

THE BILLBOARD CONTROVERSY: BUGA-UP VERSUS THE ADVERTISERS

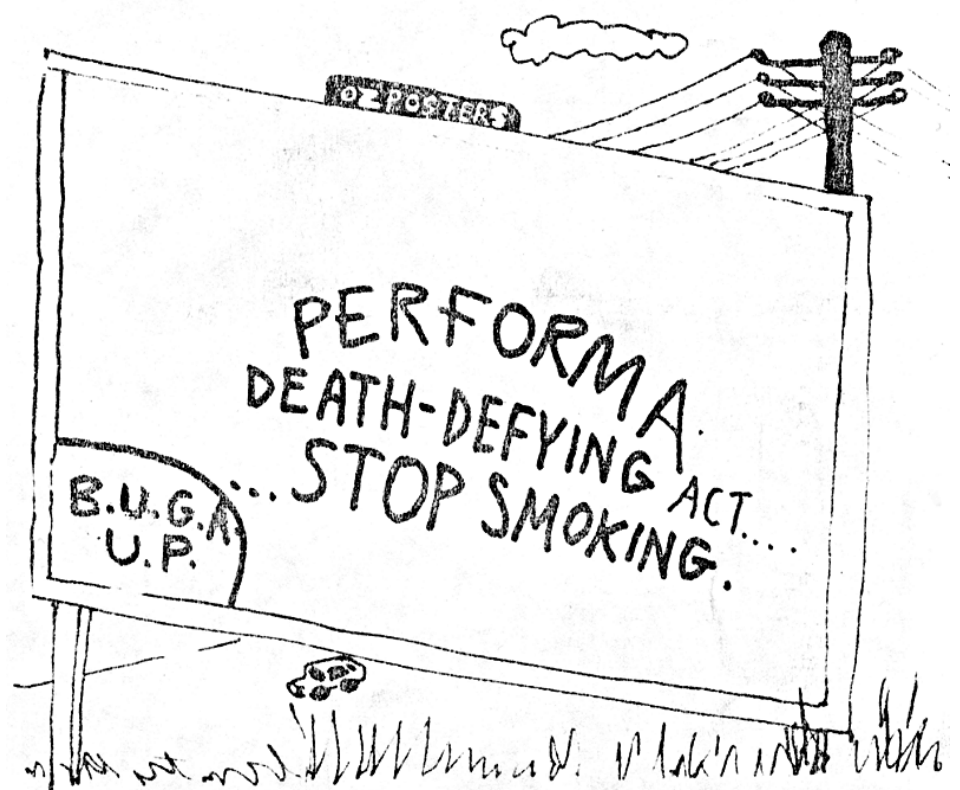
The widespread phenomenon of graffiti outdoor billboards that is believed to be the work of BUGA UP (Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions) is having a major impact on advertisers. In a recent edition of Advertising News (October 17, 1980), the Outdoor Advertising association (OAA) announced that they would lobby for changes in legislation that will physically deter graffitiists. The association claims the current fines are completely ineffectual in halting the situation and it is believed they see significant jail terms as the only way to counter the attacks. OAA president, Mr Bill Levingston, expressed the feeling which is widespread throughout the OAA and the industry - that both the press and the electronic media are giving their tacit support to the graffitiists.

Recently it has become obvious to Sydney residents that BUGA UP has become much more, active, and furthermore it is reported that branches are now operating in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Newcastle. New Doctor has received the following transcript with all three BUGA UP members who have preferred to remain anonymous. Because of the importance of billboard advertisements for cigarettes, the editors feel that this issue warrants widespread public discussion.

Interview -- 8.1.80

Q: I know that a lot of people think your work is possibly the most important anti-smoking campaign running in Australia. What sort of effects do you think you are having?

Bill: It must be having effects at lots of different levels because the feedback that we get - if I can use that awful word - is at lots of different levels also. Most of it is positive. Most of it is "gee I'm glad that somebody's doing it - it's good to see." The only people who aren't pleased to see it are those with vested interests: the tobacco companies and the advertisers. The Public Transport Commission (PTC), their security and the police have sometimes said to me



that they didn't have to go about arresting me. A number of people have said to me over the years that it might have been you graffiti that stopped me smoking. That's happened so many times. When I'm talking to people I'm sometimes introduced "Oh this is the mad graffitiist, the phantom sprayer". They say "You're one! I probably quit smoking because of your stuff" or "I used to go past White Bay and see it there. It used to really make me realise what I was doing to myself." That sort of feedback makes me keep on going. The effect against advertising in general is strong. It makes people realise that they're having unhealthy stuff foisted upon them wherever they go. By just concentrating on the most offensive one, it's made them start to look at other ones. It's getting people to start looking at them differently and say to themselves "Christ, that thing is really offensive". That's always coming back to me. The part that worries me is when they say "I'm glad somebody's doing it. I'd like to be doing it but I can't quite get around to doing it." Sometimes I just wish more

would do it. But that's what it's leading to now. There are more people doing it.

Q: You seem to be covering a very wide area of Sydney and the country. How do you get such a good coverage?

Bill: We work hard at it. We go for hours and hours. The more you do, the better you get at it. Obviously using spray cans is part knowing how to keep them going. Knowing how to get them cheap - Target stores are the ones there, they're so much cheaper than regular places. You can't just whip off to the country though. When I'm going to a Down to Earth meeting or something, I always make a point of taking someone along and a whole rig of ladders and paints. So, say, going up to Nimbin to a festival, we do them all the way up. We take two days going up. We do them all the way up at night one way, then all the way back the other way. Now those ones stay there for weeks and weeks, sometimes months. I wish that people who are going to the country, say down to the Snowy, would do a few on the way, because if you see them a hundred

miles from Sydney, that's more effective than just seeing a bunch of them around the same area all the time.

Q: How many people do you know who are active sprayers at the moment?

Bill: Personally, five. But there are ones we don't know who do occasional ones. And those who come in and out. Five doesn't sound many, with any movement that involves putting people on the line at their own expense, perhaps getting a criminal record, the possibility of going to gaol, it's lucky we've got this many. Deciding you're willing to go to gaol, as I've done, I think is very, very important.

We've got to use the prisons as part of the civil disobedience movement.

They're just full of people who don't really know why they're in there, why they feel animosity towards society. If those people can understand something wider about why they're in there . . . that's another story.

Q: I often wonder why the advertisers continue to renew the posters on the boards that you spray in places like White Bay. I can't remember having driven past when there weren't at least two posters defaced. Do you think it's become something of an issue of principle between you and them - to see who'll give up first? It must be costing them thousands.

Bill: The ones at White Bay I think have the greatest coverage. Thousands see them every day. Being no trains there, buses and cars all stop at that and having nothing else to do, look at the great billboards placed right in front of them. They're all Public Transport Commission ones. I was doing those for a year until I realised. Now PTC, being government, I can't see that they're into the money-making aspect of it. The maintenance guys aren't on any commissions. They just do their job. If they were owned by private companies, they'd be getting done much quicker. But being government and so slow, they're perfect for it.

Q: Often I think of the extraordinary hypocrisy of the PTC with their ban on smoking in trains and yet they probably display more tobacco advertising than any other group.

Bill: I'd guess that 60-70%, of all billboard tobacco ads, if you include those on the sides of buses, are government displayed. It doesn't matter

what government is in, they still play with the economics of it and conclude they have to keep on doing it. That's why I often put up signs - to remind people that money controls it.

Q: Obviously a lot of thought is put into what you write. Many remember the funnier ones like "Masturbation Fantasy" on the KB ads all over Sydney. People say it makes sense, the combination of the picture with your slogan. What sort of things do you consider in using a slogan?

Bill: It's really changed. We all affect each other. "Masturbation Fantasy" is Rick's, and the first time he did that I thought it would alienate a few. But obviously it's strong, it's great. As you say, it lends itself perfectly to it. The first time I saw it, it said "shake hands with a phallus". It was good to see and no one I know did it. I'd love to know. It was perfect.

Q: Do you see that one as being about Australian male drinkers sublimating their sexual anxieties in drink?

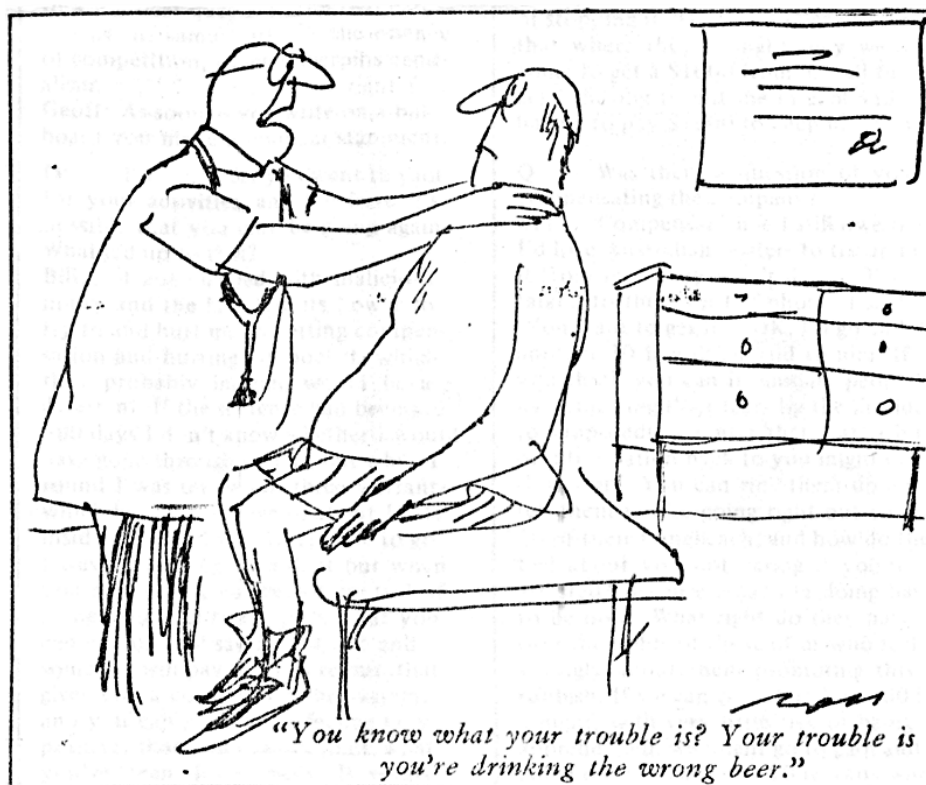
Bill: Yes, it's perfect. You don't need an explanation. Every Australian male drinker knows what it means. Kids mightn't understand it, but it's not a kids' ad, not in the way that many of the tobacco ones are.

Rick: Many of the specific messages

we do are very much directed by the billboard itself, the space available for writing, the words and how they lend themselves to distortion and addition. For example, with Escort it has on the bottom in small letters "Give yourself 25 of the best". Escort have a drawing of a young, long-haired person dressed in a teacher's mortar-board hat. I think this is obviously directed at school children - it has this authoritarian air about it, while being somehow mischievous. This is a good example of the inherent contradictions you can find in many ads. "Give yourself 25 of the best" relates ambiguously back to the school environment, referring to it in an indirect manner. That caption lends itself to good graffiti, so we have "Give yourself 25 of the best ways to prove your insecurity" or "25 of the best ways to quit smoking".

Q: The ones that you do which taunt and ridicule smokers, that concern inadequacy, potency, insecurity - what are you, trying to say to these people? These make non-smokers laugh because we can feel a little smug in relation to their problems, but I wonder what you're trying to say to them?

Rick: I feel advertisers use two main ways to effectively promote a product: one is sexual attraction and the second is to play on their insecurity. They do this by setting up a situation where the person is made to feel somehow insecure



or inadequate and then by using the product it somehow manages to save them from this terrible place they've found themselves. So all we're trying to do with that type of graffiti is to expose the devices that the advertisers are using. Demystifying their processes.

Geoff: We're trying to make them aware of what the psychology behind the advertising is. We're trying to show that ads are trying to sell to people what's denied to them in everyday life. The billboards say "all you've got to do is buy this product and you'll enter this terrific fantasy" which in this case things that are bad for you. – cigarettes. I agree that it is one of the dangers that in our being self-righteous we run the risk of exploiting the same things as the advertisers are trying to exploit. But it's got to be entertaining to be effective.

Q: Recently I've been noticing graffiti on billboards advertising other products like cars. Is there any reason for this diversification?

Bill: We are called 'BUGA UP' or Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions. We joshingly call ourselves the armed wing of MOP UP -- the Movement Opposed to the Promotion Unhealthy Products. Cars are pretty unhealthy, especially with ads which encourage you to buy the latest and get into all sorts of debt. I've concentrated on tobacco over the years, but it was clear that one day we'd diversify. Geoff came along and very strong about alcohol and he got me feeling strongly about it too. I think we have a right to answer how we feel about these things. I think we should take the chance to put back what we feel.

Rick: The other day, there were two car ads next to one another. One for an Australian car, the other for a Japanese one. On the first there was written "Just get deeper in debt" and then an arrow pointing to the next one it said "the same shit". I think our diversification is the result of the diverse personalities of the people in the group. We're involved in it for different reasons. We have printers, artists, and academics in the group.

Geoff: I think the common denominator held by everyone is that advertising for these products by using sickening fantasies, the way these things are promoted so that their possession makes you more of a human being, is what we really care about.

Q: Advertisers would say to you of course that there are a few contradictions being involved in being against car advertising and yet still driving a car to suit your own purposes. And it's of course a fairly radical proposition that our society should do away with cars given the geography of the way we live.

Bill: Yes, but it doesn't mean that we can't still constructively criticise the way in which they blatantly promote the idea that people have to have a new car, the idea that this is going to go on forever.

Rick: The two car ads I mentioned were both aimed at the same market. So we have two manufacturers, making cars which are basically similar so that there is this incredible duplication of resources and energy which is rather wasteful.

Q: Of course it really comes down to a Political question. The two cars serving the same market is the essence of competition, which underpins capitalism.

Geoff: As soon as you write on a billboard you make a political statement.

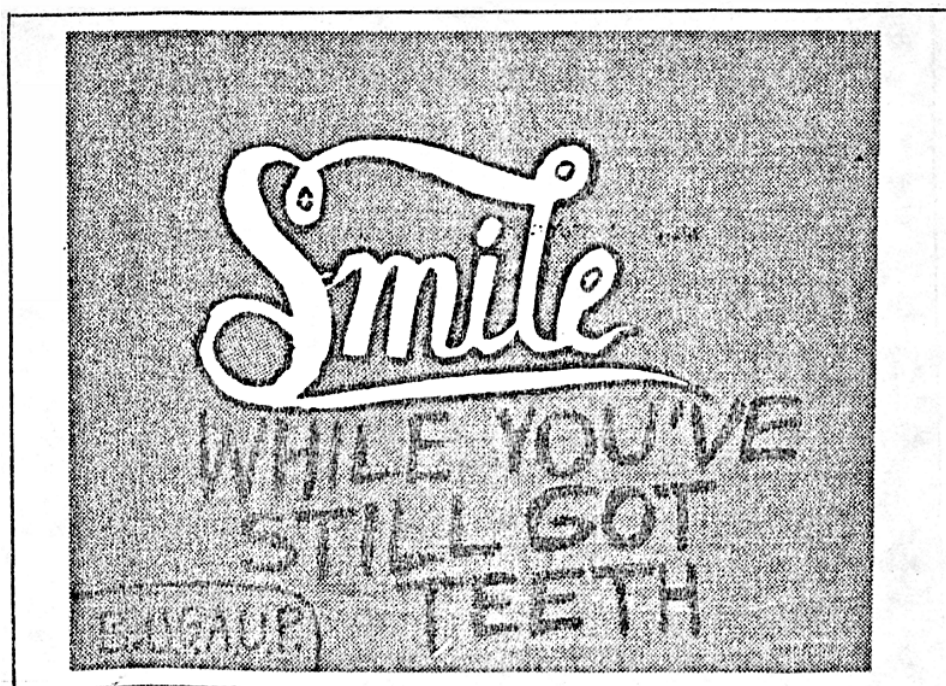
Q: Bill, last year you went to gaol for your activities, and I believe it's possible that you may be going again. What led up to that?

Bill: I got charged with malicious injury and the law used its power to try to hurt me by getting compensation and hurting my pocket, which they probably

imagine would be a deterrent. If the sentence had been say 300 days I don't know whether I would have gone through with it, but when I found I was on two or three warrants which brought it down to about 17 days inside it seemed very acceptable to go. I wasn't working towards it but when you realise that you've got control of going into gaol to the point that you can call up and say I want out and someone will pay and you're out, that gives you a control over the system, and you can go in there feeling very positive, that you can continue what you've been doing inside. It seems natural to use the system against itself. The threat of going to gaol is what stops a lot of people getting into civil disobedience. But if you feel strongly that what you're doing is right and there's a lot of you opposing the destructive elements in our society - advertising is obviously one, they have no care bar the almighty dollar. Now if they can see that people are quite willing to accept fines and gaol and quite willing to do that and continue the movement inside the gaol, they'll be in a situation where there's no way of stopping it. The economics of it are that where they ought they were going to get a \$1000 from me, all they get is having to put me in gaol and having to pay \$1000 to keep me there.

Q: Was there question of you compensating the company?

Bill: Compensation - I still owe that.



I'd love Australian Posters to try and get it from me. They wouldn't dare - I've talked to them on the phone. I said "You want to get it OK, I'll go and do another 30 boards". I said to him "If you think you can intimidate people by exploiting their fears by the product to supposedly counter that fear, a bit of intimidation back to you might even things, up". You can ring them up and tell them you're going right out to do 20 of their Longbeach, and how do they feel about you not caring if you're arrested? Because what I'm doing has to be done. What right do they have over the rights of those of us who feel strongly about them promoting this rubbish. If we can go out and do 100 in a night, with very little risk of being apprehended, we might go to gaol and come out with another 10 recruits who are quite willing to do it. In fact we might even offer to pay them. There are people who'll say "there's a billboard just around the corner from my place, I pass it every day and it irritates me to see Paul Hogan pushing cigarettes to my kids. But I haven't got the guts to go and paint on it. But I'd pay \$50 for the following message to be put up." It could easily go that way. A person who can't make money because they've got a criminal record, they could go out and instead of breaking into a service station, they could start making a bit out of doing some constructive work. It's still breaking the law, but they're going to break the law anyway.

Q: The gaol experience obviously hasn't deterred you at all; do you expect that it's going to happen again, or is it that you don't really mind?

Bill: I don't and I do. I do to the extent that I take certain precautions. I avoid security blokes if I see them and so on. But arrests provide good publicity too. I'm out on bail at the moment over PTC "promotes terminal cancer" and we're going to plead not guilty and go into the full bit for the publicity. There should be a lot of public outcry, I look at it positively. The advertisers keep on doing it. We've got to keep it up.

Q: The police are often criticised for over-enforcement of the law with radical groups when in fact they can exercise a lot of discretion. I believe with you they've been particularly lenient. What sort of things have happened and how do you interpret it?

Bill: Geoff got apprehended by two D's who took him down to the station and gave him a razz, but with me they're often half-hearted. There's a movement in the police force to quit smoking, a fitness thing, and being human they can't not respond like everyone else to the boards. They get a laugh out of it. When I turned myself into Maroubra police station, not one of the eight cops there smoked. I'd turned myself into a bunch of very sympathetic police.

Q: Why did you turn yourself in?

Bill: It got good TV coverage. I can also go in on my terms. The warrants were out, I'd moved address, they knew where I was living, but no one wants to come out and arrest me. I rang up the warrant police and asked how many there were for me and I said to them, look, I don't want to turn myself in now, but I will when I'm ready. You've got to pick your moment. It turned out the bloke I spoke to knew about me and said he liked what I was doing.

Q: There's a lot of this "off the record" type of stuff is there? Have they ever come up to you in the act?

Bill: Yes, but not when there's been two together. When they're on duty and they don't know how the other one feels they look the other way. Geoff got done late at night. We've got to remember never to do them late at night. Every policeman I talk to says "look we told you mate, don't do them after midnight". They're out looking for "break and enters". In the daytime they go right past.

Q: What about other sorts of control. Have there been any private investigators, harassment, phone tapping?

Bill: I'm pretty sure my phone is tapped. But I'm not worried. I've reached the stage where I've thought it through and have concluded what does it matter what they hear? Supposing I said 'we're going out to do boards tonight at x, y and z, would you like to be there?' What can they gain - they know arrest doesn't worry me.

Q: Have you had any direct contact with the tobacco or billboard industry.

Bill: I got on the phone to the managing director of a big poster company. I told his secretary it was Bill Posters calling, Bill Board another time.

I've talked to him an hour at a time. That's worth recording. I say to him "don't hang up on me mate, don't reject what we have to say because we might go out and do every single billboard."

Q: Do you discuss with him the proposition that they could refuse to handle tobacco ads?

Bill: Yes. He just said "you don't understand a f- - in' thing about advertising do you!" I said "Ah, but I'm learning". They were pulling them in for a while, but then Philip Morris got all the Longbeach going. He would love to not have to handle tobacco, I'm sure of it.

Q: But he's under a different sort of pressure from the manufacturers - they could threaten to pull off all their other products, besides tobacco. What about passers-by, do they ever react?

Bill: Most of it's positive - "good on you mate" "good to see it". Kids laugh. One out of 20 might say something mildly abusive "What are you doing that for!" "Invariably they've got their fag in their hand. The PTC security cop who got me smoked Benson & Hedges and I'd written "Fools' Gold". Perhaps he saw it as a bit of a hit at him.

Q: Do you ever fear for your safety?

Bill: I'm aware of it, I've got to realise there's a lot of money involved. But look at it another way. What about the guys who put them up? I feel like saying to them "do you know how many people die in Australia every day from tobacco smoking? And you're promoting it. Don't you ever fear for your safety? Aren't you ashamed of what you're doing?"

Q: You're both just doing your jobs, right?
