

Branded cities: outdoor advertising, urban governance, and the outdoor media landscape

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ABSTRACT

In many cities both rich and poor, new forms of outdoor advertising are emerging with potentially significant implications for the nature of the urban public realm. Public-private partnerships for advertising-funded provision of basic items of urban infrastructure such as bus shelters, street signs and public telephones have grown as a result of structural changes in the advertising industry and shifts towards neoliberal forms of urban governance. This article critically interrogates the implications of these new outdoor advertising arrangements for the urban public realm, and argues that they have potentially harmful consequences for the accessibility and diversity of the outdoor media landscape. It then proposes three strategies for the democratisation of the outdoor media landscape. These strategies are not premised on an outright rejection of outdoor advertising, but rather seek to contest the monopolistic capture of outdoor media by public-private partnerships involving urban authorities and outdoor advertising companies.

KEYWORDS: outdoor advertising; neoliberalism; urban governance; public space; outdoor media landscape; democratization

Cities have historically provided important spaces for advertising – as Bernstein (1997: 12) puts it, “advertising began outdoors” (see also Passikoff 2006; Cronin 2006; Baker 2007). Through window displays, signboards, billboards, posters and other forms of outdoor advertising¹, advertisers have sought to capture the attention of people waiting for the bus, catching a train, stuck in traffic or walking through shopping precincts. However, over the last decade or two, there have been significant changes in both the *quantity* and *form* of outdoor advertising. Where urban advertising might once have been dominated by static billboards and shop signs, advertisements now commonly adorn bus shelters, buses, train stations, trucks, scooters, taxis, public toilets, rubbish bins, newsstands, fruit stalls, flower stalls, and public telephone booths. Specialist media companies also display advertisements on screens in lifts, foyers, shopping malls, airports, in-shop displays, and university student union buildings. Furthermore, traditional static billboards and signs are increasingly giving

way to screens which can display video and animated advertisements. Such trends are not restricted to a few large or wealthy cities. Indeed, as I shall discuss further, some outdoor media companies now have major operations in hundreds of cities across every populated continent.

These forms of urban advertising are starting to receive some overdue critical attention (see Cronin 2006). Until recently, considerations of outdoor advertising have focused overwhelmingly on the representational content of advertisements, and on how particular advertisements may play a role in shaping people's experience of self and place (see for example van Stipriaan and Kearns 2009 forthcoming). While these questions of *content* are of course important, less attention has been paid to equally important questions of *form*, focusing on how techniques and technologies of outdoor advertising have evolved and mutated. Yet the issue of form is absolutely vital to our understanding of the wider public sphere, precisely because *what* we can say is fundamentally shaped (although not determined) by considerations about the *forms* of public address available to us to say it (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003). As Armand Mattelart (1991: 214) has noted:

many debates on the 'effects of advertising' on society are affected by a serious flaw. They remain too close to the individual advertisement or consumer, while our society is immersed in advertising as the dominant mode of communication. A mode of communication which, whether one wishes it or not, structures choice by establishing a scale of priorities and social preferences in the use which society makes of collective resources – not to mention the individual, as both consumer and citizen.

In this article, then, I seek to address three key questions. First, what are the factors behind the contemporary growth and transformation of outdoor advertising? Second, how will changes in the form of outdoor advertising impact upon the use of urban outdoor spaces for different forms of public address? And third, how can we build a more democratic *outdoor media landscape* in order to address any potentially harmful impacts of new outdoor advertising arrangements for the urban public realm?

The paper proceeds in four stages. First, I present some general context for the growth and diversification of outdoor advertising by examining some wider trends in the global advertising industry. Second, I chart the emergence of a new business model for outdoor advertising that has been pioneered by a number of global outdoor media companies, working

in partnership with urban authorities across a diverse range of contexts. Third, I develop a framework for critically interrogating the impact of these new outdoor advertising arrangements on the possibilities for different forms of urban public address. Finally, I propose three strategies for democratising the outdoor media landscape, and reflect on their potentials and limitations.

1. Globalisation and Regionalisation in the Outdoor Advertising Industry

Crudely put, the advertising industry is built upon the activities of four key players: *advertisers* who have a product, service or something else to advertise; *advertising agencies* that create advertisements and campaign strategies, *media buyers* who purchase media for those campaigns, and; the various *media* through which advertising is displayed. Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic ‘global alignment’ across these spheres of advertising activity (Mattelart 1991; Sinclair 2007). Advertising spending is increasingly dominated by large multinational corporations who seek to advertise their many products and services across regional and global markets. Catering to the needs of these advertisers, there has been a dramatic restructuring of advertising agencies and media buyers through take-overs, mergers and consolidations which have given rise to regional and global agency networks. These agency networks have been formed in efforts to provide ‘one-stop shops’ for the regional and global campaign needs of multinational advertisers, offering both the global reach and local knowledge that they require. Finally, there has also been a parallel regionalisation and globalisation of media companies. Again, this process has at least in part been driven by the desire to capture advertising revenue through offering advertisers and their agencies and media buyers a single point of access to a range of media forms and markets. The contemporary restructuring of the advertising industry could more accurately be described as a process of ‘glocalisation’ rather than globalisation (Sinclair 2007; see also Robertson 1995; Mattelart 1991). Just as the multinational advertisers differentiate their products to suit local tastes and markets, so too global advertising agencies and media corporations offer these advertisers global networks of local expertise.

The structural transformation of the outdoor advertising industry reflects these wider developments in the advertising industry. A small number of multi-national business groups have come to dominate the global outdoor media market, some of which are part of larger

multi-national media conglomerates. Clear Channel Outdoor (headquartered in San Antonio, USA) has emerged as the world's largest outdoor media company, with over 900,000 advertising displays in 49 countries across 5 continents.² The JCDecaux Group (headquartered in France) is the second largest global outdoor media company, operating over 900,000 advertising panels across 54 countries.³ Both companies a range of outdoor advertising formats including billboards, street furniture and transit advertising. Other major companies have established regional networks. For example, CBS Outdoor and Titan have significant outdoor media holdings in markets across North America and Europe, while APN Outdoor has holdings across Australia, New Zealand and South-East Asia.

2. A New Business Model for Outdoor Advertising

In recent years, traditional media formats such as newspapers and television have suffered declining advertising revenues around the world as advertising spending moves increasingly towards 'new media' such as the internet and mobile phones. Against this trend, however, spending on outdoor advertising has grown in many national markets in recent years (See Table 1). For example, in the United Kingdom, outdoor advertising is fastest growing 'traditional' medium, having improved its share of total advertising revenue from 4.5% to 5.5% between 2000 and 2007.⁴ In the United States, the world's largest outdoor advertising market, outdoor advertising is a smaller proportion of overall advertising revenue. However, it experienced above average growth during the 2000s (PQ Media 2007). In China, outdoor advertising growth averaged 26% per annum between 1990 and 2003, and had by then emerged as the third largest advertising medium behind television and newspapers (People's Daily Online 2005) (See Table 2).

Table 1: Outdoor and Print Advertising as Percentage of Total Advertising, 2002-2006.

Country	Outdoor Advertising			Print Advertising		
	2002	2006	2002-6 Change of Total Share	2002	2006	2002-6 Change of Total Share
China	N/A	15.8	N/A	35.2	24.9	-10.3
France	11.2	12.3	1.1	50.2	36.6	-13.6
Germany	3.6	6.0	2.4	57.7	52.6	-5.1
Japan	9.7	11.8	2.1	29.3	29.4	0.1
Spain	7.2	7.6	0.4	39.4	31.5	-7.9
UK	4.3	9.2	4.9	57.8	36.6	-21.2
USA	2.6	3.7	1.1	42.6	29.7	-12.9

Source: Datamonitor Advertising Industry Profiles⁵

Table 2: 2007 Top 10 Countries by Outdoor Spending in US Dollars (million)

Country	Revenue	Percentage of Total Ad Spending
USA	7,202	3.9
Japan	5,702	13.7
China	2,101	14.0
Russia	1,582	17.7
UK	1,528	6.6
France	1,383	10.7
Germany	1,066	4.9
Spain	713	7.2
South Korea	588	6.1
Greece	399	11.9

Source: Outdoor Advertising Association of America, <https://www.oaaa.org/marketingresources/revenue/internationaloutdoor.aspx>, accessed March 6 2009.

The growth of outdoor advertising is counter-intuitive at first – as one of the oldest forms of advertising, we might have expected outdoor to suffer along with other traditional media as new media experience rapid growth. So, how might we explain outdoor’s growth? Industry representatives have suggested that the growth of outdoor advertising can be attributed to the increasing significance of the city’s public spaces within the new ‘attention economy’ (Davenport and Beck 2001). The very proliferation of advertising opportunities associated with the growth of new media, according to this explanation, has actually served to enhance rather than reduce the strategic value of the city as an advertising space. As JCDecaux’s 2005 Annual Report put it:

Broadcast and cable television, radio, newspapers, magazines, the cinema and the internet compete in an increasingly competitive and complex environment. This media fragmentation ultimately benefits outdoor advertising, which has become the only mass medium capable of reaching consumers as they go about their everyday

lives. Outdoor advertising is also a particularly cost-effective way to reach the public (JCDecaux 2006: 10).

In this complex media environment, outdoor advertising agencies frequently point out that “it’s the only medium you can’t turn off” (e.g. Hampp 2007c). These arguments for outdoor advertising have in fact changed little over the past century – it has always been positioned by its advocates as a medium better suited to address a mass market than other forms of media such as print, by virtue of its capacity to reach diverse urban populations whose movements through the city overlap even if their reading/listening/viewing habits do not (Baker 2007: 1190-91).

While it may have some merit, this explanation of the recent growth in outdoor advertising should be treated with caution for at least two reasons. First, it is self-interested: the industry has an interest in circulating such an explanation to secure further spending from advertisers (Cronin 2006: 619). Second, such an explanation is at best only a partial, because it assumes that growth is fuelled by increasing *demand* from advertisers without considering issues to do with the *supply* of outdoor advertising space.

The growth and diversification of outdoor advertising can be explained more adequately with reference to the widespread shift towards neo-liberal logics and practices of urban governance.⁶ Increasingly, outdoor media space is being created through the establishment of public-private partnerships between public agencies/authorities and private outdoor media companies for the provision and maintenance of urban infrastructure. Here, the outdoor media companies agree to fund all manner of urban infrastructure in exchange for exclusive rights to sell advertising space on that infrastructure to third parties (see Figure 1). Such arrangements are characteristic of neo-liberal approaches to urban governance. Initially identified by Harvey (1989) as a shift from ‘managerialism’ to ‘entrepreneurialism’, the widespread embrace of market-based urban policy initiatives has increasingly come to be described as neo-liberal (for overviews of these discussions, see Peck and Tickell 2002; Brenner and Theodore 2005). Certainly, urban neo-liberalisms can take a variety of contingent forms (Larner 2003; O’Neill and Argent 2005). But common to these differentiated neo-liberalisms is an embrace of market-based initiatives such as ‘public-private partnerships’ for the provision of all sorts of urban infrastructure and services, from

roads, water, airports, electricity and communications to garbage collection and day-to-day maintenance of public spaces.

[Figure 1: Some examples of advertising funded infrastructure in Sydney: clockwise from top left, newsstand, bus stop, street sign, public telephone, bus, public toilet, fruit stand.]

There are countless examples of such public-private partnerships for advertising-funded urban infrastructure being established in cities around the world. To give but two high-profile examples, in 2008 Mayor of Venice Massimo Cacciari announced plans to allow digital billboards to be erected in the iconic Piazza San Marco. Faced with mounting bills for restoration of the piazza, Cacciari said of the plan:

It is neither ugly nor beautiful but simply necessary. We are forced to move in this way because we have limited resources. We need to take care of the buildings and monuments that make up the artistic beauty of Venice, but to do so we need a hand, and the city's cultural authorities are looking for sponsors (Hall 2008).

Around the same time, in cash-strapped Kentucky, fast-food giant KFC have begun repairing road potholes, stencilling the message “re-freshed by KFC” on the fresh road surface (York 2009). Outdoor advertising companies are also beginning to establish partnerships with private developers involved in the construction of new master-planned urban developments. Clear Channel Outdoor has recently launched its ‘Branded Cities’ concept, hoping to turn these developments into ‘brandsapes’:

Branded Cities© provides national and local marketers extraordinary presence in today’s most dynamic destinations. Designed to capitalize on the vast and growing trend of single-developer mixed-use real estate properties, Branded Cities© creates true “centers of excitement” in concert with the latest retail, sports, dining, and entertainment hotspots.⁷

The majority of new public-private partnerships between urban authorities and outdoor advertising have involved the advertising-funded installation and maintenance of ‘street furniture’ such as bus shelters, benches and public toilets. JCDecaux is the leading global player here, holding contracts for the provision of street furniture in more than 1,500 cities across 40 countries, with over 350,000 advertising panels.⁸ Clear Channel Outdoor’s street

furniture division, Clear Channel Adshel, operates over 3,500 municipal contracts for advertising-funded street furniture in 35 countries.⁹

The key ingredient to the ‘success’ of these partnerships is the profitability of outdoor advertising. To be profitable, outdoor advertising relies on the capacity of outdoor media companies to ‘monetise’ their advertising space or ‘real estate’. That is to say, advertising in general works precisely by putting a monetary value on the display of an advertisement in a given space at a given time. The monetisation of space for outdoor advertising presents at least three key challenges. First, outdoor media companies must attempt to provide metrics about audience and attention to potential advertisers and their agencies, in order to convince them to place their advertisement in outdoor media. This is partly a matter of providing quantitative data about the number and nature of people who may be exposed to the particular form of advertising space they have to offer. Here, the on-going development of audience metrics for outdoor advertising in different markets (see for example Outdoor Media Association 2009; Hampp 2008d) mimics the development of metrics in other media formats like television, radio and newspapers (see for example Hampp 2008b; Neff 2008). In addition, large outdoor media companies like JCDecaux and Adshel have also undertaken more qualitative ‘life studies’ to identify the ways that different groups move through urban spaces, in order to provide potential advertisers with data about the effectiveness of outdoor advertising in different locations (for example JCDecaux no date; see also Cronin 2006; Hampp 2007c).

Second, to be profitable, outdoor media companies must be able to differentiate their product from other media and from each other. In this competitive environment, new outdoor media technologies are constantly in development, with both the large outdoor media conglomerates and also smaller niche media companies seeking to gain a competitive edge in audience engagement. Over the last few years, advances in scale, illumination, digital animation, and even sensory engagement (with the inclusion of smells and sounds along with sights, for example) have been touted by a range of industry players. Among the latest developments, Google currently has a patent pending for digital billboards that can be updated in real time based on inventory of local shops (Hampp 2007a). In London, a company has developed a digital transit advertising system for buses with GPS-enabled screens that can be updated as they move through different locations (Hall 2006). In New York, a recent ad campaign made

use of new audio technology to project an ‘audio spotlight’ from directional speakers above a billboard, which is only heard by an individual who passes through the spotlight location (Hampp 2007b). Microsoft is working on equipping digital displays with face-recognition software to detect traits such as gender and age and retrieve demographically targeted ads on the spot, a scheme which has already been trialled in London (Hampp 2007a).

Third, outdoor media companies also face challenges in monetising their media space because city is a chaotic space. In particular, while outdoor advertising may well be the one form of advertising that you can’t turn off, by virtue of its location in the public realm it is also highly vulnerable to unauthorised modification and alteration. Furthermore, advertisers have often accessed outdoor advertising space for ‘free’, in the form of bill posters, pole posters, and other forms of outdoor advertising that have been tolerated in many spaces even where they may have been technically illegal. So, the monetisation of outdoor media space in part relies upon the capacity of outdoor media companies both to protect their media against vandalism and alteration, and to commodify the places with the highest exposure by purchasing, and then monopolising access to, those places.

3. Outdoor Advertising, the Outdoor Media Landscape and the Urban Public Sphere

The growth of advertising in the urban outdoor media landscape seems to reflect the growing role of advertising in other media. As Armand Mattelart (1991: 206) observed some years ago:

during the 1980s, the space occupied by advertising worldwide expanded considerably. The processes of deregulation and privatisation of the systems of information and communication have opened up access to screens and targets which only yesterday, in the name of public service or interest, or the protection of vulnerable categories of the population, were kept closed.

The same process seems to be underway in many cities. As Naomi Klein (2001: 35) has observed, finding a satisfactory vocabulary through which to articulate a critique of the “branding of the cityscape” is important.

So, how should we respond to the growth and diversification of outdoor advertising and the emergence of this new business model? What are its potential impacts on the wider urban

public realm? Some of the urban authorities getting involved in these public-private partnerships are aware of the potential for criticism. For instance, New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority has recently started selling advertising space on the exterior of its subway cars and on its turnstiles, again to address revenue shortfalls. In defending this move, MTA spokesperson Jeremy Soffin noted:

Obviously in a city like New York, advertising can be pretty ubiquitous, so we have to be very mindful of the fact we're responsible for one of the city's great public spaces. It's a very democratic space. It's just about finding the right balance (Hampp 2008a).

This comment reflects the sense of unease with which these new forms of outdoor advertising have been met from some quarters. For instance, Naomi Klein argued in *No Logo* that while outdoor advertising is hardly new, this 'balance' seems to be increasingly under threat:

somewhere along the line, the order flipped. Now buses, streetcars and taxis, with the help of digital imaging and large pieces of adhesive vinyl, have become ads on wheels, shepherding passengers around in giant chocolate bars and gum wrappers, just as Hilfiger and Polo have turned clothing into wearable brand billboards (Klein 2001: 37).

But to observe this intensification is still to beg the question of why it matters. Our answer to this question will depend upon the normative model of public space that we use to assess the impact of changes in the urban public realm.

Historically, outdoor advertising has been critiqued as an intrusion of crass commercialism in cities at the expense of civic beauty and order which embodies 'the common good'. For example, opposition to the initial growth of outdoor advertising in the United States one hundred years ago was articulated by civic reformers who were concerned that it undermined their efforts to improve the moral and civic character of the people through architecture and civic design:

In the competition between civic and commercial demands for the public's attention, it appeared the latter might prevail. Here lay the crux of the billboard problem: it destabilized architectural and landscape design's power to properly form cities – and citizens (Baker 2007: 1197).

Similarly, attempts in the middle of the twentieth century to use planning codes to reform outdoor advertising in the UK and Australia were driven by the desire for aesthetic order and

land-use control. In the UK, for instance, a so-called ‘Clutter Code’ was drawn up by the planning Minister in 1960, designed to address the billboard problem in British cities. Around 220,000 advertisements were removed by 1963, and a further 40,000 were re-sited, all paid for by an Advertisers’ Working Committee made up of industry representatives (James 1968: 99).

Such criticism of outdoor advertising was informed by what I have called a ‘ceremonial’ normative model of public space. In this ceremonial model of public space, good public space is space that privileges the civic order over and above private market interests. In ceremonial models of public space, ‘the people’ tend to be imagined by elites as a passive audience for ceremonial, monumental and architectural displays which might exercise a civilising influence (Iveson 1998: 22-23). The UK ‘Clutter Code’, and similar efforts by local authorities in Australia at the time, were concerned to use planning controls to address the “unprofitable chaos” which was the result of an accumulation of eighty years worth of outdoor advertising, rather than to address any concerns about democratic access to outdoor media (James 1968: 100). Indeed, as Baker (2007: 1200) notes of the North American experience:

When critics decried outdoor advertising’s impact on public space, they were protesting its effect on spatial order and appearance. They defined the value of public space in terms of its expressive power, not in terms of its contributions to democratic political life or its support of social heterogeneity. While critics believed government intervention was necessary to restrain outdoor advertising’s exploitation of a collective resource, they did not believe that public space’s design and use should be subject to genuinely popular determination any more than it should be at the mercy of the vicissitudes of the market. Instead, they assumed that its determination was the prerogative of a cultivated citizenry – a public conceived as an enlightened civic body of upright men and women, people like themselves.

In its opposition to outdoor advertising, the civic reform movement “positioned the urban populace as spectators, subject to its socializing influence through the sense of sight” (Baker 2007: 1195). This socialization seemed necessary because the mass circulation of commodities (of which outdoor advertising was an important part) seemed to these reformers to have infected the urban public sphere with a crass populism associated with both the working class and women (Kasson 1978; Wilson 1991; Warner 2002).

This critique of outdoor advertising's impact on the urban public realm continues to have some influence. In the few contemporary cities where authorities have attempted to limit or even remove different forms of outdoor advertising, the 'billboard problem' has been framed in much the same way as it was in earlier times. The aesthetic integrity of the urban public realm has been of most concern, rather than its democratic accessibility. However, reflecting the shift in urban governance described earlier, these concerns are now typically expressed in the entrepreneurial language of place-marketing (Hall and Hubbard 1998), with critics arguing that outdoor advertising might detract from other landscape values (such as heritage or contemporary architecture) that might be attractive to residents and tourists. In 2006, for instance, Auckland City Council proposed banning billboards from the Central Business District so that people could better appreciate Auckland's "buildings, heritage and natural landscape" (Orsman and Trevett 2006). The proliferation of billboards was seen as harming council's efforts to revitalise the CBD. The move was eventually defeated through a concerted campaign by outdoor advertisers and outdoor media companies, who argued that a ban would in fact harm Auckland's urban economy and image. One advertising industry critic suggested an Auckland without billboards would be more like the "Eastern Bloc before the fall of the Berlin Wall", and the Communicating Agencies Association of New Zealand (2006) argued that:

Banning billboards and restricting signage across the wider Auckland area will create a city that, instead of being visually exciting, looks like a place that is out of step with a city that values prosperity and growth – something which just can't be allowed to happen.

Outdoor advertising advocates have not been so successful in Sao Paulo, however, where a conservative Mayor banned billboard advertising in 2006 as part of his 'Clean City' policy designed to reduce visual pollution (Penteado and Hampp 2007).

Outdoor advertising companies are not insensitive to these aesthetic critiques. The Auckland and Sao Paulo cases are examples of a growing tendency to propose new forms of outdoor advertising as a *solution* to the 'chaos' of the outdoor media landscape. Indeed, this has been a large part of the appeal of public-private street furniture partnerships from the start. Jean-Claude Decaux, founder of JCDecaux, claims credit for inventing the concept of advertising-

funded street furniture, which his company first installed in Lyons in 1964.¹⁰ According to Decaux:

When I first created the first advertising bus shelters, free of charge to local authorities, I wanted to take on several challenges: to provide a service to public transport users; to remedy the problem of dilapidated equipment; to fight against surplus and unsightly advertising and, by revaluing it, make known the lively role that quality advertising can play.¹¹

Note here that Decaux was not only attempting to provide urban authorities with a solution to the provision and maintenance of costly urban infrastructure – he was also seeking to help them solve the “problem” of “surplus and unsightly advertising”. Decaux’s model catered to planners’ desire to allocate advertising to a ‘proper place’ in the city, in keeping with a broader impulse towards zoning and functional segregation of urban activities that characterised planning practice at the time (and still does to a large extent). Indeed, advertising on street furniture is increasingly seen as an alternative to traditional outdoor formats on these grounds. As two commentators remarked in an article for the trade journal *Advertising Age*:

At the same time that sentiment mounts in international markets against billboards and unsightly outdoor ads, cities are busily putting up for bid contracts with outdoor ad giants for public bus shelters and fixtures called street furniture (Penteado and Hampp 2007).

Significantly, at the same time that the Mayor of Sao Paulo banned billboards, he signed a contract with outdoor advertiser JCDecaux for advertising-funded bus shelters.

If we are concerned with the democratic dimension of the urban public realm we should reject these ceremonial and entrepreneurial models of public space as a basis for critically assessing the impact of outdoor advertising. Instead, we need to develop a different vocabulary more attuned to the important role that cities have played in the formation of public spheres and the various practices of being public (Iveson 2007). The literature on the production and transformation of urban public space has demonstrated that the accessibility of urban public spaces to different publics is crucial here (see for example Low and Smith, 2006, Mitchell, 2003, Sorkin, 1992, Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008). In the context of this discussion of outdoor advertising, it is particularly important to emphasise that these urban public spaces are important because of the variety of forms of public address they can sustain

– both embodied *and mediated*. Certainly, the accessibility of urban public space to different people will influence their ability to address others with whom they physically share a space – such forms of address involve *co-presence*. But urban public spaces are also critical to non co-present, more *mediated* forms of public address (Iveson 2007: 33-34). Cities have also contributed to the formation and development of public spheres through the development of what we might call *outdoor media landscapes*. I use this term to denote the various ways in which urban outdoor spaces are used as media spaces by those who place text and images on urban surfaces and infrastructure to address strangers who pass through those spaces at other times. Here, bodies combine with media to facilitate non-instantaneous forms of public address in the city which seek to attract the attention of mobile urban inhabitants. So, if we are concerned about the capacity of cities to contribute to a democratic public sphere, we also ought to ask: how are new governance arrangements for outdoor advertising affecting the capacity of different publics to access the outdoor media landscape?

From this perspective, efforts to control the ‘chaos’ of the outdoor media landscape appear quite differently. Cities in different times and places have been home to various forms of outdoor media, from commercial advertisements through to posters, notices, signs, stencils, stickers, and graffiti. This diversity reflects the fact that the outdoor media landscape is used to address a range of publics – from mainstream publics who are addressed by approved government notices and corporate advertisers, to counter-publics who are addressed by those who often appropriate urban surfaces for their own purposes. This co-existence is not necessarily peaceful, and the outdoor media landscape will inevitably be an object of contestation among a variety of interest parties including regulators, advertisers, artists and activists. Some outdoor media are legally sanctioned, others involve semi-legal or illegal confiscations of publicly-accessible private property. Some spaces are acquired for a commercial fee, others are used (either legally or illegally) ‘for free’ (see Figure 2). The nature of the legal and commercial arrangements in place in different cities will have a profound impact on the accessibility of the outdoor media landscape to different publics and their associated media. Following Staeheli and Mitchell (2008), we might refer to the legal and commercial arrangements which seek to govern access to the outdoor media landscape as a ‘regime of publicity’.

[Figure 2: A paid bus stop advertisement fights for attention alongside graffiti and illegal bill posters, Auckland NZ.]

Of course, each city will no doubt have its own distinct regime of publicity pertaining to outdoor media. As such, the question of accessibility is always an empirical question. But the widespread diffusion of the new business model for outdoor advertising stands to have a significant influence on outcomes across the many cities in which it is being embraced. Indeed, I would argue that public-private partnerships between urban authorities and outdoor advertising companies are already beginning to profoundly reshape the accessibility of urban media landscapes in different cities. Outdoor advertisers and urban authorities have become partners in regulating and restricting the use of urban public spaces as media. The outdoor advertising companies' maintenance crews help planning authorities with their efforts to regulate the public realm by keeping advertising in its proper place, and their designers are doing their best to protect advertisers' investment by making advertising panels and billboards graffiti- and vandal-proof. The planning officers are helping outdoor advertising companies with their efforts to monetise their own spaces by reducing the amount of 'free' space available to other advertisers and publics. This partnership arrangement appears even cosier when we take into account the fact that local authorities and other government agencies are themselves increasingly in the business of advertising (Mattelart 1991). As such, their interest in controlling access to the outdoor media landscape is often both as regulator *and* advertiser.

In this context, there is evidence of a worrying trend towards the privileging of commercial advertising over other forms of outdoor media, whereby access to outdoor media is increasingly restricted to those who can afford to purchase space from commercial outdoor advertising companies. In New York City, for example, a clamp down on 'illegal' but previously tolerated forms of outdoor advertising coincided with the City entering into a new public-private partnership for advertising-funded street furniture. The campaign was launched by Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer, who said:

I'm not opposed to advertising; it's an important business component to the city, but you should not create an illegal market where the city gets no benefit and legitimate businesses are hurt (Deliso 2006).

As one observer noted, the timing of the clamp down was no coincidence:

Why was the crackdown so long in coming? That's where the street-furniture deal comes in. The city has just embarked on a 20-year revenue-sharing contract in which it gets 20% of the \$20 billion the contractor, Cemusa, expects to make from ads on bus shelters and other structures. The city has similar agreements for ads on subways, phone kiosks and buses. Cutting down on illegal inventory will almost certainly boost pricing for legitimate sites (Deliso 2006).

The City of Sydney, which is in a street-furniture partnership with JCDecaux, has also recently enacted a crackdown on 'illegal' outdoor media such as bill posters and graffiti. In a concession to those concerned about the monopolisation of outdoor media space, it has erected eight poster poles available for free use (Gibson, 2008). To put that number in perspective, JCDecaux alone has over 150 advertising panels in the same geographical area, and APN Outdoor also operate dozens of billboard and transit advertising panels in the Central Business District. In these two cases, we seem to be witnessing an attempt by public-private partnerships to establish a more restrictive 'regime of publicity' by fixing in place a new configuration of property ownership and regulatory practices to control the outdoor media landscape.

If the outdoor media landscape is monetised and monopolised, this may undermine one of its most important contributions to the diversity and accessibility of the urban public realm. Historically, one of the main attractions of outdoor media for counter-publics has been its relatively low cost compared to other media. For example, Engels (1977 (1849): 326) noted the importance of posters to the formation of early working-class public spheres:

[posters] convert every street corner into a huge newspaper in which workers who pass by find the events of the day noted and commented on, the various views described and discussed, and where at the same time they meet people of all classes and opinions with whom they can discuss the contents of the posters; in short, where they have simultaneously a newspaper and a club, and all that without costing them a penny!

Engels made this observation in a critical analysis of early poster laws which sought to restrict the placement of posters in cities in nineteenth century Germany. In the politically charged post-1848 environment, he rightly saw that moves to curb the placement of posters would have political implications for the working class public sphere, even if they were

rhetorically justified with reference to more apparently neutral concerns about aesthetics and safety.

While of course the media landscape has changed dramatically since this time, the same principle holds true today – outdoor media continues to be significant for a variety of publics and counter-publics. New forms of mass media, from television to the world wide web and social media, have certainly not rendered outdoor media irrelevant. Far from being replaced by other forms of mass media, outdoor media are frequently deployed in *combination* with newer forms of media. Frequently, outdoor media are used to draw people’s attention to further information available in other media realms. In Sydney, for example, I have often observed this media strategy deployed by political activists, musicians, and street artists who continue to mobilise outdoor media such as posters, stickers and stencils to address their publics (Figure 3). Outdoor media remain strategic for many publics for the same reasons that they continue to hold appeal for corporate advertisers – because urban spaces assemble a density of activities and movements which involve a diverse range of people who can be effectively addressed ‘in situ’.

[Figure 3: I have even used this strategy myself...]

From the normative perspective I am developing here, the problem with new arrangements for outdoor advertising may not a problem of ‘too much advertising’ despoiling or intruding upon urban public spaces which ought to be free of such visual clutter. Rather, the problem is the creeping *monopolisation* of the outdoor media landscape driven in part by the monetisation strategies of outdoor advertising companies. The implication of this perspective is we ought to work to ensure that increases in paid advertising are not achieved *at the expense of* other cheaper forms and uses of outdoor media which are important to a variety of publics and counter-publics. Radical critique of outdoor advertising must distinguish itself from critiques informed by the ceremonial and entrepreneurial model of public space which see *all* forms of outdoor media as a regulatory problem unless they conform to state projects for reform. Rather than taking a position against outdoor advertising *per se*, instead I think we ought to stress the importance of *democratising the outdoor media landscape*. I now want to turn to some of the strategies that might be mobilised for such democratisation.

4. Democratizing the outdoor media landscape

As Staeheli and Mitchell (2008: 142) have argued, ‘understanding publicity as a regime makes it clear that relations of publicity are always simultaneously relatively structured and continually subject to challenge and revision’. In this process of challenge and revision, urban spaces themselves become objects of public debate and contestation (Iveson, 2007: 36-46). So, in cities where public-private partnerships threaten to restrict access to the outdoor media landscape, how can we limit and/or contest such restrictions? There are at least three ways in which urban authorities and activists are pushing for the democratisation of outdoor media. As we will see, these strategies are complimentary in some respects, but in other respects they do not necessarily fit together neatly.

First, public urban authorities who enter into partnerships with outdoor advertising companies for advertising-funded urban infrastructure have an important role to play. In their tender processes and contractual arrangements, they should be guided by the principle that there must be genuine non-commercial access to outdoor media. This could take a number of forms. For instance, the tender documents for street furniture contracts might include requirements for the successful tender such as:

- the installation and maintenance of freely-available community/public notice boards as well as other forms of street furniture such as bus shelters and telephone booths;
- the setting-aside of a given proportion of commercial advertising panels to community notices and/or public artworks, either on a permanent or temporary basis;
- the ‘taxing’ of all advertising revenue raised from third-party advertising revenue, so that a proportion is returned to municipal authorities who could use it to provide and maintain their own outdoor media space for public use.

Such strategies could open up outdoor advertising infrastructure to different advertisers and publics. This may have significant effects on the urban public realm by providing information and/or raising awareness of issues of political concern as well as consumer choice, and perhaps even puncturing the everyday with images or messages that draw us out of routine time-space.

Of course, there are constraints on the potential for urban authorities to insist on such inclusions in street furniture tenders. But the three terms I have suggested above are by no

means in the realm of fantasy, with different combinations of these requirements already in place in some cities.¹² Indeed, it is important to note that there is considerable variation in the terms of the deals struck between public urban authorities and outdoor advertising companies – and such variation can be observed even as the fine details of these deals usually remain hidden behind the veil of ‘commercial in confidence’ provisions are therefore beyond close public and academic scrutiny. Yes, the operations of many of these companies are regional or global in scope. But this does not mean that they have the power to achieve the same favourable outcomes across their hundreds of partnerships. There *is* room for urban authorities to strike different kinds of deals, precisely because the power of these corporations has to be *performed* in each negotiation and is not guaranteed in advance of every deal they make (Johns 2007). As Fleur Johns (2007: 120) reminds us, corporate deal-making involves a mix of inflexibility and pliability. However, urban authorities who are not experiencing severe fiscal pressures and/or who can promise access to a wealthy consumer base will likely find these outdoor advertising corporations more pliable than those authorities who are more desperate and/or poor.

Second, citizens concerned about the proliferation of new forms of outdoor advertising might tactically appropriate the formal planning and approval process for their own ends. In Toronto, a small group of activists working under the banner of *Illegal Signs* have worked hard to hold outdoor advertisers to account. They map billboards in the city, check to see whether they have planning approval, and petition the City to remove illegal signs. As they put it: ‘Everyone should have a hobby. Our hobby is destroying illegal billboards with the rule of law’.¹³

As important as these two strategies are, they also have a shared limitation. Both leave in place the power of public-private partnerships to determine and regulate the ‘proper place’ of all outdoor media interventions through a formalised planning and approval process. Here, we should recall the promise of Jean-Claude Decaux that his new arrangements for outdoor advertising would not only provide ‘free’ urban infrastructure, but that they would help to clean up a messy and chaotic outdoor media landscape. Further, these strategies do not necessarily challenge the uni-directional mode of communication privileged by advertising as a form of public address. As powerful as regulatory action can be, we must also think about further ways to claim the city’s outdoor media for different forms of address, even in the face

of its regulation and creeping monopolisation. The actions of the *New York Street Advertising Takeover* in creating ‘public ads’ are suggestive of another direction here. This action started by identifying illegal outdoor advertisements, and then took the next step of turning them into blank canvases for ‘public ads’. The campaign involved a group of artists white-washing and then re-painting over 200 illegal billboards in Manhattan in two co-ordinated actions staged during 2009.¹⁴

A third strategy for the democratisation of outdoor media, then, focuses on its unauthorised appropriation and re-appropriation for different forms of public address. New outdoor advertising arrangements might promise to contain advertising and other forms of public address to their proper place, but this is a promise that cannot be kept. As the failed wars on graffiti have demonstrated, it would be prohibitively expensive (not to mention politically repressive) for urban authorities to completely eradicate unauthorised uses of outdoor media (Iveson 2010). The bus shelter not 100 metres from my office at the University of Sydney is a good example of the ultimate impossibility of this promise. Despite the daily appearance of a JCDecaux maintenance van to clean up the bus shelter, it is regularly covered with notices and advertisements for meetings, parties (of both the political and dance variety), and other events (Figures 4 and 5). This game of cat-and-mouse is played out on bus shelters in different parts of the city. On other bus shelters, supposedly ‘graffiti-proof’ glass surfaces are frequently tagged with ‘scratchies’ etched into their surface. Paid advertisements exist alongside public signage and notices, neighbourhood notices for lost cats, garage sales and rooms for rent, and illegal graffiti, all seeking to reach (different but overlapping) audiences who move through different parts of the city. Sometimes these forms of address are imposed over the top of commercial advertising space. At other times, other urban infrastructure elements are mobilised as outdoor media for different forms of advertising and public address. In Sydney, for instance, posters appear overnight to advertise musical performances and club nights on building site hoardings, railway underpasses, abandoned buildings and telegraph poles around the city.

[Figure 4: A JCDecaux maintenance worker removes bill posters from bus stop, Sydney.]

[Figure 5: The same bus stop accumulates more bill posters]

More programmatically, different cities have given rise to different traditions of advertisement ‘modification’, whereby advertisements on bus shelters and billboards are appropriated by those seeking to hijack, challenge or replace the advertiser’s message. Sydney was once home to a very active billboard modification movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, groups such as *BUGA UP* (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions) and *I, Object* targeted tobacco advertisements and sexist imagery for alteration and critical comment, asserting what they called their ‘write of reply’ to the advertisers and outdoor media companies (Figures 6 and 7). Their campaign was particularly effectively in widening a public debate about tobacco advertising and smoking-related illness, and eventually contributed to a ban on tobacco advertising and sponsorship in Australia (Chapman, 1996).

[Figures 6 and 7: BUGA UP billboard alterations, Sydney. Photographs courtesy of BUGA UP]

Certainly, the anti-graffiti technologies developed by outdoor advertising companies have advanced since the days when *BUGA UP* were active, and the penalties for graffiti have also been increased in Sydney and elsewhere. But this has not stopped billboard banditry. For instance, New Jersey graffiti writer KAWS turned his attention to billboards in the early 1990s, selectively modifying their images to create a ‘hybrid of advertising poisoned by graffiti’ (Lewisohn 2008: 109). In the mid-1990s, he extended his practice to begin modifying advertisements on bus shelters and phone booths, having managed to get his hands on a key to open the glass covers of their advertising panels. As with *BUGA UP*, KAWS’ interventions are not properly read simply as ‘anti-advertising’ – rather, they model a much more active and imaginative use of commercial media space for the circulation of alternative images and messages. As he put it:

It was never anti-advertising. That was the biggest misconception about what I was doing. It was more in the vein of graffiti, trying to get up and get out there, and the fun of taking these spaces (quoted in Lewisohn 2008: 111).

Like his *BUGA UP* counterparts, KAWS took to doing his work of removing and re-installing advertisements during the day dressed as a maintenance worker in order to attract less attention by blending in with his urban surroundings. Other influential billboard bandits

have adopted similar methods and practices include San Francisco's Billboard Liberation Front, New York 'popagandist' Ron English, and London's Cut Up Crew.¹⁵

So, the efforts of 'billboard bandits' and other culture jammers should inform our analysis of what needs to be done. Culture jamming is described by Klein (2001: p. 280) as:

the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages. Streets are public spaces, adbusters argue, and since most residents can't afford to counter corporate messages by purchasing their own ads, they should have the right to talk back to messages they never asked to see.

The significance of culture jamming here lies in the fact that its practitioners have not been content to simply argue against the existence of outdoor advertising. They have also actively intervened in outdoor media landscapes through the hacking and modification of existing advertisements. Here, billboard bandits and other culture jammers have made productive use of the outdoor media infrastructure which is put in place for outdoor advertising. Their actions are based on an implicit or explicit recognition of the fact that in the contemporary public sphere, "commodities and politics share the same media" (Warner 2002: 170). Rather than accepting its monopolisation of this media by corporations, they have asserted their 'write of reply' (as *BUGA UP* activists put it) to advertisers by simply writing over their advertisements.

Now, like the first two democratisation strategies discussed above, this third strategy of appropriation and re-appropriation also has its limitations. We should be realistic about the extent to which billboard banditry and other illicit uses of outdoor media can fundamentally reshape the urban media landscape. Certainly, it would appear that the balance is tipping in favour of advertisers who can afford to purchase outdoor media space from companies like JCDecaux and Adshel. Where billboard 'hacks' and unofficial notices might once have lasted in place for days and weeks, they are now likely to be removed within 24 hours. And the penalties for those caught in the act of graffiti and bill posting are certainly harsher than they were.¹⁶ And of course, the actions of culture jammers and others who appropriate outdoor advertisements for their own outdoor media interventions rely on the existence of the very outdoor advertising infrastructure to which they are supposed to be denied access. But this is precisely why their interventions are significant – because they point to alternative possibilities lying within that existing infrastructure.

5. Concluding reflections

As this article has shown, there is a growing trend in urban governance towards public-private partnerships for advertising-funded urban infrastructure. Should citizens of cities where these deals have been struck be grateful to the outdoor advertising industry, for liberating the collective from the need to fund the provision and maintenance of basic urban infrastructure? Is a little advertising really much of a price to pay for the ‘free’ provision and maintenance of urban infrastructure?

Even if we had no political concerns about the impact of advertising-funded urban infrastructure, the sustainability of the funding model is open to question. Just because street furniture is provided at no cost to urban authorities does not make it ‘free’ – expenditure on advertising makes up part of the cost of products which are advertised, so ‘we’ are still paying for it as consumers if not as tax payers. And advertising expenditures are by no means guaranteed to keep rising, or to remain at their current levels – indeed, many major advertising markets have experienced a contraction recently, and this has already started to impact on major outdoor advertising companies who have been forced to cut rates for advertising space (in the United States, for example, see Hampp 2009). As such, even if outdoor advertising remains attractive to advertisers in comparison to other media, outdoor may simply maintain an on-going slice of a dwindling pie.

These financial questions notwithstanding, in this article I have drawn attention to the potentially harmful impact of these new governance arrangements on the urban public realm. The apparently ‘free’ provision of advertising-funded urban infrastructure does in fact have a cost, in the form of reduced access to the outdoor media landscape. The monetisation strategies of outdoor advertising companies tend towards the monopolisation of outdoor media. Public urban authorities are increasingly supporting this monopolisation through the regulation of other ‘competing’ forms of outdoor media such as telegraph pole posters, bill posters and graffiti. They do so because they now increasingly rely on outdoor advertising companies to provide urban infrastructure, so the on-going profitability of outdoor advertising now appears to be a matter of public interest and benefit. Once, urban authorities

and outdoor advertisers were engaged in a confrontation over the aesthetics of the urban public realm. Now, increasingly this confrontation is giving way to partnership. As I have shown, these partnerships have emerged not only because urban authorities have become more entrepreneurial. They have also emerged because outdoor advertising companies have helped urban authorities in their desire to better control the outdoor media landscape. As such, it is not enough to be critical of new outdoor advertising arrangements on the grounds that they represent an intrusion of corporate communication into urban public spaces. We ought to guard against nostalgia for the past that sometimes informs a critical rhetoric of ‘privatisation’, given that urban authorities have been no more interested in democratising the outdoor media landscape than have outdoor advertising companies.

I have suggested that critique of the new regimes of publicity associated with advertising-funded urban infrastructure ought to be normatively underpinned with a concern for democratisation. The strategies for democratisation I have proposed in this article are all premised on the observation that outdoor advertising companies, and their public partners in advertising-funded urban infrastructure, are building a media infrastructure. While of course they are seeking to monopolise its use, the very existence of this infrastructure simultaneously opens new possibilities for uses of the urban media landscape. To some extent at least, this infrastructure can be hijacked and put to other ends. More than that, outdoor advertising companies might inadvertently provide some ideas about how better to establish a democratic outdoor media landscape which is not dominated by their clients. While it is these clients for whom the infrastructure may have been intended, they surely will not ever attain complete control. As Anne Cronin (2008: p. 75) has asked:

might not the urban hyperpresence of advertisements and the glut of their extravagant textual promises and threats invoke a rather different response from that hoped for by advertising agencies and their clients? Might not this response be a turning away from such an intense consumption-orientation and a triggering of dreams of how we could live otherwise, how cities might be otherwise?

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the advertising industry, the kind of urban advertising discussed in this article is variously referred to as ‘outdoor’ or ‘out-of-home’ advertising. Following the convention in Australia, which constitutes the empirical context for my observations here, I will stick with ‘outdoor advertising’ to refer to advertising in a variety of media implanted in publicly accessible urban spaces.

² www.clearchanneloutdoor.com, accessed 27 February 2009.

³ www.jcdecaux.com, accessed 27 February 2009.

⁴ Outdoor Advertising Association (UK), <http://www.oaa.org.uk/#/38>, accessed March 6 2009.

⁵ Unfortunately, the Datamonitor reports on which I rely here sometimes used different categories in their 2002 and 2006 profiles for print advertising. In some cases, the 2002 figures are my additions of separate calculations for newspapers, magazines and direct mail. These categories were collapsed into press for the 2006 reports.

⁶ Indeed, it might also be correct to note that the move towards public-private partnerships in the provision of urban street furniture that I am about to describe constitutes just the kind of localised practice that is not simply a product of, but rather *productive of*, a globalising neo-liberalism. Scholars like Amin (2002) have emphasised that the shape of urban governance in cities is not determined by nebulous neo-liberal forces coming from ‘out there’, but rather through networks of actors and institutions taking action at the local scale (‘in here’, as it were).

⁷ www.brandedcities.com/about.html, accessed 27 February 2009.

⁸ www.jcdecaux.com/en/The-JCDecaux-group/Key-figures, accessed 27 February 2009.

⁹ www.adshel.com, accessed 27 February 2009.

¹⁰ www.jcdecaux.com/en/The-JCDecaux-group/History/1964, accessed 27 February 2009. Note, however, that there are earlier examples in France and elsewhere of advertising funding public facilities – see Cronin 2006.

¹¹ www.jcdecaux.com.au – “Public Services”, accessed 27 February 2009.

¹² For instance, in Sheffield (UK) large numbers of advertising panels provided by contractor JCDecaux are set aside for public and community notices. In Australia, the City of Sydney provides its own freely-available community notice boards which exist alongside (although are greatly outnumbered by) advertising panels on infrastructure also operated by JCDecaux. The City of Sydney also receives some portion of the advertising revenue raised by JCDecaux, although the precise figure is not publicly-available.

¹³ www.illegalsigns.ca, accessed 2 February 2010.

¹⁴ www.publicadcampaign.com/nysat/, accessed 2 February 2010.

¹⁵ www.billboardliberation.com/, www.popaganda.com, www.cutupcollective.com/, all accessed 2 February 2010.

¹⁶ Despite the fact that they were painting over illegal signs, the New York Street Advertising Takeover actions resulted in 9 people being arrested, spending a total of 310 hours in jail collectively. All charges were eventually dismissed.

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