



## Manchester's Electronic Billboards – Another Sidewalk for Jevons' Paradox

By Richard A Shirres & James Scott Vandeventer May, 2022

In perambulating Manchester's city centre, now the latest chore is in side-stepping yet more clutter within your pedestrian domain: dozens of electronic billboards - and if they are not within your line of sight, they are not doing their job. Each of Manchester's 86 new e-billboard contraptions hums with the energy to power three households per year (11,501 kWh per year) while visually enjoining us to consume. Yet modern consumption, fossil fuel enabled and propelled, is civilisation's 'carcinogen' and is now driving humanity towards a dire future.

Most obviously, an emergency is serious. But our climate emergency now threatens us with catastrophe: globally, regionally and locally. So, Manchester City Council's ambition for Net Zero Carbon by 2038 is commendable. Yet, in practice, latest trends already point to a shortfall in attaining essential targets<sup>1</sup>; bringing to mind a suspicion of: "make me virtuous but not just yet". The e-billboards suggest high-flown words of ambition are trumped by the more pragmatic, short term, goal of the Council's 'get the money' imperative despite this new infrastructure's complicity in supporting and growing its citizenry's consumption.

This animated, dynamic street advertising densifies the volume of consumer messaging, it distracts from enjoyment of any street design and tranquillity. It demands attention to the advertiser's priorities, ". . . briefly one takes them in, and for a moment they stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation. Each publicity image fills a moment . . ." (Berger, 1972)<sup>2</sup>. These e-billboards go beyond the clutter of street signage, they are vibrant auto-purveyors of a consumer ethic.

The publicity environment that John Berger wrote about 50 years ago has only become more sophisticated and insidious since. Advertising has transformed consumer behaviour from one of buying based on needs to purchasing based on 'perceived' wants: transforming people's concept of wants to need. Thereby, creating a mindset of wasteful consumption.

Manchester City Council's defence of this street clutter is, partly, that the energy hunger is fed from renewable sources. Thus, Jevons' Paradox<sup>3</sup> is planted in your line of sight, illuminated with advert scrolling 24 hours a day. One must ask: what are the ethics here? Because we have that available energy efficiency, we can use it to promote consumption, the very sickness that promotes our emergency.

Not only do the Council's particular departmental perpetrators not understand Jevons' Paradox, it's difficult to believe they even understand that under current GHG emissions' trends the window to avoid a 1.5°C global temperature rise will actually be closed by 2030. And that scenario (now likely) would bring about the entire annihilation of all the world's coral refugia, 25% of marine biodiversity, as well as likely help trigger the looming feedbacks from Siberian permafrost. Against that, hope only comes from actions consistent with a cultural transformation.

The Council's perpetrators, if not yet instructed on that side of carbon literacy, should be on a mission to create tranquil, quality urban shared spaces to help promote health and well-being for city centre residents. Instead of e-billboards, we could have our sidewalks populated with ecologically productive assets that espouse the ethical mindset to help us actively engage with and steward what could be our precious environment.

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1. Steady State Manchester Report: [Greater Manchester is overspending its carbon budget and Places for Everyone will make it much worse.](#)

2. John Berger 1972, *Ways of Seeing*, published by Penguin

3. The Jevons' Paradox, see: <https://www.thelandmagazine.org.uk/sites/default/files/Hannis%20-%20Jevons%20review.pdf>

#### FURTHER READING:

Fifield & Pidd (2022) Manchester electronic ad boards use electricity of three households, *The Guardian*, Sun 9 January 2022

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/09/electronic-advertising-boards-manchester-energy-use-consumption>

See also a two page text prepared for Steady State Manchester: An abridged Extract from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Chapter 7, (*Capitalism's Synergy with Semiology and its Debilitation of Democracy - A View from 1970s*)