

ADVERTISING

Advertising by anyone other than themselves is an affront to social engineers. It reminds them that people voluntarily buy goods and services of which they disapprove; worse, product advertising actually encourages people to behave in ways planners don't like.

Advertising is nothing more than making opinion or fact publicly known. The usual intention is to persuade. It is sometimes dishonest, often mindless, and often tasteless (which may be defined as anything I don't like). Although taxes sometimes pay for advertisements, advertising itself never resorts to force. Tax funded advertisements take it upon themselves to improve my health - the Life Be In It and anti-smoking campaigns - or my opinion - the Federal Government's slick presentation of "The Accord". The greatest misrepresentations tend to be associated with elections.

Unless we concede that social engineers have superior wisdom and superior authority, we can have no reason to tamper with free expression however much we may disagree with it. The case against tampering with free expression proscribes positive tampering by use of the taxes to subsidise one set of ideas against others as well as proscribing legal or other obstacles placed in the way of free expression. It is not the proper function of governments to decide what their people will think or what they will hear. Hitler's publicist, Herr Goebbels (who incidentally was regarded as a radical) enjoyed the title: Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda. His popular enlightenment included both negative and positive tampering with free expression. We should not go any distance down that road lest we cannot scramble back up it. The road gets steeper as one travels until return becomes impossible.

We may simply recognise the road by asking, is force (of law or otherwise) employed to influence what we will think. Clearly Australians are some little

The Trade Practices Commission and the Broadcasting Tribunal, both Federal statutory bodies, have recently placed obstacles which have the force of law, in the way of free expression by television advertisers.

The Broadcasting Tribunal has conducted a bout of self-initiated reviews resulting in proposed new rules governing advertising time limits, alcohol advertising, reference to tobacco sponsorships and children's programming. In imposing restrictions on so-called life style advertising, the Tribunal is making judgements on acceptable standards of public morality. Australia has come to accept, if not strange values, then very different values from those of only about two decades ago, if indeed it accepts that interviewees on programmes like Four Corners, Nationwide and 60 Minutes can commend homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, violence, law breaking and the use of drugs other than tobacco and alcohol, but that brands of tobacco and alcohol cannot be advertised. It is even stranger that a school teacher can teach his class that homosexuality is an acceptable alternative life style while tobacco and alcohol advertising is banned.

I don't believe that the public does support these standards. I think an overwhelming majority would defend ^{the} propriety of TV advocacy of the use of tobacco, alcohol, prostitution, and even homosexuality but not violence, but would object strongly to advocacy of any of these at school. The big difference is that the TV can be turned off whereas the school child is forced to listen. The difference would be even greater if the number of TV channels were not arbitrarily restricted so that the likelihood of tuning a channel which caters for each family's preferred standards is greatly reduced. We have the ridiculous situation where the justification for regulation of TV standards is to be found in the monopoly rights conferred on TV Channel owners and the ABC by TV regulations.

Lesser, although still important differences, are that TV also speaks to adults and the degree of risk in adopting a homosexual lifestyle is probably, though not necessarily, greater than that caused by use of nicotine or alcohol. Some people may make a distinction between advertising one's cause free on a discussion programme and paying for the privilege, but I cannot see the distinction.

The Trade Practices Commission (TPC) is supposed to be on the side of competitive markets. FACTS, the television stations' industrial body, registered guidelines for acceptance of television commercials with the TPC. Instead of telling FACTS and the Government that the whole arrangement was anti-competitive and would result in commercials which had less appeal to the public (though some of us may disapprove of the public's taste), the TPC instructed FACTS to consult with the Australian Federation of Consumer Organisations (AFCO) and others on how it manages self regulation.

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there is nothing wrong with consultation but, whatever one thinks of anti-competitive self regulation, it remains wrong that a self-regulatory body should be forced to admit to its consultative processes a consumerist group which is not representative of consumers. AFCA represents merely a collection of special interest groups and dominant among these is the Australian Consumers Association (ACA). ACA claims that it represents the interests of fifteen million consumers and says its mandate is from the 200,000 or so readers of Choice magazine, but these readers have no voting rights in ACA which is controlled by an elite of fewer than two hundred full members. It is organised along the same lines, and is as representative as the League of Rights, which fortunately is not consulted. There is nothing wrong with unelected and unrepresentative lobby groups as such, but they have no right to privileged positions within the process of government itself. The TPC ruling is the unfortunate result of a readiness to accept pressure groups for what they say they are.

The funny side to all this is that the Parliament has just legislated to remove political advertising from the ambit of the Trade Practices Act. It seems the public is to be trusted in the choice of the chief social planners but these have no confidence in the public's good sense in lesser matters.

Far better that the public should choose enlightenment from among competing claims than that popular enlightenment should be determined by ministers, tribunals or lobby groups.

The Government's responsibility is to increase the opportunity for competition among claims about products and ideas. Freedom of the media confers no privilege on media owners or advertisers and is the citizen's right.