

SUBMISSION

Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment,
Communications and the Arts**

Dr David van Gend

Family doctor

Senior lecturer in Medicine, University of Queensland

“My wife and I have regarded the preservation of this sphere of innocence during her early years as one of our most important parental responsibilities. In the future she will have time to learn of human wickedness and to experience the disenchantment of her world. That time has not yet come.”

Robert Manne, “Childhood”.ⁱ

I state my admiration and appreciation for the Senate, at the initiative of Senator Lynn Allison, setting up this timely Inquiry, and extend my strong support for the broad issues raised by such as the Australia Institute.

However, for brevity, my submission to this Committee will be limited to an obvious problem that is open to a straightforward solution – the need to protect children from sexualised adult-content found on roadside Billboards, and to a lesser extent on commercial radio.

Advertising conveys attitude. Certain ads are complicit in the inculcation of age-inappropriate sexual attitudes.

I write as a father, and family doctor, angered by the adult sexual 'attitude' forced upon my children in situations where parents have no power to shield them – for instance by roadside billboards – and the inability of our regulatory authority to remove this obvious offence.

I hope this is one element raised in the current Inquiry that the Senate Committee can act upon in a practical and decisive way.

Advertising standards are loosely regulated by voluntary Codes created by the advertising industry, which are then used by the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) to adjudicate complaints from the public.

As one might expect, the Codes submitted by the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) to the ASB are somewhat self-serving and permissive. And the ASB, one observes from their published judgements, finds the clauses in these Codes inadequate tools for rejecting obvious examples of ads that contribute to premature sexualisation of children.

If the advertising industry's voluntary Code is so weak that the regulatory authority cannot use it to reject material that prematurely sexualises kids, then the Code is an ass.

Here is a task for the Senate Committee to consider – reinforcing the Codes to ensure that adult material can be kept more strictly out of the path of children. To enable the ASB to distinguish effectively between adult messages advertised in a suitable medium, and forcing children to see / hear and be disturbed by strictly adult themes.

To illustrate: the trip to Dreamworld on the Gold Coast is always, for my family, diminished by a few offensive billboards on the way – in particular the Advanced Medical Institute which puts a question put to my primary-aged sons: "DO YOU WANT LONGER-LASTING SEX?"

I ask Senators to consider this: if adults from AMI came to the door of our house to ask my children that question, would that be acceptable? I would report them to authorities. How dare a bunch of ad-men thrust that adult question into the face of my primary-age children, whether in person or via the billboard they know my children will read.

But when parents do report them to the relevant advertising authority, the ASB, their complaints are dismissed! Apparently because there are no objective pictures of naked adults having 'longer-lasting sex' - only pictures elicited in the imagination of readers - the Code does not allow for the ASB to censure the AMI ads.

The fact that the AMI billboards, the condom ads, and such like, remain a blight on the landscape, and a cause of anger to parents who want to preserve the brief time of childhood unburdened with adult obsessions, shows the inadequacy of the current Code in protecting the best interests of children and the rights of parents.

I would have no problem with the titillating AMI material, visual or radio / TV, if it was presented in adult places at adult times. But it is obnoxious when forced upon young children, with parents powerless to intervene.

The Codes (the ‘ethics’ and ‘children’ codes specifically)ⁱⁱ do not acknowledge the central importance of keeping adult material in an adult domain, and not ‘in the face’ of children. Because adults cannot protect their children from billboards along the public highways, offensive ads in billboards need the strictest of all regulations.

I do hope the Senate Committee can find a way of strengthening the hand of the ASB, which presently has only the self-serving voluntary Code of the advertising industry by which to regulate the worst of that industry’s intrusions into the minds of children.

Billboards are the prime example, but radio advertising is another. I note the limp refrain in the ASB judgements that radio-advertising is not currently regulated according to suitable ‘adult times’ in the same way as TV. That is another failing to be corrected, for the sake of easing the premature ‘adultification’ of kids.

Radio ads needs to be time-zoned like TV advertising, so that adult material is kept to adult times. Children, after all, cannot avoid hearing radio ads when they go to the corner store to buy milk for Mum, or change out of their togs at the local Council pool, and a dozen other places. Yet when parents complain about AMI’s ad of copulatory grunts and squeaky mattresses playing in such public places, the ASB cannot regulate the ad – because the sounds are not, as in the Code, a recording of “actual sexual intercourse”.

Again, the Code is an ass, and makes the regulatory role of the ASB ineffective and open to contempt.

Any observer will have noted the upswing in public opinion against the premature sexualisation of children (including the ‘corporate paedophilia’ identified by the Australia Institute) – an unusually broad coalition of progressive / conservative advocacy groups.

I do hope this groundswell of concern will lead to more appropriate regulations being put on advertising, so that adult material is kept for the perusal of adults, and not, at any time, placed across the path of children.

Thank you again for the initiative in convening this Committee, and thank you for considering one aspect of the overall problem addressed in this brief submission.

ⁱ Manne, Robert, in *Left Right Left*, Melbourne 2005

ⁱⁱ http://www.advertisingstandardsbureau.com.au/pages/images/6067_AANA_ethics_final.pdf The Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) Advertising Code of Ethics and the http://www.advertisingstandardsbureau.com.au/pages/images/6068_AANA_children_ethics_final.pdf AANA Code for advertising to children