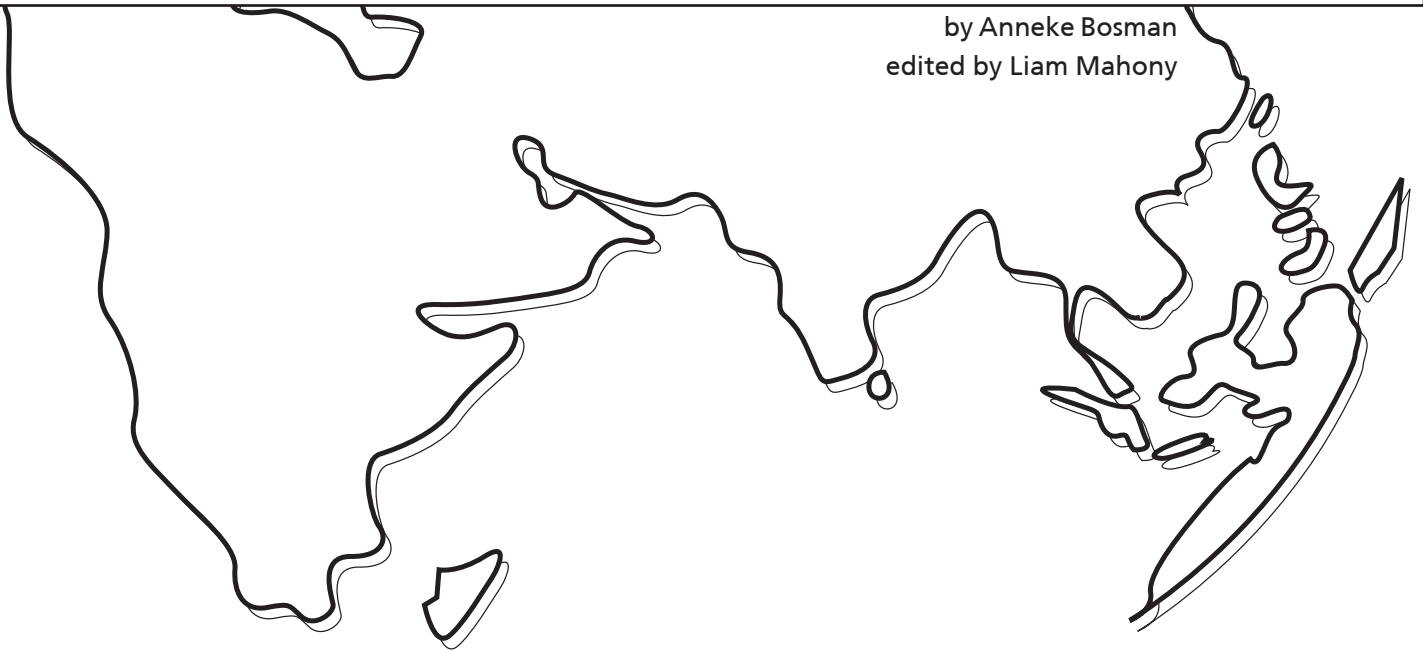


## **Sending Out an SMS**

**A rapid-response mobile phone network engages a youth constituency to stop torture fast**

by Anneke Bosman  
edited by Liam Mahony



A Tactical Notebook published by  
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## Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a worldwide movement of people who campaign for internationally recognized human rights to be respected and protected. Amnesty International's vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. In pursuit of this vision, AI's mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of its work to promote all human rights.

Amnesty International is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. It does not support or oppose any government or political system, nor does it support or oppose the views of the victims whose rights it seeks to protect. It is concerned solely with the impartial protection of human rights.

Amnesty International is a democratic, self-governing movement with more than 1.5 million members and supporters in over 150 countries and territories in every region of the world. It is funded largely by its worldwide membership and public donations.

## Anneke Bosman

Anneke Bosman is the campaign coordinator of Amnesty International's Dutch section. At the national secretariat in Amsterdam, about a hundred people are paid staff; another hundred people work as volunteers. In this energetic, creative atmosphere, Anneke is responsible for project management of international campaigns and development of new innovative campaigns. In 1998 she collected 3 million signatures for the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and developed the actions with text messages in 2000. Since then Amnesty-Netherlands has grown enormously with new members. At the end of 2003 Amnesty International, Dutch section counted 260,000 members.

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September 2004

Dear Friend,

Welcome to the New Tactics in Human Rights Tactical Notebook Series! In each notebook a human rights practitioner describes an innovative tactic used successfully in advancing human rights. The authors are part of the broad and diverse human rights movement, including nongovernment and government perspectives, educators, law enforcement personnel, truth and reconciliation processes and women's rights and mental health advocates. They have both adapted and pioneered tactics that have contributed to human rights in their home countries. In addition, they have used tactics that, when adapted, can be applied in other countries and situations to address a variety of issues.

Each notebook contains detailed information on *how* the author and his or her organization achieved what they did. We want to inspire other human rights practitioners to think *tactically*—and to broaden the realm of tactics considered to effectively advance human rights.

Amnesty International-Netherlands recognized the power of text-messaging technology (also known as short-messaging service, or SMS) to attract new members, build awareness of the campaign against torture and engage new people in quickly responding to cases of torture through Urgent Action appeals. The initial result was 520 new members gained directly from SMS participation with over 5,000 additional people becoming active in the SMS urgent action campaign. This notebook puts special emphasis on how Amnesty took advantage of SMS technology to build a new constituency among young people.

The entire series of Tactical Notebooks is available online at [www.newtactics.org](http://www.newtactics.org). Additional notebooks will continue to be added over time. On our web site you will also find other tools, including a searchable database of tactics, a discussion forum for human rights practitioners and information about our workshops and symposium. To subscribe to the New Tactics newsletter, please send an e-mail to [newtactics@cvt.org](mailto:newtactics@cvt.org).

The New Tactics in Human Rights Project is an international initiative led by a diverse group of organizations and practitioners from around the world. The project is coordinated by the Center for Victims of Torture and grew out of our experiences as a creator of new tactics and as a treatment center that also advocates for the protection of human rights from a unique position—one of healing and reclaiming civic leadership.

We hope that you will find these notebooks informational and thought-provoking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kate Kelsch".

Kate Kelsch

New Tactics Project Manager

## Introduction

*Golden Misabiko, a journalist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, was arrested and imprisoned without any charge in January 2001. It was feared he would be tortured. Amnesty International sent out an Urgent Action to members all over the world. We, at the Dutch section, sent out a text message to 8,000 cell-phone users in the Netherlands who participate in our new text-message alert network. Within 48 hours we sent a protest fax with thousands of signatures to the authorities in the DRC. Golden was released in May 2001. He had not been tortured. Golden wrote to Amnesty, "When I heard in prison that Amnesty cam-*

*aigned for my release I knew: Je vais sortir (I will be released)." And so it happened.*

Amnesty International has found a new "weapon" to use in its battle against torture: cell-phone text messages. These messages of up to 160 characters and transmitted by cell phone are known in many countries by the acronym SMS, which stands for "short-messaging service." With these messages, protests can be gathered faster than ever, enabling Amnesty International to take action against torture and other abuses more quickly. About 39 percent of the cell-phone campaigns conducted by Amnesty in 2002 were successful. Prisoners of conscience were released, people who had "disappeared" were found and death sentences were not carried out.

Cell-phone campaigning also has a special appeal for youth, and we found this campaign attracted new younger members into Amnesty in a way that other outreach and activities had not. Young people are the most frequent and numerous cell-phone users, and it is young people that Amnesty wants to reach. Young people do want to campaign for causes they believe in, but like anyone else, they prefer to do so in a way that is consistent with their lifestyles and habits. By using this popular tool of youth culture, Amnesty draws in new activists who will add to its campaigning power for a long time to come.

In this tactical notebook I will describe how we developed this text-message alert network in the Netherlands and how it helped attract a new constituency of support. To understand this alert method, one must also understand Amnesty's previous methods to involve its membership in responding to human rights abuse around the world. All Amnesty campaigns have a dual function. They direct a focused response to a place in the world where someone needs help, using simple actions that large numbers of people can participate in and know they are making a difference. At the same time, these campaigns educate the public and build a global consciousness about human rights abuses such as torture. The text-messaging campaign adds something new to both objectives. It can generate a faster response to help the victim, while at the same time expanding Amnesty's educational impact to a new constituency.

## The Urgent Action: Why speed matters

Amnesty International owes its existence to the countless members who write letters, staff stalls, lecture at meetings and schools, sell candles, and so forth. There is no doubt that Amnesty's authority and widespread fame are due to the reliability of its information and its huge postcard and signature campaigns. Many thousands participate, and power lies in numbers. These campaigns have proven to be a simple and effective way to exert pressure on the authorities. It works!

### **MTHULISI MLOYI FROM ZIMBABWE: FREE!**

Mthulisi Mloyi is an active member of the Zimbabwean opposition party Movement for Democratic Change. When he was hanging posters on March 8, 2003, for a political meeting, he was arrested by 20 men and taken away in a truck. The abductors are supporters of the government party, ZANU-PF, who regularly mistreat members of the opposition. Because the culprits are seldom prosecuted, they are allowed to go on with their practices.

When Mloyi was arrested, Amnesty immediately went into action and gathered 5,266 text messages demanding that he be released. Shortly afterwards Mthulisi Mloyi was set free.

### **FIVE HOMOSEXUAL EGYPTIANS: FREE!**

According to Egyptian law, it is forbidden to discriminate against homosexuals. In addition, homosexuality is not liable to prosecution as long as it is not practiced in public. Nevertheless, in 2001 dozens of men were apprehended because of their (supposed) sexual orientation. Sexual minorities are prosecuted on charges such as "acts contrary to nature" and "indecent or immoral behavior." Prisoners are especially in danger during the first weeks of their detention, when they have little or no contact with the outside world. The torture they claim to have been subjected to includes beating on the soles of their feet (*flake*—very painful because of the configuration of nerve endings).

In January 2002, Amnesty campaigned for these five men. They were in detention because of their (possible) homosexuality and were then sentenced to three years in prison. The campaign held by Amnesty's Netherlands branch yielded 3,062 signatures via text messages. On April 13 the five men were released. Amnesty will continue to campaign for the dozens of men still in detention in Egypt because of their supposed homosexuality.

The Urgent Action Network of Amnesty International dates from the mid-1970s, and it remains one of the most popular membership activities. Every day, the International Secretariat of Amnesty in London issues at least two new Urgent Actions. Amnesty sections capable of responding within 48 hours are generally those sections that use e-mail or faxes to receive and distribute the Urgent Actions.

Speed is crucial in the battle against torture. Generally speaking, torture takes place in the days immediately following arrest. After that, people are often quickly transferred, making it hard to keep track of them. Amnesty's campaigns are conducted by a worldwide network of contacts, who notify Amnesty International's main office as soon as they hear of torture or other serious violations. All Urgent Actions focus on the rapid processing (varying from several hours to a day or two) of any intelligence received about grave violations of human rights. Usually, Amnesty processes this intelligence into simple, fast campaigns focusing on a small number of victims. Amnesty hopes that these rapid and massive protests directed at the responsible government officials will help stop ongoing torture and prevent it in the future. Urgent Actions also contribute to the establishment of a broader human rights culture, reminding governments that their actions are being monitored, and provide moral and psychological support for individuals or communities at risk.

Amnesty has generally campaigned against human rights violations by seeking publicity, lobbying politicians and leading letter-writing campaigns to authorities. Text-message campaigns are a welcome addition to letter writing: They are fast, simple and effective. And Amnesty can demonstrate that in 40 percent of the cases a rapid intervention has a successful result. In life-or-death situations, speed is essential.

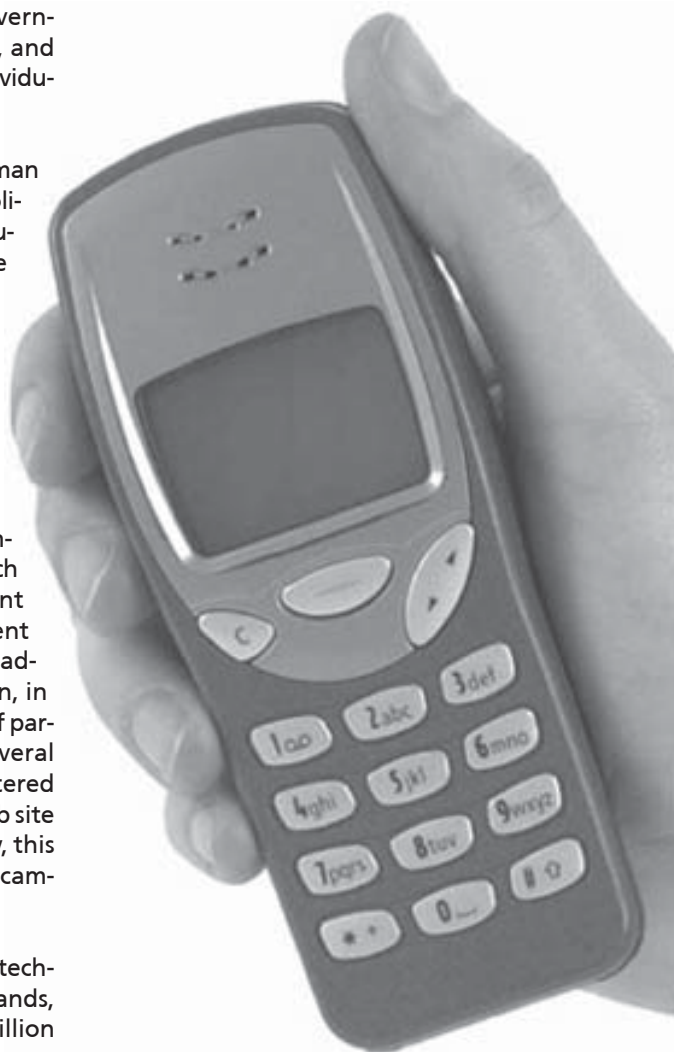
### **Constituency-building** **NEW TECHNOLOGIES ATTRACT PEOPLE**

Amnesty International started a worldwide campaign against torture in 2000. At the time the Dutch section had some 5,000 participants in its Urgent Action network. These were all people who sent their protests to the responsible government leaders by mail or fax. At the start of this campaign, in October 2000, Amnesty introduced the option of participating in the network by e-mail. Within several days, more than 1,500 new members had registered for this fast campaigning technique via the Web site of Amnesty International's Dutch section. Now, this number has increased to well over 9,000 e-mail campaigners.

Text messaging via cell phone is an even newer technology, and a faster one as well. In the Netherlands, 11 million people use cell phones. Of these, 5 million

are able to send text messages, and by doing so they can markedly increase the network's reaction speed. The great advantage of text messages over e-mail is their immediate attention value. In general, people will react to a summons by e-mail within several days, as not everyone reads e-mail every day. But because people have their cell phones with them from dawn to dusk, they likely will react to a call by text message within minutes. The campaign was started in May 2001, and by the end of the year, Amnesty had 14,000 new text-message campaigners who had not previously been part of Urgent Actions through other technologies. In addition, 500 of these text-message campaigners became new (paying) members of our Amnesty section.

Amnesty launches worldwide campaigns every year. To sustain public attention we have to find new ways, new tactics, to involve people in the campaigns. The subjects of Amnesty's campaigns are always the same: grave human rights violations far from volunteers' doorsteps. So we have to appeal to people in a way that will engage them. Recent analyses show that people are less likely to campaign for a better world without some promise that it will work. People need to see results.



In the Netherlands, most of Amnesty's members are over 30 years of age, and many of them are a good deal older than that. Amnesty would like to engage more young people. Young people have their own way of helping change the world, and they are the ones who will have to secure human rights in the future.

The benefits of the text-message actions are clear: We can say with confidence that we have attracted many thousands of participants who had not joined the Urgent Action network previously. Among our text-message activists, the age range is conspicuously young. Sixteen percent are between 11 and 15, with a total of 44 percent younger than 20.

### Young people

*This is just the way I like to campaign for Amnesty. It's simple, modern and effective. Amnesty uses the best weapon to prevent people from torture, the mobile phone!—Young Dutch participant in the text-messaging network*

Young people often have busy lives involving work, school and social activities. But they are also concerned with what is going on in the world. If you can reach them in the right way at the right time, they will prove to be strongly committed to protesting against the wrongs in the world. But you don't reach younger people in churches or libraries, the places where we find most of the older people who are active for Amnesty. They can be found at pop festivals and concerts.

Amnesty has asked pop artists to use their cell phones at festivals to make an announcement to the audience, asking everyone to use their mobiles for Am-

nesty. All festival visitors were asked to send a text message with their name as a signature for Amnesty's campaign. After sending a text message, each visitor received a text message in return saying, "Thanks for your signature." Because a mobile phone is a very personal device, we tried to personalize this thank-you message. We did that by indicating the sender's number in the list of signatures ("Thank you for your text message. You sent the 2356th protest."). Several days later, those who responded to the call by sending a text message received one from Amnesty in return, requesting that they become regular members of the mobile-phone campaigning group. Amnesty has forged a bond with many thousands of young people by creating this trendy, hip and efficient method of participating and making a big difference in the lives of people around the world.

A large-scale survey among youth in the Netherlands held in 2003 showed that 72 percent of the 12 to 14 age group, 92 percent of the 15 to 19 age group and 96 percent of the 20 to 24 age group have cell phones. Another survey suggests that the young live in a "zap culture," that they "want it all, here and now." They lead busy lives, but nevertheless care and want to be involved. They can be motivated to support good causes: the environment and human rights, for example. With our text-message campaign, Amnesty seems to have found the ideal way to reach and relate to them, judging by these statistics: Of the more than 4,000 campaigners, 62 percent are younger than 25, 75 percent are younger than 30, 83 percent are younger than 35 and 92 percent are younger than 45. In comparison, the average age of Amnesty's letter-writing members is over 45.

### ATTRACTING NEW AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL MEMBERS

We called people who participated in the text-message campaign and asked if they thought the frequency of the messages—once every two weeks—was sufficient. In their responses, all participants expressed great enthusiasm for Amnesty International's new, fast, simple and effective means of campaigning. We also asked whether they were Amnesty donors or wished to become one. Of the 7,058 text-message participants whom we phoned and who were non-members, 508 participants registered as members, which is a yield of 7.2 percent.

### HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

Every day Amnesty issues about two Urgent Actions that require quick action worldwide. We select one Urgent Action every two weeks as a "text-message action." We summarize the Urgent Action message in just 160 characters and send it. To respond, people need only to send back the message "Yes" to the number 4777. A few minutes later, participants receive

<b>Text-Message Network Members by Age</b>			
Age	Number	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
11 — 15	627	15.6 %	15.6 %
16 — 18	726	18 %	33.6 %
19 — 20	414	10.3 %	43.9 %
21 — 25	720	17.9 %	61.8 %
26 — 30	520	12.9 %	74.7 %
31 — 35	322	8.0 %	82.7 %
36 — 45	390	9.7 %	92.4 %
46 — 60	275	6.8 %	99.2 %
> 60	32	0.8 %	100 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,026</b>	<b>100%</b>	

another text message to thank them and to inform them how many people have already sent a protest (“Thank you for your participation. You are the [XXth] person to respond.”). Participants can find full information on the case on our Web page. At the secretariat, we describe the case with full details for the relevant authorities in the target country and send the thousands of “signatures” by e-mail or fax as quickly as we can. Participants may later receive a text message to inform them of the results of the campaign, such as a release from custody.

### How to make it happen

There were essentially two key components to setting up this network: We needed an outreach and publicity campaign that would attract users or campaigners into the new cell-phone alert network. We also needed to set up the technology so the system would work fast and efficiently in a very user-friendly way. Achieving both objectives required resources.

Amnesty International is highly respected in the Netherlands, so we found that an advertising agency was willing to develop commercials for free and text-messaging companies wanted to cooperate in this campaign. We realize that this is a big benefit for Amnesty because it makes it possible for us to organize such huge campaigns.

We did not initially have the financial and technical capacity to organize a huge mobile phone text-messaging campaign. I wrote a proposal to the Dutch Zip Code Lottery, which supports nongovernmental organizations like World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace and Amnesty. They liked the idea of using text messaging as a new, innovative tactic very much and they decided to support the campaign with a grant of 680,000 euros. For this Amnesty had to print the logo of the Zip Code Lottery in advertisements and materials to encourage people to join the Zip Code Lottery.

### HOW WE GOT PEOPLE INVOLVED: TARGETING A NEW CONSTITUENCY

In our opinion the best campaigns start with a simple idea—in this case, to expand Urgent Actions to take advantage of the popularity of text messaging. From this idea, the campaign grew step by step. We searched the Internet, looking for ideas for attracting young people, and we found a great deal about what people like, what they are doing and where to find them. They go to discos? We produced billboards for discos. They are at schools? We hired school publicity boards. They read certain sorts of magazines? We advertised in those magazines.

We approached soccer teams, but they showed little interest. Then we approached artists and musicians and they were more interested. Artists play at festivals with huge audiences, so we approached the festival coordinators. Young people look in the *Going Out*

### How to participate

1. To sign up, choose the text messaging function on your mobile phone. Send a text message with your name, home number, zip code and place of residence to the number 4777.
2. You will receive a message back thanking you and informing you to expect an urgent appeal when necessary (about once every two weeks).
3. You will receive text messages such as: “Amnesty urgent message: Golden Misabiko Baholelwa (D.R. Congo) without charge detained. Fear of torture. Help him! Do you support this action? Please SMS ‘Yes’ to 4777.”
4. When you send your SMS answer, within two minutes you receive a message back: “Amnesty Urgent message: Thank you very much! You have sent the 3,578th protest. For more information about this action, look at [www.amnesty.nl](http://www.amnesty.nl).”
5. Amnesty’s secretariat sends a letter by e-mail or fax to the authorities with the full details of the case and the thousands of names of people who protest.

*Agenda* for films, dance and the like, so we phoned this publication and asked it to publicize the campaign. And our initiative went on and on, steadily growing.

Through search engines, we looked for agents who do marketing analysis on youth for businesses. We found Qrius—All about Kids and Teens. We also found analyses done by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. What we learned from this is that young people don’t want to miss anything; that’s why TV, the Internet, chat sites and SMS techniques are so popular. They want to be in contact with their friends any time of the day. From these analyses we learned which magazines kids read, what programs they watch on television, how often they use Internet or SMS, and so on.

Our most important outreach tool was the 350 local Amnesty groups in the Netherlands. Amnesty groups stopped people in busy streets and asked them, “Do you have a cell phone? Are you prepared to use it in the fight against human rights violations?” Local groups also have contacts with mayors, local celebrities, companies, schools, churches, shopkeepers and all kind of networks, in addition to countless personal contacts. Local volunteers handed out leaflets in crowds, in the street and in schools. They put them in Internet cafés, libraries, post offices and telephone shops, where visitors were invited to take one.

To get a maximum amount of free publicity for a campaign you need three things: brand-name recognition,



Poster for SMS campaign: "Send an SMS to stop torture fast."

an original idea and a good network of contacts. Amnesty is a well-known name in Holland with a general and uncontroversial appeal. Many people have friends or family who have done something with Amnesty, so it is not at all threatening. We took full advantage of this recognition in the sense that we were never hesitant to ask businesses to offer us services for free, knowing that they might think it was in their own interest to be associated with Amnesty's popularity.

We had an original idea, since text-messaging is itself fairly new and no one had previously harnessed this technology for a humanitarian cause. We found that people's response was generally one of curiosity and interest, because they saw the campaign as unusual and effective.

Amnesty has a good network of contacts in Holland, through our board members and others. But since we were deliberately branching out into a constituency of young people where we felt Amnesty was a bit weak, we had to admit that there was work to be done in building up our network very quickly.

We used many other tactics to inform the public of the possibility of joining Amnesty's text-message campaigns:

- ◆ We illustrated the essence of Amnesty's text-message actions in radio and TV commercials and programs and explained how to sign up.
- ◆ We sent a letter to Sting's manager, requesting free use of Sting's song "Message in a Bottle (Sending out an SOS)." Once permission had been granted, we had the song recorded by a popular Dutch artist as "Sending out an SMS." We asked an advertising agency to develop an original commercial spot for television, radio and print. They did this almost for free because they would get new clients if the commercial was popular and if it attracted attention in advertising trade magazines. We sent the ad with the song to radio and TV stations asking them to broadcast it as a free commercial for text messages. The programs popular with the youth were happy to comply because it gained them attention as well. The big names associated with this commercial and campaign provided a ticket to free publicity.
- ◆ We published ads in newspapers, along with youth and nightlife magazines. Space was often free of charge because publishers found our campaign unusual and interesting.
- ◆ We asked artists to show their mobile phones in concerts, at festivals, and on TV programs and to explain how it works and why the public needs to join. This included popular Dutch TV programs like Music Box and Zeppelin, and festivals like Pinkpop,

### Publicity Budget

TYPE OF PUBLICITY	COST (EUROS)
TV commercials (producing)	25,000
TV commercials (broadcasting)	115,000
Radio commercials (producing)	10,000
<b>Print:</b>	
School billboards	11,000
Disco billboards	1,250
Student society billboards	1,200
Railway station billboards	1,750
Advertisements in youth magazines	102,500
<b>Total</b>	<b>292,850</b>

While this is a lot of money, the real prices for these advertisements would have been much higher. This budget represents special discounts given to Amnesty as a nonprofit organization.

Lowlands, Freedom festival and the Dunya festival. It was not complicated. We just asked the organizers for a list of the artists who would be appearing, found the address of their management and sent a request that they join the campaign. Simple as that.

- ◆ We participated in popular festivals, fielding lots of Amnesty volunteers to ask the public to join the cell-phone alert network.
- ◆ We published a handout with our text-message number.
- ◆ We hung posters in cafés, movie theatres, libraries, community centers, schools and so forth explaining how to join.
- ◆ We asked Internet advertisers to put a banner with a catchy phrase on their website. Site visitors who clicked on the banner were directed to [www.amnesty.nl](http://www.amnesty.nl), where they could fill in their name and telephone number, automatically registering for the text-message campaign.

There is one thing about a cell phone that made all these direct contacts particularly effective: People always have their cell phone with them. SMS is ideal for instant impact. Whether you are out shopping, attending a concert or watching TV, whether you see a poster or leaflet or talk to a volunteer, you can join the text-message brigade immediately. You just take the phone out and do it! This possibility of immediate action has a strong appeal, especially for the young. It is always a marketing advantage to have something people can act on immediately while you have their initial burst of attention. If people had to wait until they got home to remember to join, most would forget it.

Another marketing lesson is that mass publicity and person-to-person contact are crucially complementary. You “reach” people with spots (commercials, advertisements, etc.) but this is mostly just spreading name recognition about the brand or the campaign. The best marketing happens when you “touch” people through one-to-one marketing. Every company wishes to come as near to you as possible. Amnesty and other membership groups (like War Child, Greenpeace, etc.) have consistently found that the most effective membership growth tactic is direct dialogue, asking

people face-to-face in the street to become a member.

But it would be too simple to conclude that you don’t need mass-media publicity to support these direct contacts. People need to feel some level of confidence and trust in what they join. They need to have heard of it—so publicity helps. They need to know it is a reliable and trustworthy organization and not a scam, so name recognition is critical. Many people are more likely to join something if they feel that it is popular and that others are doing it, too. Publicity creates the conditions necessary for direct contact to actually work.

### KEEPING NEW MEMBERS MOTIVATED AND INTERESTED

Amnesty will never spam people. We don’t try to contact anyone whose number was picked out of a telephone book and surprise them with the request to join the brigade. Those who register do so knowingly. That is why we used publicity and outreach to cell-phone users, rather than initially contacting them through their mobile.

We do have to make sure we don’t lose people’s enthusiasm and become an annoyance. Network members receive an urgent appeal every two weeks. This text is about a real person with a horrifying story, and we have learned from our users that no one thinks it is spam when they are touched by such a moving story and a chance to do something about it. But if members don’t react after three or four Urgent Actions, they will automatically receive a text message saying they won’t be a member anymore unless they voluntarily choose to continue. Often people send a message back to confirm that they are still interested.



SMS campaign volunteers at a music festival.



Every year all members are sent a leaflet—"SMS works!"—with a lot of success stories. Our constant emphasis on the good news and on the successes is an important motivation for people to stay in the system.

#### **TECHNICAL ISSUES: SETTING UP THE SYSTEM**

We will not describe here all the technical complexities of setting up a text-messaging alert system. There are companies that can do all of that for you. We found we were linking into a technology that was already used in other sectors, so if you are thinking of developing such a system, you should be able to find businesses that offer their services in this field. Text messages are used to send sports results, the news or the weather forecast. News shows on radio and television use text messages to announce that day's topics. TV game shows use them to tally votes.

Because there is money to be made with cell phones and text messages, there are businesses standing in line to provide those services. Together with their clients, they devise an idea, a campaigning concept or a service. In addition, they can take care of the implementation and the exploitation of these services. This also means that they have and will maintain the contact with the telephone providers and provide the "management field," which is the technical architecture of a database and its application. They will build a website enabling a client to compose and send text messages without the client having to understand how the application works. The reactions to the text mes-

sages can also be received on the website, which can be downloaded and processed.

In our case, I surfed the Internet to find some text-messaging companies. I talked with five of them and explained to them what we intended to do with the Urgent Actions and mobile phones. I asked the companies to help me overcome the technical problems and asked for their vision. Most of the companies could think only about how to spam the message and how to make money for our organization (and themselves). They didn't see what we needed. We weren't looking for quick money, but rather wanted to mobilize as many people as possible to prevent human rights abuses worldwide.

One firm called Hot ICE, a company that specializes in defining and implementing mobile services, was by far the best because of its affinity with human rights, its expertise in noncommercial activities and the favorable financial arrangement it offered in terms of set-up fees and fees per text message. Hot ICE gave its time free, so we only paid for the technology, not for the people who had to fix it. The company is experienced with complicated systems of text messages connected with TV programs and has many useful contacts among television and telephone operators. This was also a good fit with Amnesty, as building networks is an important part of our strategy for involving people in human rights.

#### **TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS AND COSTS**

An NGO considering instituting an SMS alert network should find a company that already has experience running mobile applications like this. The company would need to have technical interfaces to the GSM (Global System for Mobile communications) networks in the appropriate country. As long as a competent and trustworthy partner company is found, the sponsoring organization does not need to have any particular technical capacity to implement the service. The sponsoring organization's primary challenge is not in technology, but rather in outreach and recruitment to build up the size of the network.

Technically, an SMS network can be of almost any scale, from 50 callers to many thousands. The cost of setting it up and running it, however, might differ from one country to the next, and with a network of fewer than about 2,500 users it might be more difficult to run the service at a break even level, meaning with no monthly costs for hosting and support. With a smaller network, below the break-even level, it might cost 500 to 1,000 euros per month for maintenance.

But outside of the cost implications, the technology you use is independent of the size of the network. This means that a network could start small and then grow without encountering any serious technical challenges in the growth process.

#### **BARYALAI FROM AFGHANISTAN, ARRESTED BY U.S. SOLDIERS: FREE!**

On November 12, 2002, U.S. soldiers visited the marketplace in the Afghan town of Sharan. They were looking for Khan Agha, the owner of a market stall with a satellite phone. They found his stall, but instead of arresting Khan, they abducted 18-year-old telephonist Baryalai. Eye witnesses claim he was forced to kneel for six hours with his hands on his back and a hood over his head. His request for water, which he needed to perform his religious rituals, was denied. Next, the soldiers pulled a body bag over him after which they presumably took him to an American military base. He was not charged with any crime and was refused a visit by a lawyer and his family was also forbidden to see him.

Amnesty International campaigned for Baryalai and received 3,875 signatures by cell phone. In the meantime, Baryalai has been released, though he still does not know why he was arrested. He expresses his warm gratitude to Amnesty International and all its members who campaigned for him. He believes he owes his release to this support.

Because of the nature of the different billing process for SMS users, there are ways in which the cost of sustaining the network can be covered by the callers themselves. In our case in the Netherlands, for instance, any person with a GSM phone can subscribe to the SMS service. After registration a mobile user receives an SMS alert from Amnesty in case of an Urgent Action. The mobile user pays 25 eurocents for receiving this SMS (so-called "premium reverse billed SMS"). Premium SMS generates income for the GSM company and they give a part of the income as kick-back to the SMS service owner, in this case Amnesty. The income generated by this traffic of phone calls currently covers Amnesty's ongoing direct costs for the service (monthly fees for hosting and support of the application, as well as handling costs for the traffic).

Companies like Hot ICE can run these kinds of SMS services in most European countries like they do in Holland for Amnesty International. You may also find there are other such companies in the country where you live that would be interested in helping you for a good cause. In every country there may be some other factors to consider regarding the billing process and how you can recuperate your costs, since this kind of billing differs from one country to the next. These variations, however, should make no significant difference to the service, but no matter where you are, the service must be configured according to the premium SMS possibilities offered by the GSM operators in your country.

### Results for victims of abuse

This cell-phone Urgent Action system has made a real difference. In addition to the expansion of our constituency among young people, it increased our ability to meet our primary goal—responding to and stopping human rights abuses around the world.

Amnesty International rarely claims direct responsibility for improvements in the situation of the people featured in Urgent Action cases. However, some improvement is reported in around one-third of all Urgent Action cases. Death sentences are commuted, "disappeared" people reappear, the whereabouts of detained persons are announced (thus reducing the chances of torture) or seriously ill prisoners are given medical attention. In 2001, Amnesty received good news in about 125 Urgent Action cases, including 99 releases, 31 stays of death sentences and five people who were saved from deportation. Overall, we have heard good news on Urgent Action cases more than 40 times so far this year. The death penalty has not been applied in more than 15 cases and we have heard of more than 20 releases. In the text-message actions Amnesty campaigned for in 2002, 40 percent met with success.

### Constraints and limitations

We think the SMS technique can be used by other organizations in other countries for a wide array of purposes. The following conditions and limitations apply:

- ◆ The technique requires considerable funding, especially the publicity effort of reaching a new constituency. We recommend asking mail providers and other companies and institutions who may be willing to offer their services for a minimum fee.
- ◆ The technique requires a significant population of cell-phone and text-message users. However, even in a country where mobile phones are not (yet) in wide use, one could start with approaching only that part of the population that uses them.
- ◆ Text-messaging actions should provide follow-up information. To save the cost of sending extra messages, summary information may be included in subsequent action appeals.
- ◆ Participants must give their explicit consent to be contacted. If not, the technique may easily be perceived as just another example of unwanted spam communications. Once people have joined the system, every response to an alert can be considered a renewal of consent, because they themselves pay for sending a message back to Amnesty.
- ◆ Message space is very short, so it is only suited for simple, straightforward appeals. It is not an expedient means to make the public aware of a more complicated issue.
- ◆ A text-message appeal should convey a sense of urgency.
- ◆ The technique should be widely publicized in order to become effective. There is a critical point at which people will begin to tell each other about the campaign. Before this you have to try hard to get it publicized.
- ◆ Participants should receive new text messages on a regular basis, not less frequently than once a month. This will ensure ongoing interest in the action technique. We found from our informal polling among young people and other users that every two weeks was a reasonable frequency. You do not want new participants to forget who you are in between alerts.
- ◆ Have a method for removing from your list those who don't respond. This further lowers the risk that mobile users will consider the messages spam.



- ◆ Thank people for their support and involvement.
- ◆ Ask your text-messagers to motivate their friends and family to become members as well. Their friends need only send a text message with the text "AMNESTY." Afterwards that mobile user will automatically receive further instructions by text messages.

## Conclusion

Many organizations other than Amnesty have different kinds of "urgent alerts." Advocacy organizations try to alert their members to call their parliament or congress about a pending bill. Solidarity organizations respond to crises in a particular country of the world. Anti-death-penalty organizations try to mobilize responses to pending executions. An organization in Argentina, SERPAJ, takes advantage of the speed of cell-phone alert system to respond to arrests of street children in Buenos Aires, so that human rights defend-

ers can get to the jails before they are mistreated. In Serbia, the youth organization Otpor! used mobile phones to mobilize street demonstrations against then-President Slobodan Milosevic. Cell phones helped to rally the public in the Philippines to oust President Joseph Estrada. Text-messaging might speed up response times in efforts like these, while also promoting the organizations among younger activists.

Cell-phone technology is rapidly incorporating photo and video information, and this may yield new ways to transmit messages and mobilize more people for human rights. Such transmissions could lead to rapid diffusion of police or other violence at demonstrations, for instance. Mobile phone networks have been used to reduce and prevent violence in interface neighborhoods in Belfast.<sup>1</sup> Cell phones and text messaging could be used to call for demonstrations or to coordinate rapid changes in strategy during demonstrations. It could mobilize people to send messages to parliament to advocate particular votes on important issues that day.

There are many possibilities, especially as newer technologies continue to appear. A more general conclusion we could draw from our experience is that if we make the effort to understand how different constituencies respond to new technologies, we can use these technologies to more effectively engage those constituencies in work for human rights.

### STUDENT ELVIS KAZUNGU IN BURUNDI: FREE!

Student Elvis Kazungu was arrested on November 1, 2002, on the pretext of being a threat to state security. Kazungu is a supporter of the opposition party, Parena, which regularly issues highly critical comments on Burundi's President Buyoya's policy. During his time in prison, Kazungu was tortured and then denied proper medical treatment. Amnesty International held a text-message campaign for Kazungu, in which 4,088 people protested his captivity and maltreatment. On November 29, Kazungu was released.

### HOPE FOR WANDER COSME CARVALHEIRO FROM BRAZIL

Wander Cosme Carvalho was arrested in February 2001 on suspicion of shooting a police officer. After his arrest, he was subjected to grave and prolonged torture. After that, he signed a confession without being allowed to read it first. Wander is pleading innocent. During the 2002 Lowlands pop festival, in the Netherlands, 1,300 signatures were gathered as a protest against the way Wander was treated. There was also a text-message campaign, in which 4,138 signatures were sent. Amnesty country specialists have visited Wander Cosme Carvalho. In the meantime, Brazil's public prosecutor has promised to investigate Wander's case.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see *International Monitoring Bodies: Powerful tools for leveraging local change*, by Paul Mageean, part of the Tactical Notebook Series and available for download at [www.newtactics.org](http://www.newtactics.org)

## NOTES



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