



WORLD**BEYOND**WAR.org  
Organizing Guide

## Billboards: A Tactic in the Activist Toolbox

*Back in 2014, at the inaugural meeting of World BEYOND War, someone proposed a global anti-war billboard campaign, which at the time seemed like a pie in the sky idea. But thanks to the contributions of supporters worldwide, we are doing it! From Alaska, U.S. to Toronto, Canada to Limerick, Ireland, we've put up World BEYOND War messages on subways, bus shelters, roadside billboards, and more.*

*This guide explains the use of billboards as a tactic in the activist toolbox. Whether you're thinking about working with us to put up a billboard in your town, or you already have one in your area, this guide explores different ways to amplify the impact of a billboard or other ad.*



---

## Media Types

Telling a compelling story - and making sure that it gets heard - are essential skills for grassroots organizing campaigns. Harnessing the media is important to amplify our campaign to a wider audience and build support, by explaining why our issue matters and how to take action. Before we dive into different methods for amplifying a billboard campaign, let's first review the 3 main categories of media.

- **Owned media:** This is the content that you "own," meaning that you create & self-publish it. Examples include: WBW's own website, [worldbeyondwar.org](http://worldbeyondwar.org); the email alerts we send to our membership; and WBW's podcast, [worldbeyondwar.org/podcast](http://worldbeyondwar.org/podcast).
- **Paid media:** This is media that you purchase, such as social media ads and billboards.
- **Earned media:** This is media that you "earn" through mentions, shares, reposts, and reviews by other outlets, outside of your own channels. Getting an op-ed placed in a well-read newspaper is an example of earned media.

In and of itself, a billboard, as an example of paid media, helps us reach a wider audience beyond our existing networks and builds support for ending all war, using messages such as our well-known stat "3% of U.S. military spending could end starvation on earth."<sup>1</sup> But to get more value out of the money spent on a billboard, we can do more than just passively buy it. We can amplify its impact using a variety of strategies and media types.



---

## Op-Eds & Letters-to-the-Editor (Earned Media)

One way to amplify the impact of a billboard is through writing op-eds and letters-to-the-editor to local news outlets in the billboard region. For example, World BEYOND War Executive Director David Swanson’s op-ed “A Billboard With a Simple Message” published by *Urban Milwaukee*<sup>2</sup> increased the impact of the billboard in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, by reaching local readers who may not have seen the billboard in person. The op-ed featured a photo of the billboard and provided context for the campaign. “Milwaukeeans and others around the country with little money of their own to spare have been chipping in to put up billboards like this one in an effort to call attention to the biggest elephant in the American room – even if, in political mascot terms, it’s a hybrid elephant-donkey: the U.S. military budget.”

The billboards help create conversations that otherwise don’t happen. Op-eds and letters-to-the-editor are important to continue these conversations locally, to contextualize the message of the billboard and, ideally, tie it to local organizing efforts, such as a city divestment campaign or municipal resolution in support of cutting military spending.

OP ED

### A Billboard With a Simple Message

Erected downtown this month and for DNC: 3% of U.S. military spending could end global starvation.

By David Swanson - Feb 12th, 2020 03:54 pm

Get a daily rundown of the top stories on Urban Milwaukee

Email Address...

Subscribe



## Generating Media Attention (Earned Media)

We can tap into earned media through a well-placed op-ed or letter-to-the-editor to a local paper. But we can also go much further to generate earned media creatively. For example, our anti-war messages have been frequently rejected by billboard companies around the world who deem them too “controversial” or “political,” or see our campaign as a threat to corporate interests. We have been able to spin this to our advantage though. We used owned media channels, such as our

website, social media, and podcast, to call out the blatant censorship of pro-peace messages. The media loves controversy; the story of the censorship of our ads attracted media coverage, ultimately boosting the reach of our message. It also resulted in a different billboard company reaching out to us to offer to run our ad! The bottom line is: Be adaptable to the circumstances and try to use whatever happens to your campaign’s advantage.

THE  TIMES Today's sections ▾ Past six days Explore ▾ Times Radio Log in Subscribe

### World Beyond War campaign against troops at Shannon 'blocked' during Trump visit

Justine McCarthy

Sunday June 16 2019, 12:01am BST, The Sunday Times



World Beyond War advert was turned down at time of the Trumps' visit  
CARLOS BARRIA

An American anti-war organisation was refused permission to place advertisements featuring the slogan “US troops out of Shannon” on billboards in Limerick during Donald Trump’s visit to Ireland.

*The Sunday Times (UK) picked up the story of our rejected billboard ad, generating much publicity for our campaign.<sup>3</sup>*

## Social Media & Photography (Owned Media)

Social media can be a necessary and potentially powerful tool to get out our messaging, because the mainstream media often doesn't cover the "people's perspective" on issues. So, in grassroots organizing, you will often find guides about how to tell your own story by "making your own media," often utilizing social media to spread your message through tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, Instagram slides, and more. We can use our own social media channels (owned media) to share a billboard campaign with our digital followers beyond the local region of the

billboard, with the goal that others will share and repost our content, spreading it beyond our networks (earned media).

Social media is often about the visuals. When someone is scrolling through a crowded feed, a stunning photo captures their attention and makes them stop to learn more. Taking good photographs - or having someone in your group who can! - is vital to any campaign. And yet, it is often something that is forgotten or relegated to low importance. But a quality shot can really

boost a campaign! As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." A photograph allows us to amplify a billboard beyond the moment in time when the billboard is physically up, and to share it with a wider audience. The billboards are branded with World BEYOND War's name and a website link for more information, so the photograph already tells a story and is attributable to the organization. Photos can be shared via email, blog posts, social media channels, and more. For photography tips, visit:

[trainings.350.org/resource/how-to-take-quality-photographs](https://trainings.350.org/resource/how-to-take-quality-photographs).



---

## Events

We have used billboards in certain regions as reactions to ongoing events. For example, in August 2020, our Milwaukee billboard went up near the site of the U.S. Democratic National Convention, knowing that the press would be focused on the city throughout the convention, increasing our chances for media attention and potential reactions from elected officials.

Additionally, we have used billboards to

generate buzz for upcoming events, such as our annual conferences. In September 2018, we placed ads in Toronto, Canada subway stations in preparation for our #NoWar2018 Conference.

Importantly, we recommend organizing events centered around the billboard, such as press conferences, rallies, petitioning, and flyering. The events themselves can be sources for owned and earned media.

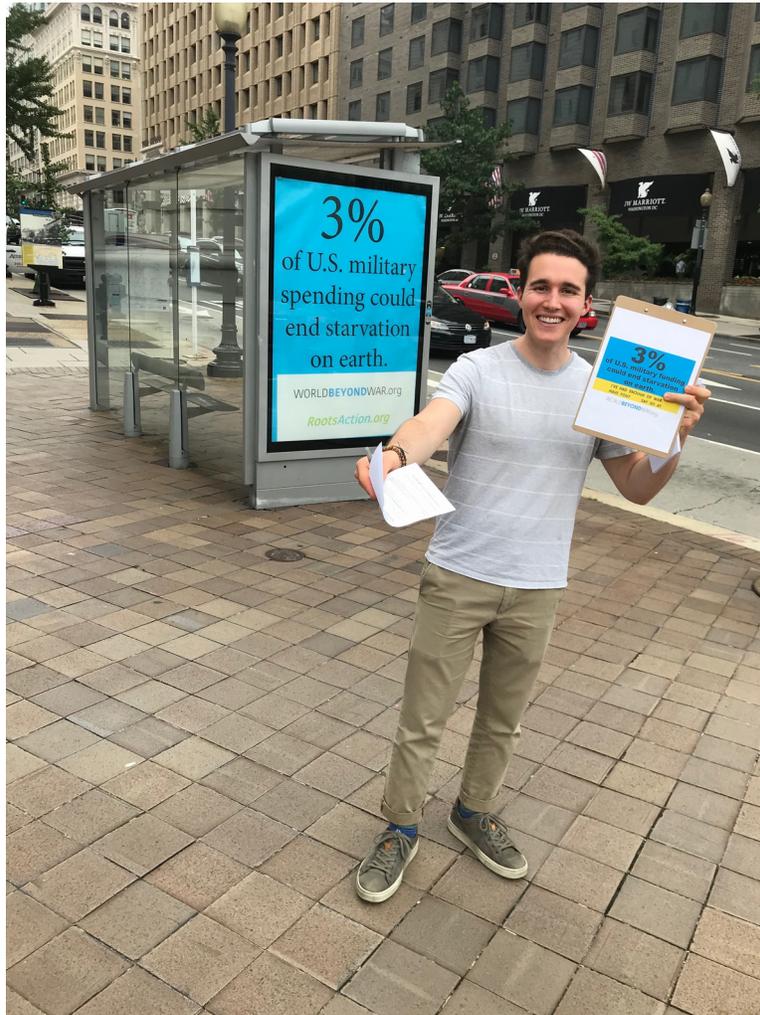




Invite elected officials to attend billboard events and come out in support of your campaign. In this photo: U.S. Representative Gwen Moore joins Milwaukee County Supervisor Steven Shea and peace activists from Milwaukee's End the Wars Coalition in supporting the campaign to use 3% of U.S. military spending to end starvation on earth. Photo by Susan Ruggles.



In this photo: Roadside rally next to a billboard in Albany, NY. Be sure to stand in a prominent location with safe sidewalks in a high-traffic area. If placing signs in a sequential order facing oncoming traffic, like in this photo, look for a road where there aren't too many turnoffs or side streets between the first and last sign, to maximize the number of cars that see the full sequence of the message.



Petitioning and flyering next to Washington, D.C. bus shelters, near the White House.

## Petitioning Tips

The petition should be chosen strategically based on what's relevant and timely in the local region. Ideally, it should build off of the billboard messaging, or vice versa. For example, our 3% billboard might be paired with a petition for municipal divestment from weapons. You could also collect signatures for World BEYOND War's peace pledge. For sign-up sheets, flyers, and fact sheets, visit [worldbeyondwar.org/flyers](http://worldbeyondwar.org/flyers). Here are some tips for effective petitioning at your billboard site:

- Bring lots of extra pens and clipboards, so multiple people can sign at once. When one person is signing, others are more likely to stop and sign.
- Hold the clipboard and pen upright at chest level facing the passersby, in full view, extended slightly, poised and ready to catch someone's attention.
- Practice your hook - a short pitch to grab people's attention as they walk by and draw them in to sign the petition. Say it clearly and with a smile. Something like "Reduce military spending. Sign here!"
- As someone is signing, talk briefly about the billboard campaign. For example: "Thanks for signing! We're putting up anti-war billboards in [your local area] and around the world to urge elected officials to reduce military spending. The U.S. government spends \$1 trillion a year on war! For only 3% of that - \$30 billion - the UN says we could end world hunger. Join us in working for a world beyond war."
- Be polite no matter what response you get, and smile as people approach.
- Don't get distressed if you get a lot of refusals.
- Don't get caught up in long conversations or arguments.
- Flyering is great, but petitioning can be more effective. People will often take a flyer and then just throw it away. By getting someone to actually stop, sign a petition, and have a short conversation, you create a more meaningful, personal connection, which may lead to more long-term engagement. After they sign, give them a flyer or half-page fact sheet about the campaign, which they will be more likely to read and retain. We also collect contact info on our petitions, so we can follow up later to engage signers on the next steps in the campaign.
- Take photos of petitioners collecting signatures to use on social media (with the billboard in the background!).

---

## Coalition-Building

The billboard campaign presents an opportunity for coalition-building, the bringing together of a group of organizations to collaborate on an event or campaign. Working in coalition can demonstrate a breadth and diversity of support on an issue and allows us to pool our resources. We are much stronger together! For example, one group may be well-funded and can leverage its funds to buy the billboard, whereas another group might be short on funds but has lots of volunteers who can volunteer their time to collect

petition signatures.

Many of our billboards are purchased in coalition with other organizations who split the costs. Our billboards are also often leveraged in coalition. For example, we'll organize joint press events outside of the billboard location, bringing together World BEYOND War and local organizations in the region to draw attention to the issue of rampant military spending and its impact on the community, as well as opportunities for plugging in to local campaigns.

### Aligning Strategy with Circumstances

It is important to adjust strategy based on the unique circumstances, goals, and targets of a particular campaign. The above recommendations won't work in all cases. For example, if a billboard is on an interstate highway, flyering and petitioning probably aren't appropriate, since there isn't any foot traffic. Further, when working in coalition with local groups, you may need to be flexible and adjust strategy based on local needs.

In 2020, the world was hit by the coronavirus pandemic, suspending most in-person gatherings, such as conferences, petitioning, flyering, and rallies. The pandemic is an extreme example of the importance of flexibility of tactics and strategies based on circumstances. It has forced us to be nimble and creative to think of new avenues for outreach, while maintaining health & safety precautions. Tweetstorms<sup>4</sup>, Zoom webinars, Instagram slides, peer-to-peer (P2P) text messaging, Action Network letter campaigns, and TikTok videos are examples of digital organizing tools that can be utilized instead of traditional in-person tactics.

### Learn More:

Billboards Project: [worldbeyondwar.org/billboardsproject](http://worldbeyondwar.org/billboardsproject)

Media Outreach Tips: [worldbeyondwar.org/media-outreach-tips](http://worldbeyondwar.org/media-outreach-tips)

Organizing 101 Training: [bit.ly/org101wbw](http://bit.ly/org101wbw)

World BEYOND War is a global grassroots network of volunteers, activists, and allied organizations advocating for the abolition of war and its replacement with an alternative global security system based on peace and demilitarization. Visit [WorldBEYONDWar.org](http://WorldBEYONDWar.org) to join the global movement to end all wars.

Email: [info@worldbeyondwar.org](mailto:info@worldbeyondwar.org)



---

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Statistic on Billboard Explained.” World BEYOND War, <https://worldbeyondwar.org/explained/>.

<sup>2</sup> Swanson, David. “A Billboard With a Simple Message.” Urban Milwaukee, 12 February 2020, <https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2020/02/12/op-ed-a-billboard-with-a-simple-message/>.

<sup>3</sup> McCarthy, Justine. “World Beyond War campaign against troops at Shannon ‘blocked’ during Trump visit.” The Sunday Times, 16 June 2019, [https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/ireland/world-beyond-war-campaign-](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/ireland/world-beyond-war-campaign-against-troops-at-shannon-blocked-during-trump-visit-th0trzv3t)

[against-troops-at-shannon-blocked-during-trump-visit-th0trzv3t](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/ireland/world-beyond-war-campaign-against-troops-at-shannon-blocked-during-trump-visit-th0trzv3t).

<sup>4</sup> A tweetstorm can refer to a series of related tweets posted by a Twitter user in quick succession, or as it is intended in this context, to a barrage of tweets by many individual users quickly tweeting about the same topic, often with a unifying hashtag to raise awareness about a certain topic or campaign. Tweetstorms may also make use of a unifying tag, to repeatedly tag a certain user – such as a campaign target, like an elected official – that way the tagged user gets a notification every time they are mentioned.