

Shadow advertising review board just misleading posturing

In March, a group of West-Australian based health NGOs announced in a flurry of publicity that they were going to set up an independent review board that would 'name and shame' alcohol advertisers because the industry's own system – the Alcohol Beverage Advertising Code (ABAC) scheme was ineffective. Australia was being swamped by a "tsunami" of inappropriate advertising, apparently.

The announcement got a very good run in the media, with journalists accepting the healthist's claims at face value and interpreting the new Alcohol Advertising Review Board (the AARB) as national, credible, fair-minded and effective, while the ABAC system was none of those things and just there to serve the industry.

The reality is vastly different. The posturing by the AARB about the purported failings of the ABAC scheme is based on quite large misstatements about how ABAC operates, what it regulates and what its impact is, particularly when a decision goes against an advertiser. The AARB backers never bothered to contact the ABAC for more information or to ask any questions.

In reality, the ABAC system has a very good record. It is closely monitored by governments and has been the subject of several parliamentary inquiries. It has an Australian Government representative on its management committee, and prestigious public health experts on its Adjudication Panels.

One of the strengths of the ABAC system is how it almost always prevents non-compliant advertising appearing in the first place. I doubt the review board will do the same.

The oddest element of the activists' Review Board is that it declares everyone under 25 years old as a 'young person' and hence needing protection from being exposed to alcohol advertising. It sourced the 25 years old target from the Preventative Health Taskforce a few years back, of which the Review Board's leading spokesperson was the Vice-Chair.

Defining 25 year olds or under as young enough to require protection is contemptuously treating grown adults as children, but it's also quite cunning at the same time because it sets up almost all alcohol advertising to be shown to the 'young', and hence open to naming and shaming by the AARB.

What advertising channel or media doesn't have a substantial number of people 18 to 25 years old watching it? Perhaps the Opera Channel?

If there is one weakness of the ABAC scheme, it is that by necessity it is a complex system and hence not at all easy to understand at first glance. This complexity is unavoidable because what it is regulating is complex.

The ABAC scheme's complexity makes it very hard for journalists to comprehend how it works, while advertising bans and 'booze industry targets children' makes simpler headlines.

The current system has evolved with the goodwill of many well intentioned people, and its credibility should not be put in jeopardy by activists seeking publicity.