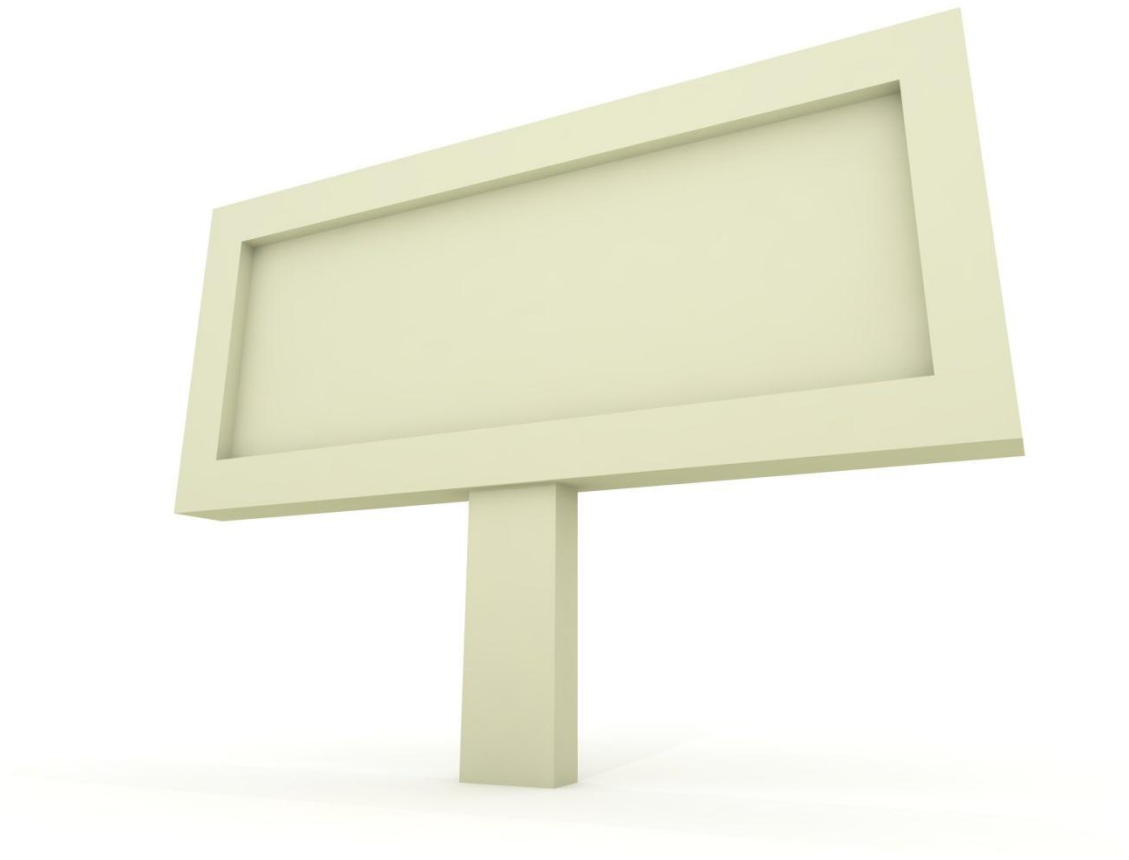


# Billboard *Evolution*

*Cat* Chien



## INTRODUCTION

Take a drive down any major highway in America or walk through any bustling part of a town and it would be rare if one did not come across at least one over-sized, visually rousing medium known as the billboard. In the days where media noise is suffocating, selective perception is a rare commodity and focused attention a new currency. Outside of the Times Squares and Hollywood Sunset strips of the world, billboards that line the perimeter of interstate roads relieve themselves of many other competing media and noise since a person's attention is mainly on the pavement ahead. Additionally, these highly-hoisted messaging sandboxes serve to break the monotonous nature of long commutes. Strategically placed within high-trafficked areas, billboards serve many purposes, namely to:

- Communicate and disseminate information
- Provoke thoughts and ideas
- Raise awareness
- Provide a platform for visual expression

More commonly associated and utilized as an outdoor advertising medium that takes the form of a large sign lining highways, long-range roads, and alongside building walls, the billboard media itself loosely spans to other outside-of-the-home channels, including bus station signage (including the seating), motor- or automotive-based agents such as blimps, buses, and taxis. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit it to land-based messaging platforms such as the standard billboards you see alongside highway roads and building-mounted signage.

## HISTORY

Based on McLuhan's theory of the medium is the message, outdoor communication isn't relegated to simply words displayed on surfaces for people to read, but the actual message can be interpreted in the structure itself. The origin of out-of-the-home communication platforms can be traced back to the Egyptians to 2750 BC where the pyramids were a form of broad-scaled communication revealing its message through its sheer physical presence and through the process of construction. Peaking at 204 feet<sup>1</sup>, the first pyramid utilized a new wave of architectural tools and techniques distinguished these structures to be different and acknowledged in a different manner than other surrounding lodging units. While a burial chamber in raw functionality, the symbolism represented and spoke for

a higher level of belief and spiritual principles. The pyramid was believed to be the gateway to a king's after-life role (king of the dead) and his legacy remained within the earthly realm.

These physical landmarks innately drew the ocular attention of the Egyptian people and the unstated understanding was that these large structures symbolized and communicated royalty, reverence, and belief principles. To have created a structure that can be seen from far distances meant something of value and importance should be recognized. As McLuhan states, "an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment..."<sup>2</sup> With the erection of the first pyramid, the view of the environment shifted as a new obtruding object commanded people's attention. Pyramids continue to intersect both time and space dimensions as they are still distinguished artifacts surviving over time now with worldwide audiences who travel long distances to catch a glimpse of these monuments. If only people would travel halfway around the world to look at a billboard.

Over time, the notion of tall structures to communicate a message evolved a step into the stone obelisk<sup>3</sup>, another Egyptian produced stone-based configuration that stood before temples and other religious buildings with hieroglyphics carved into it. Through this form of communication, the obelisk is a closer ancestor to billboards as we know it today.

Enter mass production of print in 1450, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, introducing modern advertising options through print in the form of handbills. Before the actual billboard structure came to existence, these large bills were glued against sides of buildings or replicated in paint. By 1796, the new techniques and technology of the lithographic process produced the first illustrated poster<sup>iii</sup> and as the creative got better, producers behind the material scouted for advantageous locations with the hopes to maximize exposure of both artistic expression and message. Jump to 1889 when the world's first 24 sheet billboard was displayed at the Paris Exposition and the main use of billboards at this time was to promote the arrival of entertainment talent whether it was circuses, traveling shows, or movies<sup>4</sup>.

## **BILLBOARDS AND THEIR NICHE MARKET**

Historically, before the advent of computers and the internet, television and print publications dominated mental attention within the home space, but billboards were the identified go-to method for outside-the-home, outdoor commercial communication tactics. With the introduction and wide adoption of Ford's Model T automobile, more people were on the road, on highways, and outside of the home. With the automobile, a form of technology providing an extension of human legs, people responded accordingly and began venturing further distances to experience new and different surroundings. As commutes got longer, more frequent, and more common amongst the community, this transformation of transportation mechanisms primed the scene for businesses to leverage the

isolation of man, vehicle, and road to advertise their products and services. They had relatively captive audience to broadcast messages to with minimal competition. Even if drivers had passengers in the car engaging them in dialogue, both sets of eyes would be able to look over and consume the message displayed. Assuming the creative and messaging strategy were thought-provoking enough, the added value of re-directed conversation topic to discuss what was just witnessed is smart advertising strategy.

Businesses realized the benefits of using billboards in the outdoor space and capitalized on the opportunity to erect these messaging towers and establish a rental service to sell the space to other companies in exchange for the opportunity for geographically-targeted messaging<sup>5</sup>. Much like how pyramids were erected to signify and commemorate the life of a Pharaoh, certain types of billboards signify the culture and modernity of a location. Depending on the materials used for manufacturing the billboard, the socioeconomic status of the immediate nearby vicinity is revealed. The physical space and location where billboards are erected can be interpreted as a message in itself. Soon, highways became overpopulated with billboards both increasing in attention blindness and complaints against some pro-scenery advocates in the community.

#### **TAKEN TOO FAR**

Scenic America, a non-profit organization dedicated to upholding and improving the natural beauty of America whether it be the metropolis or the countryside, states:

“Throughout the country, our most cherished scenic resources and hometown assets are being obscured by a blizzard of monstrous billboards, badly sited telecommunications towers, a tangle of overhead lines, and a hodgepodge of visual clutter. Open space is being lost. Our natural and cultural heritage is being buried under unconstrained development and poorly designed transportation systems. America's beauty and community character are being obliterated by a steel curtain of visual spam.”<sup>6</sup>

Replace “America” in the above statement with any urban and developing nation’s name and the same strongly worded diatribe can still apply. Depending on location, members of a community will have their own perceptions of how communicative-promoting structures impact society. Some argue that commercially influenced structures tarnish the natural portrait of a city braided by original architectural materials and earth-based artifacts. The idea that unsightly structures, especially ones used for advertising, contribute to a concept deemed “visual pollution”. This concept runs off the idea that pollution is not relegated to life-sustaining necessities such as air or water, but anything contributing to the offending of senses is worthy of contention<sup>7</sup>. The perception of visual pollution is that any commercial or promotional messaging within outdoor mediums is considered a nuisance to the natural beauties of the landscape; but one must at least

consider other structural units that do not have aesthetic appeal. Think of cell phone towers and electric power lines for example -- these towers can be hideous in look and tall in stature which by definition penetrate visual landscapes similar to billboards, but it's hard to dispute their functional purposes in order to maintain a certain standard of living<sup>8</sup>. Those that oppose pro-scenic endorsers will argue that the services these structures provide added value to both life and lifestyles that may be worth the scenic disruption.

The 1965 Highway Beautification Act, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, attempted to impose rules and regulations against businesses looking to construct billboards along scenic and federal-aided highways and called for the removal of illegal billboards. To assist in the clean-up act, the federal government offered monetary assistance and incentives for states to exercise their own provisions; however, over time, the rigor of keeping up with both funding and accountability started to deteriorate, rendering the Act a huge disappointment. Businesses managed to find legal loopholes to circumvent clauses and keep their billboard business intact.<sup>9</sup>

Since the passing of the Highway Beautification Act, times didn't seem to get any easier for the outdoor advertising agency. Over-dispersion, illegal erection, and cognitive-bombarding billboard patches taint the message conveyed about societal to environmental harmony in a negative tone. In September 2007, Sao Paulo became the first large, metropolitan city to impose an all-city ban<sup>10</sup> of any commercial advertising; including signage lining buses and taxis. Furthermore, storefronts were limited to strict guidelines for advertising their own services. Neighboring countries and cities took notice and strongly considered passing similar laws within their corresponding jurisdictions. A large portion of the ban was due to the illegal propagation of ads throughout the land; while the law-abiding businesses did their best to police the outdoor advertising landscape, the littering of visual poster mountains was enough for the Brazilian officials to draw blood on the outdoor advertising industry<sup>11</sup>.

## CURRENT APPLICATIONS

While billboards mostly conjure up thoughts of commercial or promotion-only advertisements, billboards have been used in a variety of ways that can range from an extension of law enforcement practices, government entities, or as an anonymous method of expressing an individual's opinion.

Government agencies can use billboards as broadcasting platforms to simply urge and remind citizens of the nature to get involved with political activity by voting and playing a role in the forward movement of a nation. Size it down to the individual level and depending on the narcissistic nature of those with deep pockets, some people can buy real estate garnering eyeballs from individuals who have been conditioned to look at billboards when driving on monotonous areas of long-range roads in efforts to make a statement and to ruffle some emotional feathers. For example, in

Jefferson County, Wisconsin, a private citizen purchased a billboard and anonymously posted a sign featuring former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton with the words "Picked Obama? Embarrassed yet?"<sup>12</sup> Some members of the community who read the sign were less concerned about what the message said and were more irritated with not knowing who the statement owner was. The message became less meaningful as the medium used in this case masked the messenger. Commentary made by community members showed they were more annoyed with the fact that the message had to stay up there for a specific duration and was posted under anonymous terms. Some would say "coward", but would the interpretation of this poster have been the same if had it been made online but also under an alias?

Regardless of the entities funding and producing these messaging towers, many billboards are subject to acts of vandalism -- both in the sense of property and material defacement or with the intent to instigate a different message. For example, take a billboard located in Sacramento, California -- an atheist-based organization launched a campaign in early 2010 reaching out to members of the society who are also non-believers of any God-believing religion. The original message stated: "Are you good without God? Millions are". Scrawled underneath in spray paint was the trespassing addition of, "ALSO LOST?"<sup>13</sup> While certain acts of graffiti fulfill a rebellious or act of defiance act against law and civility, the words selected to violate the original intended message now spark a much different message. A survey of the nearby community revealed that both religious and non-religious individuals were left to their own interpretations of the altered message resulting in offended feelings and jaded attitudes.

The takeaway from this instance is that the both the poster and vandals were aware that both the message and the medium would have an impact with those that came across it, especially if the original message is altered in a meaningful manner, whether that meaning is construed as negative or positive. In the offline world, two areas of touchy contention for conversation between citizens include politics and religion; the billboards in these cases happened to be static one-way messages where all parties involved in the creation (or alteration) of the message remain anonymous, while the audience is broad and their thoughts and responses unaccounted for. Given that this incident happened in Sacramento, think of the responses that would ensue should a similar act have taken place in areas where group polarization across any sensitive subject can stir social commotion and emotional outcry. And while the billboard structure itself is not to blame for the message itself, the structure is responsible for being the media and vehicle for communicating the message. The media is the messenger, not so much the message in this instance.

In today's current society, when "billboards" are mentioned, it is easy to think of densely saturated markets such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago where it seems billboards seem to wallpaper

the cityscape. When placed at point-of-sale locations, billboards can assist in elevating sales and awareness of products and services that patrons can be made aware and encouraged to exchange money (or attention) for the advertised product. However, one of the greater challenges of billboard advertising resides within availability, reliability, and accuracy of metrics and measurements that translate to return on investment figures. Compared to the prevalence and ease of hyper-targeting on other media platforms such as the web, advertisers are looking for more evidence and guarantee from the providers to measure and prove the effectiveness of their message and impact on brand perception and value.

### **NO LONGER STATIC**

As noted earlier, selective attention is key to the effectiveness and longevity of billboards – the one-way message format must evolve to attract and retain eyeballs and attention over time. Starting off as the static 50' x 50', creatives on Madison Avenue pursued innovative approaches away from flat plane of the billboard surface to introduce extended and 3D billboard display options. While still static and uni-directional in nature, the increased cognitive hold incurred was considered worth the effort. In looking at some creative billboards as seen on the blog 10Steps.sg, it's hard not to see tipped over billboards due to an image of an obese male standing on one edge, paint spillage breaking the bounds of a billboard to the actual side plane of a building, or an anti-smoking message that sits on top of a put-out cigarette butt<sup>14</sup>. In standard usability and marketing practices, businesses need to find ways to "stand out" amongst the crowd and the noise. Some options that achieve these results include the use of motion and bold color schemas, and what better way to produce eye-catching creative than to leverage digital technology.

Clear Channel, the leader in the outdoor advertising industry within the US, rolled out their first flight of digital billboards in 2006<sup>15</sup>. Through digital models, the advantages for all involved include more efficient turnaround times and more leniency with creativity, including the ability to swap out different messages with relative ease and reduction in production costs. Furthermore, tracking impressions and display uptime serve as data points in quantifying and validating success metrics, but are still limited in proving how these numbers can vet the effectiveness and causal tendencies of customer behavior as a result of being exposed to that message. Digital billboards in this sense are the cooler big brother to the predecessor of static billboards. With the benefits of digital capabilities, law enforcement agencies are leveraging large signage platforms to assist in investigation purposes; capitalizing the real-time nature of updating digital signage, police groups capitalize on the "sixth man",<sup>16</sup> namely the members of the community to assist in justice-seeking endeavors.

Businesses are also enhancing their execution strategies on digital platforms, but with the increased extensions of creativity, noise levels are also skyrocketing from the visual and cognitive perspective.

Though the platform is becoming snazzier in delivery due to high tech evolution, there is still much room for growth and opportunity of the billboard media.

### **FUTURE APPLICATION**

Just like the social movement is empowering the consumer more and more in the online web space, the billboard media will trend in similar fashion, but to a lesser degree. As Janet Abbact states, "Users are not necessarily just 'consumers' of a technology but can take an active part in defining its features."<sup>17</sup> With the prevalence and cost-effective nature of modern technology now, it's only natural that the next generation of billboards become a derivative of two-way interactive messaging platforms where users will have some say and some control in the content they will consume from these large monitors.

Because of the distance between the billboard media and man is much greater than man and car or man and computer, measurements of relevancy and impact will be driven more from a time perspective, rather than space. There will be less pressure to keep the user engaged over extended periods of time, but there will be expectations to maximize impact within a short amount of time, which means that in the time a user encounters a billboard, there is but one chance to strike and to strike well. Within two years, the digital billboard will become more integrated with similar technologies driving the forward movement of web-based platforms. The billboard will become just a piece of the overall experience. If the billboard is not connected to another device that relates to the customer in a meaningful way, the billboard will surely die a slow death, not in the physical world, but rather in the mental realm of passersby. Users have their heads buried in their iPhones, iPads, iPods and whatever else the latest hand-held device is. Rather than being seen as an offline, out-of-the-home advertising platform, these billboards will leverage the devices already on a user to create unique outside-of-the-home experiences with efforts for increasing engagement and inciting action. For instance, in Dublin, Ireland, consumers can send an SMS to a number on a billboard that will start a Honda Civic Type-R car.<sup>18</sup> Even though there are existing examples of this now, in two years, there will be a much greater adoption rate of similar deployments.

Within five years, it is reasonable to assume society will continue its trend towards database culture and with the Internet and its limitless capability of tracking hoards of data points, these digital billboards can be enabled with heightened technologies designed for data capture and measurement tracking with the use of the other digital devices. It is not the goal for businesses to frivolously spend cash without expecting returns; through more accurate targeting and profiling resulting from data mining and analysis, communication strategies can be modified and adjusted to meet the needs and interests of those viewing it.

Businesses with specific niche markets will be the main advocate of mining data collected by those passing by these digital billboards. Digital billboards alongside storefronts will become more prevalent built with interactive and two-way communication conduits in order to provide real-time contextually relevant information to passersby. If a group of girls are talking and walking by a retail store, speech recognition technology can pick up the sound pitch to display female-oriented merchandise and messaging in the language being spoken amongst the group. From a solo interaction perspective, any individual could potentially walk up to a digital signage available at a brick and mortar location and say keywords prompting commands and response mechanisms that provide information that the user is asking for. Vocalizing, "Show me the latest trends" could potentially reveal new arrivals and best sellers that are still in-stock. Depending on how far businesses want to push the privacy envelope and taking a page from minority report, digital storefronts can act as sales personnel and remind users about purchasing a new product that the customer could be interested in, based on their past purchases; or the virtual agents might remind them of any product that has a short lifespan and requires restocking. A little Minority Report-like, to be sure, but nonetheless a definite possibility given that privacy concerns are typically inadequately addressed.

Since billboards are better known for advertising along the road, within ten years, major efforts will be made to better tie the vehicles to the billboard platform as more road-based technologies decrease the responsibilities of the driver. As more cars end up on the road, eyeballs increase and commute times get longer, but some of the stress agents of driving could be reduced since a car could feasibly drive itself in ten years. If this is to happen, driver distraction is no longer an argument to visually ostentatious messages. A team of computer science students at UCLA spun up an application idea where digital billboards will be intertwined within ad networks in what they deemed "AdTorrent", using search and location aware content delivery to billboard "nodes".<sup>19</sup> This plan proposes a new and different mobility model where source and intelligent display is determined using real street map data and vehicular travel patterns on these streets to deliver timely and relevant messaging.

### THE TEN YEAR THEORY

Contrary to the statement above, I have a theory that digital billboards alongside very scenic roads may be obsolete in ten years due to a possible rising and uproar of pro-scenic and traffic safety advocates, as it is more reasonable to expect that humans will still have 80% control of motor manipulation. As of 2010, 25 cities across the US have either banned digital billboards, placed moratoriums on them, or are considering placing moratoriums on the digitized signs.<sup>20</sup>

Even though studies measuring traffic accidents specifically filtered down to distractedness have been unable to explicitly prove a direct correlation to billboard messaging and distracted driving<sup>21</sup>,

with enough lobbyists and private citizens clamoring for change, this is a definite possibility. Laws will continue to be imposed on drivers aimed to reduce leading sources of visual and motor distractions when behind the wheel, and mobile phones will continue to be one of the more impacted technologies condemned for simultaneous use during vehicle operation especially since the functions and application options of mobile phones continues to grow.

Specific locations will become sites for billboard farms that will become an attraction in itself. Think of more smaller-scaled Times Squares. In replacement of the digital billboard by the roadside, the actual medium will probably be scaled down in form but more powerful in functionality. Rather than using itself as a platform, what will be the successor to the actual structure of the billboard will become the chip that feeds the message through wireless transmission. Similar to other wireless technologies such as Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, infrared, another wireless frequency may become available to communicate to external devices in a more proprietary fashion.

No longer will the concept of "Approach", the distance measured along the line of travel from the point where an advertising face first becomes fully visible to the point where the copy is no longer readable<sup>22</sup>, apply because information can be transmitted and downloaded to certain receivers and stored for later consumption. The receiver could be a car's dashboard or a user's mobile phone. To keep messages relevant, identity-detecting sensors are also a foreseeable technology feeding data to and from the 10-year billboard that will read off signals emitted from cars. Queried against the DMV, the billboards can send signals back to in-car dashboards or the mobile phone registered to the vehicle owner to send personalized messages.

## CONCLUSION

The billboard is a medium that may bring nostalgic memories to most people driving on the road today and while the 10-year version of the billboard may not be recognizable to those who know it today, there is huge potential for the quality of deliverability and content in the future. Perceived mostly as an advertising vehicle, there is opportunity for the billboard industry to alter methods of medium engagement that can balance the duties of privacy protection, providing meaningful information to those who care, and keeping the technology as exciting and intriguing as possible to the receiving community.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan," *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Pyramid Visuals, "History of Billboard," March 3, 2011.

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<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. "Billboard," last modified February 28, 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billboard>

<sup>5</sup> WebPOP. "Proof of Performance," March 14, 2011, <http://www.clearchanneloutdoor.com/assets/downloads/media-planning-guide/2010-mpg-sec-10-resources-oooh-terms.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Scenic America, "Billboard Industry Myths & Facts," March 14, 2011 from [http://www.scenic.org/billboards/industry/myths\\_facts](http://www.scenic.org/billboards/industry/myths_facts).

<sup>7</sup> Arkinet, "Publi-City or No Publi-City?," March 14, 2011 from <http://arkinnetblog.wordpress.com/2010/03/08/publi-city-or-no-publi-city/>

<sup>8</sup> John C. Nagle, "Cell Phone Towers as Visual Pollution," *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy* (2009): 537-567.

<sup>9</sup> Roger A. Cunningham, "Billboard Control Under the Highway Beautification Act of 1965." *Michigan Law Review* (1973): 1296-1371.

<sup>10</sup> David E. Harris, "São Paulo: A City Without Ads", AdBusters, August 3, 2007, [http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/73/Sao\\_Paulo\\_A\\_City\\_Without\\_Ads.html](http://www.adbusters.org/magazine/73/Sao_Paulo_A_City_Without_Ads.html).

<sup>11</sup> *The Economist*, "Business: Visual pollution; Outdoor advertising," March 15, 2011 from CBCA Reference and Current Events.

<sup>12</sup> "Observers Questioning Motive And Meaning Of Billboard," YouTube Video, from a news excerpt from WISN.com, posted by "WISN," October 21, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dteMFO\\_rqAo&feature=sub](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dteMFO_rqAo&feature=sub)

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<sup>14</sup> "50 Extraordinary and Attractive Billboards," 10Steps.SG, accessed March 17, 2011, <http://10steps.sg/inspirations/artworks/50-extraordinary-and-attractive-billboards/>.

<sup>15</sup> "New Clear Channel Outdoor Digital Billboard Network Reaches 36.7 Million Annual Visitors to Las Vegas," Clear Channel, May 1, 2006, <http://www.clearchannel.com/Outdoor/PressRelease.aspx?PressReleaseID=1631>

<sup>16</sup> "Digital Billboards, What a Difference a Year Makes," Federal Bureau of Investigation, January 30, 2009, [http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/january/billboards\\_013009](http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/january/billboards_013009)

<sup>17</sup> Janet Abbatt, *Inventing the Internet*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999).

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