

How to make trouble and influence people

BUGA-UP interview



Formed in 1979, Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions (BUGA-UP) rapidly made its mark on hoardings around the nation. By cleverly revising advertising slogans and disrupting tobacco-sponsored events, the group revealed the true cost of tobacco and alcohol company deception. Having racked up numerous fines and arrests over its 16-year existence BUGA-UP formally wound up in 1994 as Federal and State Governments finally began to tighten up regulations governing the

advertising of alcohol and tobacco. In the following interview graffitiist ToFu recalls his part in the group's early adventures.

How did you first get involved with Sydney BUGA-UP?

The first billboard I saw that BUGA-UP had done was one featuring five newsreaders where someone had written across the bottom, "Five blind mice". That got me interested in the whole process. Shortly after, I passed by a local hall that had a meeting board up about a presentation by BUGA-UP and I went in. I got interested and decided to, not exactly join the group because you couldn't join the group, but get involved. You just turned up and helped with the billboards.

Soon after the meeting I went out with three other members. We generally just sat around in the car, parked near some billboards and discussed what we were going to do. Some people who'd done it before had pretty good ideas. You could get your own line across if you wanted to. Once that was decided, we'd get out and there would be

one or two lookouts and maybe up to three working on various bits of the billboard, because they were pretty big. The easiest ones were on the railway stations as they have quite big billboards on a lot of the train stations in Sydney. One night I think we must have done 20, all along the railway line, from station to station, just following on. That was all pretty trouble-free because there was no surveillance in those days, no CCTV or anything like that.

In the time that you were involved, did you have an idea of how many other people there were revising billboards?

I was aware of a core of about 12 or so people, but there were probably up to about 20. We didn't know the full extent of our numbers because people would often just do it by themselves. Generally we only met people on the run. We had a couple of workshops where we made extension rods and things like that, but that still only involved five or six people. There were about four or five people who were the original instigators or the beginners of the organisation and it expanded from there. No-one knew everyone involved and there were lots of individuals and teams doing their own thing. The principle was that if you did a billboard on your own you could sign it BUGA-UP and that meant you were part of BUGA-UP. It was a very loose, informal kind of arrangement, deliberately so because of legal reasons.

Which companies did BUGA-UP mainly target?

People went after various targets, but it was generally cigarettes or alcohol. I only did the cigarette- and alcohol-related ones. Some people were pretty obsessive about doing whatever billboard they could find.

A lot of the cigarette advertising was on government property as the railways had a lot of billboards. I think up to about 50% of the advertising on billboards for cigarettes was on government property. It seemed like a crazy idea that the government would be promoting, or helping to promote, addictive things. BUGA-UP was very loose though, there was no great prospectus or aims or principles written down. It was really based on an objection to using public space for

these products and an attempt to break up the images and values that the advertising was trying to project. They were using a lot of glamour images for cigarettes. Alcohol had already changed a bit and I think they'd even brought in some sort of regulation. They sometimes just had the bottles or the cans and a clever caption. It was a challenge to work out new words to parody those. With tobacco they were still using luxury yachts and beautiful blonde people.

While your main agenda was clearly to subvert and alter the messages that the billboards carried, were you also trying to waste the companies' money?

Partly that. The aim was to force the stuff off the billboards. The chances were pretty small, however, of making it uneconomical for them, because the cigarette industry had been taken off TV. So they had plenty of money to play with.

How many billboards were changed on a regular basis?

Quite a few along the railways because even individuals would do up to a dozen a night, maybe once a week. When you put together all the different individuals and groups there were probably at least 50 getting changed a week.

How long would they stay up?

Varying times. The ones on the railways were the best because they took months to fix them. As a big bureaucracy they didn't really care that much. They would often stay up for several weeks. On private land generally they would have someone up there the next day, or within a couple of days.

What time of the day would you normally go and do the actions?

Normally late afternoon up until midnight. Generally the consensus was that after 10pm it was a bit harder because the police were more alert. More police were about and you were more conspicuous. The first time I got caught it was after 12 o'clock.

Would you dress up to make it appear that you worked for the billboard companies or did you just go out and do it?

I think some did get into character, but I didn't do that. I basically turned up with a bag of spray cans and just started doing it. You kept looking about to make sure that there was no-one making themselves too obvious. When there was a group, probably four or five of us would go out in a car, and someone would keep a lookout. Generally people didn't use disguise, as far as I know. There were some daytime actions where they made it quite public for the media.

How long would it take to do a billboard, roughly?

Probably not more than five minutes. Possibly only three minutes. It was all pretty quick. If you had more than one person doing it, then one would write the BUGA-UP thing, someone else would do a couple of words here and a couple of words up the top. Speed was of the essence, really.

What was the connection of BUGA-UP to MOP-UP (Movement Opposed to Unhealthy Promotions)?

There were, I think, one or two people in BUGA-UP who were also in MOP-UP. MOP-UP was mainly involved in the legal and medical side of fighting this kind of advertising in the courts. They used more conventional methods in fighting the companies.

But BUGA-UP captured the public's imagination ...

Yes, BUGA-UP was more public. Obviously it was pretty hard to get publicity for the opponents of tobacco and alcohol advertising when the companies involved had big budgets and the ear of the media. However, once our messages were up on the billboards all the commuters saw them and people liked them. Anything to break up that monotony of commuting, I guess.

There was quite a lot of positive feedback and generally not much resistance from people who saw us whilst we were actually changing them. There was one case where there was a newsagency which had a billboard above it that had been paint-bombed a few times. We were doing some billboards across the road on railway land when we saw the guy. He had seen us and we figured that he was calling the cops so we all scattered. We waited about half an hour and then came back just in time to see the police pull up. It wasn't good timing.

How did the police react?

Although there were five of us and two of them it was all very peaceful. They took us back to the station and fingerprinted us. When it came to court, the original witness couldn't actually determine who had done the spray on the billboard so the case was dismissed.

Many of the magistrates were pretty anti public disorder, but some of them liked the idea. The magistrate I got for that case was not a very happy guy. He said something like, "If you want to do something for society, why don't you go and join the Lions Club or Rotary?" He just didn't like the idea that what we were doing was illegal. The charge was "malicious injury to a billboard", which was the heavier of the charges that they had available as it made it a criminal case.

Generally the police themselves would only act if they got a complaint from a member of the public. In another case concerning me there was a young trainee cop who was with his sergeant when they drove past and caught me at it. That was one I was doing on my own. He later apologised and told me that he had to say something because he would have been in trouble himself if the sergeant had seen me and he hadn't said anything.

When I went to court I was charged with wilful defacement, which was a civil offence. I didn't get a fine because it was a first offence. I didn't contest the fact that I'd done it, but I did contest the compensation costs with the company. I had seen an

ad in the paper looking to hire someone to fix billboards at one point and I rang up to find out how much they were going to pay them so I could use that in my defence. I was able to get the costs down to half what they wanted because I knew how much they were paying their staff. That was a pretty good result.

One of the guys involved in BUGA-UP was a photographer who was also involved in silk-screen printing. You could let him know where the billboards you'd done were and he'd photograph them for you. It was really handy when you went to Court because you'd have a record in case they tried to say that you had done more damage than you did. They might try to say that you had done some paint bombing, as well as the lettering and that wouldn't have been as clear a message, I think, because the paint bombing could be seen as just vandalism.

As time went on they began to use the heavier charges against people. I think they felt a bit threatened by the whole movement. I had heard that Melbourne had introduced fines of up to \$2,000 whereas Sydney was still around \$150–\$200 at that time.

Were people getting arrested a lot?

You heard of the occasional arrest. One guy was a continual offender and he used to do at least one billboard a day. He'd carry a bucket and some spray cans wherever he went. He was a regular arrestee, but generally there was not more than one arrest a month. There was a fighting fund which would pay half your fines as long as you signed BUGA-UP on the billboard.

How did the advertising industry react?

I think they mainly tried to play it down. Sometimes they would just paste white paper over the message and it would be clear that it had been altered. After a while they moved the captions to the top of the billboards so that it was harder to alter them. Generally, up until then, they had been at the bottom. So that made it a bit harder as we had to get our extension rods out.

Tell us about the use of the extension rods?

Well, they were a bit of a design challenge. You could buy an extension rod, I guess they were for professional painters, but they were quite expensive. I had this idea that we should find a cheap way to make one. We started off with a broom stick, some angle brackets and some wire and managed to create a prototype that just about anyone could put together with things you could buy from the local hardware shop.

You had to adjust the way you did things. You held the extension rod sideways to the billboard. The rod had a roll-on deodorant attached to it to keep the can a particular distance from the surface so that you could control the horizontal movement. That took away a lot of waving the stick about so you had a much more consistent spray angle on the billboard. It worked pretty well.

Did the advertising industry also move the advertisements to less accessible spots?

Where they could they did, but there were still lots on the ground. Some moved up a bit. They were still accessible, but higher than they used to be. Some of them were moved to the tops of buildings. I remember seeing a photo in the paper of some BUGA-UP people who did those sorts of jobs and used paint rollers. They probably only did that once or twice.

Did they have to scale the building?

No, they had access through the building. They were wearing white boilersuits as if they were workers. They only had to change a couple of words to change the meaning of the billboard completely. Paint bombing was a much better method for the high ones.

How would people do that?

The people I knew generally used paint-filled eggs. They were pretty good. You could get a pretty decent throw with those. Other people used balloons, but they weren't as easy. I heard about one guy who had adapted the back of a panel van so that he could open the doors to use a catapult that was attached there. He could hit quite high billboards with this method. He was a very good aim and used quite large paint bombs.

How much of a role do you think that BUGA-UP played in getting tobacco advertising eventually banned and alcohol advertising restricted?

I think we mainly affected public awareness. Not just with tobacco and alcohol, but generally with making people more aware of how the advertising industry was attempting to manipulate them, the images that they were using, and the role of consumerism in all of that. I think BUGA-UP's actions helped break down all that stuff.

For more information on BUGA-UP visit www.bugaup.org and tobacco.health.usyd.edu.au websites.

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