

'I deface Paris billboards'

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The first time police officers followed us they seemed surprised. Here we were, a group of activists who, in broad daylight and without wearing masks, approached a billboard in the middle of Paris and defaced it. When the officers stopped us, they forced us to the ground and handcuffed us. They thought we would resist. What they didn't know was that we would have offered up our identity cards if we'd had the chance.

I am a member of a French activist group the "Deboulonneurs" - the Dismantlers. We deface advertisements to protest against their influence on society. The group was founded three years ago and I joined several months later, after hearing about it in the news. I had been part of different anti-advertisement organisations before, and defaced my first billboard in 2000.

Usually, our actions take place on the last Saturday of the month. We meet at different spots around Paris which we have announced on the internet and in the press. Not only group members, but also supporters and spectators show up at the events. In a short speech, we explain to them our beliefs and mission and then move to a billboard or placard on which we spray different slogans: "Minimise advertisements", "Legitimate answer" or "Mental manipulation" - whatever comes into our minds.

Sometimes police officers arrest us and bring us to the commissioner's office. Sometimes the case is even submitted to court. So far, there have been about 10 trials against us throughout France.

To outsiders, it's surprising that we so blatantly risk getting arrested, but from our perspective, it's the best way to get nationwide attention. We see the court as an independent forum to express our thoughts.

We are not against advertising in general, we just want to reduce its

impact on society. Since a lot of billboards in France are gigantic, we want to limit their dimensions to 50cm by 70cm. That's the size of posters in political campaigns. We also want to reduce the number of posters in public space, especially since a lot of them are illegal. We want advertisers to respect the law.

Today, there are Deboulonneurs not only in Paris, but also in nine other French cities. Usually, 100 or 200 spectators show up at our actions, and most of the passers-by agree with what we are doing. A recent study showed that 79 per cent of the French population thinks too much advertising exists, 58 per cent consider advertisements are too aggressive and 30 per cent disapprove of advertising in any form. We also talk to politicians, and most of them say that they support our cause, whether they are leftwing or rightwing. Still, no measures have been taken to limit the influence of advertisers on our lives.

All our actions follow the rules of civil disobedience. Non-violence is one of our main principles - which is why we don't resist the police. Some of the spectators would like to deface the billboard structures, but we disapprove. We don't want our actions to be expressions of spontaneous anger, but conscious, well thought-out political acts. But this doesn't mean that it isn't fun. Sometimes accordion players, actors and clowns come along. It feels more like a party than a political demonstration.

A lot of the police officers say they understand us, but it is their job to stop us. Even most of the judges sympathise. Theoretically, we could face five years and a fine of €75,000 but so far the judges have only imposed symbolic penalties on us. In most cases, Deboulonneurs only have to pay €1. One judge openly expressed sympathy for our actions at the sentencing.

The advertisers never turn up in court to speak against us. One hour after our actions, they'll usually have cleaned up the billboard. They act like vampires and fear the light of day.

As told to Serge Debrebant.

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