

**OVERCONSUMPTION**

**WAKING-UP  
TO ADVERTS  
PROMOTING  
POLLUTING  
LIFESTYLES**



**Re**  **set**  
**lessons from  
lockdown**

# WAKING-UP TO ADVERTS PROMOTING POLLUTING LIFESTYLES



How the pandemic pause drew attention to adverts fuelling the climate emergency and undermining wellbeing, and the cities now acting to end 'high-carbon advertising'

Two of people's most polluting activities – flying and driving – were heavily interrupted during the pandemic. And, as many quickly adapted, attention fell on the role of advertising in promoting heavily polluting personal behaviour. Now, cities are starting to pass new rules banning 'high carbon' adverts, and international campaigns are growing to stop adverts fuelling the climate emergency.

Overnight the pandemic transformed the way people moved, worked and spent their hard-earned cash. **Whole industries, institutions and communities**<sup>1</sup> adapted in the face of a new reality. The advertising industry cottoned onto this quickly and there was a flurry of brands pronouncing that **'we are all in this together'**<sup>2</sup>. From British supermarket Asda to **American smartwatch manufacturer Fitbit**<sup>3</sup>, advertisements appealed to people's emotions and desire for solidarity, security and community to help them navigate such turbulent times. But many soon questioned the messaging, and whether the products being pushed were actually improving human wellbeing. The safer streets and cleaner air that came with the sudden absence of commuting at the height of lockdown, and the time, money and pollution saved by not flying, and holidaying nearer home, or holding work meetings online, seemed beneficial.

Living more local lives, suddenly advertisements glorifying holidays and flights to far-flung destinations, or the wonders of giant gas-guzzling SUVs, felt alien to many. Spending more time at home, surrounded by piles of 'stuff' and forgotten purchases, **led many people to realise they had too many things**<sup>4</sup>. These realisations caused people to shift their priorities around consumption, **with many deciding they wanted to buy fewer, higher-quality products that can stand the test of time**<sup>5</sup>, or instead **choosing to repair and maintain what they had**<sup>6</sup>. It was a small step from questioning consumerism to noticing the role of the huge advertising industry in fuelling overconsumption. Campaigns like **Adfree cities**<sup>7</sup>, **Badvertising**<sup>8</sup>, and **Clean Creatives**<sup>9</sup> are now growing rapidly to confront the influence and visual pollution of advertising, with a special focus on the climate emergency.

**"Now more than ever, we are seeing an increasing awareness from citizens and climate groups about the dangers from advertising promoting polluting activities and debt-fuelled consumerism in the midst of a climate and 'cost of living' crisis. This has successfully translated into actions on the ground to resist corporate polluters' propaganda, while supporting a growing sense that advertising that fuels the climate emergency has no place in our society."**

Emilie Tricarico, member of the Badvertising campaign





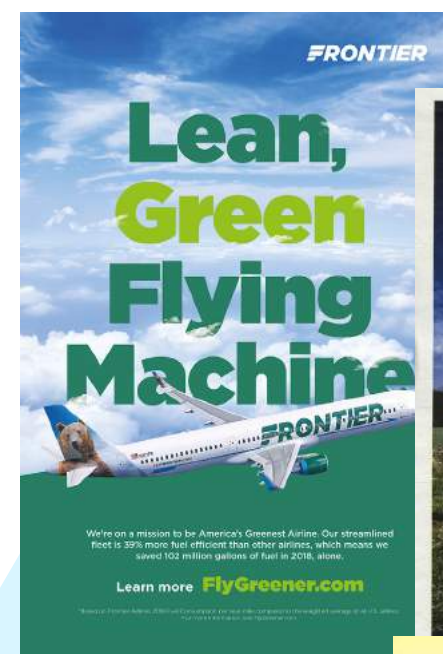
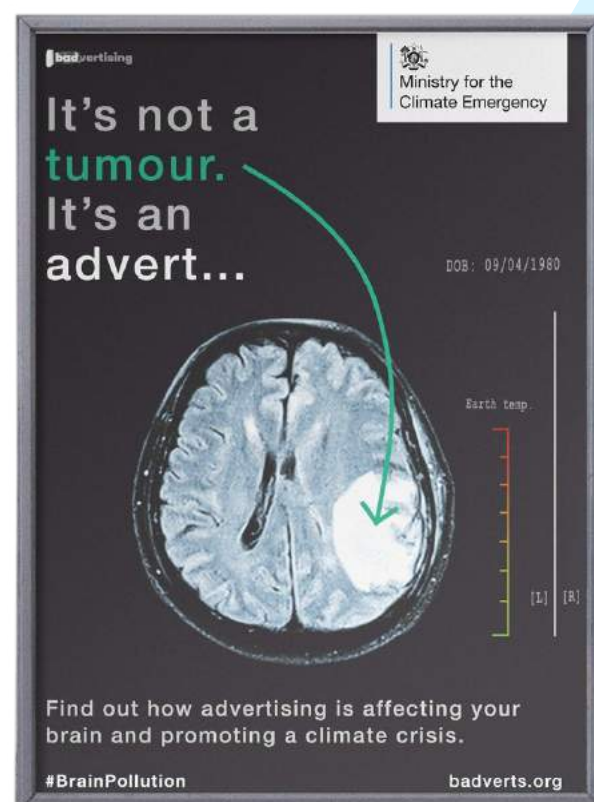
From this increased awareness came another lightbulb moment. Many of the products like cars, flights and consumer goods being advertised to us, digitally and physically, were things that people were learning to live more without, and whose absence during the pandemic, delivered a range of benefits to communities around the world. Grounded aeroplanes and the impossibility of foreign holidays cleansed the skies of chemtrails, while roads rid of SUVs and cars allowed people to fall in love with bird song and cleaner air. **Recent research has shown**<sup>10</sup> that advertisements for cars and flights could be responsible for between 202 and 606 million tonnes of greenhouse gases in 2019. At the lower end of the range, **the emissions are equivalent to that of the annual emissions from the Netherlands in 2019, while at the higher end of the range it is approximately twice the national emissions from Spain in 2019**<sup>11</sup>.

**“Before the pandemic, air travel was prognosed to have an annual growth of 5%. They presented this number as if it were a law of nature. But demand is also created by advertising. As soon as Covid-restrictions were lifted, ads for flying spread like a virus: on our streets, in our newspapers, and on our digital timelines. Advertising raises emissions considerably and maintains an illusion that a high carbon lifestyle is normal and appealing to a huge mass. This is an important roadblock for the transition and that’s why we are campaigning for a law that bans fossil ads, just like tobacco ads are banned.”**

Femke Slegers, Reclame Fossilvrij (Fossil Free Advertising)

With the benefits that could be accelerated from ditching advertising, what is the point of continuing to push high-emission products that damage physical and planetary health? During the pandemic this question echoed through cities and towns around the world with politicians and citizens working together to rid cities from high-carbon ads. The **Dutch city of Amsterdam**<sup>12</sup> became one of the first to ban ads from fossil fuel and aviation companies throughout the city in a bid to curtail the excesses of fossil fuelled overconsumption. And the campaigners aren’t stopping there, with their eyes now firmly set on winning a ban in the **Dutch cities of the Hague, Utrecht and Rotterdam**<sup>13</sup>.

Momentum is building elsewhere too. The **French government recently introduced a law**<sup>14</sup>, which is set to come into force in the summer of 2022, that bans the advertisement of petrol and diesel to consumers. This is just the first step in France, as **a ban on the advertisement of the most polluting cars is set to come into force by 2028**<sup>15</sup> and, more recently, **introduced a law requiring car manufacturers and brands to include a disclaimer in their adverts**<sup>16</sup> encouraging more energy efficient and climate-friendly modes of transport, such as walking, cycling, jumping on public transport and even carpooling.



In many cases, towns and cities have outstripped the ambition of national governments when it comes to banning fossil fuel ads due to vociferous grassroots campaigns. The British cities of **Norwich**<sup>17</sup>, **Liverpool**<sup>18</sup>, as well as the administrative region of **North Somerset**<sup>19</sup>, have all tabled motions to ban high carbon advertisements that harm both public health and planetary health, with other towns considering the move too. The **Swedish city of Lund is set to ban adverts for flying by 2023**<sup>20</sup>, while the **city council of Helsinki in Finland have just tabled a motion proposing a ban on all fossil fuel advertisements within the city**<sup>21</sup>. Similar citizen-led initiatives have been launched in towns and cities across **Canada**<sup>22</sup>, the **USA**<sup>23</sup> and **Norway**<sup>24</sup>.

Efforts to ban high carbon advertising during the pandemic go hand-in-hand with initiatives to tackle the persistent greenwash from some of the biggest polluters. In the UK, environmental lawyers **ClientEarth**<sup>25</sup> is calling on policymakers to ban all fossil fuel company

adverts **unless they are accompanied by a tobacco-style health warning to reverse this “great deception”**<sup>26</sup>. This move built on a legal challenge lodged against fossil fuel giant BP in 2019, **who were playing up their renewable energy investments through advertising despite 96% of the company’s annual investment being on oil and gas infrastructure**<sup>27</sup>.

The global pandemic gave us pause to consider what really mattered to our wellbeing and communities. This pause brought into question what we buy and how we move around, as well as what fills our public spaces. Citizens around the world, through grassroots initiatives and Citizen Assemblies, are beginning to demand a stop to advertisements fuelling the climate crisis – and the pandemic was a catalyst. As the world emerges, and people begin to spend money once again, the power of advertising could be used to accelerate the solutions to the climate crisis instead of glorifying the companies and products that are driving it.

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