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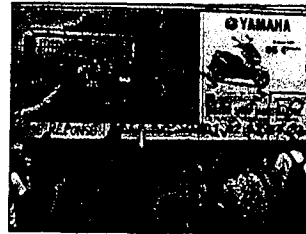
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Why the French have ad enough

A group of French protesters who say they are fed up with "invasive" advertising are defacing the country's billboards - and calling the police in advance to ensure they get arrested while doing so.



The deboulonneurs target large billboards in particular

The "deboulonneurs" - roughly translated as "dismantlers" - have been meeting about once a month and spraying slogans over hoardings in a number of French cities.

Although the defacement is nothing new, what is unusual is that they notify the police before committing their acts to make sure that they get caught - and potentially taken to court.

"We infringe the law in a very symbolic way, in a manner that's open and assumed," deboulonneur Arthur Lutz told BBC World Service's Culture Shock programme.

"We do it in the public space so that we get out the meaning of what action is going to take place. To change the law we need to provoke a debate on the place of advertising in our society."

Rich debates

The group say that billboards are particularly invasive because, unlike other media, there is no way to remove them.

"If you're watching TV, you can change the channel; you can buy magazines without advertisements; you can go on websites and block out the ads using software," Mr Lutz said.

"But in a public space we can't avoid advertisements, so for us it's the most problematic type of advertisement."

Although the police do sometimes arrest the slogan sprayers, it is rare that cases against them are brought to court.

When they do, they are usually fined a symbolic amount of one euro (80p) by judges.

But Mr Lutz explained that the point of these cases is to allow for "very rich debates".

"We choose people to come and describe, from their point of view, what is problematic with advertising," he said.

"We have people explain the problems with public health, with the environment, the social problems, the debt problems, the fact advertising tries to sell us things we don't actually need.

"There are a lot of places advertising causes problems in society."

Another deboulonneur, Antoine Troillard, said that he sprays billboards to target the people who make policy and who he says have interests in advertising.

"We do this because it creates much more influence, because it's a way of showing that we can have a direct response to it," he said.

"With the deboulonneurs, we try to claim this problem and interest



Deboulonneur Arthur Lutz describes the scene as fellow members of his collective are arrested

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'Symptom of wealth'

But Tom Standage, Business Editor of The Economist magazine, said that he believed this approach was "mixed up".

"You can tell you live in the developed world when the thing you go and protest about is that there are too many advertising billboards," he said.

"This is a symptom of wealth, and also a symptom of the classic French antipathy towards capitalism."

And he pointed out that the politicians, far from backing advertising, are actively seeking to reduce it - with President Nicolas Sarkozy trying to get rid of it completely on public broadcasters and radio, a move that has prompted strike action.



Mr Sarkozy has banned advertising on public airwaves from 2009

"This idea that politicians don't want to talk about advertising is completely wrong," he added.

"There's a massive debate going on about this. What's really funny is the employees of the public sector broadcasters went on strike to demand that they could continue to be funded by private advertisers, because they are worried they are going to lose jobs.

"This is a classic demonstration of how mixed up the French are when it comes to capitalism."