

The Sydney Morning Herald

News And Features - All information is equal in a classic post-modern barrage.

By Andrew Stevenson.

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THE HECKLER

Marketers are using small video screens in lifts to take advantage of a captive audience, Andrew Stevenson writes.

Remember the reprogramming scene from A Clockwork Orange? Malcolm McDowell's character Alex sits strapped into a chair in front of a screen, his eyelids pegged open with metal clips as he is forced to watch rapes, deaths and bashings over and over again.

I know how he felt.

The lifts in our building are among the first to be fitted with a small video screen especially designed to take advantage of what marketers gleefully describe as a captive audience. Already, there are 100 screens in Sydney and Melbourne and the thoughtful provider has contracts for a further 500.

Inlink, the operator, is yet to supply the eye clips. They hardly need to. With a mirror on the back wall it's almost impossible to avoid the constant flicker parade of ideas, information and images.

But it can be done. Lean your head against the west wall of the lift and close your eyes. People might look at you strangely but, no matter. Practise the art. It may prove invaluable if you're to stay sane through the next few decades as advertisers tear up the envelope and push their way into every inch of your personal space. **Inlink** managing director Oliver Roydhouse cheerily admits to having already twice rejected the lavatory door.

On an A4 format, **Inlink** uses a split-screen to maximise its impact. It's the classic post-modern barrage. Up top we have a running news ticker tape, interspersed with weather forecasts; below are ads or slow-moving footage of large animals.

On screen all information is equal, except when it's not information. The high rotation advertising campaign (was there no one else who wanted the space?) featured a man, a bride and a pair of undies. Above the flash of white knickers, Luke Ricketson's injured hammy occupies the same time and prominence as the death of 700 helpless passengers on a West African ferry.

But they don't, they can't and they never will and to allow them to ever be equated, either spatially or temporally, risks diminishing us as human beings. **Inlink**, which sources its news from the Herald, didn't create the problem. Ever since the printing press linked arms with the telegram we've been subjected to more information than we can actually process. The digital age only made it worse.

Actions and events especially tragic ones demand a response. It's in our nature to offer one. An unthinking response, you could argue, forms a core part of our common humanity. Think of how you would respond if someone in your street was killed accidentally. But when our neighbourhood has been stretched to encompass most of the world there's a significant other being killed hourly or daily. News of their deaths is drawn past our eyes on a ceaseless loop. When this happens our empathetic muscle cramps up and goes numb.

Roydhouse says there's a high "wow" factor in response to his service, which is aimed directly at the rich end of town.

Already, he has most of the nation's major office property trusts on board. "They're growing like mushrooms," he says proudly.

Programmed by television, our eye finds such screens hard to ignore. Movement is the key. Have you caught yourself staring vaguely at the new revolving billboards while you wait for the lights to change?

Static images seem much easier to block out. Sound obviously adds another level of intrusion. Every city railway station is now fitted with a large screen format and blurry sound. If you didn't have to wait so long for a train they might be more popular. As it is, the repetition factor grates as much as CityRail's inadequacies.

At least, though, you can walk to the other end of the platform. No such luck in the lift. All those income-rich, time-poor lift jockeys spend 80 minutes a month riding the floors. "They're obviously very captive. You know what it's like in elevators, people feel very uncomfortable, they're looking to maximise their personal space, so we're giving them something interesting to look at," explains Roydhouse.

But force-feeding images to a captive audience is not an entertainment option. If you don't like it, go back to looking at the numbers change on the floor counter, Roydhouse suggests.

There may be other options. I wouldn't dare advocate acts of senseless, random violence but I wasn't alone in feeling a frisson of excitement when one screen in our building had its eye poked out recently and was forced to wear a cardboard patch for a week.