

Nailing Billboards

Toronto activist Rami Tabello, coordinator of Illegalsigns.ca which tracks illegal billboards throughout the city, logs new billboards into his phone in Dundas Square.



ANN HERMES/© 2009 THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR (WWW.CSMONITOR.COM)

In Toronto, about half the billboards you can spot from any given street corner are illegal. This isn't unusual—in fact, an estimated two-thirds of the outdoor advertising in Chicago sits outside of permitted zones. But up in Toronto, a group of activists is doing something about it.

They're not relying on viral videos or media hoaxes, either: Rami Tabello and the rest of the crew at IllegalSigns.ca use city codes and ordinances like secret weapons.

"We fight illegal advertising using the rule of law," Tabello explains. "Advertising on television, radio, and newspapers is a matter of choice—citizens can choose not to view those ads. Billboards are different. They destroy choice because they are located in public spaces. Either the public vista belongs to the public or it belongs to global media companies. Fighting illegal billboards is about reclaiming public space."

Through diligent research, friendly phone calls, regularly filed complaints, and extensive grassroots campaigning, IllegalSigns suggests, urges, nags, and downright cajoles Toronto's city council into removing illegal outdoor ads. One by one. The group, which has around ten volunteers, has filed well over 600 complaints since it formed in early 2007.

In December 2009, the Toronto city council passed a \$10.4 million billboard tax and a new, restrictive bylaw to regulate outdoor ads. Should the changes stick, Tabello estimates that the current number of billboards will be reduced by half over the next few decades.

—Anne Elizabeth Moore