# When we let industries set their own rules, communities always lose

*This opinion piece was* [*originally published in the Canberra Times.*](https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8828762/opinion-call-for-tighter-alcohol-ad-restrictions-on-aussie-tv/)

I’ve always been a believer in progress. But we can’t advance if we keep doing the same things expecting different results.

The commercial television industry’s latest proposal to extend the times that alcohol can be advertised would be a significant step backwards in protecting children from alcohol harm.

In a move that would see more than 800 additional hours a year of alcohol ads aired at times when children are most likely to be watching, Free TV Australia, the industry’s peak body, plans to loosen already weak advertising restrictions. They are proposing these changes while also opposing restrictions to gambling advertising.

This is what happens when we allow industries to set their own rules.

https://twitter.com/FAREAustralia/status/1853958522448511004

The Commercial Television Code of Practice, self-managed by Free TV, currently allows alcohol advertising on school days to between 12 noon and 3pm, and between 7.30pm and 6am on school evenings, weekends, school holidays and public holidays.

Their proposal would expand when this programming can be shown, significantly increasing children’s exposure to alcohol marketing, which [evidence shows](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27565582/) is linked to young people drinking at earlier ages and at riskier levels.

It’s a disappointing but unsurprising development. The industry already exploits the weakness of its own advertising code with a self-created loophole that relaxes restrictions during sports coverage. The result is [more than 10,000 alcohol ads](https://fare.org.au/action-needed-to-protect-kids-from-alcohol-ads-in-sport/#:~:text=Alcohol%20advertising%20during%20sports%20broadcasts,broadcasts%20during%20children%27s%20viewing%20times.) being televised during sporting events each year – about 75 minutes of additional ads every week.

Adding further exemptions would not only make this worse but flies in the face of findings from the recent [Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches](https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential) for gender-based violence, which recommended alcohol advertising be wound back to protect women and children, due to higher rates of violence during sporting events.

One study found a [40 per cent increase](https://fare.org.au/domestic-violence-surge-state-of-origin-game-leaves-women-and-children-battered-and-bruised/) in domestic assaults reported to NSW Police during the State of Origin series. Domestic and family violence services also see surges in demand during AFL and NRL grand finals, with Berry Street, a Victorian service, experiencing between [30 and 40 per cent increases](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-09-27/domestic-violence-spike-major-sport-events-afl-nrl-rugby-footy/104399938) in women seeking support.

The Review recognised this impact, noting that, “given the statistical increase in DFSV [domestic, family and sexual violence] incidents during football grand finals, as well as the high number of children who watch sport on television and mobile apps, the Review recommends that alcohol advertising be restricted during sporting events.”

In this context, proposals to increase alcohol advertising during times when drinking is known to increase – on public holidays and weekends - is like throwing kerosene on a fire that is already dangerously volatile.

We need a serious rethink of how industries– like alcohol, gambling, advertising and social media – operate in this country and the disproportionate power they are given by governments.

The rules around how alcohol is advertised should not be left to corporations that have their profits, and not community safety as their guiding star.

https://twitter.com/FAREAustralia/status/1856116495312662532

Australia is currently experiencing some of the [highest rates of alcohol-induced deaths](https://fare.org.au/alcohol-induced-deaths-in-australia/) in more than a decade. We should be closing loopholes, not further extending hours in which alcohol can be advertised, particularly during sports coverage when kids are watching.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority – the independent Commonwealth statutory authority that regulates media – can intervene under the Under the Broadcasting Services Act, if industry standards are not meeting community expectations.

In 2022 they developed a [policy paper](https://www.acma.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-06/What%20audiences%20want%20-%20Audience%20expectations%20for%20content%20safeguards.pdf) on what audiences expect around content safeguards, and found “ongoing concerns that existing alcohol, gambling and junk food advertising restrictions do not go far enough, noting the nature of harms associated with gambling, alcohol and junk food consumption involve complex health and social issues.”

The Act states that broadcasting services should, “place a high priority on the protection of children from exposure to program material which may be harmful to them” and that industry codes “provide appropriate community safeguards”.

Under a self-policing system, this is clearly not happening. The current industry code is a toothless instrument that is breaching its obligations and should be reined in.

It’s time to end the exemptions, tighten alcohol advertising restrictions and put in proper guardrails to ensure the health, wellbeing and safety of the community is prioritised.