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Sethu Das / September 23, 2009

The Politics of Not-So Creative Billboards

From Alaska to Mumbai, concerned individuals and organisations fight not only for clean air and clean water, but also for a clean environment sans billboards. Sethu Das of Design & People looks at the politics of advertisement **billboards** and their impact on people and society.



IN a recent interview to the BBC World Service Radio, Jaipur-born Executive Chairman of Ogilvy India, Piyush Pandey disclosed that he was called a 'joker' by a top Vodafone official.

The story goes like this. Piyush Pandey was invited to Jaipur by the Chief Minister of Rajasthan to seek his advise on how to improve the appearance of the capital of Rajasthan. It did not take much time for the most influential man in Indian advertising to understand that the Pink City is now under an attack by advertisement hoardings. While touring the city, he suggested that the Chief Minister should get rid of hoardings which were shrouding Jaipur. This would bring the magnificent remains of Rajput architecture to public eyes once again. On his return to Mumbai, Piyush Pandey received a call from Vodafone informing him that some 'jokers' are advising the Rajasthan Chief Minister to remove creative hoardings from city, a good number belonging to Vodafone, the mobile giant whose subscriber base had increased by 20% due to the brand identity created by Piyush and his team at Ogilvy.

Frederic Ogden Nash, a schoolteacher-turned poet known for his satirical poems writes in 'Song of the Open Road':

"I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree.
Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,
I'll never see a tree at all."

And Turner Advertising hits back with a short poem without much delay:

"Ogden Nash may never have seen
A billboard he held dear
But neither did he see a tree
Grossing 20 grand a year."

Such is the creativity of global advertising giants.

The Outdoor Industry Trend Report of 1999-2008 shows that the top 20 outdoor spenders in the United States include leading polluters and junk food promoters — from Philip Morris to McDonalds. The United States, a country that spends \$6.99 billion on outdoor advertising has more than 5,50,000 billboards across the country and adds another 15,000 per year causing panic among pedestrians and drivers. Remember, billboards are not just the usual hoardings we normally think of. The Outdoor Advertising Association of America categorises outdoor formats into eight — Bulletins, Digital Billboards, Spectaculars, Wall Murals, Posters, Wrapped Posters, Wrapped Square Posters and Junior Posters — all for the intellectual growth of their consumers! Spending on outdoor advertising continues to increase, even during the most depressive recession periods. However, not everyone seems to be enjoying the creative boards erected to make people buy products they never wanted to buy. In 1998 Alaska joined three states in the United States to declare itself free of outdoor advertising with 72% voters in favour of this policy. Athens removed all illegal hoardings in 2000 to give way to fresh air and sunlight and also to expose its glorious architecture to the world. Brazil too instituted a ban on billboards resisting the pressure and criticism of outdoor advertisers.

Harry McPhillimy heads 'St Werburghs Against Billboards Group', a pressure group based in South West England campaigning for several years to free St Werburghs of advertising hoardings. Thousands of people have already signed their petition and the campaign enjoys the moral support of 93% of the people living there. Harry feels that one of the main obstacles to the campaign is persuading Bristol City Council to give priority to the issue amongst other Planning Enforcement issues. He says "some boards will be harder to get rid of because they do not obviously contribute to accident statistics and face an industrial estate so it is harder to argue a detrimental visual effect." Yet the Group seems to be confident that with the help of local people and business community, one day they would succeed in getting their land free of billboards.

There is a dramatic increase in the number of towering hoardings in most cities in India — from Mumbai to Kochi, Jaipur to Kolkata — mostly violating the city policy guidelines. Dangerously placed hoardings have already killed a number of people, most consumers of their own products. Dr Anahita Pandole is a Gynaecologist-turned activist who's been fighting illegal hoardings in Mumbai city. She filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 2002 with the Bombay High Court demanding the removal of all illegal hoardings mushrooming in the city and is expecting a Supreme Court ruling in October. Dr Anahita's campaign to save public and open spaces, gardens and heritage sites in city too enjoys the support of citizens and several NGOs.

Concerned individuals across the world not only fight for clean air and water but also for a clean environment sans billboards. "Ninety-nine per cent of advertising doesn't sell much of anything" — if what David Ogilvy once said is true, neither the advertisers nor the consumers would lose anything even if ninety-nine per cent hoardings are removed from public eyes. That could be a long wait. Meanwhile let us wait for the natural fall of the so-called creative billboards to see our trees again.

"Billboards are Imposed on Poorer Communities"

Design & People speaks to Harry McPhillimy of 'St Werburghs Against Billboards Group', a pressure group based in South West England. The group continues to campaign for several years to free St Werburghs of advertising hoardings.



Sethu Das: What prompted your community/organisation to start such a unique campaign to get rid of billboards of St Werburghs? How old is the campaign and what is the current status?

Harry McPhillimy: We always felt swamped by billboards. About five years ago more were put up and we decided to resist this. We persuaded the council to research the legal status of the boards and the planning grounds on which they could be removed. We organised a petition of over 1000 local people. We did a survey that showed 93% wanted them gone. We held demonstrations and gained publicity. There were 13 boards through the centre of our community — now there are eight and we are still campaigning. Where we have been successful is by working with the council — providing evidence of detriment to safety or amenity (the only two legal criteria that can be used) and mobilising local pressure.

Sethu Das: There are similar campaigns/agitations going on at different parts of the world to have a billboard free environment. Three states in the United States have already succeeded in making their states free of billboards. What are the main obstacles that your organisation is facing with the Billboard Campaign?

Harry McPhillimy: We know there have been successful campaigns in US states and other places such as Sao Paulo in Brazil and Athens in Greece. Our main obstacles are persuading Bristol City Council to give priority to this issue amongst other Planning Enforcement issues. Some boards will be harder to get rid of because they do not obviously contribute to accident statistics and face an industrial estate so it is harder to argue a detrimental visual effect. Another obstacle is keeping our focus over a number of years.

Sethu Das: Though it may not be considered a great success by some, but your Campaign has inspired a lot of individuals and organisations to take up the issue at other places. Do you have any

message for those who've taken up similar issues at other parts of the globe?

Harry McPhillimy: We would be happy just to inspire other local groups in Bristol to tackle their billboard blight. We have found, unsurprisingly, that the boards tend to be imposed in the eyelines of poorer communities and there are wealthier parts of Bristol without any. We are sympathetic to, but not involved with, those who subvertise the advertising messages on these boards but only getting them removed solves the problem of the particular form of visual pollution that is billboard advertising. To anyone else out there — go on and mobilise — do your research, build your support, make it inevitable.



(Above) How St Werburghs at Ashley Hill in South West England by Ivy Church used to be with billboards around.

(Below) An indicative drawing from the anti-billboard campaign showing how St Werburghs Gateway may look without billboards.



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