs and 1,300 metal advertising panels. And, amid all the controversy, Kassab has been re-elected. The city has provided tax incentives to help small

businesses clean up some of the mess that showed up after the billboards were removed.

The bill had its critics. Dalton Silvano, the only city councillor to vote against the laws and (perhaps not coincidentally) an advertising executive, was quoted as saying in the *International Herald Tribune*: ‘Advertising is both an art form and, when you’re in your car, or alone on foot, a form of entertainment that helps relieve solitude and boredom.’ However, Augusto Moya, creative director of advertising agency DDB Brasil, claims the ban is forcing agencies to be more inventive: ‘People at all the agencies are thinking about how to develop outdoor media that does not interfere so much in the physical structure of the city.’ Moya takes an enlightened view of the law:

As a citizen, I think that future generations will thank the current city administration for this ban... There’s still a lot to be done in terms of pollution – air pollution, river pollution, street pollution and so on. São Paulo is still one of the most polluted cities in the world. But I believe this law is the first step for a better future.²⁷

This law has proved immensely successful and the measure is extremely popular with the city’s residents, with more than 70 per cent of residents approving.²⁸ Indeed, they help enforce the law by calling a hotline to report anyone breaking it.

São Paulo is not the only city with this sort of legislation. Bans on billboards exist in other parts of the world: Vermont, Maine, Hawaii and Alaska all prohibit them, as do some 1,500 towns in the USA. Buenos Aires is considering introducing similar legislation to that in São Paulo, and some European cities have sent delegations to Brazil to examine how the legislation works. In Europe, the Norwegian city Bergen has a ban on adverts and many others are imposing severe restrictions on billboards. The mayor of Moscow is about to introduce regulation to reduce their number and size. The municipal government of Beijing, China’s capital city, began reducing ads by targeting billboards for luxury housing. ‘Many [of the ads] use exaggerated terms that encourage luxury and self-indulgence which are beyond the reach of low-income groups and are therefore not conducive to harmony in the capital,’ the city’s mayor, Wang Qishan, told the *Wall Street Journal*.²⁹

0072/0.html

27. Patrick Burgoyne (2007) São Paulo: The City That Said No To Advertising www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jun2007/id20070618_505580.htm?chan=top+news_top+news+index_innovation+%2Bamp%3B+design.

28. Adbuster (2007) São Paulo: A City Without Ads https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/73/Sao_Paulo_A_City_Without_Ads.html.

29. Jason Lowe (2007) Beijing Mystery: What’s Happening To the Billboards? WSJ <http://online>.

Restrictions on billboards could be implemented at a local level by councils; they could free our everyday environment from the pressure to consume and allow us to see aesthetically pleasing, previously obscured sections of our urban landscape.

Of course there will be some empty spaces to fill on train and stations. People will want something to look at as they travel and wait. So why don't we fill these public spaces with reproductions of great art, poetry and inspiring campaigns to encourage us to volunteer, do more to save the environment or help a neighbour? It is not a joyless, colourless world we want but one of real beauty, a feeling of real belonging and citizenship.

A ban on adverts in public places should not just be limited to billboards. The definition of public places and what goes on in them needs to be extended if they are to be protected as truly public and if we are to enjoy the freedom not to be targeted with commercial messages we never asked for, especially when they are conducted by stealth.

This is why there should be restrictions on buzz marketing. Buzz marketing is one of the latest trends in advertising and is a deceptive way of encouraging us to buy something through 'undercover; selling agents'. Paid-for actors or advocates pose as ordinary members of the public to encourage us to take their advice or become interested in their product. That way, instead of coming from a faceless and distrusted company, the marketing message emanates from the best endorser possible: your coolest 'friend'. This practice is ethically questionable and needs to be reviewed. The government should legislate to restrict such activity and render it more transparent for the consumer.

Further, instead of relaxing the laws on product placement on television, as it is currently minded, the government should ensure that any programmes shown on free to air television have product placement scenes edited out. At the moment this proposal is out for consultation, with ITV in particular pushing for the ban to be lifted. It's not surprising because it could make them £25 million a year from the 'freedom' to insert products in key places on screen. But that doesn't make it right. The government is currently consulting on the issue and there has already been a backlash from religious leaders and child psychologists

against lifting the ban. Arguments against further encroachment of commercial interests are related not just to the social and psychological effects of allowing product placements on television but to the way in which they cheapen the experience of watching a film or a programme. When it becomes so obvious, we know that the entertainment is really just a backdrop to sell us more. And where will it end? Rory Sutherland from the Ogilvy agency remarks that in the recent film *The Invention of Lying* a bus drives past carrying the slogan 'Pepsi: for when you can't get Coke'.³⁰ Will advertisers start placing rival products in places on screens with unattractive characters that are likely to harm their brand?

'Adverts are designed and placed to make them impossible to ignore. Their extent and size now means they cannot be shut out'

Of course the advertising industry and its lobbyists will say that people should have the 'freedom' to experience such adverts and that they can choose to ignore them. The major problem with this argument is that the adverts are designed and placed to make them impossible to ignore. Their extent and size now means they cannot be shut out. We believe the greater freedom lies in the ability to choose when we are being solicited to. We should choose as individuals what we want to consume and not have the decision made for us, without our consent.

Some will argue that advertising is just about providing consumer information. But this long ceased to be the main driver of modern advertising. Billboard adverts are about association and emotion not empirical facts. The emphasis is on brand not performance.

The next argument, as was tried in São Paulo, is that there will be job losses. Well it won't be good for outdoor advertising industries like Maiden but they employ few people. What is likely to happen is that advertising investment will be switched to areas that are legal, that don't violate our environment and that we can consciously choose to look at, like television, newspapers and magazines. It is highly unlikely that advertising budgets in total will be cut.

wsj.com/article/SB118273311880146640.html

30. Rory Sutherland, 'We can't run away from the ethical debates

Finally, it will be argued that local authorities and public transport organisations need the revenues from advertising to pay for services. But these revenues are only very small compared with total expenditure and by ending the commercialisation of these spaces they would help recreate a sense of public spiritedness that would have many other social and economic benefits, such as a boost to tourism. In particular schools should be free from corporate sponsorship. Up until now schemes like Cadbury's chocolate for sports goods have been backed by ministers despite the fact that a child would have to work out for 90 hours to lose the calories necessary to earn their school one ball.

Public bodies like London Transport and Network Rail should be the first to ban adverts on the properties and land they own. Such bans could become a requirement of winning and keeping government contracts for the franchised rail and bus companies. The government at local and national level should start by banning adverts in public services and eventually extend such restrictions to all public places, as São Paolo has done.

2 Control advertising on the Internet

One expanding area of the public realm is the Internet; this is one of the key new commons and should be defended from damaging forms of commercialisation. The area of greatest concern in relation to advertising on the net is the way information about what we look at is stored and used. People think Google is a free search engine but in reality its business model is based on selling adverts for private companies. At the moment this is still based on highlighting commercial companies in search responses and companies pay to be near the top.

Increasingly, though, Google is moving into 'behavioural advertising'. That means it provides information about potential customers so that adverts can be personalised and targeted, and therefore are more likely to achieve a sale. Google creates a profile for all its users, registered or not, and remembers what they looked for and stores the information. This information is then in effect sold to the right companies who are more likely to sell goods and services that chime with our interests and concerns. If you search for information on gardening and watch YouTube

videos on gardening don't be surprised to receive more adverts for spades and seeds.

This might sound innocent enough, but the issue is one of freedom and choice; we have never been consulted on whether or not we wanted these companies to collect and store information about us. People in many cases are not even aware that this is happening – let alone included in the decision to allow it.

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT), the competition watchdog, is already scrutinising behavioural targeted advertising because much of it is feared to be misleading. The OFT is worried about the means of data collection and its use, and the European Union is also looking at this expanding practice. The technology is developing fast and weighing in too quickly with a regulatory response, which may come up with the wrong answer. We would like to see a full Ofcom review of advertising on the Internet, to include how information is gathered, stored and used, and to balance commercial interest with public interest and civil liberties.

Google defends its unauthorised data collection on the basis that it makes for better targeted adverts – you get a better service because you are more likely to get the adverts you want to see. This not only ignores the point but also fails to recognise that there is little cost incentive on the Internet not to advertise to blanket audiences because transmission costs are so low. The second line of argument is that 'free content' on the web has to be paid for, so why not put up with a few adverts? But this only tells us that the content is not 'free'. Both of these arguments fail to appreciate the principal point that none of these developments have taken place with the necessary public debate. There needs now to be a discussion about what is publicly acceptable and what needs to be regulated further.

3 End the commercialisation of childhood

Children, whose minds aren't yet ready to know they are being sold something, should be protected from adverts and commercial messages.

Most children under the age of 12 cannot tell when they are being solicited; advertising encourages dissatisfaction, and encourages children to

pester the life out of their parents every time they go to the shops. The purpose of advertising aimed at young children is to use them to influence how a proportion of parents' income is spent. Although the government promises action nothing has yet been done, and it is time to end to the commercialisation of children.

Children should be protected from powerful advertising machines designed to make them unhappy, and we are not the only ones who think so: in Sweden this legislation is a reality.

When children in Sweden watch the Pokemon cartoon series, at the end of each show they don't hear the jingle that you hear everywhere else in the world: 'Gotta catch 'em all.' Sweden's consumer ombudsman deemed this stealth advertising, ruling that the tune is a surreptitious plug for Pokemon playing cards.

Stockholm has prohibited all TV advertising aimed at children under the age of 12 since 1991. Other places have similar, if less radical, regulation. Greece doesn't permit stations to run commercials for toy guns, tanks or other instruments of war, and bans ads for all other toys between 7am and 10pm. In the UK at present guidelines forbid advertising alcohol or potentially harmful products to young people. The UK also stipulates that adverts should not mislead children about the size of products or what they can do – for instance by showing a toy car accompanied by the sound of a real engine. This is important but not enough. Maria Gasste, who heads the unit on children's television in the media division of the Swedish culture ministry, argues that 'commercial pressure on children is increasing'.³¹ This advertising creates an illusion. Like all illusions, when children finally get the product or use the service there is very likely to be a level of disillusionment because the goods and services are not going to live up to what is being presented in the advertisement. This whole process can make children feel inferior and reduce their self-esteem.

A change in regulation for advertising targeted at children could have positive effects in terms of children's general well-being and mental health. In the USA it is currently being argued by a team at the National Bureau of Economic Research that banning fast-food advertising on television in the USA could reduce the number of overweight children by as much as 18 per cent.³²

Such provisions could be introduced at a national level; they would ensure our children were protected from commercial pressures. It is our responsibility to protect vulnerable and more susceptible groups from the pervasive influence of advertising, as children have almost no voice in our society.

In addition, following the move by the British Medical Association (BMA), we call on the government to ban all advertising, promotion and sponsorship relating to alcohol because of the effect it has on young children. Between 1992 and 2006 household expenditure on drink grew by 832 per cent. The young are awash with messages about drinking alcohol and about the increase in binge drinking and anti-social behaviour brought on by alcohol.

The advertising industry and companies that sell to children would fight such a ban as they try to protect their self-interest against the public interest. In particular they would argue that the development of the Internet makes it virtually impossible to impose such a ban or that television stations are often beamed in from abroad. Of course a total ban would be difficult to enforce in a digital, Internet age. But much of the advertising to children on television could easily be covered. And just as important as the practicality of enforcing the law is the moral message we send out – about what is acceptable and unacceptable in society today.

4 Tax advertising

The polluter should pay – in this case the advertising industry is helping to pollute the planet through the unnecessary creation of wasteful consumer desires.

The social and environmental impact of advertising should now be recognised as an externality to the market. An externality is an economic side-effect: the unforeseen consequences of an activity, consequences that affect individuals, often in an adverse way, other than those engaged in the economic activity. For example, pollution created by a factory may result in clean-up costs for those living in the locality. Because these costs do not form part of the calculations of the people deciding whether

in marketing', *Market Leader: the Journal of the Marketing Society*, Quarter 1, 2010.

31. Brandon Michener (2001) Sweden Pushes Its Ban on Children's Ads <http://www.commondreams.org/headlines/01/0529-05.htm>

to go ahead with the economic activity, they represent a form of market failure.

The social and environmental cost of advertising must now be seen as external to the market. To resolve this externality there are a number of potential solutions: you could simply ban or limit the activity through a cap on the amount of advertising allowed. However this would be difficult to measure and could be costly to enforce. Instead the most effective way of managing an externality is to internalise it with a tax.

'The advertising industry can no longer hide from the consequences of its actions, just as society cannot hide from the social ills it faces and no one can hide from climate change driven by over consumption'

The tax could be levied on companies spending over £10,000 a year on advertising. This would ensure simplicity and cost effectiveness in administration and give small, independent or locally based businesses an advantage over their much larger and more powerful competitors. This tax would raise revenue but its main purpose would be to disincentivise advertising and social and sustainability problems it causes. Like all taxes, if applied equally to all, it should have no competitive effect on the markets that do advertise.

Total advertising spending in the UK in 2008 was £19.4 billion.³³ If we assume that 70 per cent of this is advertising by companies who spend over £10,000 per year on advertising, a 10 per cent tax levied on these companies could raise £1.3 billion per year in additional revenues. This additional revenue could be hypothecated towards schemes that regenerate local communities, particularly toward environmentally friendly infrastructure and democratic community engagement – the spaces in which we are citizens first and consumers second. One popular extension of the tax would be to junk mail companies – not just to offset the damage they cause to the environment but to dissuade the industry from clogging up our letter boxes still further and adding to the cost of refuse collection and recycling. There could be a special 'junk mail tax' of 20 per cent of the cost of each piece of mail to try and make such marketing less cost effective.

Again the industry will argue against such a tax. They will say it is punitive and will cause job losses. But the advertising industry can no longer hide from the consequences of its actions, just as society cannot hide from the social ills it faces and no one can hide from climate change driven by over consumption. Tough choices need to be made and we have to stem the tide of unnecessary need creation the advertising industry helps make happen.

5 Introduce a time and resources levy

The most persuasive minds in the land should be used occasionally for constructive social and public purposes, not just for commercial interests.

Some of the most creative minds in the country are used to get us to buy things we never knew we wanted, let alone needed, until their clever adverts got into our minds. But as we face the crises of sustainability, inequality and democracy in particular we need those minds to help us change our behaviour; to volunteer, give, downsize, vote, pay taxes or recycle – all the things and more that a functioning society requires. But such causes and issues don't have the resources to pay for such clever minds.

Given that the advertising tax detailed above would be paid by producers of goods and services and not the advertising companies themselves, we think it is reasonable to ask the industry itself to make a contribution to society by having a stipulated minimum requirement to help sell good causes that couldn't otherwise afford their help.

We suggest that 5 per cent of advertising industries' staff time should be deployed to encourage us to do the right thing rather than just buy the next thing. There would be no need to prescribe what good causes the agencies would work on, the staff and companies could pick for themselves. Then it would be easy to regulate and engender greater commitment for the work carried out. But the list of good causes the company worked for would be published and publicised each year and we are sure their clients would not pick advertising agencies that had not worked for the right people.

On this measure too the industry is likely to complain loudly about being singled out for

special treatment. But they are a special case, they are part of the motor that keeps us consuming more and more at a greater and greater social and environmental cost. What's more they have special and rare skills that are needed for more than just commercial gain. They may not like such a levy on their time – but it could have some interesting effects. It could make the industry a more attractive place to work and keep staff turnover costs down. And exposure to more NGOs and charities might be good for business and would certainly create new insights and experiences that could be transferred back to the commercial market.

6 Put the agencies' mark on their work

We believe that advertising companies should be more responsible for the adverts they create. If they successfully promote good ethical products and services then they should be praised. If they encourage us to buy gas guzzling cars or to consume excessively then people should know whose brain child the adverts were. So we are calling for all adverts in all media to carry the name or recognised symbol of the company that created them. If they are not proud of their work

and don't want to be held to account for it, then they shouldn't make the adverts in the first place.

7 Introduce statutory regulation of the advertising industry

Finally, despite the growth, complexity, influence and reach of the industry the bulk of advertising is still 'regulated' voluntarily through the company-controlled Advertising Standards Authority. Given the importance of the industry and its impact on so much of our lives this is no longer acceptable. Other aspects of the British economy, like financial services, have caused widespread harm through lax regulation. We are therefore calling for the Advertising Standards Authority to be put on a statutory basis, to be made accountable to Parliament and to tighten up its code, setting out criteria about what types of adverts are unacceptable. These could include:

- strengthened local authority powers to restrict outdoor advertising
- the introduction in some circumstances of a right of reply by charities and others to claims made in TV advertising
- the banning of advertising on mobile phones.

Conclusions

If you go to an advertising company to sell a product or service their planners will strip the issue down to bare essentials before building a campaign around it. It is the essence of the message they are after, the essence of the advertising industry is that new technologies, new science and new psychology have put the industry increasingly out of social and political control. Advertising regulations now need to catch up with the reality of the advertising effect on us and our planet. This is not the announcement of a war on advertising but a sensible rebal-

ancing of competing interests: those of profit making with society making and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately we should be free to choose when we receive commercial messages and when we don't. The public realm should be free from such dense commercialisation. Children should be protected until their minds are able to cope with complex selling techniques – they should be free to be children not just consumers. The Internet should not just become another commercialised realm in which rights of privacy are squashed; instead it should be maintained as a new common for everyone to be free to benefit from.

The debate about the advertising effect is a debate about our freedom.

Appendices

I UK advertising regulation

- 1962 First call from the Royal College of Physicians to ban the advertising of tobacco.
- 1965 From 1 August television commercials for cigarettes were banned, although commercials for loose tobacco and cigars continued until 1991.
- 1997 As part of the election campaign, the Labour Party pledged to ban all advertising of tobacco products.
- 1997 The Independent Television Commission introduced rules on advertisements to children, restrictions on adverts that 'might result in harm to children physically, mentally or morally', employ methods that 'take advantage of the natural credulity and sense of loyalty of children' or encourage children to pester their parents for products.
- 2001 Advertising tobacco products was banned in Scotland by the Scottish Parliament.
- 2002 The Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act banned most remaining forms of tobacco product advertising.
- 2003 The Communications Act set out Ofcom's responsibilities in the statute book.
- 2006 Ofcom proposed that junk food ads during TV programmes targeted at under-16s should be banned, under rules put forward by regulators.
- 2007 The European Union created a voluntary pledge programme through which 12 major food distributors agreed not to advertise to people below the age of 12 unless the products promoted certain health requirements.
- 2008 Regulations were introduced to protect consumers from buzz marketing. It became illegal to 'falsely claim or create the impression that the trader is not acting for purposes relating to his/her trade, business, craft or profession' or to 'falsely represent oneself as a consumer'.
- 2009 On 2 July the BMA called for a ban on all advertising for alcohol.

2 Advertising – a brief history

Advertising can be traced back to Greek and Roman times but its modern form is truly Anglo American in creation. Advertising agencies emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Britain and America. Originally adverts contained large amounts of product information. Accurate illustrative pictures in newspapers and magazines were accompanied by large amounts of text, which described in detail the selling points of products – company logos and branding had not yet started. When Pears Soap commissioned the then popular artist John Millais to add a bar of the soap to one of his paintings, other firms began to take notice and branding was born.

Advertising recognised the potential of the new mass media emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century and quickly took advantage. Technological developments in print media, lithography and photography gave early advertisers the tools and means by which to reach a much larger audience. They increasingly used cinema, and to a much greater extent radio, to transmit commercial messages. Radio allowed advertisers direct access to their customers' homes, and spoke to them in human tones that were easy to relate to. Lines between programming and advertising were blurred so that listeners could not always know when they were being solicited.

Both world wars led to significant progress for the advertising industry. After World War I advertising boomed. The total spent on advertising in the USA more than doubled from \$1.5 billion in 1918 to over \$3 billion in 1925. Many of the agencies that created this boom were instrumental in wartime propaganda campaigns and they brought new techniques with them into the post-war marketplace. Their success continued and the later post-World War II boom of the 1950s saw these new advertising techniques accompanied by an increased demand by producers for their skills as the number of products on the market grew exponentially – an estimated 5,000 new grocery items were introduced to American shoppers in 1957 alone. This diversification of the marketplace drove the advertising industry to analyse society and target their products much more carefully. Hundreds of

social scientists moved into advertising, and the agencies began to cultivate a deeper knowledge of their customers.

The later spread of television gave advertising a new frontier, as it could enter people's homes in more elaborate and engaging ways. This new medium further blurred the lines between programming and advertising. Popular shows were often sponsored by brand names and product placement began to take root in this early stage of television. The UK did not see the advent of television advertising until the launch of ITV in 1955.

During the 1950s and 1960s the tone of advertising was always instructive and informative, but in the 1970s this changed as advertisers attempted to sell their products through association with a particular lifestyle. These techniques were developed to deal with consumer 'fatigue' as individuals become unresponsive to traditional communication through the pure volume of products on sale and the number of adverts for them.

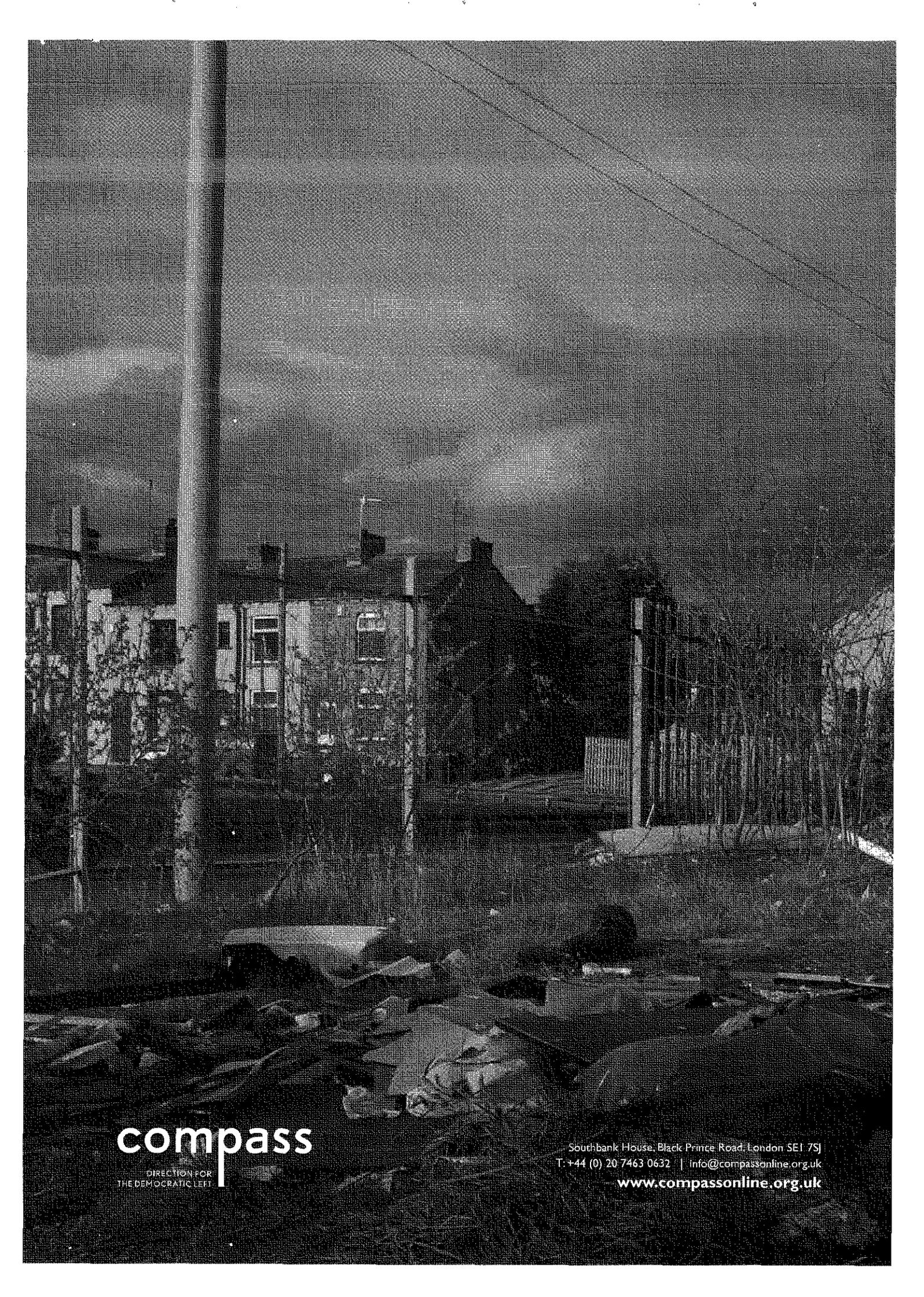
Advertising boomed in the 1980s with advertisers gaining greater and greater access to people's homes through the growing ownership of television. More products and more marketing freedom accompanied Thatcher and a period of deregulation.

Over subsequent years advertising became much more brash and hard to avoid, and proliferated across the social landscape. The growth of advertising came hand in hand with modern

forms of monopoly capitalism. Mass production and mass consumption depend on each other but in turn they demand a degree of homogenisation in consumers' tastes and desires. This was the role of advertising. Not just in Britain or even the USA, but across the world, 'brand image' grew in significance, as did advertising in its numerous forms. Advertising over this period moved away from its classic aim of providing information towards one of 'brand promotion'.

Over the years the advertising community has shaped and been shaped by changing economic and social factors, however, the purpose of advertising has remained constant: to sell products. But although to start with the advertising community did this by providing detailed descriptions of the products in question, now it sells products through brand image. Nowadays to sell a product, advertisers create needs, wants and desires by instilling a sense of inferiority in consumers, and this happens globally.

In this way the growing Western ideal of empowered individual consumers, mass consumption and mass production spreads globally, creating global brands, global markets and global advertising. In 2007 \$385 billion was spent on advertising worldwide, and this figure will exceed \$450 billion by 2010.³⁴ This industry is a behemoth, which no longer informs consumers but inspires in them dissatisfaction with life. This dissatisfaction spreads and it contributed to the social recession, the social malaise we now find ourselves in.

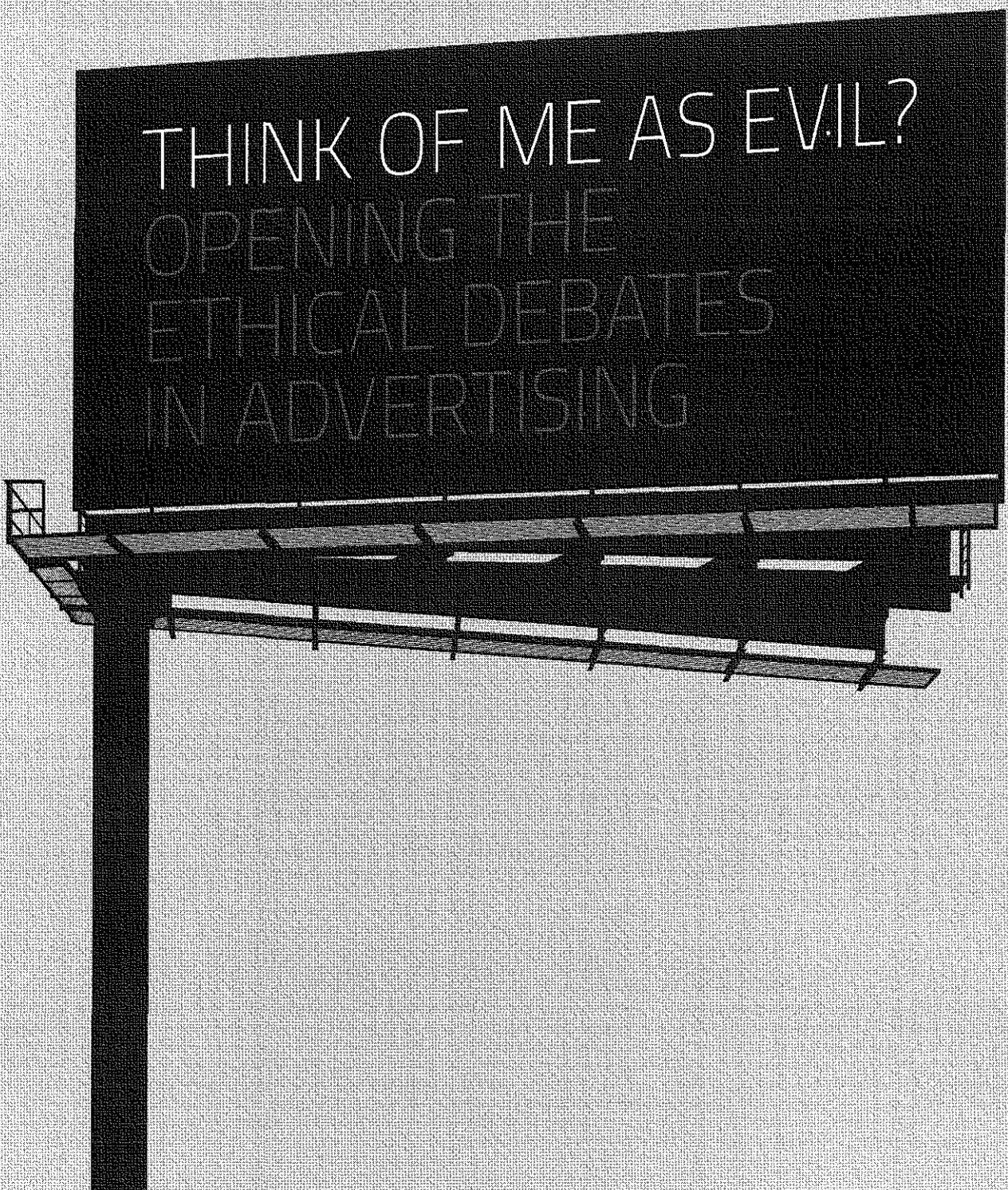


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WORKING
TOGETHER TO
HELP TACKLE THE
ROOT CAUSES OF
ENVIRONMENTAL
CHALLENGES



October 2011

This report was written by
Jon Alexander / Tom Crompton / Guy Shrubsole

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Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC) is an independent charity, whose work is aimed towards building a sustainable society. Through research and advocacy, we press for the structural changes needed to effectively tackle climate change and ecological degradation.

WWF believes in a future where people and nature thrive. Best known as the world's leading conservation body, we've seen first-hand how wildlife, the environment and human activity are all interlinked. That's why our passion for safeguarding the natural world has to be backed up by other environmental action—tackling the global threat of climate change and helping people to change the way they live to ease pressure on natural resources.

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THINK OF ME AS EVIL? OPENING THE ETHICAL DEBATES IN ADVERTISING

Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC)
WWF-UK

The truth is that marketing raises enormous ethical questions every day—at least it does if you're doing it right. If this were not the case, the only possible explanations are either that you believe marketers are too ineffectual to make any difference, or you believe that marketing activities only affect people at the level of conscious argument.

Neither of these possibilities appeals to me. I would rather be thought of as evil than useless."

Rory Sutherland

Written in his former capacity as President of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA)

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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS REPORT

Clive Hamilton

Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Canberra, and author of *Growth Fetish* and *Requiem for a Species*

"Today's best and brightest graduates in psychology and cognitive science are snapped up by the advertising industry because they want to know how best to manipulate us. The truth none of us wants to admit is that the advertisers know our minds better than we do. This report should serve as a kind of prophylactic to help stop the advertisers planting desires in our heads."

Martin Kirk

Head of UK Campaigns, Oxfam GB

"This report is tapping into deep and critically important cultural truths. Anyone interested in understanding or influencing the path into the future should take note. It is hard to overstate the incredible reach of commercial advertising into our lives today—we are wrapped in it from cradle to grave—and yet we have traditionally paid precious little heed to its influence when looking at how to bring about positive social change. This report turns, finally, an eloquent, authoritative and forensic eye on this vastly influential activity. NGOs, policy makers and, most importantly, the producers and advertisers themselves, should read it. Now."

Neal Lawson

Chair, Compass

"This is a cool, calm and balanced analysis of the possible effects of advertising. Because the authors have been so reasonable and level-headed, this report should be read and digested by all who care about the quality of our lives in a world driven by consumerist imperatives."

Justin Lewis

Head of Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

"Our cultural environment is increasingly dominated—and paid for—by advertising, and yet for too long we have been unwilling to acknowledge the broad social impact of this dominance. This excellent report foregrounds a series of questions about why our daily diet of hundreds of commercial messages might *not* be good for us. Drawing on relevant research, the report makes a compelling case that advertising messages, *en masse*, constrain our ability to solve social and environmental problems and imagine a better world. In short, greater limits on advertising may be both popular and in the public interest."

Peter Lipman

Chair, Transition Network

"The Transition movement, in seeking to address issues such as climate change and the end of cheap energy, has had to explore the full range of influences on all of our actions and decisions. Advertising and marketing certainly is one of those influences, playing as it does such a significant role in shaping the cultural stories which underpin our lives, and this report brings great and welcome clarity on the very real and negative impact which it has."

Caroline Lucas

MP for Brighton Pavilion and leader of the Green Party of England and Wales

"This report shines a light onto a seldom scrutinised sector—the advertising industry. Advertising, it suggests, harms society and the planet by increasing consumerism, manipulating cultural values, and intruding into all aspects of our lives. Yet where are the civil society campaigns against it? This report, it's to be hoped, will inspire campaigners to take up the cause as their own."

Ed Mayo

Secretary-general, Co-operatives UK

"The advertising sector is among the last to be touched by the ideas of corporate responsibility. The pharmaceutical industry accepted decades ago that they are responsible for the impact of the drugs they produce, while the advertising sector rarely accepts any responsibility for its product other than its own freedom to advertise. It is high time for the sector to get to grips with its ethics."

Alastair McIntosh

Centre for Human Ecology and author of *Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*

"For many decades marketeers have countered ethical objections by saying they do not increase consumption: they simply rearrange the deckchairs by offering consumer choice. This report lays bare such mendacity. In a world faced by burning social and environmental issues that are driven in large measure by consumerism, it challenges and invites the industry to a deeper ethical engagement and also contributes a research foundation for legislation."

George Monbiot

Journalist, author and campaigner

"This is a fascinating, clear-headed and critically important report. Reading it, I'm struck by the fact that nothing quite like it has been written before. Why not, I wonder, when this issue looms so large in our lives, and the ethical questions involved so obviously require investigation? I'm delighted that it's been done at last, and that an urgently-needed debate can now begin."

Agnes Nairn

Professor of Marketing and co-author of *Consumer Kids*

"This clear and compelling report provides a cogent point of departure for a much overdue open, public debate on the role of advertising in contemporary society. Coming in the wake of mounting concern over the impact of consumerism on the well-being of children and adults alike, it highlights as much what we don't know as what we do. I sincerely hope that the advertising industry will accept the invitation to engage in a full, frank and mature debate over the very important issues raised."

Avner Offer

Chichele Professor of Economic History, All Souls College, Oxford, and author of *The Challenge of Affluence*

"Despite its alarmist title, this is a careful evaluation of the costs and benefits of advertising. It makes a good case, on economic, social, and cultural grounds, for respite from the all-pervasive advocacy of consumerism."

Gus Speth

Sara Shallenberger Brown Professor in the Practice of Environmental Policy, Yale University; Founder of the World Resources Institute; Co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council

"Today's environmentalism is too narrow in vision, too restricted in approach. For too long, it has sidestepped the challenge of building deeper approaches to tackling the problems that it addresses. But there are signs that this is beginning to change. *Think of me as Evil?* offers one such cause for hope.

This is not a sensationalist report. It represents a careful sifting of the evidence on the cultural impacts of advertising. It is candid about the gaps in the research base. Yet it still serves, compellingly, to level profound challenges at both the advertising industry and the environmental movement. Of the former, it demands: demonstrate that you have a positive cultural impact—that you're not serving to spur rampant consumerism, and to erode those very values upon which widespread public concern about the environmental crisis must come to be built. And of the latter, it demands: demonstrate that the interventions you make are a credible and proportional response to the scale of challenges that you seek to tackle."

Stewart Wallis

Executive Director, the new economics foundation (nef)

"There is increasing awareness that (a) we are running out of planetary resources, with over-consumption by the most fortunate being the biggest contributing factor and (b) that for many, this increased consumption does not even lead to increased well-being—yet we carry on with business as usual! Understanding the role of advertising in leading to over-consumption and to the creation of values and attitudes that may prevent us tackling our key environmental and social problems is therefore vital. This report brilliantly sets out the issues and arguments and points the way to both necessary actions and crucial further research."

FOREWORD

David Norman
Director of Campaigns
WWF-UK

Guy Shrubsole
Director
Public Interest Research Centre

Earlier this year, PIRC and WWF-UK worked together, as part of a wider group of third sector organisations, to publish *The Common Cause Handbook*. As this *Handbook* showed, particular cultural values motivate public appetite and demand for serious political engagement to tackle today's profound social and environmental challenges. Other, opposing values serve to undermine such responses and operate to close down political space for implementing the ambitious policies that will be needed if these challenges are to be tackled. The *Handbook* presented evidence that cultural values are likely to be shaped by a range of influences—including, importantly, people's exposure to commercial advertising.

Think of me as Evil? reviews the evidence for the cultural impacts of advertising in more depth. It concludes that the potential impacts of advertising should be of pressing concern to a wide range of third sector organisations—irrespective of whether they are working on poverty, climate change, child deprivation and neglect, abuse of human rights, ecological degradation, physical and mental ill health, or failure to place proper value on non-human life.

It is incumbent on the advertising industry to demonstrate that the cultural impacts of advertising are benign. We know that many people within the industry, including several who have contributed to putting this report together, care deeply about the impacts of advertising. We hope that this report will be used by such employees to bolster arguments for precautionary measures, and to press for investment in the research necessary to explore these concerns more deeply.

But, crucially, this report also builds the case that civil society organisations should develop a far more rigorous and concerted approach to press these arguments harder, and to join together—irrespective of the issues upon which they work—to campaign for appropriate changes in policy and practice. The time is ripe to do so. Rising public disquiet about the creeping commercialisation of childhood has led to a string of enquiries by successive UK governments and, most recently, by UNICEF. But we believe this is not only an issue of influence over children. It is about the shaping of our entire culture, and there is a need for a deeper debate about the impacts of advertising on that culture.

We hope this report will contribute to that discussion. If you too are interested in participating in this conversation, we would be delighted if you were to get in touch—whether you work inside or outside the advertising industry.

1

INTRODUCTION

The opening quote to this report is taken from an article by Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman of Ogilvy UK and then President of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). He concluded his article in *Market Leader* last year by inviting a serious-minded debate about the role of advertising and marketing in society: "I am much keener that we should accept the vast moral implications of what we all do and debate them openly rather than fudge the issue."²

It is to Sutherland's invitation that this report responds. Too often, the debate for which he calls has been held back by shrill and poorly-evidenced arguments on both sides. On the one hand, advertising's detractors have sometimes been quick to level accusations that are poorly supported by the empirical evidence. On the other hand, the industry's supporters have often been overly dismissive of opposing viewpoints: perhaps happy that the unsteady opposition which they encounter allows them to rely upon an incomplete evidence base, and arguments that are at times inconsistent. The Advertising Association has itself stated that "the stock of research, analysis and academic study to support, justify, buttress and prove [advertising's] worth is at rock bottom."³

The public debate about advertising—such as it exists—has also been curiously unfocused and sporadic. Civil society organisations have almost always used the products advertised as their point of departure—attacking the advertising of a harmful product like tobacco, or alcohol, for instance—rather than developing a deeper critical appraisal of advertising in the round. The inconsistencies contained within the Code of the Committee of Advertising Practice (the CAP Code) are symptomatic of an industry that has seldom been challenged to reconsider its fundamental assumptions.⁴

This report argues that modern advertising's impact on British culture is likely to be detrimental to our wellbeing, and may well exacerbate the social and environmental problems that we collectively confront. The balance of evidence points clearly in this direction.

The standard defences of the advertising industry can be summarised in three assertions, which, taken together, reflect the main industry response to critics of advertising:

- 1: Advertising merely redistributes consumption
- 2: Advertising is simply a mirror of cultural values
- 3: Advertising is about the promotion of choice

This report addresses each assertion in turn. It finds that, while there is material to support each claim, there is also substantial evidence to the contrary. We present evidence that advertising increases overall consumption; that it promotes and normalises a whole host of behaviours, attitudes and values, many of which are socially and environmentally damaging; that it manipulates individuals on a subconscious level, both children and adults; and that it is so pervasive in modern society as to make the choice of opting-out from exposure virtually impossible.

In constructing these arguments, this report also strives to be clear about where the evidence base does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the impacts of advertising. But it is not good enough for the industry to be content with such areas of uncertainty; there are clearly important grounds for concern about the impacts of advertising, and research to clarify these concerns is urgently needed. Responsible advertising agencies and their clients should begin to find ways to support such research—while preserving the independence of the investigators. The advertising industry should also take precautionary action to reduce its probable negative impacts in ways we recommend in our concluding chapter. Civil society organisations, meanwhile, need to give much greater attention to the impacts that advertising has on British society, culture, and the global environment.

2

DOES ADVERTISING
MERELY REDISTRIBUTE
CONSUMPTION?

One frequent critique of advertising is typified in a recent report by Hazel Henderson and Fritjof Capra:

*"The goal of most national economies is to achieve unlimited growth of their GDP through the continuing accumulation of material goods and expansion of services... Since human needs are finite, but human greed is not, economic growth can usually be maintained through **the artificial creation of needs through advertising**. The goods that are produced and sold in this way are often unneeded, and therefore are essentially waste. Moreover, the pollution and depletion of natural resources generated by this enormous waste of unnecessary goods is exacerbated by this waste of energy and materials in inefficient production processes" (emphasis added).⁵*

This is an important critique. If advertising does, in fact, increase aggregate material consumption, it can be pinpointed as an engine of the least sustainable aspects of an economy that is currently using up resources, destroying ecosystems and creating pollution at an unsustainable rate. Such trends, in turn, threaten to exacerbate global poverty and pose grave challenges for just and equitable development. Even if the world economy proves capable of decarbonising swiftly enough to avert climate change, and dematerialising production in time to avert various peak resource crises, advertising will have made the uphill struggle that much harder.

Assertions such as those levelled by Henderson and Capra are, however, inevitably controversial. The controversy that they generate revolves around the disputed evidence as to whether advertising tends to *increase aggregate* consumption (through the "creation of artificial needs"), or whether it simply serves to *redistribute* consumption from one product to another. To put it in the language of business—does advertising in aggregate increase the size of the market, or does it redistribute the share of different products within the market?

The idea that advertising increases an overall desire to consume is usually attributed to J.K. Galbraith.⁶ He argued, in *The Affluent Society*, that human wants must be contrived in order to achieve on-going demand for things, once basic needs have been adequately met. He called this the dependence effect:

"As a society becomes increasingly affluent, wants are increasingly created by the process by which they are satisfied. This may operate passively. Increases in consumption, the counterpart of increases in production, act by suggestion or emulation to create wants. Expectation rises with attainment. Or producers may proceed actively to create wants through advertising and salesmanship."⁷

The advertising industry, however, tends to dismiss this argument, advocating the 'spread-it-around' perspective, according to which advertising is held to redistribute consumption, rather than expand it. For example, Tim Ambler, Simon Broadbent and Paul Feldwick review over 150 papers from *Advertising Works*, scrutinising these for reports of impacts on market size. They conclude that such effects are only significant in a minority of cases.⁸ Some academic studies support this view. Statisticians R. Ashley, C.W.J. Granger and R. Schmalensee, who conducted early work in this field, concluded their study by stating that "no significant statistics suggesting that advertising changes affect consumption were encountered."⁹

But the sum of evidence from social science research on this issue is inconclusive. While some early approaches to investigating the nature of this relationship rejected the idea that advertising affects aggregate consumption, others have supported it.¹⁰ In their 1994 review of earlier studies, Chulho Jung and Barry Seldon set out to address some of the shortcomings they identified in previous work: shortcomings that relate particularly to the statistical methods upon which these earlier studies rely. In their own study, they detected a two-way causality:

"[O]ur results suggest that consumption not only affects advertising, as previous research has shown, but that the converse is also true: aggregate advertising affects aggregate consumption."¹¹

This area of research has been largely dormant since Jung and Seldon published their conclusions, although the more recent work that does exist also seems to corroborate Galbraith's original assertions. Thus, Benedetto Molinari and Francesco Turino conclude their recent study on the macroeconomic impacts of advertising as follows: "[We tested] the spread-it-around against market enhancing [or 'dependence effect'] hypotheses as originally stated... by Galbraith. Our main finding is that the second hypothesis is preferred by the data."¹²

Nor do all advertisers believe the dominant arguments of their own industry. As Guy Murphy, formerly Vice President of the advertising agency BBH and now Global Strategy Director at JWT, has written: "Some academic studies, especially about advertising, can encourage a view that market growth is too ambitious. They claim advertising increases market share but not market size. (A theory vociferously used by the cigarette industry,)... [But] it is simply not true to say that advertising does not influence market size." Rather, argues Murphy, advertisers can and should try to grow the size of markets, not simply engage in a war with other brands. He calls on advertisers to "see themselves as trying to manipulate culture; being social engineers, not brand managers; manipulating cultural forces, not brand impressions."¹³

Indeed, the academic evidence on tobacco advertising suggests that advertisers have historically been major engineers of cultural change. A recent meta-study by the US Department of Health finds that: "The total weight of evidence—from multiple types of studies, conducted by investigators from different disciplines, and using data from many countries—demonstrates a causal relationship between tobacco advertising and promotion and increased tobacco use."¹⁴ Tobacco advertising, it seems, has not simply redistributed consumption between brands, but increased the overall size of the market. Still, whether the tobacco market has expanded at the expense of other consumer goods can only be answered by looking at the relationship between advertising and consumption in aggregate.

Given the importance of the issue, it is surprising that there is so little recent and relevant empirical research. Francesco Turino, an economist at the Universitat d'Alacant in Spain, and one of the authors of the most recent study on advertising and aggregate consumption, suggests that there are two reasons for this lack of research—one ideological, one practical:

"(1) [A]dvertising is typically studied in microeconomics while the relationship between advertising and aggregate consumption involves issues related with macroeconomic theory. Macroeconomists believe that advertising just redistributes demand across firms without affecting the total market size. As a result, many of them are not ideologically interested in this topic.

*(2) [The necessary] data are not really available. In fact, while you could find for free data on advertising expenditures at annual frequency, it is almost impossible to find data at quarterly frequency."*¹⁵

Yet from a macro-economic perspective, it is perfectly conceivable that advertising could increase overall consumption, in at least two ways. In the first case, advertising can be theorised to shift household income from savings and investments towards spending and borrowing—with individuals persuaded to use earnings or take out loans to buy the latest consumer products, rather than put money aside for later. In fact, there is some empirical evidence that this happens; one recent study finds that, historically, "exposure to television advertising increases the tendency to borrow for household goods and the tendency to carry debt."¹⁶

Secondly, advertising may lead to individuals seeking higher incomes—trading in their leisure time for longer working hours in order to receive higher pay. Once again, there is emerging evidence for this. Several researchers suggest the existence of a work-spend cycle whereby advertising heightens expectations about the acceptable material standard of living, leading people to work longer hours in order to attain a disposable income that allows them to meet those expectations.¹⁷ Keith Cowling and Rattanasuda Poolsombat at the University of Warwick, for example, find that "advertising may raise the desired amount of marketed goods and services for which workers find it necessary to work long hours."¹⁸ Stuart Fraser and David Paton, from the Universities of Warwick and Nottingham respectively, point out that, although working hours in the UK declined substantially between 1850 and 1950, the average Briton's working hours have stabilised at around 42–43 hours per week over the past forty years. Meanwhile, UK advertising expenditure increased from £3.8bn in 1970 to £10.5bn by 1997. Using statistical methods to explore the relationship between advertising spend and working hours, they suggest that: "Advertising seems to have a significant impact in both the identified male and female long run labour supply relations... Based on the present results, the increase in hours worked, associated with the change in *per capita* real advertising between 1952 and 1997, is estimated to be between 21% and 46%... for male weekly hours... The corresponding estimates for female weekly hours suggest an increase of between 20% and 45%."¹⁹ In other words, "an increase in advertising is associated with an increase in hours worked... causality runs unidirectionally from advertising to hours."²⁰

While the evidence is not conclusive, it seems that advertising may be encouraging society to save less, borrow more, work harder and consume greater quantities of material goods.

Certainly there is a need for further, sustained empirical research, carried out transparently. Until now there has been sufficient uncertainty in the evidence base for both sides to adopt unhelpfully dogmatic stances. This seems to be one important reason why discussion about the cultural impacts of advertising has reached an impasse.

Yet this is only just the beginning of the debate. As the following sections discuss, advertising may also have major implications for cultural values, and for freedom of choice.

3

IS ADVERTISING SIMPLY
A MIRROR OF CULTURAL
VALUES?

For some within the industry, advertising simply presents a reflection of ourselves—holding up a mirror to society, warts and all. If we don't like it, it's ourselves we need to change, not advertising. Critics of advertising often assert advertising is, by contrast, a 'manipulator of the masses', seeking to shape society in its own image.

The distinction between 'manipulator' and 'mirror' seems contrived. Irrespective of the extent to which advertising moulds cultural values, it must also hold a mirror to them. This is because the advertising industry is inevitably constrained by the need to reflect—albeit imperfectly—cultural values. As Stephen Fox writes:

*"To stay effective advertising couldn't depart too far from established public tastes and habits; consumers must be nudged but still balk at being shoved."*²¹

But there is also evidence that advertising will further embed and reinforce the values that it reflects. In the language of psychology, it 'models', or 'normalises', particular values socially. Advertising—in common with other communications—will tend inevitably to establish social norms which condition us to accept certain values, and which will suppress expressions of alternative values. As Rory Sutherland says, with reference to smoking:

*"While I can accept that the purpose of tobacco advertising was not to encourage people to smoke, I find it astounding that anyone could barefacedly suggest that cigarette posters seen everywhere did not serve to normalise the habit."*²²

Cigarette posters may not be seen everywhere any more, but advertising as a whole has proliferated. One recent advertising textbook estimates that the average American is exposed to between 500 and 1000 adverts every day and higher numbers are often quoted.²³ Indeed, in his basic training in the industry, one of the authors of this report was taught always to remember that his prospective audience would be seeing 3000 messages a day—something that was presented as problematic only because of the challenge it posed for designing effective new advertisements.

As a direct result of this pervasiveness, advertising seems set to be an important factor in normalising particular cultural behaviours, attitudes, and most fundamentally, values.

3.1 WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CULTURAL VALUES?

Cultural values have been shown, through extensive research, to be of critical importance in determining our attitudes and behaviour towards social and environmental issues. Building on pioneering work by social psychologist Shalom Schwartz in the 1990s, and since testing this in dozens of academic studies, researchers have identified a number of values which occur and recur consistently across different countries and cultures.²⁴

A recent model, based on Schwartz's work and developed by Frederick Grouzet and Tim Kasser, highlights an important split between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' values. Intrinsic values refer to those things which are more inherently rewarding to pursue—a sense of community, affiliation to friends and family, and self-development, for example. Extrinsic values, on the other hand, are values that are contingent upon the perceptions of others—they relate to envy of 'higher' social strata, admiration of material wealth, or power. (For more examples, see Table 1).

The link between values and behaviours is well documented for a range of concerns. Placing greater importance on extrinsic values is associated with higher levels of prejudice, less concern about the environment and lower motivation to engage in corresponding behaviours, and weak (or absent) concern about human rights.²⁵ People who attach greater importance to extrinsic values are also likely to report lower levels of personal wellbeing.²⁶

Taking the evidence as it relates to the environment as an example:

- Studies in the US and the UK show that adolescents who more strongly endorse extrinsic values report themselves as being less likely to turn off lights in unused rooms, to recycle, to reuse paper and to engage in other positive environmental behaviours.²⁷
- Similar findings have been reported for American adults, among whom extrinsic values are found to be negatively correlated with the frequency of pro-environmental behaviours such as riding a bicycle, reusing paper, buying second-hand, and recycling.²⁸
- The ecological footprints of 400 North American adults were also found to be associated with their values. A relatively high focus on extrinsic values was related to a higher ecological footprint, arising from lifestyle choices regarding transportation, housing and diet.²⁹

Similar results are found for a range of social concerns.

Experiments show that extrinsic and intrinsic values act in opposition—placing importance on extrinsic values, for example, diminishes a person’s regard for intrinsic values, and reduces his or her motivation to engage in environmentally or socially helpful behaviour. This is not to say that extrinsic values should be viewed as ‘evil’, or that we ought seek to expunge them. Rather, they are an inherent part of human nature; all people can hold all values at all times, but with differing levels of emphasis. However, the evidence strongly suggests that where extrinsic values are accorded particular importance, pro-social and pro-environmental behaviours will be undermined.³⁰

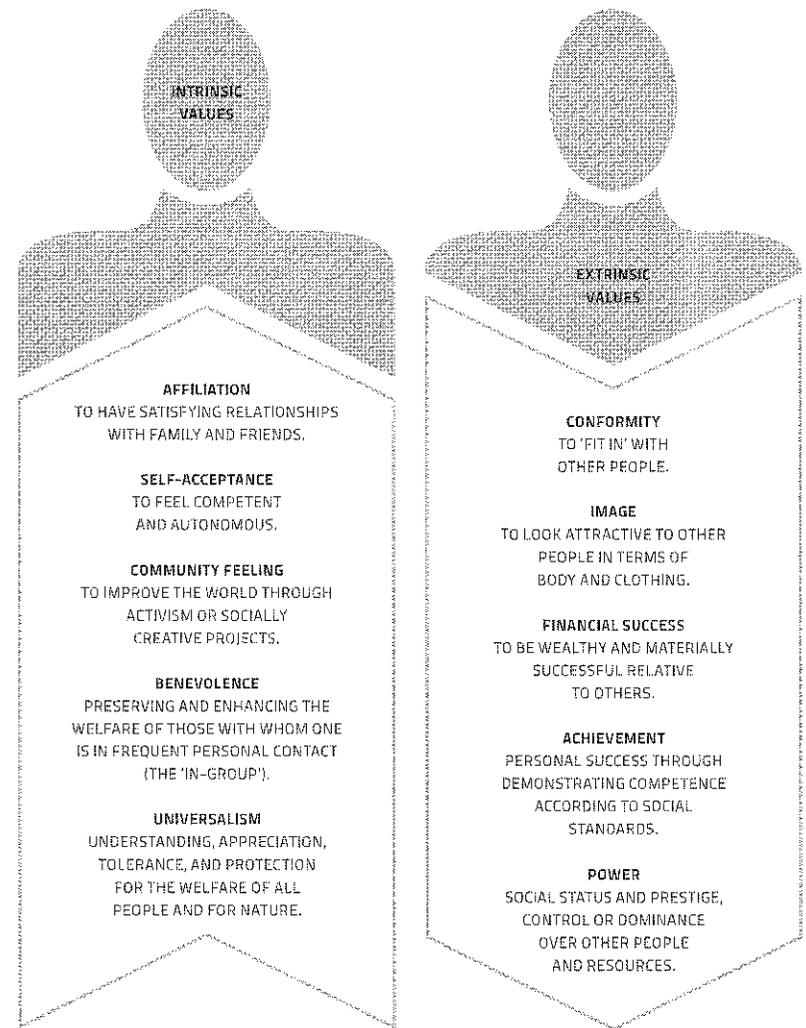


Table 1: Examples of opposing pairs of intrinsic and extrinsic values.³¹

3.2 ADVERTISING APPEALS IMPORTANTLY TO EXTRINSIC VALUES

The great majority of advertising money is spent in ways that appeal to extrinsic values—that is, values associated with lower motivation to address social or environmental problems. This is to be expected: the behaviour sought as an output of almost all advertising is an act of consumption. It seems clear that acts of consumption are more likely to fulfil extrinsic value motivations than intrinsic ones. Buying a Lexus car or a Sony TV can really make people jealous of you. It seems far less likely that buying a particular brand of processed food will improve the quality of one's family life.

As the marketing academic Terence Shimp notes in reviewing Schwartz's original values model:

*"All 10 values are **not** equally important to consumers and thus not equally applicable to advertisers in their campaign-development efforts... the first six values [which broadly correspond to the extrinsic set]... apply to many advertising and consumption situations, whereas the last four [which broadly correspond to the intrinsic set] are less typical drivers of much consumer behaviour."*

Shimp concludes that these first six values "drive the bulk of consumer behaviour and are thus the goals to which advertisers must appeal."³²

3.3 ADVERTISING IS LIKELY TO STRENGTHEN THE VALUES TO WHICH IT APPEALS

There is evidence from a range of diverse studies that repeated activation of particular values serves to strengthen these.³³ Given this, one would predict that increased exposure to advertising would lead a person to attach greater importance to extrinsic values, and to display a reduced concern about environmental and social issues. It is important to stress that this effect will have nothing to do with the *product* being advertised. Thus, it is possible to advertise 'green' products through appeal to extrinsic values: that is, values which are likely to undermine a person's concern about environmental issues. For instance, selling a hybrid car by advertising that it is driven by a film star may sell more vehicles, but is likely, at the same time, to promote extrinsic values by encouraging status competition and social comparison.

It is also important to recognise that this effect will not require a product purchase. As discussed above, there are persuasive arguments that advertising drives increased consumption, and therefore increases a society's aggregate environmental footprint. But the effect of advertising operating at the level of *values* does not relate directly to the amount of 'stuff' that is sold. For example, many thousands of people may be exposed to an advertisement that appeals to extrinsic values. Irrespective of whether this advertisement drives up sales of the product that is being advertised, the vast majority of people who see the advertisement will not buy the product. Yet exposure to the advertisement is nonetheless likely to have affected these people. In particular, where the advertisement appeals to extrinsic values, it will probably have contributed to the social modelling of these values, and therefore, incrementally, to eroding a person's motivation to help address environmental problems.

Anat Bardi is a Senior Lecturer in social psychology at Royal Holloway College, University of London, whose expertise is cultural values, and the ways in which these change. We asked her about the likely impact of repeatedly presenting a person with messages that suggest the importance of status, image, money, and achievement in life. She identified two ways in which this is likely to lead to these extrinsic values becoming held more strongly—through 'automatic' (or unconscious) and 'effortful' (or conscious) routes. She writes:

"As these values are primed repeatedly, they are likely to be strengthened. This is likely to happen through an automatic route as well as an effortful route of cognitive processing. Through the automatic route, priming values strengthens links between environmental cues and these values in the way that information is stored in our memory (i.e., our schemas). This serves to strengthen these values automatically, even without awareness on the part of the person. In addition, through the effortful route, messages that strengthen existing values provide people with further proof that the values are indeed important and worth pursuing. Hence, through effortful cognitive processing of the person actively thinking about these values and their importance, these values are strengthened and the environmental cues provide evidence and reasons for the importance of these values."³⁴

If Bardi is right, then one might expect that people who watch more commercial television will hold extrinsic values to be more important. There is evidence for this.

For example, one study, conducted by Bradley Greenberg and Jeffrey Brand, researchers at Michigan State University, examined the impact of the use of Channel One in US schools.³⁵ Channel One is a daily 10-minute news bulletin with two minutes of advertisements. Viewing is incorporated into some school timetables in return for donations of telecommunications equipment. The study compared the importance attached to extrinsic values in large samples of teenagers from two neighbouring schools—one with Channel One, the other without. The demographics of the two samples of children were otherwise comparable: for example, they had similar levels of parental income, similar levels of access to TV at home, and similar class sizes. Teenagers enrolled at the school that used Channel One were found to hold extrinsic values to be significantly more important.

Other work has looked at the impacts of television viewing on attitudes to the environment. There is good evidence for a correlation between television viewing and a sense of apathy regarding environmental issues, including less concern about environmental problems, a lower sense of agency in addressing these problems, and lower levels of active engagement to help tackle them.³⁶ On the basis of the evidence we have presented here, this is to be predicted—if heavier television viewing is correlated with increased prevalence of extrinsic values, and extrinsic values are negatively correlated with environmental concern. Jennifer Good at Brock University in the US investigated the relationship between television viewing and apathy about environmental problems. Her study corroborated earlier work in identifying a positive relationship between television viewing and extrinsic values—or, in the case of her study, the closely related concept of 'materialism'. She also, as expected, found a negative relationship between materialism and environmental values. But, importantly, analysis of her results established that materialism mediated the relationship between television viewing and attitudes about the natural environment.³⁷

Of course, this effect may not be attributable exclusively to the advertising content of commercial television broadcasts: a great deal of editorial content on television is also likely to reinforce extrinsic values. Indeed, the boundaries between content and advertising are ever more difficult to define—particularly with increasing use of product-placement strategies. Nonetheless, as Jennifer Good notes:

*"Advertising content is the most obvious way in which messages about materialism reach television viewers and, not surprisingly, researchers—using both qualitative... and quantitative... approaches—have found positive relationships between exposure to television advertising and favourable attitudes about materialism."*³⁶

3.4 ADVERTISING AND INTRINSIC VALUES

Not all advertising appeals to extrinsic values. Indeed, a significant—and perhaps increasing—quantity endorses intrinsic values. Advertising campaigns for brands such as the telecommunications network Orange, which focus on concepts of community and togetherness, spring immediately to mind.

However, even advertisements that appeal to intrinsic values may do more harm than good. Advertising that seeks to sell a product through appeals to intrinsic values—for example, promoting a fast-food chain by claiming that it will improve the quality of family life—risks reinforcing the perception that intrinsic values can be meaningfully pursued through the purchase of particular products. Where a customer feels, on purchasing this product, that it falls short in expressing these values, this experience may serve to erode a person's future commitment to pursuing these intrinsic values.

Moreover, some appeals to intrinsic values, particularly where these are self-evidently used opportunistically, may actually serve to undermine a person's belief in the integrity with which others express these values, thereby diminishing the importance that they attach to these values when they encounter them elsewhere. Such use of intrinsic values is particularly stark where the same company uses both extrinsic and intrinsic appeals to engage different audience segments. Comparison of the advertising campaigns of the Unilever brands Dove and Lynx provides a useful case in point. Dove is marketed through campaigns for 'real beauty' that have been praised by feminists; Lynx is sold using pictures of near-naked women who conform to the stereotypes of 'unreal beauty' that advertisements for Dove set out to challenge. The fact that the same parent company is responsible for both campaigns risks eroding an audience's belief in the sincerity of appeals to intrinsic values. This may lead them to devalue expressions of intrinsic values when they encounter these elsewhere.³⁹

We cannot state, with confidence, that these effects arise. While such arguments are advanced by some psychologists, current research does not allow us to draw firm conclusions. Nonetheless, it is clear that we cannot simply assume that, because advertising which makes appeal to extrinsic values is likely to erode concern about social and environmental issues, then advertising which makes appeal to intrinsic values will serve to strengthen an audience's concern about these issues.

Finally, we note that creative advertising can be effectively deployed by charities and governments to promote public information campaigns and social and environmental causes, in line with intrinsic values. Where these advertisements accurately reflect the intrinsic values expressed in supporting these organisations or campaigns—for example, where a conservation organisation promotes visits to a nature reserve on the grounds that this will improve a visitor's sense of connection to nature—it seems likely that the problems outlined in this section will be avoided.

3.5 THE NET EFFECT OF ADVERTISING ON CULTURAL VALUES

All this suggests that to see advertising as an innocent mirror of cultural values is naïve at best. Rather, every advert must be considered to have a potential impact on cultural values. As Sutherland asserts with reference to tobacco, advertising normalises what it endorses: something that is likely to be as true of values and identities as it is of a behaviour like smoking. If we know that certain cultural values are environmentally and socially damaging then responsible companies—including marketing agencies—must respond to this understanding in their communications, and especially in their advertising.

Many marketing agencies, like their clients, are now working to reduce their internal ecological footprints. Some, like Starcom Mediavest Group's CarbonTrack, are even constructing elaborate and impressive carbon footprint calculation tools.⁴⁰ Yet the negative social and environmental impacts of the advertisements that an agency produces—as mediated by the values that these advertisements serve to strengthen—are likely to far outweigh the positive steps that an agency may be taking to address the more immediate impacts of its business activities. Indeed, to produce advertisements with potentially negative impacts on values, at the same time as attempting to address more immediate environmental impacts, may be analogous to poisoning the roots of a tree while watering its leaves.

4

IS ADVERTISING PURELY
ABOUT THE PROMOTION
OF CHOICE?

In his *Campaign* magazine column 'On the couch', Jeremy Bullmore from the advertising group WPP regularly links advertising to the promotion of choice, in turn positioning choice as one of the key tenets of democracy. His central thesis is that the key role of advertising is to provide information that enables people to make better choices.⁴³

There is, however, a crucial problem with this argument. It ignores the case that people are influenced, in part, through unconscious responses to an advertisement about which they are unaware. Such unconscious responses serve to remove—rather than extend—choice. This may be particularly true for advertising targeted at children. It is a problem that is further compounded by the fact that it is difficult to remove ourselves from the unconscious influence of advertisements—because these are so pervasive.

4.1 THE IMPLICIT IMPACTS OF ADVERTISING

Many understand that advertising impacts on individuals without their being aware of this—that is, it impacts at an 'implicit' level. As a recent survey sponsored by the advertising industry found:

*"Awareness of advertising may be conscious or not—surprisingly many people understand that advertising may work below the radar of attention (e.g. tube, press and posters); this is referred to as soft, subtle or 'subliminal' advertising."*⁴²

This suspicion is increasingly supported by both academia and the industry. As Robert Heath, lecturer at the University of Bath's School of Management, and Paul Feldwick, former Executive Planning Director of major London agency BMP DDB, wrote in 2007:

*"Most advertising influences behaviour not through the conscious processing of verbal or factual messages, but by mediating relationships between the consumer and the brand—and it does this using types of communication that are not necessarily processed with conscious attention."*⁴³

Their words echo, with striking similarity, those of Vance Packard, who fifty years ago famously set out one of the first critiques of subconscious advertising in *The Hidden Persuaders*. As Packard wrote:

*"Large-scale efforts are being made, often with impressive success, to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing decisions, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and the social sciences."*⁴⁴

Others since Packard—both within the advertising industry and outside it—have come to similar conclusions. Brand consultants Wendy Gordon and Peter Langmaid wrote back in 1986:

*"There is irrefutable proof of the presence in the consumer's mind of advertising messages... that are inaccessible to conscious recall."*⁴⁵

This perspective is supported by experimental evidence for the effectiveness of advertising in influencing people's choices without their conscious awareness. For example, one recent study associated Coke and Pepsi logos with positive or negative words and images. This was found to effect a change in people's implicit attitude towards each brand, but to leave their explicit attitudes unchanged.⁴⁶

Academics Agnes Nairn and Cordelia Fine, meanwhile, have argued that much advertising "operates darkly, beyond the light of consciousness. This poses a significant challenge that will become more demanding."⁴⁷ They recount how once-orthodox theories of mind, which emphasised how audiences consciously and rationally evaluate the persuasive intent of each advert they are exposed to, have now been supplanted by a more subtle 'dual process model'. In this explanation, the mind first responds automatically—or implicitly—to stimuli like advertising, with conscious cognitive defences only kicking in if the viewer realises that he or she is being targeted with explicit efforts at persuasion. Nairn and Fine have been particularly concerned with the development of *new* stealth marketing techniques and their effects on children. However, implicit advertising is not new, nor has its use ever been confined to children. As Tim Ambler of the London Business School has written, "The relatively recent recognition of 'implicit' (i.e. non-conscious) processing of advertising does not imply that the advertising industry has only recently employed implicit appeals".⁴⁸

Indeed, while some within the advertising industry resist the notion that much advertising relies upon implicit appeals, others have sought to actively champion such strategies. After World War One, marketer Edward Bernays sought to deploy the findings of his uncle, Sigmund Freud—the pioneer of psychoanalysis—to encourage customers to buy his clients' products through the use of subconscious association.⁴⁹ Where psychoanalysis was cutting-edge in the 1920s, today marketers look to the latest neuroscience to glean new ways to appeal to potential consumers. Erik du Plessis, chairman of market research agency Milward Brown South Africa, extols the usefulness of "how brain science can contribute to marketing" in his books *The Advertised Mind* and *The Branded Mind*.⁵⁰

Meanwhile Robin Wight, President of communications agency Engine, recently launched an initiative to 'Save Advertising'. He called for the advertising industry to start using brain-scanning as a standard process in development research, as opposed to traditional focus groups. Such approaches, he argued, could begin to tailor responses to a proper understanding of the implicit impacts of advertising, and could therefore help to justify financial expenditure on marketing—especially during economic recession. Concerns were raised within the advertising industry: it was feared that Wight's initiative could harm reputations, and the website containing his recommendations has since been taken down.⁵¹

The research agency TwoMinds, however, is already positioned to take advantage of techniques that assess implicit responses to advertisements:

"Intuitive brand judgments are made instantaneously and with little or no apparent conscious effort on the part of consumers—at point of purchase (or at any other brand touchpoint). Intuition is now well accepted as a powerful driver of brand choice and brand affiliation, but it has largely been ignored, because in the past we lacked the ability to really understand and leverage it.

Our techniques are based on the fact that the unconscious mind acts to either help or hinder our speed of decision making."⁵²

So it seems that we may have little choice about whether or not we respond to advertising. If we see it or hear it—even if we are not consciously aware that we have seen or heard it—we process it, and there are limits to the extent to which we can choose whether it affects us or not. Implicit attitudes can be changed without changing explicit attitudes—that is, without a person being aware that his or her feeling towards something has changed—and this change in attitude, in turn, is likely to have an impact on behaviour.

The standard rejoinder is to recommend the public be schooled in media literacy. Responding to the debate about the commercialisation of childhood, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned a report in 2009, led by media education academic Professor David Buckingham. The report appears initially sanguine in its assessment:

"The commercial world is not going to disappear. Children and parents need to understand it and deal with it. Consumer and media literacy, both at home and in schools, offers one important strategy here..."⁵³

Yet the implicit influence of advertising will inevitably limit the effectiveness of greater 'media literacy', as the conscious brain simply cannot process and filter all marketing. To its credit, the DCSF report clearly acknowledges this later on, concluding:

"Finally, it is important to emphasize that education is not an alternative to regulation, as it is sometimes implied. As we have noted... people (adults or children) who are more media literate are not necessarily immune to media influence."⁵⁴

Education alone, in other words, cannot equip individuals with all the defences needed to resist advertising's arsenal. This poses a conundrum for anyone wishing to promote real freedom of choice.

4.2 ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

Children are often seen as being particularly susceptible to advertising's powers of persuasion.⁵⁵ At the same time, there is growing concern that children are increasingly exposed to marketing which deploys sexual images, and are being prematurely sexualised as a result.

David Cameron, the UK prime minister, has spoken out strongly against this trend:

*"Premature sexualisation is like pollution. It's in the air that our children breathe. All the time. Every day... some businesses are dumping a waste that is toxic on our children. Products and marketing that can warp their minds and their bodies and harm their future. ... More and more today, sexually-provocative images are invading public space—space shared by children... Enough is enough."*⁵⁶

But if we are concerned about marketing's capacity to sexualise children, what about its likely effect in promoting extrinsic values—associated with lower wellbeing, and less concern about social and environmental problems? As John Richard Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds, has pointed out:

*"Sexualisation of childhood is only one part of a wider problem. There is a danger that our society's obsession with sex ignores the wider problems of the impact of commercialisation on childhood. Advertising aimed at children can affect their physical health (food and drink marketing), mental health (low self-esteem, obsessive concern with appearance), and values. Consumerism, materialism and commercialisation are closely linked..."*⁵⁷

To give him credit, David Cameron seems to recognise this, going on to refer to "our shared responsibility to protect children from aggressive commercialism", as well as "giving kids a respite from the consumer culture."⁵⁸ The Conservative Party's 2010 manifesto included a set of proposals for cracking down on advertising aimed at children, including giving headteachers and governors the right to ban advertising in schools;⁵⁹ and upon taking office, Cameron commissioned Reg Bailey to further investigate the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.⁶⁰

News coverage of the Bailey Review's publication in June 2011 focused mostly upon its recommendations to tackle premature sexualisation, but its pronouncements on children and consumerism were also noteworthy. "Children are undoubtedly under a great deal of pressure to consume," it concluded. Its recommendations included ensuring advertisers better reflect parents' and childrens' views, through more frequent ASA consultations; prohibiting the employment of children as brand ambassadors and peer-to-peer marketers; and raising parental awareness of marketing and advertising techniques. As with the Buckingham Report, the Bailey Review also stated it was "unconvinced that simply improving the media and commercial literacy skills of children provides a sufficient response or protection."⁶¹

Large segments of the public remain concerned about the impacts of advertising on children. A YouGov poll in 2010 found 77% of people agreed that advertising to children under the age of 12 should be banned.⁶² A parent quoted in the Bailey Review wondered, pointedly, "if the advertising industry are comfortable spending millions of pounds targeting children direct and then saying it's down to Mum and Dad to stand up to them?"⁶³

But it would be wrong to think that children are uniquely susceptible to advertising. As the Buckingham Report noted, the young people it surveyed "did not see themselves as particularly vulnerable in this regard. All recognised that adverts could create desires for things they might want but did not necessarily need—but, as one boy said, 'the same could be said of my parents!'"⁶⁴

Similarly, Reg Bailey concluded that a healthy society "would not need to erect barriers between age groups to shield the young; it would, instead, uphold and reinforce healthy norms for adults and children alike, so that excess is recognised for what it is and there is transparency about its consequences."⁶⁵ Other researchers agree. A recent UNICEF study found that materialism isn't just detrimental to children's wellbeing: "materialism appears to be problematic for UK adults as well as children",⁶⁶ it suggests that "in the UK parents and children seemed to be locked into a compulsive consumption cycle."⁶⁷

4.3 THE PERVASIVENESS OF ADVERTISING

In accepting the evidence that they are influenced by advertising in implicit ways, people may seek to exercise their free will by removing themselves from situations in which they are exposed to advertisements. But that is far from straightforward. With advertising in its various forms now so pervasive, the choice not to be exposed to it at all—and therefore not be influenced by it—seems to have been removed.

There are certain media in which advertising is at some level a conscious 'opt-in' communication. Viewers of commercial television channels know that there will be advertising in the breaks. Buyers of magazines, or readers of online newspapers know that the cost of these media has been subsidised by advertising. To some extent, in consuming these sources of media, one is accepting that one will encounter advertisements—and therefore accepting the impacts that these advertisements are likely to have upon one's attitudes and behaviour.

But, as recent research has confirmed, the public is growing increasingly irritated by the pervasiveness of advertising, and some businesses have started to recognise this.⁶⁸ Recent developments in recording technology allow viewers to strip out the advertising breaks from programmes they have recorded from commercial TV channels. Similarly, the 'Do Good' application allows internet users to blank out online adverts and replace them with alternative messages—encouraging the user, for instance, to recycle more.⁶⁹ Other business models, meanwhile, are being developed to finance media and entertainment outlets without recourse to advertising at all, such as the subscription-fee version of Spotify, which removes the advertising used to fund its free version, or Ongo.com, an online news service that offers a monthly subscription in return for a clean, ad-free read.⁷⁰ Such innovations seem to attest to a growing public desire for the freedom to avoid advertising—an emerging 'right to opt-out', if you will.

But for every innovation seeking to empower the individual to opt-out of advertising, there are many more which seem set to extend advertising's pervasiveness. Product placement in television programming is—by its very nature, and as a basis for its effectiveness—difficult to recognise. Regulations formerly banning product placement have recently been liberalised in the UK. Online search engine technologies and the information stored by social networking sites and webmail services are opening up huge markets for advertisers seeking to tailor adverts to specific individuals; while the Office of Fair Trading has recently begun investigating celebrities' use of Twitter to surreptitiously endorse brands that they have been paid to promote.⁷¹

Yet while new technologies often challenge pre-existing social boundaries, it is an old form of advertising that seems most egregious in its infringement of our liberty to opt-out. Advertising in public spaces—known variously as 'outdoor' or 'ambient' advertising—is particularly difficult for an individual to voluntarily avoid. Is it right that a person cannot even step outside her house without encountering attempts to persuade her, at an unconscious level, that she should—for example—feel envious of the owners of a particular make of car?

When promoted by advertisers, 'choice' invariably means a choice between different brands. But real choice goes beyond merely commercial decisions. True freedom of choice, in the context of advertising, means having the choice of not being advertised to. It should be made open to us.

5

EVIL, USELESS, OR JUST
OUT OF CONTROL?

Rory Sutherland—a leading voice in the advertising industry, whose words were quoted at the start of this report—uses extraordinarily candid language to describe his outlook: “I would rather be thought of as evil than useless.”

Can we offer Sutherland the reassurance that he should indeed be thought of as more evil than useless? There is evidence that advertising may have significant negative cultural impacts: increasing our ecological footprint by boosting consumption; influencing our values and identities in ways that undermine our concern about social and environmental challenges; and eroding wellbeing and freedom of choice.

While this evidence base does not allow us to draw unequivocal conclusions about the impact of advertising, it warrants a clear and practical response from the industry.

It is incumbent, therefore, upon the advertising industry to demonstrate that its net impact is positive. Specifically, responsible companies—both clients and agencies—should integrate an assessment of the possible impacts of their advertising into their sustainability strategies. Increasingly, failure to scrutinise advertising’s effects will be seen by the public as indicating a lack of commitment to drive through meaningful corporate responsibility strategies.

But equally, it is incumbent upon civil society to hold the industry to account. Civil society organisations should pay much greater attention to the impacts of advertising. To date, they have tended to critique advertising at a superficial level, failing to engage it in the round.

NGOs that work on international development and environment issues need to take a keen interest in whether advertising is exacerbating greenhouse gas emissions and unsustainable resource use by promoting increased aggregate consumption. Groups seeking to tackle a wide range of social and environmental issues need to understand how advertising may be undermining public concern about these problems by promoting extrinsic values at a cultural level. Charities devoted to safeguarding childhood or protecting civil liberties need to consider carefully whether advertising damages their aims.

It is the role of civil society organisations to increase public awareness and concern about these possible impacts, to hold the industry to account, and where necessary, to press for government intervention. This report therefore makes two overarching recommendations:

- We must seek to reduce the negative impact that advertising has on cultural values.
- We must reduce the pervasiveness of advertising, reversing the trend to communicate with us as consumers in every facet of our lives.

Details of these recommendations are explored below.

1. We must seek to reduce the negative impact that advertising has on cultural values

As has been discussed, there are two qualitative problems with current advertising. First, the great majority of advertisements seem to appeal to extrinsic values. Second, the use of appeals to intrinsic values is usually spurious and is often inconsistent.

Crucially, **responsible companies need to examine the values that their advertisements invoke, and therefore strengthen, in society.** Unilever, with its impressive Sustainable Living Plan, for example, must look very closely at how it advertises products like Lynx; an agency like Wieden+Kennedy must do the same with their work for brands like Nike. From a values perspective, to do otherwise will risk undermining other steps that these companies may be taking to reduce their social and environmental impact.

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) already has powers to regulate the promotion of socially-damaging extrinsic values in certain circumstances. In particular, the CAP Code rules against advertising to children in ways that would make them feel unpopular for not buying the advertised product.⁷² The Portman Group, meanwhile—a voluntary grouping of businesses that sell alcoholic products—undertakes not to use appeals to social success or popularity in order to sell alcohol.⁷³ These examples establish the principle that there are grounds for avoiding appeals to certain extrinsic values, although this is not a principle that has been generally applied. **Civil society organisations should be pressing for such principles to be adopted on a wider basis.**

Spurious and unjustified appeals to intrinsic values could also, in principle, be policed by the ASA. However, agencies are currently required to provide only scant evidence to justify such claims for the brands they promote. Again, civil society organisations could give this issue greater attention.

Going further, **the CAP Code should be amended**, in order to take better account of advertising's effects on cultural values, recognising that advertising's impacts are often implicit, rather than conscious.

As this report acknowledges, the evidence base does not permit a categorical assessment of the impacts of advertising. Nonetheless, this mustn't become an excuse for procrastination. Precautionary action should be taken now.

More research, however, is undoubtedly needed.

The recent creation of Credos, a think tank whose mission is to “understand advertising” and to conduct studies into its impacts, is one response to this need.⁷⁴ But it is not a response that fills us with confidence. The new research that is needed, while funded by the industry, must nonetheless be conducted with a level of independence that is beyond dispute. Whilst Credos claims to be independent and objective,⁷⁵ it forms part of the Advertising Association's strategy of ‘selling advertising’ to an increasingly doubtful public. “Our aim is immodest,” the Association stated in setting up Credos. “We want to create a world class faculty to provide the soundest possible intellectual and academic basis for the advocacy of advertising in all its forms. Nothing more. Nothing less.”⁷⁶ Given such aims, it seems unlikely that Credos will prove capable of a dispassionate examination of the impacts of advertising. We recommend that responsible advertisers, and companies which invest in advertising, should support independent research into the impacts of their marketing—not simply on how effective it is in increasing sales, but into its potentially damaging social and environmental impacts. Arrangements should be developed to enable responsible agencies to provide financial support for this research, while safeguarding against any possible agency involvement in directing this work, or in influencing the results of such studies.

2. We must reduce the pervasiveness of advertising

If, as we have argued is likely, advertising exacerbates social and environmental challenges, then the pervasiveness of advertising seems set to magnify this effect. Yet, far from seeking to restrain the reach of advertising, public policy often serves to actively extend it. The recent relaxation of legislation on product placement in commercial television—a technique popular with advertisers precisely because it is not explicitly recognisable as advertising—is just one example.

Rather, **the choice to avoid advertising must be made open to us.** As a principle, we should aim for a world where, at some level, people consciously ‘opt-in’ for exposure to advertising. This principle has several consequences.

First, in contrast to the example of product placement, **we should always be made explicitly aware of advertisements.**

Second, **we should be able to move in public spaces without being exposed to advertising.** There are many precedents for bans on advertising in public spaces—including the city of São Paulo, which has banned adverts from its central district; and the US states of Alaska, Hawaii, Maine and Vermont, which have banned billboards. Metropolitan authorities in Paris have pledged to reduce the amount of advertising on the city's streets by 30% by 2013.⁷⁷ Still, the lines here will require some skill to draw. Advertising on public transport networks (for example, on the London Underground) would be a more difficult issue, since the advertising revenue often significantly subsidises the cost of use. Decisions to stop advertising in these spaces would therefore require the deliberation of the users of these services.

Third, **we should extend provisions for opt-out from exposure to advertising**—such as the development of software to block out online adverts.

Fourth, **alternative methods of subsidising news and entertainment media which remove the need for large advertising revenues, should be protected and promoted.** Examples of such methods include the BBC's licence fee, Spotify's ad-free Unlimited service, or Ongo.com's ad-free news subscription service.

Fifth, reducing advertising's pervasiveness also means **there should be tighter restrictions on advertising to children.** There is already widespread acceptance that advertising to children is likely to incur social costs. We have presented evidence that it is also likely to lead to environmental costs, impacting upon the likelihood of children becoming environmentally-conscious citizens as they grow up.

As we've seen, one frequent response to this awareness is to call for improvements in media literacy skills. But an understanding of the unconscious impact of advertising raises questions about whether such skills offer children sufficient protection from the impacts of advertising. A conscious understanding of the strategies that advertisers deploy may offer little protection from the influence that they exert unconsciously. Teaching of media literacy skills is perhaps akin to building a fence to stop a mole.

Advertising to children has been banned in some countries. This is not a perfect response, by any means. Increasingly, the advertising to which children are exposed is received through the internet—which would probably be unaffected by any national ban. Moreover, children are exposed to—and influenced by—a large volume of advertising that is (at least purportedly) targeted at adults. Yet, imperfect as this response may be, **a ban on advertising to children would at least reduce children's exposure to adverts,** and send a signal that there are areas that should be off-limits to marketers.

Finally, **measures should be taken to make the public more aware of advertising's implicit impacts.** Whilst media literacy training programmes must warn adults and children of the implicit impacts of advertising, this—as previously discussed—will clearly not be sufficient alone. The advertising industry should also formally acknowledge that advertising has effects below the level of conscious recall, engage in wider public debate about the implications of this, and consider the industry's responsibility for such implications. **One proposal is for the inclusion of a disclaimer on every billboard.** This could read:

This advertisement may influence you in ways of which you are not consciously aware. Buying consumer goods is unlikely to improve your wellbeing and borrowing to buy consumer goods may be unwise; debt can enslave.

Conclusion

This is an ambitious set of proposals. *Think of me as Evil?* is a contribution to the start, not the culmination, of a debate. Undoubtedly, more work is needed in thinking through the detail of these proposals, and in developing further responses.

All those concerned about social and environmental challenges—whether they work in business, government or the third sector—can find common cause in contributing to this work. Yet responsibility for developing this debate further must fall particularly upon the third sector. It seems unsustainable for civil society organisations—almost irrespective of the issues upon which they focus—to continue to largely disregard the cultural impacts of advertising.

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Guy Shrubsole is Director of Public Interest Research Centre (PIRC), an independent charity whose work is aimed towards building a sustainable society. He helped coordinate the *Offshore Valuation* report (2010) and wrote PIRC's analysis of green investment in the UK, *The Green Investment Gap* (2011). He previously worked for the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and New Zealand's Ministry of Agriculture.

ABOUT COMMON CAUSE

Common Cause: The Case for Working With Our Cultural Values was published in September 2010 by a group of NGOs: Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN), Friends of the Earth (FOE), Oxfam and WWF-UK. The report makes the case that civil society organisations can find common cause in working to activate and strengthen a set of helpful 'intrinsic' values, while working to diminish the importance of unhelpful 'extrinsic' values. The report highlights some of the ways in which communications, campaigns, and government policy, inevitably serve to activate and strengthen some values rather than others.

Common Cause has inspired a number of follow-up pieces of work, including *Finding Frames: New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty*, published by BOND, and *The Common Cause Handbook*, published by PIRC.

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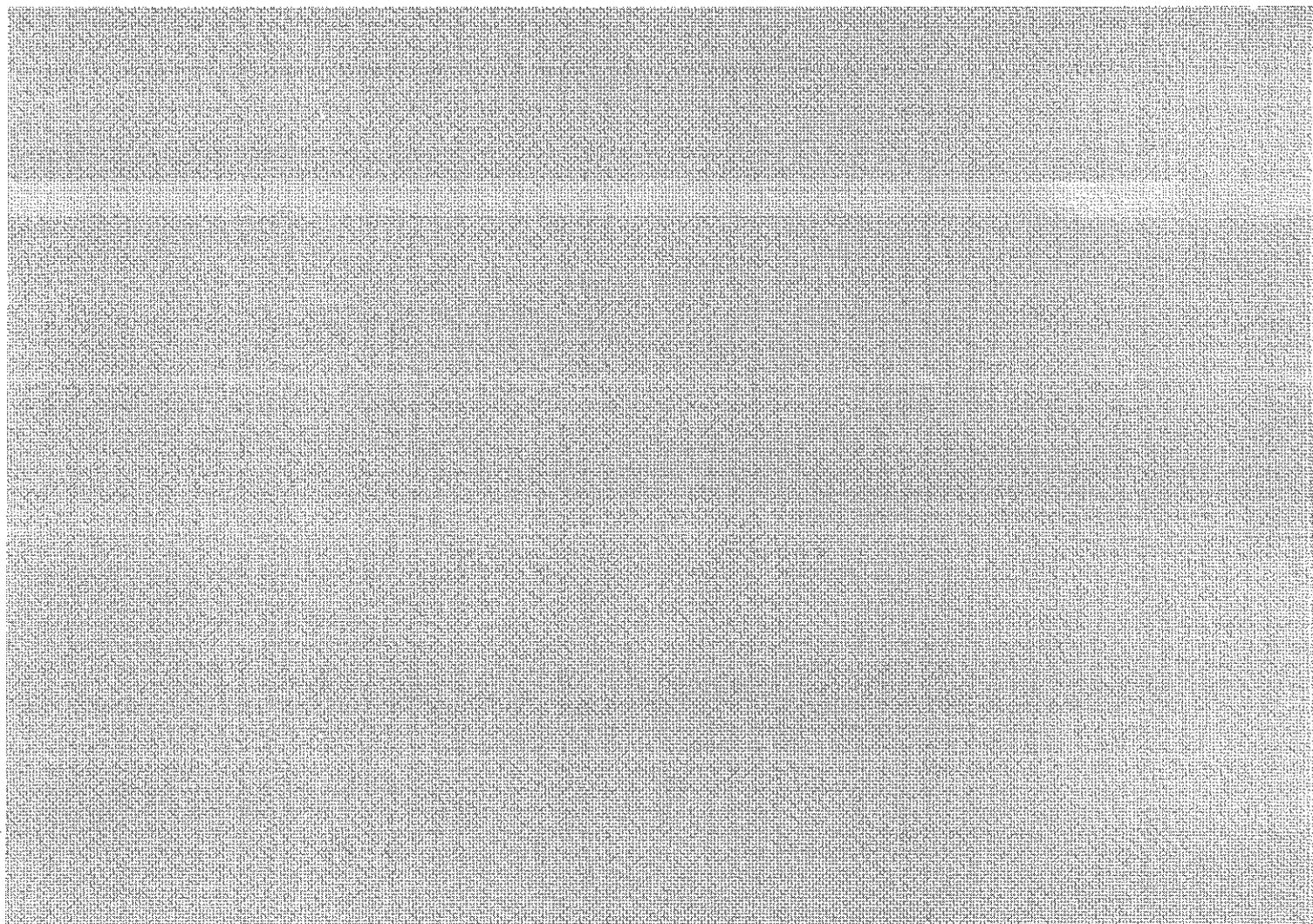
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