

Let Us Fight Harmful Commercial Advertising

A call on the occasion of Black Friday 2023

Consumerism is at the root of climate change and ecological degradation and it undermines social cohesion. Yet for several years now, hundreds of thousands of Swiss citizens have been receiving mail from the Swiss Post with stickers reading “Advertising welcome,” “Yes to Advertising,” and “Not Afraid of Advertising.” The package also includes an invitation to receive product samples such as industrially-produced chocolate bars.

This mailing sparks outrage on social networks. The authorities are urging citizens to save energy, be frugal and recycle waste. Meanwhile, Swiss Post encourages over-consumption and paper waste. It also trivializes the impact of plastic on the environment. The justification for a “Yes to Advertising” sticker is debatable. It is supposed to be in line with the principle of freedom of reception, as with radio and television advertising where you can always just turn it off. According to its supporters, the “Yes to Advertising” sticker, together with the existing “No Advertising” sticker promoted by environmental associations, can even represent a defence against unsolicited advertising. However, the association Résistance à l’agression publicitaire France urges caution on this subject. In view of the number of “Oui pub” (Yes to Ads) stickers currently being actively promoted in France, it believes that well over 30% of the population would have liked to have a “No to Ads” sticker.

Advertising industry’s responsibility

Commercial advertising still often conveys sexist or discriminatory prejudices. It contributes to over-consumption, which facilitates indebtedness. Advertisements for fossil fuels, SUVs, fossil-powered cars, and air transport have been criticized in particular, as well as those for fast-fashion clothing, food such as beef and dairy products, and luxury cruises. These goods and services emit large quantities of greenhouse gases and bear a disproportionate responsibility for the climate crisis. Commissioned by Greenpeace Switzerland, the consulting company Infrac found that up to 7% of Switzerland’s greenhouse gas emissions (including imports) can be attributed to advertising. In terms of environmental impact, the figure is as high as 10%. Retailers Coop (CHF 385 million) and Migros (CHF 241 million) spend the most on advertising.

Initiatives in several European metropolitan areas and Swiss cities

Numerous groups and associations in Europe and in Switzerland are committed to empowering local communities to create alternatives to consumption by stimulating community, solidarity, public art, and environmental commitment. Examples include the Adfree Cities network, which brings together a number of towns and counties in Great Britain, and the citizens’ petitions that have collected tens of thousands of signatures in Hamburg and Berlin. In a landmark decision in 2021, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court ruled that restricting outdoor advertising — both on public property and on private property visible from the public domain — does not constitute an infringement of the principle of economic freedom. Although narrowly defeated at the ballot box by 51.8% last March, the “Genève Zéro Pub” initiative has sparked a lively, wide-ranging debate, which is likely to lead to changes in practices in this area. In 2022 and 2023, Zurich’s parliament passed two postulates calling for a significant reduction in outdoor advertising. Last spring, the authorities in La Chaux-de-Fonds announced their intention to free the town centre of commercial advertising from 2025. In August, the town of Vevey decided not to make its public space available for commercial advertising from 2025. These are just a few of the welcome initiatives in favour of a society aligned with tomorrow’s sustainability challenges.

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